

HAUNTED BY REALITY

**TOWARD A FEMINIST STUDY OF DOCUMENTARY FILM:
INDEXICALITY, VISION AND THE ARTIFICE**

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Haunted By Reality.
Toward a Feminist Study of Documentary Film:
Indexicality, Vision and the Artifice

Opgejaagd door Realiteit.
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Indexicaliteit, Het Zien, en De Kunstgreep
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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I'm telling you stories. Trust me.
– Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*.

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INTRODUCTION

The degree to which the social world determines the cinematic image of it is the degree to which it can be transformative of that same world. The source of the awesome magic, its political pathos, is a realism beyond realism, no longer just realism.

– Jane Gaines, *Documentary Radicality*, p. 19.

If, however, a need for the documentary exists, it lies, I believe, in a necessary confrontation ... [with] the realities that shape us here and now. ...the documentary film draws its power from its very difficulty, wholly derived from the fact that the real doesn't give film the time to forget it, that the world presses on, that it is through contact with the world that cinema is made.

– Jean-Louis Comolli, "Documentary Journey to the Land of the Head Shrinkers," p. 40.

On October 30, 2010, on BBC 2, I watched *Paul Merton's Weird and Wonderful World of Early Cinema*, a television programme about the birth of cinema, its pioneers, the early visual tricks and forerunners of cinematic technologies. At the beginning, I had the impression the programme was indeed going to be about cinema as a whole, as it was dealing with the Lumière brothers' as well as Méliès' cinema. In the canonical version of the history of early cinema, the former are generally considered the initial explorers of cinema's realism and documentary function and the latter the magician who started to play with illusionism and the fictional potential of the medium (Simons 2008, 117). After a few minutes, however, when narrating the development of cinema in the late 1900s, only one specific path and history was followed: that of the so-called 'fiction cinema.'

Without feeling the need for any explanation as to *what* kind of history was going to be tracked, the programme presented what appeared to be *the* history of early European cinema. In other words, although what are generally considered the two main strands of cinema – fiction and non-fiction – began simultaneously and were accordingly recounted by Merton as one; at one point in the programme cinema seems to split and what is commonly recognised as the non-fiction genre disappears from the picture. The presenter proposes a rich, accurate and entertaining account of some of the forgotten male and female pioneering inventors, actors and directors of silent cinema in Britain and France. However, the stars and masterpieces recounted are only those which appear to be the

predecessors of what could be considered the fiction cinema industry or 'show business.' Why did the programme deal with only part of the whole story? How did it happen that a whole section of the history of cinema just vanished? And, more importantly, how and why did Cinema split in two kinds of cinema and where can this caesura be located? These were the questions *Paul Merton's Weird and Wonderful World of Early Cinema* encouraged, while greatly entertaining me. These are also the issues that inspired this study and the starting point from where the specific questions and concerns of this research departed.

In all fairness, I did not spend much time thinking about the first two questions. As the origins of documentary are simultaneous to the origins of cinema, with the Lumière brothers' recording of the *Workers leaving the factory* (1895) (Ellis and McLane 2005, ix; Barnouw 1993, 8-9), cinema soon started to shape up into two distinct domains – documentary and fiction – or this is at least how a dominant history of cinema now categorises all various cinematographic experiments.¹ In popular understandings as well as in most academic texts, how-to manuals and entertainment and educational films, only one branch of cinema appears to fully deserve the title of Cinema: classic Hollywood (i.e.: narrative fiction) cinema. The history of documentary instead becomes 'the other' history, the one that requires specification: the former is the universal, the latter the particular.² This is not surprising and there are several reasons behind these developments, the financial aspect being a very relevant one.³

What left me wondering was not the issue of why documentary is considered a less significant or more specific genre of Cinema. Rather, what struck me was the fact that this BBC programme was exemplary in as much as it did not explain where and on which grounds documentary and fiction film could be separated. The good old question of what a documentary film is started haunting me, and I began swinging between the knowledge that there is no actual distinction between documentary and fiction film in terms of their origins and technologies, and that yet a/some difference/s must be in place – but which ones, then?

A love for sounds ultimately drove me to the visual field of anthropology. During my first academic degree, I became passionate in the anthropology of

¹ Another categorisation, for example, is that which distinguishes three "basic creative modes in film": documentary, narrative fiction and experimental avant-garde (Ellis and McLane 2005, 1).

² Grant and Sloniowski elaborate a comparable critique, albeit from a different angle. Considering how fiction films and documentaries have been studied differently and how the interest in documentary of both scholars and the general public is a relative recent development, they observe that documentaries "tend to be discussed *as documentaries*" rather than as works of cinema (Grant and Sloniowski 1998, 19-20).

³ For an account of the history of documentary, including its financial aspects and its relation to the film industry, see for example: Barsam 1992; Barnouw 1993; Ellis and McLane 2005.

music and I committed to undertake research in this field. Not long after diving through texts and courses on the musical traditions, instruments, rituals, rhythmic and symbolic systems of various European and non-European peoples and communities, I realised that ethnographic films were one of the main tools to gain and produce knowledge about such musical events and traditions. I started my research on anthropological documentary films, because I was interested in ethnomusicology. To sharpen my knowledge about sounds and music, I had to first learn how to see films. The visual medium became central to make sense of the aural dimension of cultures, of the musical practices and systems of whichever social context was presented.

In my experience in approaching anthropological films two aspects became clear from the start: first, these films were mainly studied in terms of their content matter, and occasions to gain knowledge about how they were made, or how to 'see' them, were scarce; secondly, women were mainly the subjects in front of the camera, filmed, and very seldom behind the camera, actually filming.

Anthropological films, especially in academic and didactic contexts, as supports to written ethnographies or as audio-visual researches themselves, matter because of what they are about, what discourses they present, and what representations and knowledges they produce about a certain subject. This is an obvious and undeniably important aspect of the use and study of anthropological documentary film. Accordingly, when I started researching this topic I could not help but noticing that in almost all anthropology classes a number of films were screened. However, whereas so much attention was paid to the analysis of how, when, and under which circumstances *written* ethnographies were produced, it was surprising to note that so little of the same kind of attention was given to the anthropological films screened (other than in those classes that focussed specifically on visual anthropology).

This was when I started to realise that *how* anthropological documentaries are made is not only a fascinating field, but a very important one if the reflexive gaze⁴ (deemed fundamental in, and been turned towards written ethnographies for the last thirty years) is to be consistently used on anthropological films and other media. The scholarship on the *how* of anthropological documentary film is vast, but in my academic experience this kind of research has remained all too often a field or sub-discipline that runs parallel to, but detached from the broader field of cultural anthropology or ethnomusicology.

While *what* films are *about* was – and probably still is in many university departments – the primary concern and the main reason to screen films in anthropology classes, because of my interest in politically committed post-structuralist and feminist theories, my attention has instead predominantly

⁴ The issue of reflexivity in the history of the discipline of anthropology is dealt with in this dissertation, in pages 118-119.

focused on the implications of ethnographic filmmaking in terms of politics of scientific knowledge production (see, for example, Weedon 1997; Moore 1996; Moore and Sanders 2006). Furthermore, my research interest in sounds and in the aural dimension of anthropological documentary films pushed me to ask the question of the *how*. How do films about anthropological subjects, or as I will name it in this research, films about the Other, produce a specific, situated knowledge? How do they manage to make sense of complex realities, cultures and events through the very selective medium of film? How are documentaries constructed and how can their audience become aware of the choices, criteria and strategies of representation deployed by the filmmaker or the anthropologist so as to be able to critically observe the power dynamics at play in the film? Finally, how is one to identify what an anthropological documentary is in terms of its 'scientific' accuracy in presenting actuality and referring to a reality that is not only performed for the camera but also embodied and experienced in the everyday world and lives of people?

The second aspect that I noticed quite soon in my anthropological academic path was that women filmmakers or camera-persons seemed nowhere to be found. Despite the fact that the number of female anthropologists has undoubtedly grown from the 1970s onwards, as far as I could glance, it seemed quite rare to encounter anthropological films made by women. Women appeared to be mainly in front of the camera lenses as filmed subjects, or as anthropologists, or as part of a research team behind the ethnographic research, but almost never actually behind the camera or as film directors. While at first I thought this to be but my very limited and situated experience, after some research in the European and North-American contexts, I understood that the phenomenon was much broader. Initially I approached the issue in terms of the inequality between sexes, thus focusing on the lack of presence and visibility of women in comparison to men. This meant pondering the question of 'where are the women in the documentary-making business?' This is an important problem and the scarcity of women in the field is a very real matter that ought to be addressed. However, this approach also entailed considering women as a somewhat uniform and oppressed group, in a manner that echoes the stance of so-called 'equality feminism,' and thus susceptible of running into the same pitfalls (Buikema and Smelik 1995, 4-7). Therefore, aware of the critiques to and the limits of this theory of equality, and being interested in the relations between anthropological film and the processes of knowledge productions at large, I soon realised that the matter at stake was much more complex. Thus my focus shifted to the question of gender, intended in a post-structuralist perspective as a concept that points not only at the differences and power relations between men and women, but also *within* men and women (Buikema and van der Tuin 2009, 2), as well as a theoretical tool that enables to critically analyse how "power, knowledge, and the constitution of subjectivity combine" (Braidotti 1998, 298) in

socio-cultural systems of representation. Therefore, I soon turned to questions such as: what is the relation between anthropological film and gender? What is the link between documentary and the hegemonic practices of inclusion and exclusions? How can anthropological films become accountable to their audience as well as useful tools for the production of knowledge and representations sensitive to gender and other cultural and social differences?

Once I saw a video that started with this sentence: "Camera is rolling. Hito, our trip to Tokyo is almost over. But I still ask myself: what is your film about?" and ended with this one: "But you consider yourself a feminist? Yes, definitely!" It was *Lovely Andrea* (2007, 30min), one of Hito Steyerl's works. Steyerl is an artist, filmmaker and scholar working at the crossroads of experimental cinema, documentary and video art. In her works the lenses of post-colonial and feminist critiques are deployed to address, manipulate, trace and re-create stories, events, images and sounds. *Lovely Andrea* departs from the search of a bondage photo of the artist that was taken in Tokyo thirty years earlier. From this main story several other reflections depart in multiple directions: the ropes of bondage and self-suspension connect with Spiderman and internet networks, the Twin Towers and war violence connect with the material life of images and their uses and abuses, the story of the artist becomes the story of her Japanese interpreter and vice-versa, the name of Andrea Wolf – murdered because of being considered member of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) – becomes the nick-name of the bondage model, the secrecy of the pornographic industry echoes the issue what is made visible and why, of what can be filmed and how. In *Lovely Andrea* bondage becomes a metaphor of censorship and desire, control and independence, masters and servants, shame and power, subjection and global connections.

Not unique in its genre, this video is however a very clear example of what I became to recognise as feminist film or feminist art-video: critical and reflexive about patriarchal gender norms, intended as both the social and the symbolic norms that regulate and reproduce the gender binary, and are the condition for culturally intelligible gendered subjects (Butler 2004, 48-52);⁵ complex and ironic in dealing with the filmic medium; aware of hegemonic discourses and of cultural and economical power imbalances; and attentive to the global and historical implications of current geo-political events. Additionally, *Lovely Andrea* uses and performs a reflection on documentary techniques. The hand-held camera movements, the question of where the filming crew is allowed and where

⁵ The concept of gender norms is critical for feminist philosophy, gender studies and queer studies, and there are several accounts and definitions of what such norms are and how they come into being. The one provided here should be considered as a working definition of the term. For a clear and more nuanced elaboration of some of the main theories on both "social norms" and "gender norms" see the full chapter of the text referenced above: Butler 2004, 40-56.

it is not, the issues of authenticity and reproduction, original images and copies, fictional stories and characters and historical events and people, make the 'documentary' element prominent in the video, although it is not the only strategy of representation used.

Lovely Andrea is then, to a certain extent, a documentary film that reflects on its own artifice. Moreover, it plays with the questions of visible and invisible, power and submission, sexuality and female bodies, economical needs and state control, disciplining and non-hegemonic codes and desires, transnational and intercultural movements of images and people, and alternative and political approaches to images and realities. In short, Steyerl's video is located at the intersection of feminist film, documentary and art. It crosses the boundaries of labels, technologies, languages and national contexts. It is a video that deploys documentary strategies – that is to say that it does not forget the real, rather it plays with the "constraint of reality" (Comolli 1999, 42) – and produces feminist effects. While Steyerl's video greatly appealed to me in terms of feminist content, this further piqued my interest to search for films that seemed to more directly touch upon each of my areas of interest.

Nonetheless, apart from the pleasure of having watched an inspiring, political, critical and powerful film, some questions also arose during my experience as a viewer of *Lovely Andrea* which have contributed to this overall research, namely: How does this video produce such feminist effects? Which aspects make this video an art-film and which a documentary? Where is the line, if one is there at all, which divides artistic practice from documentary representation? And, how is it possible to identify where the relation between politics and the aesthetics lies in feminist documentary video art? I was also alluded to the fact that, despite some examples such as Steyerl's video, in the last twenty-plus years documentary film has been predominantly absent from the arena of feminist scholarship.

The research of this dissertation springs from events and reflections such as the ones I have outlined above, if not precisely from these specific occurrences and encounters. The goal of this research, then, through the study of three films, is to bring documentary film back into the arena of feminist intervention.⁶ I intend to

⁶ In this research, I regard as feminist those approaches and matters that, both in academic and theoretical terms – broadly referred to as feminist studies – as well as in practices and actions, focus on subjects as gendered, on the relations between power, discourse and subjectivity and that have a political dimension. Additionally, I share an understanding of (feminist) politics as being "ultimately a matter of bringing about changes in the very structures of subjectivity" and in "our collective modes of relation to the environment...to our cultural norms and values [and] to our bodies" (Braidotti 2011, 74-75). Importantly, I do not wish to provide any final definition of the terms feminism or feminist. Since this task is highly problematic and definitely not the concern of this study, I intend to elaborate throughout the research, and primarily in the analysis of the films, some elements of what a feminist approach might entail, specifically in relation to documentary film.

reinterpret the notion of feminist documentary not by fixing a new normative set of rules about what it *is* or should be, rather by studying what makes a documentary feminist in terms of what a documentary *does*: the representations it produces, its effects, and *how* it engages with reality, with the filmic medium, and with the broader political milieu.

Feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology are the three domains that this study crosses and connects. The multifaceted relation between these three fields can be summarised as revolving around the debates on the intra-actions⁷ between reality, truth, representation of the Other, knowledge and power.⁸ This research explores such intricate interrelations through the analysis of three films: Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law* (2005), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) and Ursula Biemann's *Europlex* (2003). To different extents and in multiple and overlapping ways these films address the issue of how non-Western cultures and female subjects are, could or should be represented, the relation between sign and reality and the power dynamics implicit in documentary filmmaking.

The foremost questions that drive this study are the following: how do these documentaries deal with issues of power and gender, that is to say, with the relation between power, knowledge, and the constitution of gendered subject positions? How do these films negotiate the relation between sign and reality? From these, a new set of questions emerges: What can feminist studies⁹ do for documentary theory and vice versa? What can anthropological knowledge about vision and documentary tell us about what feminist filmmaking can do, that is, the effects it can produce and eventually the political changes it can trigger? Can a feminist approach to documentary films about the Other shed a new light on anthropological observation and visibility in film? And ultimately: how can a documentary produce feminist effects?¹⁰ How can a feminist approach to

⁷ Although the term intra-action is a neologism coined by Karen Barad to refer to the "relationship between the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced" and the inseparability between "observer and observed, knower and known" (Barad 2003, 814), I do not specifically use the term in this agential realist manner. Rather, the term intra-actions is employed in the context of this research to stress the intertwined, non-hierarchical and reciprocal dimension of the interconnections between the various concepts and elements studied.

⁸ Throughout this research, when referring to the relation between knowledge and power, I am invoking a Foucauldian understanding of their "mutually constitutive relation" and "how each constitutes the other to produce the truths of a particular epoch" (Hallway quoted in De Lauretis 1987, 16).

⁹ As previously mentioned, with this term I refer to that field of enquiry that explores the socio-cultural implications of the processes of knowledge production for the constructions of subjects and subjectivities, and that proposes political spaces of resistance to hegemonic discourses and promotes change (Braidotti 1994 and 2011; Buikema et al. 2011; Lykke 2010)

¹⁰ I provide a preliminary description of what I postulate these feminist effects are or could be later in this introduction. However, it is through the detailed study of the documentaries that these effects will be identified more precisely.

documentary mobilise at once our understanding of reality, fiction, politics and aesthetics? This research puts forward possible answers to these questions, concentrating specifically on the interrelations between the materiality of documentary film, reality, vision, and relationships of power between Self and Other, observer and observed, filming and filmed subjects.

Between feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology I detect a 'grey zone,' or 'gap'. It is an in-between area where labelling and clear-cut disciplinary and generic investigations are uncomfortable, a space that because of its complexity has been too often left uncharted or purposefully ignored. It is in this gap that a space is offered for a critical and affirmative, and hence "transformative" (Braidotti 2006, 8-9) and feminist understanding of documentaries as tools to produce new knowledge, alternative images, imaginaries, and ultimately "to solicit a new seeing" (Trinh 2005, 13). This is the overall goal of this research.

It is important to stress that to precisely delineate what a feminist documentary *is* would be beyond, or rather against, the intention of this study. I do not fix a new normative set of rules about what feminist documentary is or should be; nonetheless, a working definition in the context of this research is necessary. I first propose that the relation between reality and the documentary sign can be understood as one of 'haunting.' Haunting here refers to the specific indexical quality of the relation between sign and object, the manner in which the object affects or determines the sign (Peirce 1958, 8.177), or the way in which "the world presses on" the cinematic sign (Comolli 1999, 40). Borrowing and expanding upon Mary Ann Doane's definition of the indexical sign as one that is "haunted by its object" (Doane 2007b, 134), I present several examples in which the filmed reality indeed inhabits, intrudes upon, and makes itself continually present in the filmic documentary sign.

I consider feminist documentary, then, as a film that is *haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues*, namely, issues of gender, power, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, as the particular focus of this research is on anthropological feminist documentaries, these documentaries are understood as *films haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues to do with the politics of the Other and processes of Othering*.

While the overall concern of this work is to (re)open a field of enquiry, (re)focus the issues at stake, and refine theoretical tools to address them, each of the three documentaries studied provides different, partial responses to these queries. Accordingly, the research is performed through a twofold movement. I first propose a theoretical and analytical framework which enables the study of documentary film through a feminist lens. This framework is an interdisciplinary one, traversing visual anthropology, documentary film studies, semiotics, cultural studies and gender studies. Second, I present an in-depth analysis of the three aforementioned films. These films function both as sources to identify the

questions and tools necessary to approach this specific genre, and as cases to test the limits of current definitions of (feminist) documentary. They all inhabit the 'grey zone' and each of them answers my questions in specific, multiple, and occasionally overlapping ways.

The three films studied, although not unique, are nonetheless exemplary of the diverse styles and the various degrees of complexity of what I propose to identify as a kind of filmmaking, at the crossroad between documentary, art and anthropology, which has or could have feminist effects. I articulate that the feminist potential of documentary – the whole of its possible effects – is a political one, that resides in the possibility of giving testimony to marginal voices and subjectivities, of representing struggles and the material existence of Other realities, of making visible the invisible yet very material dimensions of cultural, geo-political and social power inequalities, and finally, of creating new imaginaries and knowledges. From this perspective, I illustrate how *Sisters in Law*, *Reassemblage* and *Europlex* produce different feminist effects in diverse, manifold, at times contradictory, ways. Each film is, in its own specific way, excessive. Too much or too little, they exceed labels and disciplines: either too documentary to be taken seriously by prevailing feminist film theories (*Sisters in Law*), or too feminist to be considered properly anthropological (*Reassemblage*), or too experimental to be easily labelled as documentary (*Europlex*). The notion of excess has been of central importance in feminist theory as well as in feminist artistic practice.¹¹ Excess then is a multilayered and important concept in this framework, and excessiveness is a quality that has been and can be understood and utilised in alternative, feminist and affirmative ways, as it refers to that which does not easily fit within normative categorisations and labels, and therefore upsets or points at the limits of existing hegemonic structures. It is

¹¹ In poststructuralist philosophy, particularly Derrida's (1978) and in Lacanian psychoanalytic theories, as well as in their feminist elaborations, the notion of excess is crucial. Although it has different connotations – as in the former framework it refers to the process of signification, specifically to the economy of writing (Derrida 1978, 62), and in the latter to pleasure and the processes of self-representation and the subject's experience of reality (Campbell 2004, 131) – in short it can be said that excess denotes that which cannot be signified, that "which unsettles meaning and interpretative control" (Davis 2010, 28), or that which can never be fully represented. Moreover, in these perspectives, excess is also strongly connected with notion of difference and sexual difference (Parker 2011, 54; Campbell 2004, 60-61): 'woman' functions as a mark of excess, as "something that is not said" (Kristeva 1980, 137), which cannot but be excluded from the phallogocentric systems, that transgresses social norms and therefore has a revolutionary potential (Kristeva 1980; Irigaray 1985b). Also in some anthropological theories, such as Mary Douglas', that which exceeds categorizations creates disorder and in doing so it necessarily also has a great potentiality (Douglas 1966). For what concerns the notion of excess in feminist art, suffice to recall how the notions of the grotesque and that of repetition – both deeply connected with excessiveness, and transgression – have been used by artists to subvert normative conceptions of the (female) body as well as to upset and deconstruct patriarchal artistic practices, conceptions of (female) beauty, dominant canons, and to create critical and alternative meanings, images and representations.

precisely along these lines that I propose to understand the concept of “inappropriate/d” (Trinh 1986, 9), which I have chosen to refer to the films here studied.

I deem a feminist approach to these kinds of audio-visual representations not only valuable and enriching, but also necessary. Therefore, I suggest a possible way to look at documentary film in a critical, interdisciplinary, feminist perspective, in the contemporary geopolitical and academic situation. Contextually, I demonstrate why documentary films, particularly so-called anthropological documentaries, are an exemplary site that allows tackling at once several crucial theoretical and methodological matters: issues of reality and representation, subjectivity and control, audio-visual technologies and their impact on the cultural imaginary and on the construction of the Other. To acknowledge the haunting of reality present in (feminist) documentary film – that is, an indexical relation between the real and the sign – is crucial for an analysis that takes into account the content matter as well as the construction and the materiality of the film as an audio-visual medium.

Accordingly, this research concentrates on the interconnections between the *indexical* aspects of documentary film, which I suggest as a renewed framework to identify the specificities of how documentary works and how it could be understood; *visuality* and the feminist critique of the hegemony of vision; and the *materiality* of the film. Materiality here is intended in two senses. It concerns how the film is constructed: its technologies, framing, editing, voice-over, use of realistic or fictional images and sounds, and use of different filmic strategies. Materiality also refers to the manner in which documentary film engages with bodies and with the matter of the world. With *visuality* I refer to the domain of how vision, as one of the senses, has a specific history and is therefore a cultural phenomenon that became, in Western society, philosophy and science the primary tool to ‘make sense’ of the world. Vision in its cultural understanding as a tool that has a privileged relation to reality and, therefore, vision as observation is discussed as being fundamentally linked with the production of scientific knowledge. Consequently, through feminist critiques, particularly Donna Haraway’s (1988; 1991) I elaborate on how vision is not only non-neutral or a-historical, but how it is deeply connected with social power relations and hegemonic practices: the focus shifts then from the primacy of vision to the hegemony of vision. Hence, I discuss the need to consider *visuality* in documentary film in its implications with patriarchy, Eurocentrism and processes of Othering. In other words, I elaborate on how a focus on documentary as a “technology of vision” (Haraway 1988, 587) is necessary for a feminist and critical outlook that therefore also considers documentary as a “technology of gender” (De Lauretis 1987). Finally, I propose that a study of documentary that engages with the implications of observation, the gaze, visualising technologies, situated perspectives and the limits of visibility can

reveal the political potentials as well as open new perspectives of a feminist practice of documentary film.

As stated, in this research feminist documentary theory and practice is understood as one that critically reflects on the interconnections between reality, power, knowledge production and strategies of representation. The renewed feminist approach to documentary hereby proposed is deemed to be a most needed endeavour, as I suggest that this kind of study could offer fruitful insights on, and contribute to important debates in the field of gender studies, visual studies and cultural studies at large, namely those concerning: the politics of representation, the interconnection of power and/in visual strategies, contemporary processes of Othering and the political implication of the use of (new) technologies.

The structure of this book follows as such. Chapter 1 elaborates on the interactions between feminism, anthropology and documentary and defines how these terms are to be deployed in the context of the remaining chapters. It also identifies how the relation between reality, representation, power and film can be productive to think of a feminist understanding of the links between politics and aesthetics. Finally, this chapter aims at outlining the theoretical tools used to approach and analyse the three films at the centre of this research. I will elaborate first on the importance of indexicality as a lens to study documentary film and the way the world “presses on” cinema (Comolli 1999, 40) and how documentary films perform the “pressures of the world on representation” (Gaines 2007, 19). Then I will argue for the necessity of a renewed emphasis on materiality within a semiotic framework and not in opposition to such framework. Issues of reality and language, sign and matter will be addressed alongside an elaboration on why an attention to the *how* documentary film is a necessary and fruitful approach. Next, I explore how vision and the act of looking are culturally determined, and so is the knowledge therein produced. Therefore I elaborate in why it becomes important to focus on (a critique of) the hegemony of vision in order to possibly stimulate the production of alternative images and knowledge about them.

In chapter 2, I analyse Kim Longinotto’s film *Sisters in Law*. Here I observe how the film deploys classic documentary techniques of realism that provoke affects and potential feminist effects, while at once problematically reproducing hegemonic strategies to represent the Other. Of each of the films selected for this research, *Sisters in Law* is most easily identifiable as feminist in terms of *content matter*, however such a method of representing the non-Western Other can produce other feminist concerns simultaneously. I therefore examine the tensions as well as the space for critical reflection that this documentary produces: between realism and a feminist agenda, indexical referentiality and fictional narrative constructions, claims of invisibility and political potential.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to *Reassemblage*. I show how this film by Trinh T. Minh-ha, like that of Longinotto, is also a locus of tensions and paradoxes and a liminal space where disciplines and gazes intersect, and where theoretical concepts are deconstructed and redefined. Through an analysis of the filmic language and narrative strategies I aim at revealing how and at what levels, the film engages with indexicality and with the “pressure of the world.” While I illustrate how the film produces feminist effects specifically because of the way it engages with its own materiality and filmic codes, I also examine how *Reassemblage* fails at giving voice to the women filmed. Thus, I elaborate on how the film, although it reproduces to a certain extent the power imbalances between Self and Other that it aims at deconstructing, it nonetheless proves to be an influential example of how the field of anthropological documentary is crucial to mobilise and create feminist theoretical reflections as well as spaces for political intervention.

Finally, Ursula Biemann’s video *Europlex* is considered in chapter 4. In the analysis of this video I show how the use of multiple media and filmic strategies can produce critical and alternative representations of realities, and of non-Western subjects. I elaborate on how video performs borders and not only represents them. Simultaneously, I point the attention to the limits and pitfalls of the implications associated with the manipulations that this kind of creative and artistic digital medium offer, testing the limits of fictional strategy possible in anthropological documentary. While the three lenses selected to undertake this research are deployed to observe the feminist effects this film provokes, I also propose that it is specifically in the challenges to the hegemony of vision that the political implications of documentary occur.

With this research I intend to articulate what a feminist documentary and a study of feminist documentary could be and how it could be approached. I elaborate on the interactions, tensions, limits and the overcoming of such limits in some specific examples of what I name feminist documentary films about the Other. This research sets out to prove that these films are in a ‘grey zone,’ a liminal space of difficult labelling and theoretical tensions. The films could be, and have been, regarded as being either too feminist, too anthropological, too fictional or too documentary to be considered anthropological documentary that produce feminist effects. However, I show that these three films, exemplary but not unique, reveal their specific significance, their critical, aesthetic and political importance, precisely because of their overall ‘excessiveness’: it is exactly because these three films perform and challenges all common definitions and boundaries that they should be regarded as a feminist documentary.

These films are, to borrow Trinh’s concept, “inappropriate/d” (Trinh 1986, 9). I show how they cross labels and categorisations, explore and perform borders; let themselves be *haunted by reality* without falling flat into the hegemonic pitfalls

of realism; how they imagine and represent invisible realities while pointing attention to the power of vision and visibility; how they escape rigid definitions while providing the space to redefine meanings and realities; and finally I illustrate why and how these films are determined by the social world while they can also be “transformative of that same world” (Gaines 2007, 19).

CHAPTER 1

Tools and Concepts

The question is not so much to produce a *new image* as to provoke, to facilitate, and to solicit a *new seeing*.

– Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The digital film event*, p. 13.

Feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology are the three domains that this study traverses and connects. Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law*, Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*, and Ursula Biemann's *Europlex* are examples of what this book calls feminist documentary with anthropological concerns. Accordingly, I propose a feminist approach to these kinds of documentaries, namely: one that aims at challenging dominant representations and conceptions of the Other; defies the normative and fixed implications of truth claims by offering an alternative way to study the relation between reality and the documentary film; critically looks at the hegemony of vision and the implications therein; and casts new light on the materiality of documentary film in its specificity as a genre, and as an audio-visual medium.

Between feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology, then, is a 'grey zone,' a 'gap.' Several scholars including, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Michael Renov and David Howes, have been working at the intersection of these three disciplinary fields from diverse specific angles and in different academic contexts.¹² Although their theories are the inspiration of this study, they however leave unexplored, in my reading, some facets of the specific 'feminist anthropological documentary film' node.

'Anthropological' is here intended in a general though limited sense, not so much as concerning the knowledge produced by anthropology as a discipline, but rather referring to representations – knowledges – produced about the non-Western Other. It should be noted that this is a highly specific use of the term.

¹² Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989b; 1992) worked at the crossroad of feminism, post-colonial theory, anthropology and documentary film but she abandoned a (open) critique of ethnographic film already in the early 1990s; Michael Renov's (1993; Gaines and Renov 1999) and Bill Nichols' (1991) renowned books specifically explore issues of documentary film theory and ethnographic filmmaking, refer to questions of gender, objectivity and power but do not engage with a critique of vision and its implications in power dynamics and knowledge production; anthropologists of the senses, such as David Howes (1991), instead concentrate primarily on the cultural aspects of sight and vision but do not directly focus on documentary film or take directly into account feminist theories; finally, anthropologists such as Sarah Pink (2006) or David MacDougal (2006) work in the field of documentary film, explore in depth the importance of the senses as crucial factors in the process of filmmaking as knowledge production, however, in their work, a feminist or critical reflection on the relation between power and vision is missing or scarce.

Indeed, anthropology is not solely concerned with 'other cultures' (for example: since the 1960s the anthropological gaze has turned more and more often towards Western cultures and phenomena); more importantly, anthropology as a discipline cannot be defined by its object of study, but rather by its "specific formal mode of enquiry" (Moore 1999, 2). However, for historical reasons, the study of 'other' cultures and the imaginary connected with the relation between the West and its Others (Moore 1999, 3) is tightly linked to anthropology as a science, as a set of concepts and of methods (Scott 1992). Therefore, although the films studied in this research do not comply with these "specific mode of enquiry," they are however concerned with study of (non-Western) subjects in/and culture, and can therefore be productively understood when analysed in relation to anthropological concepts, methodologies and practices of representation.

Documentary is a contested term, a "fuzzy concept" (Nichols 2001, 21), a genre with a canon and a history but without a fixed set of techniques or, for some, maybe even a misconception that should be abandoned and cancelled once and for ever from every discourse and vocabulary (Trinh 1993). There are many complex and, at times, contradictory definitions attributed to the term 'documentary,' yet in the last decades the production, both quantitatively and in variety, of so-called documentary films is quickly increasing both inside and outside the scientific sites of knowledge production. Never like in the last fifteen years has documentary as a term been so often uttered in the most diverse contexts. Television programmes, news reports and thematic channels are claiming to show 'documentaries;' on the internet hundreds of websites and online archives present documentary audio-visual materials, produced with the most varied of technologies; furthermore, specialised festivals and prizes keep appearing and attracting a significant audience all over the world.

More and more academic disciplines are critically dealing with the history and the changes of this genre and corpus of films; just as other disciplines are, more straightforwardly, using documentary images to explain, demonstrate and provide evidence of theories and practices. Much change has occurred in the field of documentary films in the period between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st Century. I consider, therefore, the processes that are affecting the production and the consumption of documentaries at different social, technological, and political levels. However, it is both necessary and useful to outline a possible working definition of documentary as it pertains to this research. Here 'documentary' is considered a film that is "haunted by its object" (Doane 2007b, 134), or haunted by reality. This entails a focus on the *materiality* of documentary as a sign, and as a system of signs. Employing a semiotic, particularly Peircian, perspective, it becomes possible to identify the specific – indexical – relation documentary film has with its referent, the 'object' in the world.

However, over the last thirty years, with a few exceptions,¹³ feminist film theory forgot documentary films. Multiple and understandable are the reasons for such an omission, which, however crucial and possibly necessary for the feminist agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, appears now to be, if not dangerous, certainly an important missed opportunity to intervene in an increasingly crucial contemporary field. But how can feminist scholars approach such a complex situation? Why should they? And, what exactly is new in the contemporary production, understanding and usage of documentary films? These are the issues I was inspired and challenged by when I first started working on documentary and on feminist accounts of it. The relation between feminism and documentary should be put into focus: how and why has this relation changed, and what is the state of it now?

Chapter 1 elaborates on the relation between feminism and documentary and defines how these terms are to be deployed in the context of the remaining chapters. Here I outline the debates this research departs from, identify the key concepts at stake when working on documentary, and introduce the core concepts that compose my methodological framework, present the main research questions the selected films stimulate, address and offer answers to. I first clarify what the 'grey zone,' or 'the gap,' is and how it came into being by providing some elements to understand the development of documentary studies, feminist film studies, and visual anthropology in the last decades. Secondly, I outline the debates within visual anthropology, followed by those in documentary film studies and feminist film theory. Next, the semiotic framework that informs the research is presented, specifically focusing on the relation between sign, reality and the real, and on some of the major discussions on mediation, technology, filmic images and reality. Here the first theoretical tool, namely the concept of index, is introduced and contextualised in its relation with documentary film to elucidate my understanding of documentary images as an *indexical* signs. Indexicality, as a concept developed by Charles S. Peirce, is generally defined as the kind of connection between a sign and its object where the two are in a "real," "existential" or "physical" relation, or in a relation of co-presence if not of contact¹⁴ (section 1.5). The other two theoretical tools, *materiality* and *visuality*, are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs (1.6 and 1.7). The chapter then concludes with a summary of the main research questions that drive this book, to be explored through the aforementioned lenses in subsequent chapters.

¹³ Noteworthy are the journals *Jump Cut* and *Screen* and some of the edited volumes in the Visible Evidence Series, namely: Juhasz and Lerner (2006), and Waldman and Walker (1999). And, more recently: Smaill (2010) and Cowie (2011)

¹⁴ This is a general and standard definition, though the topic is much more complex, as this chapter will show.

1.1 Outlining the 'gap' at the intersection of documentary film, feminist film studies and visual anthropology

First it should be noted that since the advent of audio-visual recording technologies, anthropologists and ethnographers have realised the advantages of such tools for field research, archival purposes and dissemination of knowledge. Soon enough, anthropology as a discipline had to face the complexities, implications and ambiguities of filmic recording, thus starting to interrogate the role of non-textual, and, more specifically, of visual accounts of 'other cultures' (Chiozzi 1984; Hockings 1975).¹⁵ In the late 1960s through the 1970s and 1980s, while anthropology started focusing the attention on its own processes of knowledge production¹⁶ (Leach 1966; Geertz 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986), several new branches of ethno-anthropological studies evolved, not without tensions and disagreements, within the discipline and accordingly in various university departments (Mead 1995, 3-10; Banks and Morphy 1997, 1-15; Ruby 2000, 41-66). One of these new sub-disciplines was visual anthropology, also referred to as visual ethnography or anthropology of vision. Although these terms are not synonyms, and, quite the opposite, they carry important disciplinary and thematic differences, they reflect a similar interest in the cultural, social and aesthetical dynamics involved in producing scientific knowledge with and about visual artefacts, techniques and technologies (Ruby 1996, 1345-1351; Ruby 2005).

Secondly, it should be taken into consideration that feminism has often been greatly concerned with the politics and ethics of images, and of representation more broadly (Braidotti 1994, 163), across disciplines: from art history to popular culture, from literature to history, via philosophy, semiotics and film studies.¹⁷ It is in the same decades when visual anthropology was becoming instituted, between the 1960s to the 1980s, that the relation between feminism and documentary film was officially established, and, interrupted soon thereafter. As filming technology became cheaper and more widely available, documentary films about and for women were produced for informational, propaganda, or political purposes (Juhasz 1999a, 191; Waldman and Walker

¹⁵ For a history of the relation between the discipline of anthropology and the "image-making activities" of those who are/were engaged with the anthropological project, see: Banks, Marcus, and Jay Ruby. 2011. *Made to be seen: perspectives on the history of visual anthropology*.

¹⁶ It is important to stress that this critical perspective within anthropology, this need to turn the anthropological gaze to the work of anthropological observation itself was determined, or, at least, stimulated, by the social movements of the 1960s and 70s, among which figured prominently black and feminist movements. (See: Lewin, Ellen. 2006. *Feminist anthropology: a reader* and McClaurin, Irma. 2001. *Black feminist anthropology: theory, politics, praxis, and poetics*).

¹⁷ For a general overview of the abundance of feminist approaches to images and visual culture see: Jones, Amelia. 2003. *The feminism and visual culture reader*.

1999, 5; Zimmermann 1999, 73-74). However, it was only with the so-called 'realist debate' (Kaplan 1983), characterised by suspicion towards 'realistic' cinematic strategies, that the relation between documentary and feminism entered into the theoretical and academic realm, and was subsequently acknowledged and critically analysed.

Indeed, despite the long running, widespread and important role of non-fiction video recordings for the women's movement, a critical approach to documentary film has not been a consistent concern of feminist scholars. The years between the late 1970s and the early 1990s witnessed a gap between theoretical investigations and documentary film practice (Waldman and Walker 1999, 8-11).¹⁸ Feminist film scholars 'forgot' the documentary form and focused their attention on mainstream or fiction films¹⁹ with particular emphasis given to the iconic representation of women in Hollywood movies, the star system, and the 'male gaze' within these film and issues of spectatorship and identification (for example, consider De Lauretis 1984; Doane 1987/1991; Kaplan 1983; Mulvey 1989/1975; Silverman 1988; and Stacey 1987/1994). In the meantime, many feminist activists and filmmakers kept on producing documentaries that circulated in small political circuits, far from the deconstructive anti-realist academic gaze.

Finally, it should be remembered how documentary images, films and videos populate the daily media and their mediated imaginary in and of the Western world. These images influence the way we learn about and look at other cultures, at our own society, at contemporary phenomena as well as at historical events. In the last twenty years, festivals and journals have flourished under the label of 'documentary'. Numerous academic and professional texts that examine the theory and practice of documentary-making are published every year. More and more academic and professionals' forums, art events and conferences are organised around the challenges posed by defining the concept of documentary

¹⁸ The two authors of *Feminism and Documentary* summarise this gap with Constance Penley's words (1980) stating that documentary became "a neglected area in feminist thinking about film" (Waldman and Walker 1999, 10). In their explanation of the anti-realist debate, they refer to Eileen McGarry's "Documentary, Realism, and Women's Cinema" (1975) as one of the very few feminist works to engage with documentary in that period, and to Laura Mulvey's article "Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde" (written in 1978 and published in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 1989) as one of the texts that signed the alliance between feminism and the avant-garde, a dismissal of documentary as being necessarily connected with realism and a realist aesthetic, and therefore the interruption of a consistent engagement of feminist theories with documentary. The debates on realism and anti-realism will be discussed more at length later in this chapter.

¹⁹ Exceptions to this dominant tendency are for example: E. Ann Kaplan (1982), Annette Kuhn (1982), Julia Lesage (1978) and Jane Gaines (1984). These scholars wrote important contributions to feminist film scholarship in particular and to film and documentary studies at large, but their voices were, so to say, marginal in feminist film theory. They argued either in favour of the use of realist techniques for the purpose of clarity and political efficacy, or for a new kind of documentary that would at the same time use and challenge traditional documentary forms and the realist aesthetic.

in general, and documentary film in particular. In short, I would like to stress how documentary studies, feminist film theory and visual anthropology are three domains not only concerned with shared issues (that is, the aesthetics, ethics and politics of representation) but have also undergone comparable developments in the same decades. Nonetheless the relationship between documentary and feminist film theory, as well as the one between visual anthropology and feminist studies has been one of intermittent collaboration if not of mutual myopia. Accordingly, while the films at the focus of this research are all, in different ways, at once anthropological *and* feminist *and* documentary; yet, they all reside in ‘the gap,’ in the not fully explored intersection *in-between* these domains. It is because of their complex yet liminal location that I regard these three films as belonging to a ‘grey zone.’

The films themselves selected for this research brought the concepts this book considers to the fore. In other words, it is the material that I have chosen to investigate that ‘asks’ for certain concepts and theories; it is not that case that given frameworks have been selected a priori and then applied to the analysis of the films. Interestingly, the in-betweenness of the films – in terms of subject matter, styles, genres and techniques – mirrors, or rather points at this grey zone, this space between disciplines that I have outlined and that I intend to explore. In this sense, a sort of back-and-forth dialogue takes place between the films and the tools I have chosen to analyse them with: from the study of the films the need for certain analytical and theoretical lenses emerges, and at the same time the chosen frameworks bring to the fore some specific aspects and issues of the films.

In order to better clarify this double movement, it is here useful to recall the “semiotic principle,” which means that “every interpretation produces its own signs and elicits new meaning from one and the same text” (Buikema 1999, 34). Consequently, it should be noted that in a cultural studies framework, such as that of this research, each angle of investigation, each cultural context and disciplinary approach can transform the meaning of a text, or can even contribute to creating a different text altogether. For this reason, in order to do justice to the films I analyse, this research has an interdisciplinary scope, which intersects visual anthropology, feminist theory and documentary film studies. Furthermore, concepts from semiotics, cultural studies and art criticism had to be borrowed and explored to make sense of specific aspects of the corpus of films in question. Interdisciplinarity has been discussed at length in gender studies.²⁰ Even though different scholars propose different interpretations of the concept, interdisciplinarity, from a gender studies perspective, could be summarised as

²⁰ See, for example: Buikema et al. (2011), Buikema and van der Tuin (2009), Lykke (2004; 2010), Liinason and van der Tuin (2007), McNeil (2007), Pryse (2000), Smelik and Lykke (2008), or Vasterling (2006).

that “mode of working that generates transversal dialogues...and creates an experimental space for the emergence of unexpected synergies between heterogeneous perspectives” (Lykke 2011, 142). In the specific case of this study, it allows the exploration of the complexities of the films analysed, while simultaneously creating productive theoretical tensions and doubts. This research therefore, deploys an interdisciplinary framework as I uphold that this approach forces one to always question and complicate codified disciplinary assumptions, thus possibly revealing their complicities with power, patriarchal discourses and ethnocentrism. Power is understood, in the context of this dissertation, as a multilayered and complex concept. However, the definition that Rosi Braidotti provides in the second and revised edition of *Nomadic Subjects* summarises exemplarily the matter at stake: “Power is therefore another name for the political and social currency that is attributed to certain notions, concepts or sets of meanings, in such a way as to invest them with either ‘truth value’ or scientific legitimacy” (2011, 96-97).

In a different context yet with aims that match my own, in an article that tackles at once visual culture studies, disciplinarity, and the power embedded in observation and knowledge production, Mieke Bal writes: “knowledge, itself not limited to cognition even if it prides itself on such a limitation, is constituted, or rather, performed, in the same acts of looking that it describes, analyses and critiques” (Bal 2003, 1). In other words, Bal stresses that not only is knowledge produced and performed in the act of looking, but that studies on visuality have to reflect on their own practices of looking. Therefore, if filmmaking is understood as one of the processes and techniques of looking, in order to observe and critically produce knowledge on filmmaking itself, one has to be aware of the assumptions at the basis of that observation.

If one acknowledges that any given discipline defines the rules of its specific kind of scientific observation, then they implicitly accept the unspoken assumptions which reside therein. Interdisciplinarity, then, can become the critical lens that allows an uncovering of such assumptions. Hence, the complicities between power and knowledge are addressed in this research on two levels: 1) in the choice of the object of research and the methodology used to study it, and 2) in the objects of study, the films themselves. For these reasons I consider interdisciplinarity imperative for producing a different knowledge and contributing to cultural and social change. In sum, I maintain that only a feminist, critical, interdisciplinary approach can account for the multilayered issues addressed by and in these films. The documentaries I have chosen for this research reside in the gap between visual anthropology, feminist film theory, and documentary film thus ‘ask’ for an interdisciplinary approach, therefore making them exemplary of the political potential such films can have when the

crossroads, the gap, the “space in-between”²¹ can be explored unrestrained by rigid (mono)disciplinary perspectives.

The gap is the space that brushes up against visual anthropology, documentary film and feminist film in such a way that the very interdisciplinarity of this space is charged with political potential, the potential for constructive self-reflection, for producing alternative knowledge, for refining critical conceptual tools and eventually the potential to produce change.²² To reiterate, the three fundamental concepts that emerged from the films and which I deem most appropriate to explore the grey zone are indexicality, materiality, and visuality. Although they are not unusual or innovative concepts as such in this field of study, I maintain nonetheless that a renewed understanding which takes into account their interconnections can be beneficial to a feminist reading, and eventually also to practice and use of documentary and anthropological films.

1.2 Scientific treatment of reality: from observing to filming the Other.

What is "ethnographic film"? The term itself seems to embody an inherent tension or conflict between two ways of seeing and understanding, two strategies for bringing order to (or imposing order on) experience: the scientific and the aesthetic.

– Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic film*, p. ix

The goal of an ethnographic film should be similar to the goal of a written ethnography - to contribute to an anthropological discourse about culture. As this view flies in the face of common usage, an alternative solution and one that I am increasingly leaning toward, is to accept that the term, ethnographic film, has found a particular niche in popular parlance and that it is simply easier to abandon the term altogether and describe filmic work produced by

²¹ In Chapter 3 of this research, through the study of Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Reassemblage*, the theoretical specificities and implications of the concept of “space in-between” will be examined.

²² I maintain that striving to produce change is the ultimate goal of feminism as a social movement as well as of feminist works, texts and theories. See, for example, Braidotti (1994), for an elaboration of what kind of change I am referring to, that is social change as well as change “in the very structures of subjectivity” (*ibid.* 75).

anthropologists with a more accurate phrase - anthropologically intended films.
– Jay Ruby, *Picturing culture: explorations of film & anthropology*, p.6.

Since the films discussed in this book engage with the representation of the Other, as will become clear when looking at the films more closely, and since anthropology is considered *par excellence* the discipline that studies Other cultures, in this section I elaborate on the relation between anthropology and film, specifically concentrating on the field of visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. Although the three films studied in this research are not explicitly labelled as ethnographic films, I argue that, because of their subject matter, they can be better understood in relation to anthropology. The debates that have been taking place about and around these kind of documentaries, that is, those in the field of visual anthropology, will later prove to be precious tools when observing the relation between feminism and documentary representation in general, and between practices of looking and the representation of the Other more specifically.

As previously noted, the historical origins of the discipline, rather than the contemporary developments, characterise anthropology as the discipline that studies 'other,' non-Western cultures. The origins or predecessors of (cultural) anthropology are usually traced back to late 16th century travel reports of adventurers exploring 'exotic' places, or are linked to the 17th-18th century colonial enterprises when European nations were expanding their economical and political sovereignty onto the rest of the world. It is only in the late 19th century, however, when the Western Empire was establishing itself and 'the civilising mission' was underway, that anthropology was established as a discipline. It is in the 1870s that the ethnological, comparative study of 'primitive' cultures developed into a more organic study of the human kind, an anthropology, with universalising goals departing from the understanding of Other, non-Western cultures.²³ Through this extremely short account of the origins of anthropology I only intended to stress how the scientific knowledge about humankind – and anthropology is popularly understood as the study of humankind throughout the world and over time – is directly linked to the West's encounter with, and its study of, non-Western societies. Accordingly, the history

²³ There are numerous historical overviews or introductory books to the theories and concept of cultural anthropology; see, for example Ida Magli (2001), Marvin Harris (2001), Marvin Harris and Orna Johnson (2007). For a critical exploration of the relationship between the Empire, the processes of Othering and anthropology see Johannes Fabian (1983 and 1990). The study of the Empire, the processes of Othering and the racialising discourses therein are the main concern of post-colonial scholars such as Stuart Hall (1997b and 1992), Anne McClintock (1995), and Edward Said (1994). In the context of this research it is important to stress that these authors are also specifically concerned with issues of representation and gender.

of anthropology has been critically examined by scholars such as Fabian (1983; 1990) so as to reveal the implications, if not the complicities, of the discipline with practices of colonial oppression and imperialistic discourses. Stuart Hall refers to this unequal encounter and the discourses produced therein in terms of “the West and the Rest” (Hall 1992). Along these lines, Henrietta Lidchi summarises the matter at stake writing that “using a Foucauldian perspective suggests that anthropology emerged as a distinctive type of knowledge at a defined historical moment and was inscribed with particular relationships of power” (Lidchi 1997, 186). What is left to consider, however, are the consequences of the fact that this encounter and relationship with non-Western cultures is imbued with power inequalities, not only at the economic, geopolitical and social levels, but at the level of cultural representation. It is for this purpose that the concept of the Other, as it has been elaborated by post-colonial as well as feminist scholars, proves to be crucial.

From a feminist perspective, specifically that which departs from a Lacanian conceptualization of the construction of subjectivity through the relation between Self and Other, the Other is understood as the opposite of the Self or of the ideal Subject and its content is filled according to what features the Other lacks.²⁴ This Other therefore is not only “constructed as ‘different from’ the expected norm” (Braidotti 2011, 97) but it is an imperfect copy of the ideal singular Subject (Irigaray 1995, 7), and is consequently denied full selfhood, abjected (Kristeva 1982). Difference then is understood hierarchically, as pejorative. Hence, the concept of the Other is necessarily engaged with questions of power and dominance as well as with the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally it should be stressed that the Other has also been conceptualised as being not only external to the Self, rather, the very threatening connotations of ‘otherness’ become extremely significant when recognising the ‘other in oneself’ (Kristeva 1991). When considering that this ideal Subject is connoted as “one, singular, solitary, historically masculine, the paradigmatic Western adult male, rational, capable” (Irigaray 1995, 7), then it becomes clear that the Other is a notion that engages multiples axes of difference and diverse subjectivities.

Coming back now to the field of anthropology, it can be seen how the Other in anthropology would traditionally refer to non-Western persons precisely because anthropology emerged as a discipline by the West observing and studying “the Rest” (Hall 1992).²⁵ Or, in other words, it is the non-Western world as a whole that has been constructed as Other by the West, through scholarly disciplines, cultural representations and “imaginative knowledge” (Said 1979,

²⁴ The Other has been considered in a variety of scholarly contexts. To name only a few scholars who have done so from a gender/women’s studies perspective: de Beauvoir (1989/1949); Gatens (1991); Irigaray (in all of her texts. Just to name some of the seminal works, see 1985a, 1985b); Lloyd (1984), Trinh (1989b); amongst many others.

²⁵ This can be seen, for example, in Edward Said’s famous book *Orientalism* (1979).

55). Therefore this act of anthropological observation was and is not neutral, but rather it is deeply entrenched with the history of colonialism and the Empire. It is therefore also through anthropological discourses – together with others found in biology, linguistics, philosophy and psychology, just to name a few (Said 1979) – that the Other became racialised and connoted not only in terms of difference, but in terms of inferiority. This conception of the Other then brings together issues of knowledge and representation, with issues oppression and western colonization. Furthermore, as outlined above, talking about the Other necessarily also entails talking about subjectivity and processes of subjectification. The ways in which colonial power and discourse produce certain subject positions is explored, for example, by Homi Bhabha, who discusses how the colonial man (sic) becomes “*object of regulatory power...the subject of racial, cultural, national representation*” (Bhabha 1984, 131). Additionally, feminist theorists such as Kaplan (1997) have stressed the relation between the ‘male’ gaze and the ‘imperial’ gaze and shown how, in western patriarchal cultures, the two gazes cannot be separated (Kaplan 1997, xi). In sum, a conception of the Other always includes issues of gender and sexuality, as well as of race. In other words, the Other that is constructed by western dominant discourses is always already gendered and sexualised as well as ethnicised (McClintock 1995; McClintock et al. 1997). It is because the Other is defined in terms of lack, too, that the concept is necessarily engaged with issues of power and dominance, as well as with the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

Anthropology is thus not without controversy as a discipline, and this extends as well to the visual domain. Despite the fact that visual anthropology appears to be a well-established discipline, it is astonishing to notice how little agreement – and explicit investigation – there is on the terms used to describe a cinematic, audiovisual text which deals with anthropological issues. At times, films in this discipline are called anthropological, at other times are called documentaries, and in yet other contexts they are considered television programmes (without further labels), travel films, experimental videos, and so forth. Many are the elements at stake in this labelling confusion. Those elements usually considered when defining a film as anthropological seem to have different importance depending on the approach, but usually concern the author of the film, his/her education, the subject matter, the technology used, the target or expected audience, where the film is screened and in which context, and so on (see for example: Hockings 1975; Banks and Morphy 1997; McDougall 1998; Ruby 2000; Heider 2006). According to which one of these factors is considered to be most important, the analyses and the conclusions differ, to the extent that the result is an intricate, seemingly unintelligible Babel of definitions.

Furthermore, one of the greatest issues at stake here is the question of whether reality can be expressed through the filmic medium. So as anthropology as a discipline was first considered able to achieve objectivity, in the same way

this was thought about anthropological film. For example, in the 1920s some cinematographers started using the camera on the field to produce ethnographic/sociological films. Those cinematographers “were concerned with expressing reality” (Rouch 1975, 86) through this new medium. However, very soon thereafter it appeared to be urgent and necessary to study the implications of this medium for producing knowledge or documenting reality. It was urgent because the visual medium was believed to have a direct access to reality, therefore to be able to directly and transparently represent reality. However, in the moment that filmmakers started using this medium they realised the many processes of mediation involved in this cinematographic representation, thus rendering it potentially less objective. It was questioned, then, whether objective representations of reality could be achieved through a visual medium at all. Yet contrarily, still in 1972 Walter Goldschmidt held to the claim that “ethnographic film is a film which endeavours to interpret the behaviour of people of one culture, by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the camera were not there” (in Chiozzi 1984, 13), and he is not alone in considering ethnographic film as a truthful representation of events. From the 1980s onward, however, the importance of the presence of the ethnographer/filmmaker became more and more acknowledged, and with it came the need to shift the paradigm of ethnographic filmmaking from the claims of objectivity to a reconfiguration of the *subjectivity of objectivity* (see: Clifford and Marcus 1986; Stocking 1983; Geertz 1988, among others). This is parallel to a reflexive shift that took place in anthropology as a discipline more generally. Thus, as a consequence of those debates the situatedness of the anthropologist/filmmaker became a point of attention.

This is one of the theoretical knots of anthropological filmmaking, namely the question of how to produce veridical accounts, and thus reliable knowledge about other cultures, whilst at the same time being aware of the multiple processes of selection, mediation, and manipulation at place in the filmic medium. Another problem that arose is more connected to the issue of representing the Other, however, and is of the imperialistic gaze. That is to say, the degree to which the location of the filmmaker, and therefore his gaze, (re)produces stereotypes and cultural inequalities is the point of concern. This is the question of ethnographic cinema’s relation to imperialism, nationalism, and so forth, and is also the problem of ethics in/of anthropological filmmaking. At the core of the question of anthropological film is the issue of *referentiality*: that is to say, the degree to which the anthropological documentary sign can be considered to refer to the object studied. These issues are considered at length with relation to indexicality. At this stage I have only aimed to make explicit the main concepts and problems addressed by studies on anthropological films. Now that what is at stake in an anthropological film has been established, then, the status of the genre of documentary film will be explored.

1.3 Creative treatment of actuality.

There is not such a thing as documentary. Or is there?

There is not such a thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach or a set of techniques. This assertion – as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality – needs incessantly to be restated despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition.

– Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, p. 90.

Every film is a documentary.

– Bill Nichols, *Introduction to documentary*, p. 1.

Before approaching issues such as why indexicality is a viable lens to look at documentary, or what the relation is between documentary films, reality, and knowledge about the Other, it is necessary to elaborate on the possible working definition of documentary. In many different circumstances I found myself confused while reading, watching, or listening to scholars, film critics or journalists discussing what they define as a documentary film. The word documentary seems to label many different phenomena, too many, to the extent that it becomes the key word used when someone wants to claim and prove the truthfulness and the unquestionable authenticity of a text (films, photographs, written records, and so forth). As a result, it tends to become an empty word with no meaning at all.

Documentary is/not a name²⁶

‘Documentary,’ in the modern understanding of the term, not as an adjective but as a noun, refers to a specific genre of films. Since when Grierson in 1926 devised a new use for this word when commenting upon Flaherty’s film *Moana* (1926) in the *New York Sun*, ‘documentary’ has been used in different contexts and periods as a label to define the most diverse films. It is now a sort of umbrella term to identify a highly heterogeneous corpus of filmic representations. But what are the common elements that characterise such films? In what sense are documentaries different, if they are, from other genres of films? It would be virtually impossible to summarise here the many definitions and schemes elaborated by scholars over more than seventy years to shed light on the very qualities of this significant and almost ungraspable field of audio-visual representations. It is nevertheless important to strive for a useful working

²⁶ This is also the title of an article Trinh T. Minh-ha published in *October* (Spring, 1990).

definition in order to understand the changes within and the increasing value attributed to this genre of cinema, and consequently to appreciate the reasons and the limits of the feminist critiques.

What I want to specifically focus on are those different genres (or sub-genres) of documentary films which deal with the representation of 'other cultures,' because the films selected show Otherness, though this is not the only reason. The reasons why I concentrate on these kind of films are twofold. Firstly, because I am an anthropologist myself and I had the occasion to observe how 'ethnographic films' are approached and used within this academic discipline; secondly, because I believe this type of film can be a privileged strategic site to examine the relations between the uses of cinematic technologies, processes of Othering, and the interconnections between power dynamics and economical and geopolitical factors. For the sake of clarity it is worthy to mention that other types of non-fiction cinema include, among many: historical films, propaganda films, network news magazines, reality series, journalistic enquiries, independent films, travelogues and naturalistic films. It is also true that, to different degrees, many of those films deal with the Other, but in less apparent and codified ways.

With 'other cultures,' according to the dominant Eurocentric tradition, I intend 'other than the West,' non-First World, or 'sub-cultures' and 'subaltern' traditions within the West (or otherwise: liminal, rural, exotic, primitive, and so forth, in line with the elaboration on the Other as seen above). Such films are commonly labelled as ethnographic or anthropological films, in the broader understanding of those two terms. Following the feminist and postcolonial conception, I regard those films as documentaries that represent 'the Other.' Particularly, I consent with Trinh Minh-ha's approach and line of argumentation when she states that "to raise the question of representing the Other is to reopen endlessly the fundamental issue of science and art; documentary and fiction; universal and personal; objectivity and subjectivity; masculine and feminine; outsider and insider" (Trinh, 1989). The Other is understood as the counterpart to the Self, the counterpart of the subject of knowledge. In this sense, following from a feminist perspective that criticises how, in the patriarchal knowledge tradition, the Self, the subject of knowledge, is a white/ male/ western/ heterosexual/ well-educated/ able-bodied/ rational/ adult person;²⁷ dealing with filmic representations of the Other becomes, to me, a feminist concern and urge.

Documentary is generally defined as a non-fiction genre, as "one of the three basic creative modes in film, the other two being narrative fiction and experimental avant-garde" (Ellis and McLane 2005, 1). The high-quality and informed thematic research on this genre, often with seemingly inconsistencies

²⁷ See the above footnote on the Other in gender studies scholarship for instances of these characteristics of the Subject/Self.

and apparent contradictions within and among them, define documentary in terms of its specific characteristics as 'distinct from' or 'opposed to' other film types. That is, its definition is usually inferred negatively. Alternately, the features typically taken into account to describe, give a historical account of documentary films and classify them into sub-genres are: the filming or filmed subjects, the purpose, the form, the production methods and technologies used, the experience they offer to their audience, the aesthetic mode, the financial system and the commercial purposes, the intellectual content and the academic context of its production and employment.²⁸

Characteristic of documentary is that its filmed subjects are not trained actors but 'real people' in their 'real environment,' or better, that its subject matter is *actuality*, actual events and people in their everyday experience and lived world. Said otherwise, what differs between fiction and non-fiction films is "the extent to which the referent of the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen" (Renov 1993, 7). Documentary, supposedly, holds a certain kind of 'less mediated' connection with reality or, at least, it retains a certain degree of realism in the form of its representation.

In the last two decades, in the theories and histories of documentary film, all these definitions which involve concepts such as 'reality' and 'realism' have been strongly criticised and, nowadays, such definitions are never straightforwardly shared or inertly acknowledged, especially considering the 'realist debate' (which will be done further shortly). In academic writing the concepts of reality and realism, of facts as opposed to fiction, of Truth in relation to power (Foucault 1980) and as opposed to meanings, have been amply criticised and deconstructed over and over by theorists. Nevertheless, in the vast majority of documentaries made and seen the impact of those theories is minor. The public understanding of documentaries is still that they are means to inform, to describe; documentaries are typically seen to have the 'capacity of observing and selecting from life itself,' they photograph 'the living scene and the living story,' portray 'real people' and real events 'as if the camera were not there.' As Trinh puts it, this notion of documentary "sets a value on intimate observation and assesses its worth according to how well it succeeds in capturing reality on the run, 'without material interference, without intermediary'" (Trinh 1991, 33).

It is important to notice that this common conception is also deeply connected with the highly commercial logics behind the production and distributions of such films. Bill Nichols (2001) notices that the institutional and economical framework of documentary needs to assume a certain clarity and simplicity. It takes documentary images "as visible evidence of the nature of a

²⁸ See, for example: Renov 1993; Nichols, 1991, 2001; Ellis, Mclane, 2005; Grant, Sloniowski 1998; Heider 2006; Ruby 1996.

particular part of the historical world,” implying that “documentaries achieve direct, truthful access to the real.” Because of the perceived ability of documentary to have truthful access to the real, this is the primary attraction to this form, and therefore the reason for the public appreciation and the consequent economical return (Nichols 2001, 24-25).

Processes of change in documentary production and consumption

The elements that partake in the process of change in the production and appreciation of documentary films are several and intertwined. For the sake of the analysis they can be distinguished into categories of technological changes, geopolitical changes and economical changes. To consider technological advances: at the end of the 1950s the introduction on the market of 16mm cameras, and afterwards of the Video8 and the Hi8 devices, changed the way of shooting documentary films (Nichols 1991, 2001). The so-called handycams were lighter and far more manageable than the old 35mm cameras: this ‘simple’ fact brought along a series of crucial consequences. It became easier to carry those devices on almost every part of the planet, the filmmaker could really be ‘inside’ the action and among the people filmed; accordingly the content and the aesthetic form of those films changed. The geopolitical dimension comes into play at this time as well: this is the period of the Direct Cinema movement in the US and of the Cinéma-vérité in France (Winston 1995; Jacobs 1979); this is also the period when ethnographic documentary films and their theories started flourishing. Consequently, it was between the 1950s and the 1970s that terms such as fact and fiction started to be questioned and redefined.

To return to the technological advances: the middle of the 1990s saw the wide diffusion of digital technologies. DV cameras and, afterwards, mobile phone cameras and software to edit films on the personal computer all became readily available. Those devices declined in cost – an economical change – and internet quickly turned out to be one of the privileged means to share, archive, show, but mainly sell, documentary films. A milestone that marks a shift in the contemporary process of change in documentary-making was the media response to the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in the US. Hundreds of people with video-cameras and mobile phones taped the attack itself, and many others recorded their experiences and impressions in the following days and months. No previous event had been recorded by so many different cameras, people and perspectives (Ellis and McLane 2005, 335); furthermore, those recordings could not be controlled or effectively limited by anyone. One outcome of this impressive amount of footage was the HBO film *In Memoriam: New York 9/11/01*. What happened on that 11th of September in terms of production of ‘documentary’ images is astonishing but not surprising; it is just the tip of the iceberg of a phenomenon that is an extraordinarily characteristic of the everyday life of the contemporary western world.

Digital technologies mean also possibly infinite copies and reproductions; so as easier modification, editing and 'falsifications' of the original footage. Indeed, never before has the issue of originality, forgery and copyright been as central as in the last ten years. However, though it is certainly true that technological changes influence, shape, and are encouraged by new modes and aesthetic forms of filmmaking, I find it reductive to think of an almost deterministic correlation between new technologies and new documentary styles, as often happens in some 'new media' theories. I will offer an example of the persistence of certain attitudes in anthropological filmmaking, despite the dramatic change in size, price and technique of the camera used. As cited above, in 1972 Walter Goldschmidt wrote that ethnographic film endeavours to interpret the behaviour of people by filming them doing precisely what they would have been doing if the cameras were not present. More than thirty years after, and past many technological changes, British filmmaker Kim Longinotto, during a radio interview for Channel 4 in 2006, said of her style of filmmaking: "you become very passive and very reactive...and you kind of lose your ego a bit... and people often completely forget you're there." The issue of the 'invisibility' or 'transparency' of the filmmaker is still one of the most debated battlegrounds in documentary theory, and one of the main sites where the detachment between theorists and practitioners emerges strikingly. Moreover, the fact that Longinotto supports and reproduces such claims is certainly problematic also from a feminist perspective, as will become clear when considering some of main feminist approaches to documentary, in the following section. Contrarily, John Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1933) seems to be still appropriate, shared and acceptable after more than eighty years.

The geopolitical level is similarly intertwined with the economical aspects of documentary making, and of course both are directly connected with the kind of technologies available. In the 1990s the market became global: international co-production or co-financing became the keywords in the documentary field; at the same time, low-budget productions could be seen in every wired corner of the world, in the cinema or via internet. The innovations in satellite construction are the apex of the interconnection between the geopolitical, the economical and the technological dimensions. Satellites, appearing in the 21st century as devices to track and control migration transits through national borders, brought to the highest degree the notion of disembodied vision and of visual control in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1977). Broadcasting corporations, security agencies and national states all contribute to and benefit from satellite recordings. In this vein, some video artists who work at the crossroad of documentary and art, critically and explicitly included such 'disembodied' images in their works, including Ursula Biemann in *Remote Sensing* and *Europlex*.

Nevertheless, so as a globalised market does not at all mean democratic distribution of wealth or evenly available resources and power, as such the digital divide is an important element to always consider when talking about accessible production techniques and widespread circulations of documentaries. Accordingly, the main centres of ethnographic documentary production are, at the moment, still well established in the US, in Canada and in Europe. The sources of knowledge production through documentaries remain - with the few exceptions of some experiments like the so-called 'native films and media' - in the hands of multinational media corporations.

These multifaceted changes occurred at the turn of the century, influencing directly or indirectly the production of documentary; they shaped the habits, the perception of the world and the aesthetic taste of the viewers. The market is already developing strategies to benefit from the mounting interest in this film genre, which begs the question: what kinds of theoretical and methodological tools have been, or still need to be refined and reinvented to recognise these phenomena? To explore these questions I am taking on board Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1933) in conjunction with the previously mentioned working definition of documentary, in order to avoid reproducing the conception of documentary film as intent upon displaying objective truths about, in the context of anthropological films, non-Western Others.

1.4 Feminist film theory VS feminist documentary

The feminist critique of antirealism is a way of conserving the baby of vocalized struggles while draining out the bathwater of pseudotransparency.

- Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, *Feminism and documentary*, p. 13.

Feminists started producing documentary and Newsreel films (Zimmermann 1999, 73-76) and articulating critical insightful reflections on 'realist techniques,' as early as in the 1970s. Afterwards, in the late 1990s and in these first years of the 21st century, feminist critiques and reflections specifically on the genre of documentary film had been sporadic, underestimated, and surely absent from broader public debate; it was only in 1999 that the first and only anthology of older and newer essays on feminism and documentary was published.²⁹ One of the reasons for this relative absence can be found in the approach towards documentary that eminent feminist scholars developed in the 1970s and in the

²⁹ Waldman and Walker (1999).

1980s. This perspective can be roughly summarised as the ‘feminist realist debate,’ and it held extensive consequences for the future developments of feminist film studies.

Despite such a name, as Alexandra Juhasz argues (1999, 214), only the position of one side of this debate has been widely circulated, thus becoming greatly influential: the ‘anti-realist’ side. Characteristic of the ‘anti-realist’ stand in the realist debate is/was a suspicion towards realistic cinematic strategies. It followed the structuralist, semiological criticism that signifying practices, having a hegemonic shaping function and being complicit and produced by the ‘ideology of gender’ (De Lauretis 1987), “are in fact all we can ever ‘know’” (Kaplan 1983, 130). From the assumption that there is no knowable ‘reality’ outside signifying practices, feminist film theorists such as Claire Johnston inferred that the cinema vérité style was dangerous for feminists, since it used a realist aesthetic embedded in the capitalist and patriarchal representations of reality. Accordingly she argued that “any revolutionary must challenge the depiction of reality” (Johnston 1973). This kind of critique focused the attention on the ‘language,’ the form of such films. How films were constructed became a crucial feature to pay attention to, since cinematic representational strategies could shape subject positions, produce and reproduce power inequalities and patriarchal oppressions.

All of this is not to say that there are no recent important feminist publications on this theme;³⁰ rather, I argue that there is not a strong critical up-to-date discussion and, consequently, the circulation of the few texts remains limited to specialised academic fields such as women’s studies, as well as some ‘open-minded’ departments of visual anthropology and film/cinema studies. Conversely, the actual production and distribution of documentary films made by women (and feminists) is increasing even though, interestingly and not surprisingly, the availability of those films is still limited and requires a certain degree of tenacious exploration. Furthermore, even if I believe this anti-realist approach to be somewhat too simplistic and not constructive or efficient anymore, I deem precious the emphasis those theorists put on the ‘how,’ on the filmic apparatus, rather than solely on the content of the film, the ‘what.’ The exclusive focus on the content, the subject matter of the film is, instead, one of the limits I see still nowadays in many theories on ethnographic film.

A voice supporting realism belongs to Alexandra Juhasz. In her article, “They said we were trying to show reality” (1999), she engages with the ‘realist debate’ and specifically with Kaplan’s article “The realist debate in the feminist film.” In this article, Kaplan states that “realism, as a style, is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old

³⁰ Exemplary is the book edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, *F Is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, 2006; as well as academic journals such as *Jump Cut* and *Screen*.

consciousness" (Kaplan, 1983: 131). However, Juhasz strongly challenges the assumption that all 1970s realist feminist documentaries were 'naïve;' thus, she criticises the theory according to which realism is seen as intrinsically complicit with patriarchy, and masking the production of meaning. She reclaims the importance of making feminist realist films, stressing a potential positive political value of such films: a potential I also perceive.

I do not necessarily think that Kaplan's argument sterilely over-generalises the understanding of the terms realism and documentary, though. Even if her approach has its limits insofar as it ultimately rules out realism as a possibility of feminist documentary, I consider her work important nonetheless, as she opens up a discussion on complexities and contradictions peculiar to this genre, such as the perceived connections between the "politics of truth" (Foucault 1997), patriarchy, and representation of the Other, and how the genre is often complicit with these factors. Equally, I deem Juhasz's proposition interesting and valuable in some senses, as she stresses how realist documentaries are more generally accessible because of their standard language, so they may reach out to provoke instances of political and cultural change more easily, and to a wider audience. I do not read the two perspectives as reciprocally exclusive and conflicting, however. Furthermore, positive of this 'realist debate' for my research is the emphasis it places on the cinematic apparatus, the attention it pays to the style of filming, and the accent it puts on the very bodily implications intrinsic in the act of filming.

Post-colonial feminist filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha's article "Documentary Is/Not a Name" (1990), provides further inspiration here. Trinh asserts that "A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction" (1990, 89). Thus, revealing the artifice becomes crucial. In this sense, a feminist approach to documentary can make possible the ability to uncover and address the risks inherent to the fact/fiction dualistic view. It can also help casting some light on the fictional elements that are always intrinsic to every documentary, especially the construction of a narrative and assemblage of images and sounds, thus problematising and overcoming the biases which link documentary, facts, reality and truth. In sum, this approach entails deconstructing the "aesthetic of objectivity" (Trinh 1993, 94) and pointing the attention to "documentary as a technology of truth" (Trinh 2007, 121). However, even though documentaries usually contain these standard fictional elements, the dominant or popular understanding of documentary remains that they are non-fiction films. Indeed, especially in the field of ethnographic filmmaking, overtly fictional strategies (such as very fast editing, non-diegetic soundtracks, animation, computer generated imaging and digital layering,³¹ just to mention a

³¹ These examples of 'fictional' techniques have not been coincidentally chosen. They are some of the strategies used in Biemann's video *Europlex* which is analysed in this research.

few) which go beyond the standard fictional elements mentioned above, are still looked at with suspicion if they are not dismissed altogether.³² However, by focusing on the documentary artifice, one is able to reflect on the medium itself, to be aware of representation as representation.

Indeed, focusing on the artifice, and uncovering the processes of mediation, interpretation and creative treatment at play in documentary does not mean denying the specificity of documentary film as representations of reality, different from fiction film. In my interpretation, there need not be a dismissal of documentary, where it would then follow that all films are fictional, and thus documentary is nothing else but a different genre of fiction film. On the contrary, in a feminist perspective addressing the artifice means reflecting on the medium, on the specific workings of documentary representations; that is to say, with Trinh's words again, paying attention to the "cultural, sexual, political inter-reality of the filmmaker as subject, the reality of the subject film and the reality of the cinematic apparatus" (Trinh 1988), an ability that is invaluable to the feminist approaching documentary film, and one which is not undermined by documentary's fictional elements.

Subsequently, once the subjective, creative, fictive and canonical aspects of documentary film as a genre are acknowledged, its "technologies of truth" (Foucault 1980; Miller 1998) revealed, its implication with patriarchy, ethnocentrism and the hegemony of vision exposed, then the question becomes: what is it that makes documentary film different from other kinds of films? Where is such a specificity to be found? I suggest that the issue to address here must be the question of reality. However, I intend to focus not on reality in the sense of realism or resemblance, since 'realism' is but one of the possible techniques and styles of documentary, and a highly problematic one from a feminist perspective. By applying a semiotic framework I am instead going to concentrate on the problem of referentiality as the defining feature of feminist documentary film (Gaines 1999, 5). In the following section the concept of the

³² It can be argued that this common conception of ethnographic documentary is somewhat shaken by two new technologies. The first, not that new anymore, is digital video, which brought with it questions of authenticity related to the malleability of the medium (images and sounds can be easily manipulated and the traces of these manipulations are invisible). Although the arrival of digital cameras and digital editing technologies has had a great impact on anthropological filmmaking and led to rethink questions of aesthetic as well as ethics in ethnographic film (see for example MacDougall 2001); it also had a sort of backlash effect: the reiteration and defence of those non-fictional criteria that were the warranties of scientificity in analogue documentaries. The second, and very recent, technological developments in the field are the web-based, digital, non-linear, interactive, video databases and editing platforms. The specific characteristics of this medium and its new filmic storytelling technologies surely demand a thorough reshuffling and reconsideration of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. The debate however has just started, so the outcomes are yet to be seen. For example, a discussion on these issues took place at the last *Visible Evidence* conference (New York, August 11-14, 2011).

index will be mobilised to identify what makes documentary different from fiction film and, consequently, to explore its specific political potential as a film that is haunted by reality.

1.5 Documentarity by contact? Retracing the indexical bond

Index is a term and a concept that features often in film studies, its alternate fortune depending not only upon the scholars who explored it, and their historical and disciplinary locations, but on the meaning attributed to the concept itself. Tracing an exhaustive genealogy of the concept of index in film theory is beyond the scope of this research. Yet, I wish to outline some of the understandings and misunderstandings of this concept in the context of visual studies. The aim is to delineate a definition of *index* and *indexicality* that is specific to documentary film and that allows for an understanding of documentary *as documentary*; that is to say, a notion of the index that enables a conception of documentary as being both a creative mediation of reality (a film), as well as a sign that has a privileged relation with reality, a relation of contact and continuity. It is this indexical relation between the sign and its object, between sign and reality, which I maintain is specific to documentary as opposed to fiction film. Therefore what is at stake in this discussion of indexicality is the relation between representation and reality, between sign and referent and issues of mediation and technology.

It should be mentioned that the use of a semiotic framework to work on documentary, and the consequent assimilation of documentary to the realm of sign has been criticised as being reductive of the richness and specificities of the medium. The critiques about approaching (documentary) films as signs usually draw their arguments from André Bazin's 1945 article "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1967). Tom Gunning, for example, elaborates his argument about photography, through Bazin's theory, stressing how "the photograph exceeds the functions of a sign and that this indeed is part of the fascination it offers" (Gunning 2004, 48). This same critique is applicable to (documentary) film as well since the indexical nature of film has "almost always (and usually exclusively) been derived from its photographic aspects" (Gunning 2007, 29). Specifically, it is Bazin's "'magical' understanding of photographic ontology" (Gunning 2007, 33) and the idea that a photography "creates an aesthetic world" rather than providing a substitute for it (*ibid.*), which validates approaches to film which go beyond the semiotic perspective. Although these theoretical positions are well respected and several other approaches to documentary have proven to be fruitful and challenging, I however propose to take these critiques to semiotic and indexical frameworks in an attempt to

redefine what indexicality might do for documentary, rather than moving away from documentary altogether.

The American scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce is considered one of the founding fathers of semiotics as a science of signs and signification, together with linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Index is one of the three types of signs that Peirce defines as belonging to the category of “signs in themselves.”³³ Within this category, Peirce subdivides signs into icon, index and symbol, “the most fundamental division of signs” (Peirce 1958, 2.227-302). Indexes are those signs founded on a “physical” or “existential” relation with their referent,³⁴ a relation of co-presence if not of contact. This is how the index is commonly defined by those who take the Peircian concept as a starting point for their work while not necessarily exploring all the nuances of his definition (Krauss 1977; Didi-Huberman 2009).³⁵ However, reading Peirce’s texts directly, some other characteristics appear to be peculiar to the index. Although they do not contradict this common definition, they definitely make it more multilayered, specifically highlighting the complexities of how this “physical relation” is to be understood. It should be noted that there is not a common agreement among semioticians who study Peirce’s conception of the index. In other words, not only his own different definitions of the concept seem at times contradictory, but the interpretations of Peirce’s texts are also not univocal. Rather than diving into the different readings of the index, which encompass all various levels of the semantic process, I will focus on some of the aspects of the notion that I consider relevant for this study of documentary film.³⁶

To recognise how Peirce intends the referent, and therefore what the indexical relation between sign and object entails, one specific aspect of his theory should be recalled. Albeit not always in a clear and univocal way, in *Collected Papers* (1958), the huge text in six volumes that includes most of Peirce’s lectures and unpublished materials written between 1931 and 1935, Peirce distinguishes between the Dynamic Object and the Immediate Object: the first being the experiential datum, the object-in-the-world, the referent, unknowable in itself, and the latter being the effect of the Dynamic Object on the sign, the sum

³³ The category of “signs in themselves” is one of the three main criteria of classification Peirce identifies.

³⁴ At this stage of the argument, although the concept has many meaning and interpretations in different semiotics frameworks, with ‘referent’ I mean the object, ‘the thing’ in the world, the specific reality the sign refers to.

³⁵ I do not claim to know Peirce’s theory in any exhaustive way, given that that is even possible; far from it, I am not a semiotician nor a Peircian expert. What I wish to do in this study however is to go back to some of the explanations of the index that Peirce himself provides, to discover how the concept has been used and simplified by various scholars in the last decades, and to then propose that the concept still has a potential and that it is worth being revisited rather than abandoned.

³⁶ The facets of the definitions concerning the Interpretant, for example, are not going to be analysed in this context.

of the attributes of the object-in-the-world made pertinent by the sign (Marmo and Violi, unpublished data, 53). Taking on board the (not always clear) distinction Peirce makes between Dynamic and Immediate Object, I would stress that documentary film images and sounds are indexical signs because they can be understood as pertaining to the former: they are signs that engage, have a relation with the Dynamic Object, with the object-in-the-world. Otherwise phrased, it can be said that “indexicality designates the presence of the camera and sound-recording machinery at the profilmic event, which in turn, guarantees that the profilmic really did exist in the past” (Renov 1993, 85). This definition, however, is not enough to account for the specificity of documentary and requires a further condition. Indeed, it could be disputed that cinematographic images in general, and therefore fiction films too, could be understood as having an indexical bond with their objects, objects fabricated for the camera, yet objects-in-the-world. For this reason I would propose to refine this definition of indexicality by adding that the object (an actual object, event or situation for that matter), the historical referent, of the (documentary) indexical sign is, or *refers to* an actual object that exists or existed in actuality and that has not *solely* been created for the camera. It is crucial to stress that such object might also *refer to* an actual object that existed *also* prior to any fabrication, that is to say that the object “was likely to exist at a specific time, in a specific place” (Moran 1999, 270). In this way it is possible to think of the object of the documentary as a material reality that has or had an independent ontological existence even though it might have not entered in direct contact with the recording device and even though it might have been – to a certain extent – fabricated or modified for the sake of filming process.

Accordingly, degrees of mediation and manipulation can be taken into account without dismissing the documentary specificity of the indexical sign. This aspect of my conceptualisation of indexicality will be put into use when analysing *Reassemblage* and *Europlex* (chapters 3 and 4), two films that could be labelled as being too fictional to be considered documentary. Instead, by deploying this working definition of the object of the documentary indexical sign, I shall demonstrate that both films are documentaries because their object directly or eventually *refers to* an actual object that existed *also* prior to any fabrication for the film. Although the status of reality remains ambiguous in Peirce’s theory, in *Collected Papers* (1958) the object – the Dynamic Object – can be read as being almost synonymous with reality.³⁷ I will return to the discussion about how to understand this reality and the relation between sign and reality in the next section, when elaborating on the materiality of the sign and more specifically on the relation of documentary with material-reality. For now, it is

³⁷ For example, Peirce writes that the dynamic object is “the reality which, by one means or another, comes to determine the sign’s representation” (1958, 4.536).

necessary to focus on what is the particular connection between sign and object that makes a sign be considered an index.

Peirce defines the index as a sign that represents its object/s independently of any resemblance to it, only by virtue of a real connection (Peirce Edition Project 1998, 460-461); “a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it” (Hardwick and Cook 1977, 33); “a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object” (Peirce Edition Project 1998, 291-292); “something which, without any rational necessitation, is forced by blind fact to correspond to its object” (Peirce 1958, 7.628); a sign that “may simply serve to identify its object and assure us of its existence and presence” (Peirce 1958, 4.447); for instance, “a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole” (Peirce 1958, 2.304). Moreover, he states that “the index asserts nothing; it only says “There!” It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops” (Fisch et al. 1980, 5:162-163). Finally and somehow encompassing some of the other definitions, Peirce writes that indices may be distinguished from other signs, or representations because they have “no significant resemblance to their objects,” and they “direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion. But it would be difficult if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality” (Peirce 1958, 2.305). This last statement is crucial to keep in mind when considering filmic signs and their complexity; they indeed present indexical qualities as well as iconic and symbolic ones.

From these definitions different scholars have identified sub-categories, types of indices. Doane for example focuses on the two kinds of index, which follow more directly from the two main aspects described by Peirce’s classification: index as trace or imprint, and index as deixis (Doane 2007b, 136). The first is the mould with a bullet-hole, and the second the sign that forcibly directs our eyes towards an object. My elaboration of indexicality in documentary film follows from her theorisation. Before elaborating further upon what different kinds of indices pertain to documentary, it is necessary to stress why the index is relevant when talking about (documentary) film.

Indexicality has long been considered a peculiar aspect of cinema on account of cinema’s technological photographic process (for example: Manovic 2001, Metz 1985; or see Hainge 2008 for an overview), at least until the advent of digital technologies. Let us, for now, not be concerned with the digital, as it will be elaborated in Chapter 4 in relation to *Europlex*. If the index is that sort of sign that has a physical connection with the referent, then cinematic images fit into this category by virtue of the process through which an object – the term now used in its common understanding of what Peirce would call the object-in-the-world – enters in contact with the photochemical support of the film: light reflects on the object, it reaches the camera lens, and is imprinted on the film

stock modifying the chemical structure of the light-sensitive area. In this sense, quite straightforwardly, the film, understood as an index, “touches the real” (Doane 2007b, 140). Cinema therefore requires a moment when the object and the camera, with its film plate, are in the same place at the same time. The object, so to speak, touches the film: there is a physical relation of continuity between the object (the referent) and the sign (the cinematic image). Otherwise put, in Peirce’s terms, the Dynamic Object affects the sign, via the Immediate Object, thus determining a Representamen – which still requires an Interpreter to complete the semiotic process – that has a specific “existential relation” with the Object: the indexical sign has and requires a “real connection” with the Object (Peirce 1958, 2.283-287). Here the indexical quality of cinema seems to refer mainly to the index as trace.

This has been the paradigm of cinema in general and of documentary film as a subcategory or genre. The indexical value of documentary has long been considered the warranty of its authenticity and adherence to reality, or actuality (see for example, Nichols 2010, 34-36; Renov 1993, 95). Bill Nichols for example talks about “the special indexical bond between image and historical referent” (Nichols 1991, 21), and several of the contributions in the renowned book *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Gaines and Renov 1999) deal with this topic. The matter at stake is summarised in the introduction to that book by stating that “the defining edge that documentary has over fiction film is the edge of indexicality” and that the question now is to either revise or abandon the concept of indexicality (Gaines 1999, 6). However, as previously mentioned, this characteristic of documentary, its indexical value, has traditionally been deduced from the cinematic aspect: the photographic recording process. In other words, indexicality is crucial to documentary but is not always seen as specific to it; rather, it pertains to cinema as a whole, as a technique and as an apparatus, thus comprising fiction and non-fiction films. Needless to say, this overlapping of usages and definitions creates confusion, which becomes even greater when the indexical dimension of cinema started to be considered obsolete by the introduction of digital cameras and other non-analogue technologies (such as x-ray photography, satellite imaging and computer animation) in the field of audio-visual representations. This is the main aspect of the concept of index that I intend to address and refocus: what is specific to documentary film that allows us to talk about the “special indexical bond” between sign and reality?

As already mentioned, the indexical dimension of cinema has been dismissed or ignored by most film theories in the last twenty years. Several reasons might be behind such a move: either because of a shift of attention from the film itself – the film as text – to the broader cultural context (Stuart Hall 1997a; Kellner 2002); or because of a growing scepticism towards semiotic frameworks or analyses with the so-called crisis of representation in art and

media particularly in the 1970s and 1980s;³⁸ or because of the equation of the indexical with claims of realism, hence with ideology (as in the already explained feminist film theories of the 1970s); or because the advent of technologies that made the physical relation between sign and referent more and more unnecessary, or so perceived, or uncertain³⁹ (Mitchell 1992, Moran 1999, Landesman 2008). In all these diverse cases, however, one common concern seems to be at the source of the rethinking of indexicality, “the vexed issue of referentiality in representation, a concept subjected to a massive attack from the 1960s on” (Doane 2007a, 6). Whatever the reason, the index has mostly been set aside as a useful concept for studying films. With this I do not intend to say the concept has disappeared altogether from film studies. Nonetheless, it has increasingly become an uncomfortable term, often referred to or hastily defined in order to rule it out of the methodological framework of analysis, rather than to prove or disprove its efficacy. In the last few years, however, the concept seems to be coming back and, importantly, in feminist film and media studies: one complete issue of the journal *Differences* was dedicated to indexicality in 2007 (Vol 18:1); prominent scholars have given new interpretations to the concept of index, such as Laura Mulvey, who connects indexicality with time and memory in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), and Doane in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (2002); while new approaches to the index have been elaborated by researchers such as Laura Marks, who reclaims the importance of indexicality for “intercultural cinema” (2000).

I maintain that the notion of indexicality became mostly obsolete and was highly criticised because it was understood and applied too literally, as a relation of “physical” contact *only*. Re-reading Peirce’s definitions might instead offer a more nuanced and useful interpretation of the concept. More importantly, along the lines of the above-mentioned feminist scholars, I suggest that identifying the indexical specificity of documentary film, therefore claiming the existence of a bond between documentary representation and reality, can disclose the political potential of this genre of films. In short, this feminist political potential of documentary is the possibility of giving testimony to marginal voices and subjectivities, of representing struggles and the material existence of Other realities, of making visible the invisible yet very material dimensions of cultural, geo-political and social power inequalities, and finally, of creating new imaginaries and knowledges. In short, I intend to make mine Doane’s invitation to engage with the “politics of the index” (Doane 2007a, 4) and explore “the

³⁸ For an account of this crisis see Nöth 2003. I will address this issue in the following section when discussing materiality as a theoretical tool to study documentary.

³⁹ The uncertainty in this case lies in the fact that, given the high degree of possible manipulation of digital video, it is hardly possible to be assured that a ‘contact’ between the camera and the object, the sign and the referent, has ever occurred.

viability of indexicality as a concept, an expectation, and a crucial cultural and semiotic *force*" (*ibid.* 6).

For these reasons I propose an understanding of indexicality as particular of and relevant to documentary film: the index is a kind of sign that is "haunted by" the object. The index is thus understood in a threefold way: as a sign that is in a relation of physical contact and co-presence in space and time with its object; as a trace that entails a previous temporal contact or existential connection with the object; as deixis, which occurs where the sign indicates the existence of, directs, or forces attention to its object. Moreover, I propose to see these three aspects as always interconnected. The indexical documentary sign therefore could not only be "actually modified" by the object in a physical sense, by direct contact, but it could also point the attention towards the object. In other words, it is not only a trace or imprint of the object, it is also a deixis: it points towards a presence, makes present the object it refers to (Doane 2007b, 136-140). In this 'making present' lie the specificities of documentary film and, more importantly, its political potential from a feminist perspective. Against the risks of either erasing the political potential of documentary, by considering it no more than a slightly different kind of fiction film, or of reviving the illusion that documentary films can produce a mimetic and truthful copy of the world and that they are necessarily implied with the ideology of realism, *indexicality* and the "politics of the index" (Doane 2007a, 4) are here mobilised. Accordingly, some documentaries can have feminist effects, then, as will be shown in the analysis of the three films in this book. This is precisely because they establish with reality, with the object, this kind of indexical relation. Moreover, to acknowledge such haunting, such indexical relation between the real and the sign is crucial for an analysis that takes into account not only the content matter of the film but that also focuses on how the film is constructed and on its specific materiality as an audio-visual medium.

1.6 Materiality and/of the sign

The issue of materiality is here approached from two different perspectives: the relation between matter and sign (the *how* of the films in question, the artifice); and materiality in the sense of its presentation of reality, how it can be connected with reality. Therefore a precondition of the second position is to acknowledge the possibility of representing this reality – this is where, why and how the political aspects of such films are able to present themselves. The point is that it is not language or the sign which constructs reality, but that reality presents itself in the sign. Reality, then, is not just a passive unknown or unknowable, which is why I concur that reality *haunts* the sign. Thus, the issue of representation is of

crucial concern. Representation needs to be redefined, not jettisoned, comparable to the way documentary itself must be redefined. Indeed, Santaella Braga argues that “there is no crisis according to Peirce” (2003). If, then, a Peircian framework can help overcome the problem of representation in such a way that documentary film can then be understood as an actual sign that has an indexical relation to reality, then this framework ought to be applied to the films in question in order to reveal their political and feminist potential. This will take place at each individual analysis, but for now I will elaborate further on the two perspectives of materiality.

The matter of the sign: technology and the media-specific analysis

One way to look at what Trinh called “the artifice” (1990, 89) mentioned above in section 1.4, is paying attention to the specific cinematic levels of a film: not only its narrative structure, plot and subject matter, but also the technical aspects of it and the filmic language, for example: the selection of the images, its shooting and editing technique, the use of sounds, silences and voice-over. Of course, ‘artifice’ also includes the entire apparatus surrounding and shaping the filmic representations: the economic aspects, the production-distribution system, the audience reception, the disciplinary paradigms, and so on. This implies considering the filmic representation in its *material specificity*, as an *audio-visual product*. Talking in semiotic terms, what I am exploring and arguing for is a feminist approach that does not fail to focus on the *materiality of the sign*; a methodology and a theoretical perspective that not only concentrates on the meaning, on the ‘what’, or on the connections between signifier, signified and referent, but one that considers documentaries in their medium specific features and takes the ‘how’ into account as a crucial element of the analysis.

It should be noted that my approach to the analysis of the films is not a ‘formalist’ one as it focuses on the materiality and textuality of the film rather than on the formal aspects in themselves. I do use formalist film theory (particularly Bordwell and Thompson 2001) as a tool to dissect the three selected films, however, I focus on these technical and formal aspects not ‘in themselves,’ (e.g. how the editing, shot composition or soundtrack works). Rather, I take these features into account in terms of how they produce certain representations; that is to say how these formal strategies are connected with truth claims, with aesthetics of objectivity, in short, with hegemonic discourses and power. In other words, I focus on both the poetics and the politics (Hall 1997a, 6) of these films. Hence, my approach to film as text entails always a simultaneous attention to the socio-political discourses it (re)produces (or as Barthes, 1957, would call it, ‘the myth’). For these reasons my framework of analysis of the films is not in line with formalist film theory even though I adopt some of its tools.

I use notions such as medium or media specificity, and material specificity while being fully aware of the large scale debate and contention surrounding

these analytic frameworks (for an overview see, for example: Maras and Sutton 2000). Therefore, attentive to the possible essentialist pitfalls implied in certain medium-specificity theories, I concur with the way scholars such as Katherine Hayles have redefined the concept. The notion of specificity is strongly connected with that of the materiality of the medium and therefore with the “interplay between a text’s physical characteristics and its signifying strategies” (Hayles 2004, 67).

Further analysis of the *how* of the films in question can only be performed in the successive chapters, though, and thus I now focus my attention for the remainder of this section on materiality in the sense of its presentation of reality.

Materiality and Reality

I am referring to the so-called crisis of representation, in which an essentially realist epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it – projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy and Truth itself.

– Frederic Jameson “Foreword” to *The postmodern condition*, p. viii.

Post-structuralism has taught us to be cautious when talking about reality. Therefore, the notions of referentiality and representation cannot be taken for granted: one of the most famous sentences that supposedly summarises post-structuralism, and deconstructionism specifically, is Derrida’s quote that “there is nothing outside the text” (1997, 158). In the common interpretation, “outside the text” means a world existing before the language that speaks about it, and accordingly, “the text” would here refer to language, the context of the system of signification that makes sense of the world, of reality. In other words, this understanding of post-structuralism would entail that there is no knowable reality outside the representation of such reality: all we can ever know is language, the system of signs used to refer to reality. Furthermore, Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, in their account of the intellectual development of the study of language, explain that early theories posited that since language is the place where the social individual is constructed, “man (sic) can be seen *as language*, as the intersection of the social, historical and individual” (Coward and Ellis 1977, 1). The two authors in *Language and Materialism* develop their study from early works on language and subjectivity, expanding it further to include and combine semiotics, structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminist theory. Interestingly, their investigation starts with focusing on the centrality of the ‘sign,’ only to conclude with a chapter entitled “The critique of the sign,” in

which they state that the sign has to be seen as “simply a stage in the process of signification” (*ibid.* 151).

On a more positive note, one possible way of explaining this conception of the relation between language and reality, between a sign and its object within a Peircian framework is by saying that post-structuralism implies a conflation of the two objects – the Dynamic and Immediate Object – where the former disappears from the equation. If we cannot be certain of the existence of an object outside of the system of signs that represents it, outside of the language that speaks of it, then it would mean that a sign (a Representamen) only refers to its Immediate Object – which is not the ‘thing,’ the real object, but the sum of the effects of the Dynamic Object pertinent to the sign. In this way the Dynamic Object, the object-in-the-world, would disappear from the relation: unknowable or even non-existent. However, it should be remembered that Peirce specifies that the Dynamic Object “affects the sign;” therefore, even though perhaps such object is not “knowable in itself,” it nonetheless *exists and affirms its presence* via the mediation of the Immediate Object and then the Representamen.

To elaborate further on what a documentary film is and what feminist documentary is or could be, a new level needs to be added to this exploration: a clarification of what is here meant with ‘representation.’ The last decades have seen a proliferation of critiques of the very concept of representation. From cultural studies to feminist scholarship, via political theory and philosophy, nowadays there seems to be a tacit yet problematic agreement on the so-called “crisis of representation” (Nöth 2003). It is not a new crisis, as it started at least in 1970 when Foucault first named it (Foucault 1970 [1966]), nonetheless it is a contemporary one, since it appears to be the main concern of several academic debates within and outside interdisciplinary and feminist studies. In this milieu it has therefore become necessary to justify, or at least to articulate on why one would still decide to take seriously the concept of representation.

Peirce’s understanding of reality is complex and at times contradictory. Occasionally he seems to postulate a ‘real’ that is independent from being represented, that is *other* than the mind’s creation. Elsewhere he seems to exclude the possibility of the recognition of an object that exists outside of its representation. However, as Kaja Silverman lucidly discusses it, this is not necessarily a contradiction in his theory. She concludes that “Peirce argues that we have a *direct experience*, but *indirect knowledge* of reality” (1983, 16). Bearing in mind the language/reality dichotomy, what is to be learnt from this initial analysis of the sign?

I will elaborate on Peirce’s definition of the sign, as it proves to be open and complex enough to accommodate and stimulate an understanding of the process of mediation and signification that could question the very crisis of representation. He defines the sign as an “irreducible triadic relation between a first or a sign (that which stands for something else, its object), a second or object

(that which determines the sign), and a third or interpretant (another sign produced by the sign due to the sign's relation to the object)" (Santaella Braga 2003, 46). This being said, a further question would have to concern that status of the 'object.'

It can be noted at this point that Peirce's theory does not erase the object/reality from the scope of his enquiry as Saussure's does, for example. Moreover, he suggests a relation of the object with the sign that is other than a passive one: the object *determines* the sign (Peirce 1958, 8.177). If from this it follows that the object is only accessible through the mediation of the sign, this definitely does not mean that the sign is a 'copy of' the object, nor that reality (or nature) is a passive entity and that reality is a product of language, as a certain feminist materialism has implied (Barad 2003; Alaimo and Hekman 2008). The object in this framework has an active effect on the sign, *determines* it and consequently determines the interpretant. Hence, reality affects language. This is the first step to try and deconstruct the presupposed dichotomy of language/reality.

It is important to stress this interrelation between the object and the sign: so as the object performs an action upon the sign (Santaella Braga 2003, 47), thus the sign and its interpretation produce an endless effect on the process of semiosis (Noth 2003; Culler 1982, 188-9) and mediation itself. Can this last process then be read as the possible effect of the sign on the object, that is, reality, and hence establish a two-way entanglement between reality and representation? To elaborate this further, it is necessary to refer to what has been called the endless chain of signs (or signifiers, according to the semiotic paradigm one embraces). Nöth's (2003) concluding remarks on the (absence of a) crisis of representation clarify that

re(-)presentation does not mean the mere repetition of a previous sign phenomenon. Instead it always involves a difference from what precedes (as a sign or a referent) and it is the dynamics of the effect of this difference which result in what Peirce calls 'the growth of signs' (2003, 14).

Having discussed each of these elements relevant to the Peircian framework I now want to consider how the relation between language and reality and Peirce's semiotics is relevant to the specific field my research is exploring. I maintain that if we were to uncritically follow the supposedly post-structuralist understanding of reality – that a sign always only refers to another sign and never to the ontological reality "outside of text" – the conflation of Immediate and Dynamic Object which results in the erasure of the latter (though not inherent to post-structuralist theories themselves but to some later readings of them) one could only conclude that documentary film consists of nothing else but a representation, a fiction, a narrative about reality: it is a sign which refers to a sign which refers to another sign in the infinite semiosis. In other words, when

considering the referent, the object of documentary as nothing but another sign, all documentaries could be considered fiction films: both fiction and documentary film would stand for a narrative, a representation, a fictional and creative account. This conception would lead to a complete erasure of any distinction between the two genres, which also erases the political potential documentary film can (and does) have.

Keeping this in mind, if the dichotomy language/reality is so unsolvable in the postmodern approach to representation, then what is the status of documentary? How can we define documentary in its being different from fiction film, and therefore unravel its political potential? How can we produce a new shared language to think about documentary representations and, with it, an intelligible practice? If we can instead conceive of a theory of representation which does not erase the referent, reality, the object, from the picture; then it can become possible to reclaim the promising specificity of documentary without falling into an essentialistic realism. What if such theory has already been produced and the challenge is to unknot its potencies?

Due to a well-grounded scepticism towards representation or representationalism as an epistemological paradigm, semiotics, with its implication in the foundation of a (post)structuralist and language-oriented understanding of culture and knowledge, has to be the most vulnerable field, the most debated, and yet at once the one that needs to be defended most convincingly if one wants to claim its very importance. I claim that even from within a post-structuralist framework, or at least a *feminist* post-structuralist framework, great attention should be paid to not erase reality, to not discard the Dynamic Object. Therefore, the framework that I suggest is not cynical and not relativist. Rather, it strives for an exploration, and if possible, an explanation of power struggles and the mechanism of knowledge production.

Finally, the semiotic framework I outline here is useful to study documentary because it is aware of the power of language/the process of semiosis, yet remains attentive not to confound or conflate documentary and fiction film, because of the epistemological risks implicit in such a move. The risk would lay in denying the importance of films that make visible political struggles, that speak of the oppressed, that bring traces of traumas and preserve the memory of historical events and experiences. My aim, then, is twofold. I will elaborate on how semiotics could still prove to be useful in an understanding of that very specific kind of 'representation' that is the documentary film. By the same token I will suggest that documentary, as a particular facet of knowledge production, is a matter that can cast light into the problem of representation itself. In other words, representation helps us to understand what is going on in documentary, and at the same time what is going on in documentary helps to illuminate the problem/s of representation.

As we saw in outlining a definition of documentary, two are the concepts that appear to be most crucial and problematic. The first one is the notion of referentiality: the relation of the documentary representation with reality, with the 'world out there' or, in semiotic terms, the relation of the sign with the referent, of the representation with the object (see section 1.2 and 1.3 of this research). The second problematic knot is the one built around the concept of realism, Truth and objectivity, as outlined in section 1.4 of this chapter when discussing the feminist criticism towards realism and the claims of objectivity. These two facets of the problem are not disconnected. Indeed, another main concern of this research is to propose a way to engage with such filmic products that does not sink into unquestioned objectivism and that, at the same time, values their very specificities. The goal therefore is to suggest a 'language' to talk about documentary, a language that is accurate and self-reflexive but not cryptic or inaccessible to those not acquainted with philosophical debates.

1.7 Visuality and/as knowledge: for a critique of the hegemony of vision

From Michel Foucault (1977; 1980) to Donna Haraway (1988; 1989; 1991), from Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968; 1993) to Luce Irigaray (1985a; 1985b), from Martin Jay (1993) to Griselda Pollock (1988), many theorists have compellingly elaborated upon the interconnections between vision, knowledge and power. Although such works embrace and traverse different disciplines and concerns, some general outcomes of the studies about visuality and power could be summarised as: 1) observation, and therefore seeing, is always already culturally and historically specific and a process that organises what is made visible and what is left invisible; 2) in the Western world, the primacy of vision as a tool to make sense of the world entails or leads to a hegemonic use of vision, that is to say, visuality is not a neutral and transparent medium but a process entangled with patriarchy and Eurocentrism; and 3) the knowledge produced through the conception of sight as superior to other senses and through this hegemony of vision is embedded in power relations and, more importantly, is gendered.

Documentary film is deeply connected with practices of observation and with processes of knowledge production through vision at various levels. Firstly, being that cinema is a visual – as well as aural, but this is less obvious – medium, documentary film is concerned with visuality on account of its medium specificity. Moreover, when considering documentary films that engage with the representation of the Other, and are therefore related with anthropological methodologies of observation, then vision becomes a metaphor as well as a

practice⁴⁰ (see for example, Stocking 1983). Annette Kuhn, for example, discussing how documentary's hegemonic practice is connected with observation, the act of seeing, summarises that:

the hegemony of the visible without doubt informs the stress laid on the significance of on-the-spot observation in the production of documentary films. Equally, though, it underpins the methodological and even the epistemological debates which place the question of observation in the context of such notions as objectivity, truth, verification and evidence (Kuhn 1978, 77).

Finally, documentary film, being engaged with the representation of reality, is always in dialogue with the hegemonic processes of knowledge production – to challenge or reproduce them – and, therefore, with the specifically gendered power relations at play in the act of seeing and representing. Although, as already elaborated in a previous section, the relation between gender and documentary specifically is as complex as it is still often ignored (Rabinowitz 1994, 6). Certainly the links between vision and gender have instead been amply discussed.

The aim of this section is to elaborate on how visibility is a crucial theoretical lens to look at feminist documentary. More specifically, the interconnections between vision, documentary representation of the Other, power and gender are here explored in order to introduce why and how a feminist framework to study documentary and feminist documentaries themselves could be understood as practices that challenge the hegemony of vision. First, an overview of vision as the primary mean for making sense of the world, and on the implications of the act of looking for anthropology and documentary film is presented. Next, adding the dimension of power to this understanding of vision as the privileged tool for producing scientific knowledge, I refer to some of the critical studies and feminist theories about the hegemony of vision.

Observation, documentary and the primacy of vision

It is at the same time true that the world is *what we see*, and that nonetheless we must learn to see it.
– Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible*, p.4.

From a strictly physiological perspective, sight is, among the senses, the one that is more developed in the adult human being. Although there are critical voices, this claim is mostly supported by scientific studies about vision (Jay 1993, 4-8).

⁴⁰ See section 1.2 of this research.

This explanation of the primacy of vision would be enough to justify the amount of studies that have been produced on the subject. However, adding to this the growth of visual media and technologies mostly in Western society but not only, and the correlation some scholars have established between means of communication and “the ratio or balance between the senses” (Ong 1991, 29), then the primacy of vision in contemporary Western society appears undeniable. A cultural historical explanation of this primacy has been elaborated, for example, by Walter Ong (1982) and Marshall McLuhan (1962) in terms of a transformation of the media of communication. The two scholars, but the former more so, link the shift from the orality of language to the technology of writing, then to printed text and, relatively recently, to electronic and digital technology with a *shifting of the sensorium*. This shift entails a change from orality to writing, and with it, a move of emphasis from hearing to vision.

This is but one of the many approaches to the historical and cultural reasons behind the primacy of vision.⁴¹ What is interesting of this framework is how the sense of vision itself – in contrast with that of hearing – is interpreted as having specific characteristics that are, so to say, connected more with the physiological aspects than with the cultural and social specificities. As problematic as this is, it is worth considering what David Howes, one of the founders of the anthropology of the senses, writes: “Hearing is omnidirectional, syntetic, and sounds always have an emotional impact; sight is unidirectional, analytic and distancing. As Ong put it, sound surrounds and penetrates the listener, sight situates the viewer outside what he sees” (Howes 1991, 171). Although this understanding of sight and vision is useful to bear in mind since it focuses on the working of the senses specifically and thus might contribute to add a further element to recognise the implications of the hegemony of vision in western society, nonetheless it is the “question of the cultural determinations of visual experience in the broadest sense” (Jay 2002, 268) that characterised most of the scholarship on visuality in the last decades. There would be no point and no space to summarise here years of debates that anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, scientists, psychologists and many others have elaborated around the issues of vision, visuality and the image. What I want to stress, however, are the implications of this primacy of vision for the western perceptive model(s), from the perspective of cultural and visual studies.

In short, the so-called visual turn, inaugurated by the edited volume *Vision and Visuality* (Foster, 1988), revolved around the above-mentioned question that Jay summarises, and elaborated an approach that, in general terms, sees vision as influenced by culture and by the specific technologies of vision available in a particular social, historical, geo-political context. Accordingly, numerous

⁴¹ For other perspectives see, for example: Levin (1993), Jay (1993) and Merleau-Ponty (1964). Instead, for a list of texts on the status of the scientific knowledge about vision see Jay (1993, 5 note 13).

scholars from the perspective of visual studies have elaborated upon the cultural relativity of vision, or on “the technical and cultural mediation of visual experience” (Jay 2002, 270). On the degree of such mediation and on the role of culture, discourse or ideology in influencing or determining “scopic regimes” (Metz 1981), the mechanisms of sight, visual representation, visual practices, visual technologies or images, the debate is ongoing. However, Jay summarises some of these debates by stating that “whether it be via technological virtualization or socio-cultural mediation, or perhaps both at once, the image as a natural sign, a straightforward analogue of its object, is an assumption whose time, it seems, has clearly gone” (Jay 2002, 270). Hence, the issue at stake becomes an epistemological one that entails questioning the status of the image, the relation between visual signs and ‘natural’ facts, between cultural practices and reality, between technological mediation and the degrees of representability of the object.

It is interesting to retrace how this elaboration on vision landed on an issue very similar to the one I addressed when addressing indexicality. In this overview, I started by considering the role of sight as one of the human senses; then some of the possible historical and cultural reasons behind the primacy of vision have been outlined, followed by a mention of the debate about the degrees of cultural specificity in visual practices. Ultimately then, the question of sight and vision becomes a question of how to make sense – visually – of reality, how images work and about the techniques and technologies of observation. For these reasons it follows that the specific cultural aspects of vision and visuality⁴² are important to consider when, as is the focus of this research, the aim is to study: a specific visual technology, film; a set of techniques, a genre, documentary; from the specific feminist perspective of how to give an account power differences in/and the documentary representation of Other cultures. This is why in the next paragraph I elaborate on the relation between power and knowledge in visual practices, that is to say, how the primacy of vision becomes the hegemony of vision. I approach this matter from the perspective of observation and objectivity, to then account for the gendered aspect of the gaze.

The hegemony of vision and the gaze

There are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds. (...) Understanding how these visual systems works, technically, socially, and

⁴² For a definition of the differences between the two terms see Foster, 1988: ix.

psychically ought to be a way of embodying feminist objectivity.

– Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, p. 116.

Mieke Bal summarises the interconnection between vision, reality, objectivity and truth very convincingly when she writes that “sight establishes a particular subject-relation to reality in which the visual aspect of an object is considered to be a property of the object itself” (Bal 2003, 14). Conversely, Bal argues, other senses such as touch and hearing “are associated with the subjective relation between subject and object” (*ibid.*). Accordingly, as previously noted when quoting Howes, sight and the practices of looking – contrary to other perceptive practices – seem to be intertwined with the idea of a detached observer that looks at an object, which appears to be knowable ‘in itself,’ and the conception that the outcome of this observation is an objective knowledge of such object. Therefore, another crucial element gets entangled in this relation between observation and objectivity: the very processes of knowing and of knowledge production.

Even before the cinematographic technology entered in the field of anthropological and ethnographic research, observation has been framed as the most characteristic and specific activity of the anthropologist. Suffice to recall Malinowski’s famous definition of the anthropologist as a “participant observer.” His approach, innovative as it was in the 1920s when he first formulated it, stresses nonetheless how the anthropologist’s main activity, in its endeavour of producing (scientific) knowledge about other cultures, was to observe, although such practice is accompanied by the act of participating, of experiencing the field in a more direct and embodied way. This is not anymore the dominant metaphor of anthropological research, and already several decades ago many scholars have proposed alternative approaches, such as, for example, interpretive anthropology (Geertz 1973) and dialogical anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986). It is nonetheless important to note how not only anthropology but all modern sciences have been constructed around the practice and the model of detached, objective observation.

A great amount of scholarship has been produced about scientific observation, objectivity, and the construction of the modern subject of knowledge, specifically from the perspective of feminist philosophy, feminist science and technology studies, and with a particular attention to bio-medical sciences and the female body (see for example: Haraway 1989 & 1997; Lykke and Braidotti 1996; Stacey 1997; Lykke and Smelik 2008). One way of summarising or at least bringing into my argument the feminist accounts of visibility, objectivity and science, is by referring to Haraway’s famous article “Situated Knowledges” (1988). She writes:

The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity to...to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interest of unfettered power. The instruments of visualization in multi-nationalist, postmodernist culture have compounded these meanings of disembodiment (Haraway 1988, 581).

The eyes she describes are the eyes of objectivity as the paradigm of modern science, and the knowledge so produced is the one of the all-knowing god-trick. In this essay, Haraway also proposes, as an alternative to the patriarchal, militarist, colonialist, capitalist metaphor and practice of objectivity, a feminist objectivity, that she also calls “situated knowledges,” that is connected with particular and embodied visions and “partial perspectives” (*ibid.*). From this kind feminist critique, the implications embedded in the act of looking and in the knowledge produced through observation are far-reaching. Not only is vision always, at least to a certain extent, culturally determined and situated, but observation and the technologies of visualisation are never neutral; that is to say, power is enmeshed in visibility and in the practices of knowledge.⁴³ For these reasons then, the aim is not a “denigration of vision” (Jay 1993, 282), rather to explore the limits of what is made visible and how. Accordingly, I also concur with – and in the analysis of the three films I employ some of – feminist theories on film and embodiment (Marks 2000, 2002; Sobchack 2004; Barker 2009), as they propose a theoretical approach that does not dismiss the potential of the practices of visual representation, rather it works in the spaces opened by an embodied and multi-sensorial experience of cinema⁴⁴.

As I have already discussed when explaining the ‘realist debate’ in feminist film theory in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist scholars elaborated on the issues of vision and power also from the specific perspective of cinema. Therefore another concept that should be mentioned here is the gaze. Several scholars from various perspectives dealt with the notion of the gaze. Foucault, for example, uses the concept in his study of the technologies of surveillance and disciplining (1977). But it is with Mulvey’s famous theorisation of “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) that the gaze, through the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan, went from being the mere act of intense looking to becoming indissolubly connected with issues of gender and power. Specifically after Mulvey’s essay most of feminist film theory has been concerned with a critique and reformulation of what Mulvey’s called the “male gaze” (see, for example: Stacey 1994; Smelik 1998; Buikema and Zarzycka 2011). The gaze, in feminist theory and in post-colonial studies, is now a concept that can be summarised as referring to the act of a subject who looks and one who is looked at, where this relation is a relation of

⁴³ On these issues, Foucault’s formulations of the interconnections between power and knowledge, and between power and vision come to mind. See, for example, Foucault 1977 and 1980.

⁴⁴ For an elaborate yet concise account of most of these theories, see: Papenburg (2011).

power encoded in hegemonic norms. It is a normative gaze that defines, devalorises or objectifies the Other, being it the woman on the screen (as in Mulvey's theory) or the non-Western subject (Shohat and Stam 1994, 90). The concept of "oppositional gaze" also developed from Mulvey's text, or rather as a reaction to it, as in bell hooks' conceptualisation of the Black female spectator (bell hooks 1992).

It shall be noted at this point that documentary filmmaking is understood in this research as a specific, technologically mediated practice of observation and knowledge production. Therefore, I maintain that the feminist analyses on visibility and knowledge are deeply pertinent to and connected with the issue of documentary representation. For this reason I deem visibility, or rather, a critical approach to the hegemony of vision, as a fundamental tool to study documentary film and to identify the feminist effects of documentary. In sum, particularly important for the context of this research is the fact that cinema can be understood as "a powerful apparatus of the gaze" (Shohat and Stam 1994, 103). Once again, also from the perspective of the gaze, what is at stake in the analysis of visibility in relation to documentary film is an understanding of documentary as a specific cultural, gendered, Western technology of vision and an apparatus of knowledge production, which is necessarily implicated in relations of power, particularly those pertaining to the politics and aesthetics of representing Other subjects.

1.8 What does feminism have to do with/for documentary film?

In this first chapter I identified three fields of research – feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology – and the grey zone that exists between them. The connections between these three fields turn around the debates on the interactions between reality, truth, representation of the Other, knowledge production, and power. This so-called 'grey zone' or 'gap' is an in-between area where labelling and clear-cut disciplinary and generic investigations are uncomfortable. To show that such a 'grey zone' does indeed exist, I examined some of the tensions and progress that emerged from these three fields in recent decades.

In the context of this book 'anthropological' is intended in a general though limited sense, referring specifically to representations – knowledges – produced about the non-Western Other. The Other is understood as the opposite to the Self or Subject, whose content is determined according to what features the Other lacks. It is because the Other is defined in terms of lack, too, that the concept is necessarily engaged with issues of power and dominance, as well as with the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, this was one of the theoretical knots

present in the field of anthropological inquiry I identified as specific to the content of this book. Another theoretical knot was the question of how to produce veridical accounts, and thus reliable knowledge about other cultures, whilst at the same time being aware of the multiple processes of selection, mediation, and manipulation at place in the filmic medium. The question of the ability to express reality through the filmic medium has been a concern in visual anthropology for some time, and was furthered by the so-called 'realist debate.'

Following from this, the difficulty in defining documentary as a genre was addressed. Indeed, technological changes, geopolitical changes and economical changes have contributed to such difficulties. What is characteristic of documentary is that its filmed subjects are not trained actors but 'real people' in their 'real environment,' or better, that its subject matter is *actuality*, actual events and people in their everyday experience and lived world. They influence the way we learn about and look at other cultures, at our own society, at contemporary phenomena as well as at historical events. In this research, in line with Doane, I have considered documentary as a specific genre of film that is haunted by its object, or haunted by reality. To work with this suggestion entails a focus on the *materiality* of documentary as a sign, and as a system of signs. Thus, I have employed a semiotic, particularly Peircian, perspective, making it possible to identify the specific – indexical – relation documentary film has to its referent, the 'object' in the world. I have argued, furthermore, that documentary film can be a privileged strategic site to examine the relations between the uses of cinematic technologies, processes of Othering, and the interconnections between power dynamics and economical and geopolitical factors from a feminist perspective.

Indeed, it has been taken into consideration that feminism has often been greatly concerned with the politics and ethics of images, and of representation more broadly. Specifically, for what concerns this research, if the 'realist debate' is again recalled one sees that such a critique focused its attention on the 'language,' the form of such films. How films were constructed was a crucial feature to pay attention to, as cinematic representational strategies were shown to be able to shape subject positions, as well as produce and reproduce power inequalities and patriarchal oppressions. While I argued in this chapter that the anti-realist approach is somewhat too simplistic and thus no longer efficient, I nonetheless appreciate the emphasis such theorists put on the 'how,' on the filmic apparatus. As was shown, Trinh asserts that "A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction" (Trinh 1990, 89). Thus, revealing the artifice is crucial. In this sense a feminist approach to documentary can make possible the ability to uncover and address the risks inherent to the fact/fiction dualistic view. It can also cast light on the fictional elements always intrinsic to documentary. Therefore, I deem a feminist approach to these kinds of audio-visual representations not only valuable and

enriching, but also necessary. Consequently, I proposed that this kind of study may contribute to wider women's studies debates, that is: regarding the politics of representation; the interconnection of power and/in visual strategies; contemporary processes of Othering; and the political implication of the use of (new) technologies.

Thus, in this chapter I employed a semiotic framework to approach documentary. The aim was to delineate a definition of *index* and *indexicality* specific to documentary film, which would allow for an understanding of documentary *as* documentary. That is to say, a notion of the index that enables a conception of documentary as being both a creative mediation of reality (a film), as well as a sign that has a privileged relation with reality, one of contact and continuity. It is this indexical relation between the sign and its object, between sign and reality, which I have maintained is specific to documentary as opposed to fiction film. Therefore what was at stake in this discussion of indexicality was the relation between representation and reality, between sign and referent, and issues of mediation and technology. It has been disputed, however, that cinematographic images in general, and therefore fiction films too, can be understood as having an indexical bond with their objects. For this reason I have refined the definition of indexicality by adding that the object – the historical referent – of the (documentary) indexical sign is or *refers to* an actual object that exists or existed in actuality, and has not *solely* been created for the camera. Such an object might also *refer to* an actual object that existed *prior* to any fabrication, though. Thus, in this chapter I have proposed an understanding of indexicality as particular of and relevant to documentary film: the index is a kind of sign that is “haunted by” the object. The indexical documentary sign makes present the object it refers to (Doane 2007b, 136-140). In this ‘making present’ lie the specificities of documentary film and, more importantly, its political potential from a feminist perspective.

Following this elaboration on indexicality, then, I went on to consider the issue of materiality from two different perspectives: the relation between matter and sign (the *how* of the films in question, the artifice); and materiality in the sense of its presentation of reality, how it can be connected with reality. For what concerns the first point, what I argued for is a feminist approach that remembers to focus on the *materiality of the sign*; to embrace a methodology and a theoretical perspective that not only concentrates on the meaning, or on the connections between signifier, signified and referent, but one that considers documentaries in their medium specific features and takes the ‘how’ into account as a crucial element of the analysis. For what regards the second point I argued that it is not language or the sign which constructs reality, but that reality presents itself in the sign. Reality, then, is not just a passive unknown or unknowable, this is why I

concur that reality *haunts* the sign. Thus, the issue of representation is of crucial concern.

Following this second point, the post-structuralist conception of the relation between language and reality was considered. One possible way of explaining this conception, within the Peircian framework I employ, is to argue that post-structuralism implies a conflation of the two Peircian objects – the Dynamic and Immediate Object – where the former disappears from the equation. The conflation of Immediate and Dynamic Object which results in the erasure of the latter logically implies that all documentaries can be considered fiction films: both fiction and documentary film would stand for a narrative, a representation, a fictional and a creative account. This conception would lead to a complete erasure of any distinction between the two genres, which also erases the political potential documentary film can (and does) have. Thus, it is this conflation I have been cautious to avoid.

Furthermore, Peirce's theory does not erase the object/reality from the scope of his enquiry. Rather, he suggests a relation of the object with the sign that is other than a passive one: the object *determines* the sign (Peirce 1958, 8.177). If from this it followed that the object was only accessible through the mediation of the sign, this definitely did not mean that the sign is a 'copy of' the object, nor that reality (or nature) is a passive entity, and that reality is a product of language, as a certain feminist materialism has implied.

The semiotic framework I am here outlining is therefore useful to study documentary because it is aware of the power of language/the process of semiosis, yet remains attentive not to confound or conflate documentary and fiction film, aware of the epistemological risks implicit in such a move. The risk would lie in denying the importance of films that make visible political struggles, that speak of the oppressed, that bring traces of traumas and preserve the memory of historical events and experiences.

Finally, in the visuality section of this chapter the interconnections between vision, documentary representation of the Other, power and gender were explored in order to introduce why and how a feminist framework to study documentary could be understood as practice that challenges the hegemony of vision. Many studies of visuality and power have taken place in a broader context, yet despite this, general outcomes of such studies were summarised as acknowledging: 1) observation, and therefore seeing, is always already culturally and historically specific, and a process that organises what is made visible and what is left invisible; 2) in the Western world, the primacy of vision as a tool to make sense of the world entails or leads to a hegemonic use of vision, meaning visuality is not a neutral and transparent medium but a process entangled with patriarchy and Eurocentrism; and 3) the knowledge produced through the conception of sight, as superior to other senses and through this hegemony of

vision, is embedded in power relations and, more importantly, is gendered. Indeed, the 'gaze' was a very important concept to consider for these reasons. The gaze, it was shown, at least in feminist theory and in post-colonial studies, can be summarised as the act of a subject who looks and one who is looked at, where this relation is a one of power encoded in hegemonic norms. It is a "normative gaze" that defines, devalorises or objectifies the Other.

A further issue at stake was an epistemological one, entailing a questioning of the status of the image, the relation between visual signs and 'natural' facts, between cultural practices and reality, between technological mediation and the degrees of representability of the object. Haraway proposed the useful concept of a feminist objectivity called 'situated knowledges' as an alternative to the patriarchal, militarist, colonialist, capitalist metaphor and practice of objectivity. Such 'situated knowledges' are connected with a particular and embodied vision and 'partial perspectives.' From this kind of feminist critique, the implications embedded in the act of looking and in the knowledge produced through observation are far-reaching. Not only is vision always, at least to a certain extent, culturally determined and situated, but observation and the technologies of visualisation are never neutral; that is to say, power is enmeshed in visuality and in the practices of knowledge. I have maintained that feminist analyses on visuality and knowledge are deeply pertinent to and connected with the issue of documentary representation. It is for this reason I deem visuality, or rather, a critical approach to the hegemony of vision, as a fundamental tool to study documentary film and to identify the feminist effects of documentary.

Accordingly, I proposed a feminist approach to anthropological documentary with the aims of challenging dominant representations and conceptions of the Other; defying normative implications of truth claims through offering an alternative aspect to study the relation between reality and documentary; casting new light on the materiality of documentary film in its specificity as a genre; and critically looking at the hegemony of vision. In order to achieve these aims, then, I suggested *indexicality* – the relation between the documentary sign and its object – as a renewed framework to identify the specificities of how documentary works and how it could be understood. I again stress how documentary studies, feminist film theory and visual anthropology are three domains not only concerned with shared issues (that is, the aesthetics, ethic and politics of representation) but which have also undergone comparable developments in the same decades. Interdisciplinarity is crucial: if one acknowledges that any given discipline defines the rules of its specific kind of scientific observation, then they implicitly accept the unspoken assumptions which reside therein.

Thus, the working definition I maintain for looking at films residing in the grey zone of anthropology, documentary, and feminism is as follows: they are films *haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues*, that is, issues of gender,

power, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, because such films are anthropological, they are *films haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues to do with the politics of the Other and processes of Othering*. It should remain in the mind of the reader, also, that I have maintained the validity of John Grierson's definition of documentary as a "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1933), and thus should be seen as a necessary element of this working definition. Thus, it is with this working definition that I proceed to analyse Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law* to determine what feminist effects emerge when the film is considered as belonging to the grey zone this chapter has identified.

CHAPTER 2

Sisters in Law

104 min., colour film (2005)

Shot in super 16mm, printed in 35mm

Producer/Director/Director of Photography: Kim Longinotto

Co-Director: Florence Ayisi

Editor: Ollie Huddleston

Sound: Mary Milton

Music: D'Gary

I like it when a documentary has the same constraints as fiction, when it doesn't have to give you a lesson or teach you what to think and is just an emotional experience.

– Kim Longinotto (interviewed by Helen Pidd), *The invisible woman*.

This chapter focuses on the acclaimed documentary *Sisters in Law*, directed by Kim Longinotto and co-directed by Florence Ayisi. It won numerous prizes all over the world, such as the Audience Award at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam and at the Royal Anthropological Institute FF, UK; the Grierson Award for best documentary on contemporary issues; and the Prix Art et Essai at the Cannes Film Festival. This is one of the few recent documentaries made by a woman and dealing specifically with women's issues, which reached great acclaim by both audience and critique. Released in 2005, it was screened at 120 festivals around the world.

Sisters in Law centres on two women: State Prosecutor Vera Ngassa and Judge Beatrice Ntuba, both working in Kumba, Cameroon. Longinotto follows these two women in their dealings with four court cases of different injustices and abuses. The four cases presented in the film vary. There is Amina, a Muslim woman who wants to charge and divorce from her abusive husband. There is Sonita, a ten-year-old rape victim. There is Manka, a six-year-old girl beaten by her aunt. Finally, there is Ladi, also wanting to divorce from her violent husband who acts according to the Sharia law, unlike herself. All four court cases have a positive ending: one by one all the proceedings are solved. Ultimately, *Sisters in Law* is a film about two exceptional women (Vera and Beatrice) and those four exemplary, but not unusual, court cases of injustice against women.

I saw the film for the first time at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam in 2005, and it immediately appeared as an interesting and

enjoyable example of a committed, though accessible, documentary style. In that occasion, director Longinotto was present at the screening and also participated to a debate entitled 'Feminism and Documentary' together with other women filmmakers. The relation between *Sisters in Law* and feminist documentary is, however, far from straightforward and unproblematic. As this study will show, whether the film can be read as a feminist work depends largely on the lens chosen to analyse it.

I argue that this film, while at first glance seeming to be an obvious example of feminist documentary, rather proves to be a complex, ambiguous yet productive one – so as the others considered in this book – when the concepts of indexicality, visuality and materiality are mobilised for the analysis. *Sisters in Law* can be considered a feminist documentary at the level of its content matter and because of the possible impact, effects, and affects it can produce on the viewers. Furthermore, *Sisters in Law* is made by a woman, with a crew composed entirely of women, and tackles important issues about women's rights and patriarchal violence. It also managed to reach exceptional success among the general public and critics as a *documentary* film. However, the question persists: what are the feminist effects of this documentary? In what sense is this film a feminist documentary? Is it at the level of content, or of affect, or both, for example? Furthermore, since Longinotto appears to pay no attention at all to the realist claims embedded in an uncritical privileging of visuality as the main tool for documentary representation, and because of the lack of the self-reflexivity deployed in the cinematographic strategies of the film, *Sisters in Law* can be also greatly criticised from a feminist perspective. As such, it does not fit as neatly into the category of feminist documentary as it may first appear. For these reasons, this film is an interesting example to explore the limits of any definition of what a feminist documentary is, should, or could be.

In the following sections, after a close observation of the film, its narrative structure, style and techniques of representation, I proceed with some contextualisation, such as when the film was made, how it connects with the three disciplinary fields central to this study, and why it can be read as belonging to that 'grey zone' described in the previous chapter. Next, the question as to what extent and how this film is a documentary will be addressed. Here the indexical status of *Sisters in Law* is explored: what sort of indexical relation is established between the film and the diegetic reality? And how is such a relation performed? Finally, I elaborate on why and how this film can be considered to be feminist. The conceptual tools of *visuality* and *materiality* are deployed to explore the specific complexities of this renowned and contradictory documentary.

2.1 “I’m looking for good stories”⁴⁵: plot and narrative structure

The success of the film *Sisters in Law*, according to the numerous reviews and interviews with Kim Longinotto, lies in the amazing stories it manages to present on screen. Those stories are indeed incredibly powerful and compelling. However, remarkably, the film has been presented, both in the media reviews and in the official press kit, as a film without narration, a film that “eschews narration” (Land 2006, n.p.). This manner of describing *Sisters in Law* could be interpreted in two ways. Defining the stories of the film as “unfolding effortlessly without need for narration” (as the press kit of the film states) can be read as a strategic move to stress the realism of the film, to emphasize that it is a ‘real’ documentary that represents facts without much alteration or explanation. Narration is indeed often associated with fictional texts, referring to the way a story is constructed and told. In cinema, the terms narrative film and fictional film are used as synonyms. However, the ‘classic narrative structure’ is that scheme that is followed in most Hollywood fiction films, as well as in most mainstream documentaries: a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in a defined time and space (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 60). In this context, narration means an unambiguous narrative structure: a clear beginning, a sense of progress, a climax or build-up of tension, a central story or event of topic, a direction, conclusions and a definitive ending. Asserting that *Sisters in Law* does not require any narration can therefore be understood as a way to underline the immediacy (as in non-mediation) with which the events are presented by Longinotto, and therefore to stress the authenticity if not truthfulness of the film. Being less critical, one could also say that in those articles with ‘narration’ is intended the filmic technique of superimposing a voice-over or a written commentary.

In any case, if it is true that the film lacks an explicit narrating commentary, *Sisters in Law* is still organised according to a clearly perceivable narrative structure: two main characters, four main stories, few locations and an unambiguous plot. Therefore, reversing the abovementioned descriptions of the film, I argue that it is precisely the narrative structure of the film, skilfully constructed by Kim Longinotto, which creates those gripping stories.

In my understanding, stressing the constructed aspects of a documentary film, the fictional strategies used, does not mean dismissing the ‘documentary’ value of it (i.e.: its authenticity, relation to actuality or facts, social or political significance and impact). Indeed, as I noted in the previous chapter, following scholars like Bill Nichols (2010) and Michael Renov (1993), I argue that fictional

⁴⁵ Kim Longinotto. Video interview. “Four Docs,” Channel 4.

and non-fictional filmic forms are entangled.⁴⁶ Moreover, according to some feminist film theorists such as Ann Kaplan (1988)⁴⁷ the awareness of its construction is one of the crucial elements that contribute to make a documentary film accountable, hence with critical and political potential in a feminist perspective. This crucial point – what it means for a documentary to be self-reflexive and aware to the filmic apparatus, its processes of construction and its implications – will be further elaborated through the analysis of Trinh T. Minh-ha's work. It is only if a cause-effect relation is assumed to exist between non-fictional strategies, documentary, and truthfulness, that narrative or fictional techniques are looked upon with suspicion and considered inappropriate to documentary film. In other words, if documentary films are understood as accurate and authentic (to a certain degree objective or at least scientific) accounts of reality, then the inclusion of explicit fictional strategies is frowned upon because they would mediate, manipulate (and possibly falsify) such reality too much.⁴⁸ Although, as previously mentioned, so-called fictional techniques are now widely recognised and accepted by scholars as necessary aspects of documentary, the idea that documentary films should present the smallest degree of perceivable manipulation is still quite rooted in non-expert milieus and mainstream popular media. On the contrary, I maintain that *Sisters in Law*, so as many of Longinotto's works, is remarkable precisely because of its distinctive capability of telling stories which employ, in the most effective way, many of the so-called fictional strategies without, however, losing its indexical status. That, I argue, is where the film's credibility as documentary lies. In the next section I will illustrate other aspects of Longinotto's representational approach when analysing her shooting and editing techniques.

At this point, focusing on the level of the narrative structure of the film, let me recall, with Renov's words, that "narrativity, sometimes assumed to be the sole province of fictional forms, is an expository option for the documentary film that has at times been forcefully exercised" (Renov 1993, 2). *Sisters in Law* appears then to have much in common with this expository option, a sometimes solely assumed fictional technique, here performed in a documentary form. I will come

⁴⁶ See for example: Nichols (1991 and 2010 [2001]), Renov (1993), and Gaines and Renov (1999). For a clear account of the differences and overlaps between fiction and non-fiction film, see: Renov (1993, 1-11) and Nichols (2010, 144-147).

⁴⁷ In the article "Theories of the Feminist Documentary," Kaplan outlines the common aspects of those feminist films which attempted to avoid the theoretical problems connected with realism, while maintaining a relation with the 'referent' and the social formation. She defines them, broadly, as "theory films." In her scheme, the first characteristic of such feminist documentaries is "A focus on the cinematic apparatus as a signifying practice, on cinema, that is, as an illusion-making machine" (1988, 93).

⁴⁸ For example, texts such as Heider (2006) and some of the articles in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (Hockings 1975) cautiously outline the boundaries of what is acceptable, in terms of filmmaker's interventions, for a film to be considered a proper anthropological documentary.

back to the topic of fictional versus non-fictional filmic strategies, since such definitions and techniques are relevant to other aspects of *Sisters in Law*. In fact, far from being a mere terminological dispute, I maintain that these definitions of what a documentary is or how it should be made are the issues at the core of the debates about the status of feminist documentary films.

Sisters in Law is commonly summarised as being a film about two women: the State Prosecutor Vera Ngassa and the judge Beatrice Ntuba. In other synopses it is described as a look at justice in the small courthouse of Kumba, in Cameroon. In other reviews it is stated that “the film captures the legal proceedings and courtroom drama surrounding several heart-felt stories.”⁴⁹ The film is, of course, all of these things together; the focus shifts according to what one wants to see in it. Interestingly enough, in most cases it is the two female practitioners of law who are considered the focus of the film.

Kumba Town, Cameroon, is a large village with a majority of Muslim inhabitants. Kim Longinotto’s camera follows the four cases of two women and two girls, victims of different injustices and abuses, from the moment they are brought to the attention of State Prosecutor Vera Nkwate Ngassa through to the trial in the court where Beatrice Nembang Ntuba is the judge, and until the final verdicts. Most of the scenes are set in the office of Vera and in the courtroom, several others are shot in the public space of Kumba Town, in the streets and in the courtyards of some of the women’s houses. Only the very final images are filmed in the completely different space of a classroom at the University of Buea, where Vera teaches Law at the Department of Women and Gender Studies.

The four cases presented in the film are harsh and dramatic. The first case is that of Amina, a Muslim woman who wants to charge and divorce from her brutal and unrepentant husband who beats her and rapes her regularly, despite the fact that her community presses her to remain quiet and accept the situation. This case is followed throughout the film and it is the last one to be solved. Then there is Sonita, a very brave ten-year-old girl who was raped by a neighbour and is determined to incriminate him. Next, the story of Manka is presented: a six-year-old girl beaten by her aunt with whom she lives arrives in Vera’s office thanks to a man who found her covered in wounds and scars and who temporarily cares for her. Finally, the fourth story follows the case of Ladi, a very determined woman who wants a divorce from her violent husband who, unlike her, lives and thinks according to the Sharia law.⁵⁰

It is already apparent from these short summaries that the stories represented in the film are heartbreaking, harrowing and cruel. Nevertheless, on

⁴⁹ From the catalogue of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, 2005.

⁵⁰ Sharia is the religious law of Islam. “In application, it constitutes a system of duties that are incumbent upon a Muslim by virtue of his religious belief” (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

the whole the film remains positive, at times sadly hilarious, but always encouraging and full of hope. Crucial is the fact that all four court cases chosen by the director have a positive ending: one by one all the proceedings are solved, the suffering women and girls obtain justice, freedom and the possibility of a different life, and the offenders are convicted. *Sisters in Law* is certainly a film about those four exemplary but not unusual court cases of violence and injustice against women. However, it is also a film about some of the other women, men and children of Kumba Town; it is about the traditional legal systems and customs, and about the changes and contradictions of that community. Furthermore, it is a film about the extraordinary character of Vera. Vera Ngassa, the State Prosecutor is indeed the only person who is portrayed in the film in a multifaceted way: in her duty, in her private moments with her child and co-workers, with one of the already condemned persecutors in jail and in the classroom with her students. She is the only well rounded character. Far from being a critique, remarking the emphasis on Vera could be useful to understand the success and the power of this film.

Focusing now more in depth on the narrative structure, the beginning and the end are particularly meaningful when giving an account of the construction of the plot of this film. *Sisters in Law* opens with a long shot from a moving car showing the countryside, some houses, cars and people walking along the street. The music of the soundtrack suggests the film is set somewhere in Africa, the superimposed text confirms it: "Kumba Town, Cameroon, West Africa." Literally the film leads the spectators from the countryside into the town of Kumba. The camera then enters a building where an officer and other employees have just arrived, who are filmed while chatting, cleaning and organising things around at what appears to be an office. A woman enters, in western clothes, wearing a suit: she, Vera Ngassa, is immediately portrayed as a highly respectable and authoritative person. Indeed, just as she enters in her office the opening title appears on screen. It thus becomes clear that she is the protagonist of the film, or, at least one of the central characters. Finally, to complete this opening, the viewers are conducted in Vera's office where a case is briefly presented: a woman complaining because the father of her child kidnapped the child. As Kim Longinotto explains in one interview⁵¹ this story, which is not followed throughout the film, functions as an introduction: it serves to bring the audience 'in the action', and to introduce the attitude of Vera, the State Prosecutor, namely her direct way of asking questions, her beliefs, her humour and her different approaches toward the people involved in the cases. From now onward, one by one, the other central characters of the film are introduced and the four court cases start unravelling.

⁵¹ Debate at *Film Forum*, recorded for "Film Forum Broadcast" on April 12, 2006 in Manhattan.

The stories of the two women and the two girls intertwine along the 104 minutes of the film, following a clear, linear plot development: introduction, more accurate description, trial, and conclusion. Long shots of the town, of people in the streets or in the courtroom patio, and of women and children talking and working around their houses, are used as transition-sequences to separate one scene or one court case from the other. Apart from these slower long shots, the film presents the events in their chronological occurrence; there is no use of flash-backs or recaps of previous events. The rhythm of the narration is somehow slow but compelling. The time development is linear, as stated, although at moments it is so compressed that it is not easy to grasp how much time has passed between two different scenes: maybe hours, or days, or weeks. Nonetheless, this strictly chronological, partially 'real-time' narration is one of the features of *Sisters in Law* that makes it a Direct Cinema kind of film, or, as other critics have defined it, a film made in a perfect 'fly-on-the-wall' style⁵² (see, for example: Rodger-Snelson 2005, Mulholland 2005). As I show in the next paragraph, this documentary technique is employed by Longinotto also at the level of the shooting and editing strategies.

So as the beginning of the film is finely constructed to transport the audience *in media res*, the final scenes are undoubtedly composed to convey a sense of closure and of a 'happy ending'. After the last case is concluded and Amina also manages to have granted a divorce by the customary court, the film moves to a new different location: Kumba State Prison. Here Vera checks whether Manka's aunt, there imprisoned, has received the proper medications. The following three minutes of the film are dedicated to the well-deserved celebrations of Amina's new freedom. In a yard, some women congratulate her, explain how much they have learnt from her example, and how unjust the traditional custom is that gives no rights to women. In this sequence Amina openly laughs for the first time; when Ladi also arrives to celebrate this moment of relief and happiness with the other women, it seems that all the suffering is finally over and that the film has arrived to its most wished for joyful closure. Long shots from a car, driving out from Kumba Town, and the song of the soundtrack remind the viewer of the opening sequence of *Sisters in Law*. Just when the film appears to be ending just as it started, in an elegant symmetry, like the opening and closing scenes of a play, the director adds another final sequence. In a classroom of the university where Vera teaches, Amina and Ladi are introduced to the students, all female, as the two Muslim women who fought and won, achieving what had not been attained for seventeen years: a conviction for spousal abuse. Finally, the

⁵² The fly-on-the-wall style refers to that method of documentary-making where the camera crew is as unobtrusive and invisible as possible. This strategy is believed by those who consider it possible at all to allow for a recording of the events as if the camera were not there, hence to capture reality as it unfolds, in the most direct and truthful manner.

music starts again and along with laughs and applause the film ends with the students applauding and expressing a grateful “thank you!” to those two brave women. Clearly, with this sequence as the grand finale Kim Longinotto decides to honour the great work of the women represented in the film. In this way, she manages to stress even more that feeling of victory, positive change and empowerment the film already conveyed. Additionally, this ending can be read as a message or an example for all women, stating that that violence against women should not be tolerated, and if it occurs, that the offenders should be brought to court, have a fair trial and be convicted – quite like in Western societies and legal systems,⁵³ in Cameroon and beyond.

To conclude this section on the narrative structure and content matter of *Sisters in Law*, I now focus briefly on the way the central figures of the film are presented. If it is true that to make a good story you need remarkable characters, Kim Longinotto definitely managed to find such characters and portray them in a magnificent way.

The director uses a highly subtle and skilful strategy to indicate which figures the audience should focus upon. Many women and men are indeed actively present and presented in the film, but only seven of them, at their first appearance on screen, are accompanied by a short text superimposed on the frame, which states their name, and, if considered relevant, their surname and profession. They are, in order of appearance: Vera Ngassa: State Prosecutor; Amina; Veraline: Legal Aid Lawyer; Sonita; Beatrice Ntuba: Judge; Ladi; and Manka.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the key characters, so visually named, are all women, both the ones who suffered the violence and the lawyers who are assisting and helping them. Among the people who have quite a relevant role in the film, neither the two supportive men who helped the girls, nor Vera’s collaborators and officers, nor the convicted woman, Manka’s aunt, are so explicitly named. This strategy of disclosing the names of some of the subjects, even if not immediately apparent or intrusive, is, considering the importance of the ‘power of naming,’ and according to my own experience as a viewer of this film, formidably effective in guiding the attention and directing the memory of the audience. Through this method of selection, Kim Longinotto overtly indicates for the audience who the heroes are (or, better, the heroines) and which people are or should remain in the background. However debatable this approach is, it is important from a feminist perspective that the themes treated in the film (violence, women’s actions, patriarchal oppression) are made clearly visible and

⁵³ An elaboration of how the legal proceedings and the general managing of these cases resembles (or emulates) the Western system is presented later in this chapter.

⁵⁴ Curiously, the six-year-old girl Manka is not introduced with a tag stating her name in the first scenes in which she appears. Only towards the end of the film, when she is happier and reunited with some of her relatives, her name appears on the screen.

known to a world public. It is also partly thanks to its simplicity and straightforwardness that this film attained such success and reached such a wide audience.

This easiness of interpretation and the associated large audience success can be considered problematic when read from the perspective of some feminist theories or approaches to filmmaking. This is because the audience success of a film is commonly linked to the mainstream channels of distribution (criticisable as being, for example, patriarchal, capitalist or Eurocentric) as well as with the film's normalised and dominant style and widely-accessible intelligibility. When considering critical approaches to documentary realism (such as Kaplan 1983, Johnston 1975, or Trinh 1990, 1991) and to the cinema apparatus (Mulvey 1989 or De Lauretis 1987), *Sisters in Law's* popularity and its Direct Cinema style appear at odds, if not in plain opposition, to such feminist perspectives. The tension between feminist documentary theories (and practice), and mainstream techniques and styles is at the core of the intricate issue that feminist activists and scholars have been struggling with for decades. That is the compromise between rigorous complexity and the possibility of being understood by people with non-feminist or non-academic backgrounds. The central questions of this quarrel are: how can a documentary film be (self)critical, aware of the power dynamics at stake in filmic representation, and respectful of its filmed subjects, while at the same time reaching out to an audience broad enough for such a film to have an impact on society, with the goal of provoking or stimulating social, cultural and political change? It is not my intention to find an answer to this complicated dilemma. However, coming back to the analysis of *Sisters in Law*, this broader set of questions can be transposed into narrower ones: what is feminist in/of *Sisters in Law*? How is it possible to give a feminist reading of it? Therefore, how can this film contribute in answering the core question of this study, namely which theoretical tools do we have to recognise this film as a feminist documentary? And what are the possible feminist effects of a documentary film? Keeping in mind the tension here outlined between mainstream documentary techniques and feminist critical concerns, I will articulate my answers in the following paragraphs.

As I have mentioned before, I do not think that *Sisters in Law* would have been equally successful if Vera, the State Prosecutor, would not have been such a charming and strong woman. Kim Longinotto herself, when talking about the process of making this film, always stresses how crucial and important it was to have met Vera. It is probably also because of this charismatic female protagonist that the film had been compared to television shows such as *Judge Judy* and *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ These comparisons are present in the description of the film in the online catalogue of Longinotto's main film distributor, Women Make Movies [<http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog>] (accessed August

In order to better appreciate what the specific cinematographic style of *Sisters in Law* is, I will proceed with the analysis of its filmic language. Namely, in the next paragraph, I will look at the shooting and editing strategies, both at the level of the images and at the aural level, hence questioning their representational implications.

2.2 Filmic language and strategies of representation

The way I film things, I try to have it as if the viewer is actually standing there, in the position of the camera. So they're where I am, seeing things through me, but not at all aware of me. I try and make the camerawork very simple and very slow, so you're not really thinking about camera movements. I want to make people feel they're actually there, and watching things happening.

– Kim Longinotto (interviewed by Craig Duncan),
Interview with Kim Longinotto.

Sisters in Law is appreciated or criticised by journalists and film experts for its documentary approach, which is labelled at times as Cinéma Vérité, and other times as a 'fly-on-the-wall' or Direct Cinema style. These terms, often used interchangeably, refer to historically and geographically different and specific modes of documentary filmmaking. If the image of the fly-on-the-wall is a general visual metaphor to summarise what the filmmaker should do in order to catch the events in the most unobtrusive way, the other two definitions indicate two political and stylistic movements initiated in the 1950s and developed in the 60s, respectively in France and North America.⁵⁶ It is essential to say that there is not a wide agreement on the terms Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema and they are often confused (Winston 1995, 26). Different filmmakers interpreted and applied the concepts in different ways. Therefore I will not engage in what would result as an endless historical and terminological quarrel.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, it

11, 2011)], as well as in the press kit of the film. They are reported as quotes from statements or articles made by important people, institutions or magazines. Just to name one, Deborah Young from *Variety* writes: "has the fascination of watching an African 'Judge Judy'."

⁵⁶ For a further exploration and an account of those movements and their differences see for example: Ellis and Mclane (2005), or Renov (1993).

⁵⁷ I prefer the term Direct Cinema to describe Longinotto's style of filmmaking. In accordance with Winston (1995) I maintain that the fly-on-the-wall approach is indeed more pertinent to the aspirations of Direct Cinema, while the term Cinéma Vérité can be reserved to describe the French approach. In fact, as Winston writes, quoting Breitrose, the latter "wanted to be a 'fly in the soup'...visible for all to notice," openly addressing the processes of construction of the documentary and stressing the personal and mediated dimension of filmmaking (Winston 1995, 188).

is relevant in the appreciation of *Sisters in Law* to sketch some of the broad conventions and approaches of these documentary styles.

The name Cinéma Vérité and its initial intentions derive from Dziga Vertov's theories about what he called the *kino-pravda*, or film truth (Ellis and McLane 2005, 216). This 'cinema of truth' was supposed to photograph reality without preconceived notions or filters through a direct encounter with the events without influencing the scene, thus recording life with immediacy (Jacobs 1979, 375). However, the claims that the camera could reach a hidden truth were, from the beginning, accompanied by the awareness that the filmmaker needed to provoke this truth to happen. As a result, it was necessary to make these films 'look like' reality. Hence, cinematographic techniques needed to be developed, explored and questioned to create this cinematic truth. Therefore, with Cinéma Vérité is intended both that style of documentary that deploys naturalistic and realistic techniques to present reality and, thus, reveal truth (albeit it would be better to talk of Direct Cinema in these cases), as well as an approach that questions reality and, accordingly, poses the problem of truth. Certainly, it should be again stressed that the power relationship involved in 'provoking' the 'truth' to happen, teemed with an approach to filmmaking that often echoed the drives of colonialist 'discovery', could and often did produce a Eurocentric/Western (re)presentation of the Other. Moreover when truth becomes the aim and the hidden treasure that has to be found (by the 'White Man'), the risk is that such truth is essentialised and naturalised. Hence, it becomes not one of the possible, subjective, interpretations and experiences of reality, but the Truth: that is, the patriarchal, normative and Western perspective. In this sense, both the Cinéma Vérité and the Direct Cinema approaches are of significant concern to feminist criticism of documentary as previously stated.

Direct Cinema, departing from the same inspirational theories of Cinéma Vérité and applying similar techniques, is a documentary genre originating in Canada and in the United States. The differences between Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité are geopolitical as well as socio-economical and it would be a methodological mistake to overlap them. In the context of this chapter, however, I deem it more useful to outline some of the similarities of these two styles, rather than dig into their differences.

To summarise, both schools are involved with the relationship between reality and cinema. As a result, it is in this period, between the 1950s and the 1970s, that the dichotomy between fact and fiction in documentary started to be questioned and redefined. Both Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema are engaged in a political use of cinema. This new cinema needed to represent common people and make visible the real problems of subalterns and outcasts, beyond or against the Hollywood fiction films and the governmental use of cinematographic images for news and propaganda. Furthermore, it is fundamental to notice that technological changes in camera devices in that same period also influenced,

shaped and encouraged new modes and aesthetic forms of filmmaking. Even though I find it reductive to think in terms of a cause-effect correlation between new technologies and new documentary styles, it is arguable that, at the end of the 1950s, the introduction on the market of lightweight, handheld 16mm cameras, and afterwards, of the Video8 and the Hi8 devices, significantly changed the way of shooting documentary films (among others: Jacobs 1979, 375-376). These reflex motion picture cameras were lighter and far more manageable than the old 35mm; besides, they brought along the possibility of making films without the aid of a large crew. These technological innovations resulted in major flexibility, allowing the filmmaker to carry those devices to almost every part of the planet, hence making it easier for the camera-person to really be 'inside' the action and among the people filmed without the need of staging or directing the subjects.

Finally, coming back to Kim Longinotto's film, these two styles of documentary-making, namely Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité, aimed at creating films where "the result was a strong feeling of immediacy and involvement that transmitted to an audience a keen sense of participation" (Jacobs 1979, 376). In the next paragraphs I will look more closely at the cinematographic techniques employed in *Sisters in Law* in order to further elaborate if and how the film achieves such feeling of "immediacy and involvement". The following section of the analysis is dedicated to the framing and editing style used in *Sisters in Law*, thus focusing on the film at the level of the images, the visual aspects. As the reader will recall, visuality is one of the three lenses I propose for a feminist analytical framework to study documentary. It is therefore important to first observe in detail how the film functions, to subsequently be able to broaden the scope of the analysis. The aim in this chapter is to consider how, where, and with which consequences Longinotto's film presents strategies of representations similar to those of Direct Cinema.

Images, framing, editing, montage

Approaching the framing and editing techniques of *Sisters in Law* the first problem encountered is the fact the film appears to deploy a very inconspicuous or neutral style. Namely, the selection of the shots, the way of framing and the editing techniques are so neat and precise, and follows all the rules of correct or classical filmmaking⁵⁸ to such an extent that those rules become invisible. For

⁵⁸ Although there is not such a thing as one prescriptive grammar of correct filmmaking, there is a shared understanding of such grammar (See for example 'how to' guides to making a film, or academic handbooks such as Bordwell and Thompson 2001). With the term classic I therefore refer to the canon that establishes, in this specific contemporary Western period, what is to be considered a mainstream or correct film and what is experimental or plain wrong. Moreover, if there is not a complete agreement about what a documentary should be like, the general rules of fiction film apply to the documentary genre as well when it comes to standards of framing and editing (See, for

example, even though the handheld camera moves incessantly, and at time very rapidly from one subject to another, the shots are always perfectly framed with the focal subject in the right section of the picture and almost never out-of-focus. Also at the level of the editing – how the various shots are organised in sequence, along a time line – the effect is of smooth and uninterrupted development. The film follows the rules of continuity editing (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 262). In all these techniques, the ability of Longinotto as a cameraperson or director is manifest, as she manages to accomplish her goal completely (see opening quote of this subchapter): the viewer becomes unaware of the camera, unaware of the filmic medium, of the mediated-ness of that representation. Invisibility is not an accomplishment free from concern, though.

Going deeper in the observation, it is possible to notice that the film is characterised by a predominance of medium and long shots. Especially in dialogues close-ups are used to concentrate on the facial expression of the interlocutors, thus conveying their feelings and emotional reactions. However these shots are generally not too intrusive, apart from some sequences whose style becomes dangerously similar to some annoying news-reports in which people's drama and suffering is highlighted with compulsive zooms and close-ups. The kind of sequences I am referring to are, for instance, the ones in which Manka's family and her relatives come to see her, after they have just heard what happened to her. They sit around her, crying, checking the scars on her body and commenting upon the cruelty of Manka's aunt. Actually, all the examples of this zooming-in dramatising approach are related to the case of the young girl, Manka: the family gathered in the office where a policewoman is interrogating the convicted aunt, the same aunt crying in prison, her daughter excusing herself and lamenting the cruelty of her mother, and so forth. Interesting to consider is that this strategy, which only applies to Manka's case, may serve to victimise Manka the most among the four women/girls who bring forth their cases, and may also serve to vilify Manka's Aunt. Even though the film presents real issues that apply to many women this raises concern because the cinematography may actually reinforce stereotypes of women's victimhood⁵⁹/cruelty. This note should serve as an example of how crucial it is to pay attention to *how* a documentary is

example: Hampe 1997). The criteria of fiction film constitute the basic, popular and dominant understanding of correct filmmaking. It has to be added that, when it comes to anthropological or ethnographic film specifically, the matter is more complicated, as this research shows time and over again, because of the disciplinary context and the different scientific and ethical aspirations. Therefore the rules of correct filmmaking for this specific genre change according to the historical moment and the specific author who outlines them (see for example: Hockings 1975, Heider 2006, or Barbash et al. 1997).

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the tradition of documentary of representing subjects, and particularly women as victims, see for example: Juhasz (2003) and Smaill (2010, 53-70). Smaill refers to these conventions as "victim documentary" that she describes as "a form of film-making that typically re-inscribes the power of the film-maker to exploit the suffering of the other" (2010, 89).

constructed. Indeed, the production or reproduction of Western and gendered assumptions, and of colonial or patriarchal stereotypes does not occur at the level of the story in *Sisters in Law*; rather, it concerns *how* that story is re-told through the filmic medium.

It is nevertheless true that the film as a whole is characterised by a sense of non-intrusiveness and of respectful, though intimate, distance. This effect is also due to the fact Longinotto avoids extreme close-ups completely. Furthermore, the angle of framing, remaining more or less always at eye-level, hence being never too low or high, plays a role in avoiding that the images become too forcefully dramatised (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 218-223). Only when filming children the angle of the shots is slightly high: this conveys a sense of looking-from-above, thus portraying the subjects as somewhat small and fragile. However, even if this strategy is indeed appropriate to the mode of the narrative and supports Longinotto's approach to the subject matter, I interpret this more as a contingent necessity due to the position of the camera in the room rather than as a purposeful tactic. Still, this potential double interpretation should be noted. The panoramic images are limited to the introduction, the closure of the film, and what I called the transitional-sequences. Possibly also because of this relative lack of very wide shots of the surroundings and of the environment, the film has collected numerous critiques about a certain deficiency of contextualisation (for example: Marqusee 2005, Klawans 2006). Another critique relating to the deficiency of contextualisation of the film refers to the actual information provided in the commentary⁶⁰ of the film about, for example, the specific historical, cultural, social, political, economical or religious situation of Kumba and of Cameron. A lack of explicit contextualisation lends itself to a universalisable interpretation of the film. Earlier I already suggested that this can be problematic from a feminist perspective.

The camera appears to be nearly always handheld, meaning it is not fixed on a tripod. A fixed camera, called 'steadycam,' allows for more stable shots but prevents free movements. These movements are precisely what Longinotto needs since she uses only one camera and she literally follows the progress and the rhythm of dialogues, and the movements of people in the space. Accordingly, the prevailing camera movements are 'pans' and 'tracking shots.' Examples of this strategy are all those situations in which one or more people are in front of the State Prosecutor Vera, in her office, to explain their reasons and illustrate their case. The camera moves as they talk, it follows the rhythm of the conversation, from Vera to the plaintiff, from right to left, then slightly zooming in on the expression of one of the interlocutors, then left again, then zooming out, and so forth. The scenes are not set by the filmmaker in advance, and are almost

⁶⁰ With commentary I intend the voice-over (or rather, lack thereof), or other techniques such as superimposed texts.

certainly unexpected. Such passages are fast and it is only because of the trained ability of Longinotto that she manages to maintain the subjects into focus and perfectly centrally framed.

In line with the realism of the film is absolutely no use of animation or of written texts inserted within the frames. The technique of superimposing a text on the images is used only where considered strictly necessary for the sake of accountability and clarity. Consequently, only the subtitles for the sequences spoken in pidgin language and, as I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the names of the protagonists and the locations are superimposed on the images.

The editing of *Sisters in Law* follows the same approach as the shooting and the framing: intimate but unobtrusive, dramatising but not blatantly so. The montage is at times slow and at times faster to underline the tension or the enthusiasm of the events filmed. Accordingly, the distinctive quality of the editing is the juxtaposition of 'long takes,' also called 'plan-sequences,' and of more condensed representations of conversations through the 'shot/reverse shot' technique. This last editing strategy is one of the most firmly established conventions in fiction cinema and implies shooting alternatively one of the subjects speaking, then the other in such a way as to maintain a sense of simultaneity and continuity (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 266).

It is clear from this analysis that Longinotto stylistically "adheres to realist documentary conventions" (Smail 2007, 177). These filmic conventions, as explained above, can be read as reproducing the power relations embedded in the act of observing and filming without any critical self-reflection. The hegemonic implications of the gaze and of the cinema apparatus remain unquestioned in *Sisters in Law*; thus, the manner in which visuality is deployed and understood in this film becomes a crucial concern - a point to which I shall return shortly. This is not to say that other material aspects of the film are not relevant for the analysis as to whether *Sisters in Law* can be considered a feminist documentary. However, from this section of the analysis we can see that, while the film seems to fit easily in the standard definition of a documentary film, the analysis thus far has shown its content as a feminist film to be somewhat dubious. While it does deal with feminist concerns (gendered violence in a patriarchal society and the resistance of women), the mode by which it presents these concerns is typical of a dominant Western approach that could be and has been considered Eurocentric, hegemonic and patriarchal.⁶¹ Furthermore,

⁶¹ Using a different framework and borrowing Comolli and Carboni's taxonomy, *Sisters in Law* could be defined as belonging to the category of "Content-oriented political films, explicitly political and critical films (...) whose critique of the ideological system is undermined by the adoption of dominant language and imagery" and because of this language, it does not fit in the category of "Resistant films, which attack the dominant ideology on the level both of the signified and of the signifier" (Stam et al. 1992, 196). Paraphrasing, *Sisters in Law* could be defined as a 'content-oriented feminist

Longinotto does not discuss her position as a film maker in relation to the African women, and subsequently risks taking their voice in creating a filmic 'truth' about them (and more universally, in general). Yet despite these central feminist concerns, as the remainder of this chapter will show, I still find *Sisters in Law* belonging to that 'grey zone' I highlighted in Chapter 1. It is the very fact that the film is not easily categorised which causes it to fit in this position.

Having analysed the visual techniques of the film, the next paragraph is devoted to the aural aspects: the use of soundtrack, music and sounds is briefly explored so as to add another element to the observation of the filmic strategies deployed in *Sisters in Law*. I suggest that an attention to the acoustic elements of documentary film is necessary to develop an analytical gaze that is aware of how senses other than vision partake in constructing the representation of the filmed reality. Additionally, I propose a method of filmic literacy that critically reflects on all facets of a documentary film. This has to do with the lens of materiality that I propose for analysing what the effects of feminist documentary are or could be.

Sounds and sound-editing

In *Sisters in Law* the selection and the editing of sounds contribute to provide a sense of harmonious development of the events and serve to accentuate the realism of the scene filmed. The soundtrack of *Sisters in Law* is rigorously composed by diegetic sounds, both on-screen and off-screen, though with the meaningful exceptions of the music of the opening and of the closure of the film. Such sounds are for example: the voices of the on-screen conversations, noises from the street, sounds of animals outside, children playing, steps, people chatting in the background, and so forth. It is important to notice that, as it will be clear when comparing this with the other films such as *Reassemblage*, throughout the 104 minutes of the documentary there is not one single moment of total silence (without voices, music, or relevant background noises). This lack of moments of complete silence is very common in mainstream documentary films, in which all sounds should have or appear to have a meaning. Silence is accepted and skilfully used during interviews, for example (Barbash et al. 1997, 354), but moments without speech and without somehow significant or purposeful noises are avoided as they are considered non-realistic, fictional disturbances to the 'immersive' experience of 'being there' created by the documentary. This is another aspect that connects *Sisters in Law* with a common, dominant, widely recognised documentary style. Moreover (the lack of) silence becomes meaningful when considering how it can signify, for example, an

documentary,' while the 'resistant feminist documentary' would be what the most prominent position in feminist film theory in the 1970s (the anti-realist stand) would have advocated.

abrupt interruption in the film flow and thus become a strategy for unsettlement and to trigger self-reflection on the filmic process (as in almost all of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films and in *Reassemblage* specifically). Alternatively, it can be related to the choice of shooting uneventful, quiet, intimate moments (as in David MacDougall's *Doon School Chronicles*, 2000) that could create or engage a "corporeal image" (MacDougall 2006).

For what concerns the sound editing, Longinotto deploys extensively the technique of 'sound bridges.' They are those sounds used to make the shift smoother from one scene to another and again give a sense of continuity, of a narration that seems natural, unnoticed. Such bridges can occur at the beginning of one scene when the sound from the previous scene carries over briefly before the sound from the new scene begins. Alternatively, they can occur at the end of a scene, when the sound from the next scene is heard before the image appears on the screen (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 313).

The details provided by Mary Milton, the sound-recordist, reveal that the sounds in *Sisters in Law* were recorded separately on a DAT recorder. As a consequence the sound has been recorded at the moment of filming but not through the microphone of the camera itself. This means that the noises, sounds and speech are those of the profilmic (i.e.: the outside of the film, the real world) event and they are synchronous, even though they have been added to the images at a later stage in the editing process. This technique is called 'post-synchronisation dubbing.' A question to ask at this point, having dissected the audio and visual representational strategies of the film (its *how*, its narrative structure, audio-visual construction and style), is whether Longinotto missed an opportunity to allow the audience to create their own meaning, or at least to practise their critical thinking, whilst viewing the film despite it being her explicit intention 'not to teach us what to think'. Such an opportunity could have been offered, for example, by the strategic use of silent moments or by presenting some elements of meta-reflection on the act of filmmaking itself.

Before shaping any further elaborations on these concerns and before exploring how this film answers the main research questions of this study (to what extent is this a feminist documentary and, if so, why and how?), I shall first contextualise *Sisters in Law*. In the next section, some more details about how and when the film was made will be provided, together with an elaboration of how this documentary relates to the three domains this research intersects: gender studies, documentary film and visual anthropology.

2.3 Too successful to be a feminist documentary

Shot in over three months in Cameroon in 2004, in a super 16mm format, *Sisters in Law* was not the film Longinotto and Ayisi had planned to make. The original story about an old woman becoming a judge, which was filmed for five full weeks, got destroyed in an unattended X-ray check-in at the airport. Thanks to the co-director, Florence Ayisi, the crew managed to immediately find another powerful subject. Not for this reason only the film is highly indebted to Ayisi. Being born in Kumba Town, where the film is shot, she acted as informant as well as translator. Furthermore, having studied Producing and Directing at the Northern School of Film and Television in Leeds, UK, and being a teacher and filmmaker herself, she was also an experienced insider in the documentary making process.

Sisters in Law poses complex questions and gives contradictory answers to the viewer or researcher who approaches the film from a feminist perspective. Such complexities and internal tensions of the film are traceable at three levels: its subject matter, its success and its style. Firstly, the film portrays the strong characters of two women whilst suggesting to offer general statements about violence against women on a global scale. In this sense, it is possible to detect in the film a risk of universalism, in as much as it takes one specific experience, culturally and geographically situated, and makes it an example about all women. Also of concern is Longinotto's resistance to elaborating on her standpoint as a white Western woman filming a documentary about the Other, about violence against black, African women. When one presents a film whose contents risk making 'universal' statements there too is a further risk of reifying essential stereotypes, and especially of reinforcing the supposed need for the people of the West to save helpless black women from violent black men.⁶²

It can be argued that *Sisters in Law* suggests that the results of the cases in Kumba Town could or should be a model or example to follow. This film seems to posit that domestic violence and gender inequalities can be revealed, punished, and possibly prevented by properly applying Western⁶³ rules and its

⁶² An example of how these stereotypes and common conceptions of Africa and the Other are reproduced in the film is a particularly unfortunate sentence towards the ending. When Amina and Ladi, the first two women to win court cases for spousal abuse, are triumphantly presented to a classroom at the university, Vera proudly states: "these two, Muslim women... who would have thought!". Here they stress the fact that they are Muslim and that this makes their fights even more exceptional; as such being Muslim is connoted with backwardness and women's oppression. Therefore it could be argued that these two women are presented as having being saved from both the oppressive Islam and the black men.

⁶³ As already mentioned, both the Public Prosecutor and the Judge, the two main protagonists of the film, show clear signs (e.g.: clothes, language, behaviours) of being acquainted with western codes and conceptions, or to at least be more familiar with them than many of the other people represented in the film.

modality of implementing the law (i.e.: with an attorney, a judge, a court, and so forth). Additionally, Vera, the State Prosecutor and main protagonist, is presented as an emancipated woman. Emancipation appears to adhere to a Western and patriarchal model: she is a working woman, with a helpful husband, children, a western education, in a powerful position, etcetera. At once, however, the film does vividly represent a successful situation in which two women managed to change an oppressive and often violent status quo, which was until then invisible and unquestioned. It appears a feminist success story, and clearly framed as such particularly in the ending of the film. Accordingly, already from this specific perspective, the film opens up intricate as well as stimulating questions.

Another aspect of *Sisters in Law* which creates complexity is the broad success the documentary reached. *Sisters in Law* manages to represent women's struggles in an empowering way, while at the same time reaching a wide audience due to its theatrical releases. In other words, this film is a documentary, made by women, that deals with women's oppression and resistance, and that, within the community of documentary lovers and practitioners, feminist and not, achieved quite an exceptional success. Only a few years after this film was released Kim Longinotto's popularity grew exponentially. Not only does she continue to produce films (all of them world-wide prize-winners), but in May 2009 a fourteen-film retrospective of her works took place at the renowned Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, accompanied by additional special events such as talks with Longinotto and a "rare"⁶⁴ master-class on documentary filmmaking. The popularity of a film might or might not be considered a relevant factor in a critical analysis; however, whether reaching a wide audience is an aspiration of feminist documentary film or not, it is important to explore the reasons why certain films achieve such status. Indeed, neither *Europlex* nor *Reassemblage* received the kind of mainstream attention that *Sisters in Law* did. Furthermore, the success of *Sisters in Law* presents a contradiction when taking into account what I referred to as the 'realist debate' (Kaplan 1983) in feminist film theory.⁶⁵ According to Kaplan, realism (and a documentary style equated with it), "is unable to change consciousness because it does not depart from the forms that embody the old consciousness" (Kaplan 1983, 131). The risk is that the use of typically patriarchal forms of (re)presentation will serve to reify current relationships of power (who has it, who creates knowledge, and so forth). Longinotto's film is not self-reflexive in this way insofar as she does not depart from standard methods of presenting

⁶⁴ This is how WMM, Women Make Movies, Longinotto's distributor, advertised this series of events in their newsletter (WMM News You Can Use, April 2009).

⁶⁵ See Chapter 1, section 1.4.

'reality,' nor does she reflect on her position and relation as a white Western film maker to African subjects, as previously stated.

Feminist documentary can be perceived as being incompatible with a broad audience success. The reasons for this perceived, or expected, incompatibility are traceable in the 'realist debate.' Feminist documentary films in the 1970s and 1980s were either highly experimental, thus echoing some of the avant-garde deconstruction of the film form, or were produced in the context of the women's movement and feminist collectives. In the first case, although the films were, ideally, aimed at a broad audience to propose a critical and alternative modality of (de)constructing filmic reality and the society therein reproduced, they remained of difficult accessibility for an audience not acquainted with such new filmic language. In the second case, feminist documentaries had a political or didactic function, or were made by activists to represent and discuss some of the issues relevant to the feminist movements. Consequently, these documentaries stayed confined within the circuit they were produced in. Thus, for two very different reasons, most feminist documentaries from the 1970s and 1980s remained confined in their circulation and are/were consequently unknown, or ignored by scholarly enquiry.

Finally, another reason for the scarcity of renowned feminist documentary films is that their very label – 'feminist documentaries' – served to limit both their circulation in documentary film festivals, and their use as subjects of academic enquiry. That is to say, such films fall into that *grey zone* I previously described: too 'feminist' – that is to say, too political or critical – to be taken into account by documentary distribution circuits, documentary film theory and visual anthropology, and too 'documentary' to be acknowledged by feminist film theories, which deal, even today, with the huge impact the 'realist debate' had. It is questionable whether one of the aims of a feminist text, in the broad sense of the term, is to reach as many people as possible. Someone might claim that the importance and the political, cultural and imaginative significance of a certain work, being it film or else, is not measured by its wide acceptance and positive reception. This is not only an agreeable point, but historically confirmed when looking at how many films are now considered undisputable masterpieces, though they did not achieve public recognition at their time of release (and maybe many still do not).

However, focusing on the political dimension of feminist art (allow me to include documentary in this category), we can readily agree that its effects on the public are desirable outcomes of a feminist action. I here refer to feminisms as political interventions, aimed at producing change, in society and culture and therefore in the public arena. On this ground I deem it important to consider the reasons behind the success of a film such as *Sisters in Law*. I will elaborate on this concern again at a later stage in this chapter, after the analysis of the film.

Sisters in Law is a complex and contradictory film, not only for what concerns its subject matter or its success, but also at the level of its filmic strategies, as will be explained in the following paragraph. For now, it is suffice to say that the 'fly-on-the-wall' techniques deployed by Longinotto cause an emotive response from the audience. The film extensively engages with the techniques of realism in a classical documentary manner, and this is specifically the cause for concern when acknowledging the 'realist debate.' With the term 'classical' I here refer to the stylistic and, arguably, ethical approaches of documentary as it was conceptualised and codified in the 1960s and 1970s, after the birth of Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité,⁶⁶ and that has dominated the documentary canon at least until the 1990s and is starting to be profoundly questioned only in the last decades with the advent of widespread digital technologies. One exemplary text that attempts a codification of what a proper documentary should have been in an anthropological context is Paul Hockings (1975), or, with a more hands-on style Barbash et al. (1997). From the perspective of its style, as already explained, *Sisters in Law* appears to be in close dialogue with the Direct Cinema approach to (anthropological) documentaries in as much as it follows the rules of invisibility.⁶⁷ This documentary, however, simultaneously challenges the idea that a film should simply offer the viewer a lesson, and avoids any claim of scientificity: it is not Longinotto's goal to "teach you what to think" (Pidd 2006, n.p.); the film is supposed to be "just an emotional experience" (*ibid.*). It should now be evident from the epigraph of this chapter and, more importantly, from the detailed analysis of the film, that *Sisters in Law* is a film aware of the fictional implications of documentary representations, nonetheless, it does not abandon realism as a crucial element of its construction.

The following sections are hereby dedicated to the elaboration of the central question of this study: how does *Sisters in Law* engage with documentary film from a feminist perspective (especially considering its worrisome aspects, as previously highlighted)? To break this question down further: in which sense is it a documentary? To what extent is it a feminist film and, if so, why and how? To elaborate on such questions, first the documentary dimension of *Sisters in Law* is analysed through the semiotic framework outlined in the previous chapter: the *indexical* value of the film is identified and scrutinised. I argue that a very clear indexical relation between the filmic sign and reality is played out; a relation that is at the basis of this documentary's claim of realism and authenticity. Next, I elaborate on why and how can this film be considered to generate feminist effects. Here the conceptual tools of *visuality* and *materiality* are employed to investigate the specific complexities of this contradictory documentary.

⁶⁶ See also footnote 58.

⁶⁷ See footnote 57.

2.4 Indexicality as ‘having been there’

At first sight, *Sisters in Law* could easily be defined as a documentary because of its recognisable Direct Cinema style. Most viewers would consider it feminist because of the content matter of the film, its story and characters. I argued that the three films focused on in this research fall into what could be called a ‘grey zone’, an in-between area where labelling and clear-cut disciplinary investigations are uncomfortable, a space that because of its complexity has been too often left uncharted or purposefully ignored. This is a zone in which a film is at once too feminist and too documentary to be successfully both and, as such, to be respectfully taken into account by either documentary film studies or feminist analyses. Since *Sisters in Law* is, at least apparently, clearly feminist and clearly a documentary, does it challenge the very categorisation I have just set out to explore? Does this film represent an exception to what I have described as a grey zone into which most feminist documentary films would be relegated?

In order to provide an appropriate answer to this issue, another element should be introduced: the anthropological dimension of the film. *Sisters in Law* is not an anthropological film to the extent that it has not been filmed or directed by a trained anthropologist⁶⁸. Nor does it address an audience of anthropologists, nor the outcome of an ethnographic research. It does not, in other words, aim at producing ‘scientific’ knowledge about its subject matter. However, following my working definition of anthropological films as films about the Other, *Sisters in Law* (so as almost all of Longinotto’s films for that matter) fits into that category in as much as it deals with an ethnic Other in terms of content. Moreover, even though the production of scientific knowledge is not the goal of the filmmaker, the film nonetheless certainly produces a representation of some aspects of the culture and social conditions of Kumba Town and of the daily lives of some of its inhabitants. *Sisters in Law* intends to give voice, to make visible, “to film the unfilmable” (Duncan 2006, n.p.), and therefore to make sense of what is happening in a town in Cameroon in 2005. If nothing else this factor echoes the reasons behind many anthropological films. It might be telling in this sense that the renowned British Royal Anthropological Institute distributes Longinotto’s films alongside topical and unquestionable anthropological titles such as David MacDougall’s. Finally, the film shows several characteristics of the classic anthropological documentary, codified in the 1960s and 1970s as Cinéma Vérité or Direct Cinema.

⁶⁸ For an account of the various perspectives on the criteria to define what an anthropological film is, see Chiozzi (1990). Among the texts that stress how an ethnographic film has to be evaluated vis-à-vis the anthropological training of the director and the research that is behind it, two particularly clear examples are Heider (2006), and Ruby (1989 and 1991).

Having previously delineated some of the key characteristics of Direct Cinema, it is now possible to elaborate further on this style compared with the techniques of representation of *Sisters in Law*. I argued that there are several correspondences between the style of *Sisters in Law* and classic documentary. Kim Longinotto's own statements about her approach to filmmaking seem to confirm my interpretation (see, for example: Smaill 2007, 180; Duncan 2006; Saunders 2010; *Kim Longinotto* on Channel 4; *Kim Longinotto* on BBC Radio4). However, according to the available radio programmes and written interviews, Longinotto has never explicitly defined her works either as Cinéma Vérité, fly-on-the-wall, or Direct Cinema. She seems instead rather careful in avoiding the attachment of any stylistic or academic label to her films. This factor could be interpreted as a way of distancing herself from dominant modes of filmic (re)presentation of the Other and therefore could facilitate defining or considering her film as feminist. Nevertheless, when describing how she films her subjects, it is apparent that her choice and her first aim is to remain as invisible as possible to the audience; her other major goal is to achieve a direct emotional reaction from the audience. This approach appears overtly when she affirms in an interview published in *The Guardian*, entitled quite appropriately "The invisible woman": "I don't want you to be thinking about me, or the camera or the filming when you watch my films. I want you to feel that you're there, standing where I am and going through the emotional experience" (Pidd 2006, n.p.).

Statements as the one quoted above are the only actual self-reflective elements that she provides to explain her style of filming. Besides, Longinotto is always careful in stressing the fact that she uses a big camera, not a small digital camcorder. She maintains, accordingly, that her 'invisibility' is not due to an almost hidden camera; her subjects are very aware she is there to make a film but, she asserts, they easily forget they are being filmed. Rather it is her approach to the subjects, her choice of working with a very small crew, and the way she moves in the space, that give her the capability of representing things 'as they happen' in front of the camera, without being an intrusive presence. *Sisters in Law* is, indeed, shot with only one 16mm camera and the filmmaker is accompanied only by the sound-recordist Mary Milton. The actual physical presence is surely a crucial element that influences the filmic approach; nonetheless, the framing strategies and the editing choices are what ultimately shape the film's style.

It should be clear that Kim Longinotto has a highly classical approach to documentary making. Nonetheless in shooting *Sisters in Law*, Longinotto is absolutely contemporary both in the style and in relating to her subjects. She is not at all naïve and is absolutely aware that her presence influences the events

filmed;⁶⁹ she is also aware that her gender, national and ethnic origins play a role when influencing what is filmed, however (as noted below and above), Longinotto is not explicitly reflective on this point. Maybe this is also why the film is co-directed with Florence Ayisi who is originally from Kumba Town: it was thanks to her that they had access to the stories represented in the film and that they gained the trust of the women filmed. But, Longinotto explains, the simple fact of being there in Kumba Town, in the court, a woman with a cine-camera, had a positive and empowering influence on the women who were fighting for their rights. In fact, a sort of a silent solidarity is established and Longinotto, the sound-recordist and the camera itself become witnesses; their presence is perceived as a support and a sort of protection for the women filmed, especially in certain more delicate circumstances.⁷⁰ However Longinotto is not very talkative about her own positioning as a white, British, western woman and its implications. When asked by a journalist on this point, she replied that “race and nationality are hugely important but they aren’t the only human divisions. There’s also class and gender and sexual orientation and that’s what I make my films about” (Marqusee 2005, n.p.). In my view, this claimed attention to other lines of difference, to an intersectional approach, does not signal to the audience, her responders, that she positions herself along such axes in any way. She does not seem to truly reflect on the implications of her position in relation to Others or along other axes of difference. In another interview, for example, she maintains, answering to a question about the (power) relations between her crew and the filmed subjects that “this outside/inside doesn’t have to do with geography, then. It has to do with where you’re coming from. It’s an emotional thing” (D’Arcy 2006, n.p.). Note that “where you’re coming from” does not refer to a geo-political positioning, but rather to a universal experiential subject position as human beings.

However contradictory, *Sisters in Law* is a complex documentary: at once classic in style and contemporary in its intentions. Of all doubts and problems the film provokes, its documentary value never seem to be questioned. None of the several different audiences I have watched the film with, students, colleagues, film-festival goers, have ever had any hesitation in labelling the film as documentary. Surely this has to do with the recognisable style the film deploys, its shooting and editing techniques. Nevertheless, I would argue there is another, more hidden and fundamental factor that makes the film fall in the category of documentary, an element that is activated by, and becomes perceivable through, such techniques and styles: its indexical dimension. Thus, it

⁶⁹ Her approach on this matter is comparable with that of other renowned contemporary documentary directors (see for example the precious film by Pepita Ferrari *Capturing Reality: The Art Of Documentary*, 2008; also partially available online at: <http://films.nfb.ca/capturing-reality>).

⁷⁰ Again, the sources of this kind of information are interviews such as D’Arcy (2006).

is quite obvious that *Sisters in Law* can be credibly defined as documentary; yet it is precisely its documentary elements that make it problematic from a feminist perspective, and indeed the same would be true vice versa. While the content matter of the film does seem to make it recognisably feminist (as I have previously argued), its classic techniques make it questionable whether *Sisters in Law* actually reproduces hegemonic and patriarchal techniques of filmmaking, and whether the result is simply another film proffering the 'truth' about women (and specifically, about the Other, about ethnic women, for that matter). On the other hand, I have shown that Longinotto is aware of the *construction* that goes into documentary film making – thus blurring the line as to whether the film produced is a work of 'truth' or 'fiction' – and this very acknowledgement seems to be a feminist, self-reflexive strategy of film making. However, this awareness of the positioning of the filmmaker, of the impact the presence of the camera can have on the filmed reality, and of the implications therein does not show in the actual documentary. Although the feminist effects of *Sisters in Law* will have to be further explored, I will first turn to elaborate on why and how its credibility as a documentary lies in the indexicality the film performs or displays.

At the basis of this research I postulated an understanding of (feminist) documentary film as a film that is haunted by reality. This haunting is related to the indexical dimension of documentary. Indexes, as discussed in the previous chapter, can be defined as those signs founded on a physical relation with their referent, a relation of co-presence if not of contact. More precisely, the index is a kind of sign that is "haunted by" the object (Doane 2007b, 134). Accordingly, the indexical documentary sign not only could be "actually modified" by the object, in a physical sense, by direct contact, but it could also point the attention towards the object. In other words, it is not only a trace or imprint of the object, it is also a deixis: it points towards a presence, makes present the object it refers to (Doane 2007b, 136-140). Taking into account the complexities of Doane's and Peirce's definitions of the index, let me return to the indexical status of *Sisters in Law* to see where and how it can be interpreted as being haunted by reality.

Longinotto's film performs its indexicality in a strong and unambiguous manner that becomes the very ground upon which its power and credibility is built. *Sisters in Law* is constructed to confirm, over and time again, that the filmmaker, the camera, was there, by *denying* or at least *making invisible* such presence. To reiterate: because the camera is 'invisible,' the events which are filmed appear to have truly happened, thus the signs so produced (the recorded images and sounds) materialise as being haunted by reality precisely because of the conventions of documentary production the audience is familiar with. Realism (that is how Longinotto's style can be defined), as previously argued, creates the illusion, or presents that fact of being in Kumba Town, 2004, observing the daily activities of two women and their clients. What distinguishes

Sisters in Law from any other film we can define as fictional is not only the label itself. Certainly, it is presented as a documentary and, most likely, when watching the film the viewer knows that the cover of the DVD, the description on the film festival booklet, or the distributor's synopsis on the website labels it as a documentary. It is also the fact that this film deploys all those techniques a western audience recognises as belonging to the documentary genre, because of decades of acquaintance with such style (the fly-on-the-wall approach). Moreover, as a consequence of these representational strategies, the film lets us think that what we as viewers are experiencing has to do with reality: the events happened in the actual world, and have, at least for the largest part, not been performed for the camera. This is the most widely acknowledged definition of documentary film (for example, Bordwell and Thompson 2001; Hockings 1975; Nichols, 2001; Renov 1993).

If indexicality is not the only, but the most peculiar aspect of documentary film, then *Sisters in Law* exemplifies in the clearest yet not unique way⁷¹ how the contact between object and sign took place. Watching this film, one can have doubts as to whether the protagonists are at times performing for the camera, or whether the conditions for the women of Kumba Town are really improving as massively as Longinotto portrays them thanks to the intervention of the two protagonists. However, one can hardly argue with the conviction that the situation represented in the film actually happened; the viewer can hardly doubt that the subjects of the film are not actors or that the filmmaker, or at least the camera, was there when the profilmic events were taking place. In sum, *Sisters in Law* is a documentary by virtue of the way it presents its indexicality as a sign. The object is in an existential relation with the sign, the film points at and alerts us to the reality out there, to the object-in-the-world, at the experiences of some men and women in Cameroon. All this does not at all mean that the film reproduces that reality faithfully, also because this would be the wrong question to ask and it is beyond the point in this study.

Having elaborated on why and how this film is a documentary through the lens of indexicality, the second aspect I wish to take into account is to what extent and how the film can be considered feminist. It is important to note though, in concluding this section, that the very thing that makes *Sisters in Law* most recognisably a documentary (its style: realism), is the point where the most tension lies in also calling the film feminist (insofar as realism risks producing 'truth'). This is *not* to say that a film cannot be both feminist and documentary (it is precisely my argument that they *can*), but it is important to be aware of where the friction between the two categories rubs most forcefully.

⁷¹ This multiplicity of ways of presenting the indexical dimension of documentary will become clearer after the analyses of the other films.

2.5 On the limits of self-reflexivity: materiality and the emotional experience

There is not one systematic or fixed criterion to define what a feminist documentary film might be, or to identify to what extent any film is feminist, where, why and how. At best it is possible to talk about several feminist canons. Feminist documentaries cross multiple genres, styles and themes.⁷² Such indeterminacy, I argue, is a positive one, in as much as it avoids any normative labelling of what could otherwise easily turn into a genre and a set of standards. It is therefore not at all my intention to provide any general principle or rigid collection of rules to classify feminist documentary. Rather, I intend to dissect Longinotto's film to zoom in to its materiality, limits and qualities. I investigate the film's specificities in terms of its political potential in presenting or producing alternative representations and imaginaries. It is not 'the genre' that I engage with, but the individual facets and details of this specific film.

Although one canon for the feminist documentary does not exist, a certain common understanding of the term has to be acknowledged. Scholars and filmmakers alike use the category 'feminist documentary.' There is an agreement about what it refers to, but ask anyone to define it and you will get a number of different and probably contradictory descriptions. Feminist films are generally identified in terms of content matter or conditions of production/reception: they are films by, about, or for women. Alternatively, they are defined as films dealing with gender issues and power inequalities.

It is quite evident that there are numerous risks and pitfalls in equating films made by or about women with feminist films: essentialism being but one such danger. Not only can the emphasis on the gender of the filmmaker lead to dangerous essentialist perspectives, I argue that the sole attention to the content matter of films can do the same and ought to be criticised as well. As elaborated in Chapter 1 of this book, I consider feminist those documentaries that are *haunted by* feminist issues, such as: issues of power relations, gender, social inequalities, and the politics of representation. These matters are, therefore, at stake at multiple levels and, I propose, they become manifest and particularly relevant for a feminist appraisal once they produce certain political effects. Accordingly, I claim that a focus on *how* documentaries are made is as crucial as an attention to *what* they are about. The former being definitely, and regrettably,

⁷² One example might be useful to outline the multifaceted scope of feminist documentary. In the call for papers for the 2011 edition of the renowned Visible Evidence conference, Julia Lesage posted the only panel on this topic, namely "Feminist Documentary Now". Among the themes mentioned to encourage prospective panellists' submissions, we find: pedagogy, internet media making, national specificities in women's film production and exhibition, autobiography, humour, interdisciplinary theoretical interconnections, etc.

less practiced as a perspective to observe and make use of documentaries outside of the specialist classrooms. Nonetheless, the political and social significance of documentaries that deal with women's issues in a patent and accessible way has to be recognised. The problem at stake here is the tension between films by and about women that attain a wide audience appreciation and those feminist films that practice experimental deconstruction at all levels of style and aesthetics. The former kind carries the downside of being considered 'solely' documentaries about women but not necessarily feminist. The latter, instead, can become very hard to decode, thus alienating any possibility of reaching a broad audience and remaining relegated to unknown archives and circles. Ultimately such experimental films might end up having a very limited circulation and influence, or failing altogether to produce change, being it a cultural change, a social one, a change in the public imaginary, or in the geo-political arena. It is important to remember though that this very point is the crucial purpose of feminist film; that is, the potential to produce effects or affects that can lead to change (cultural, political, social, and so forth). Being that this issue is one of the main concerns of this book, I will ask what kind of effects Longinotto's film generates, how, and whether the film consequently provides a potential for change.

Another way to approach the question of identifying feminist documentary is by considering the historical development of the debates in feminist film studies. In the 1970s and 1980s the academic debates that defined the dos and don'ts of feminist film practice and theory suggested, or demanded, some parameters to identify such 'feminist' ingredients of a documentary. The antirealist discussion that animated feminist film theorists in that period has been not only crucial but also the last systematic discussion about feminist documentary. One will recall that the shift away from realism came about when realism is seen to be "unable to change consciousness" (Kaplan, 1983, 131) because it does not "challenge the depiction of reality" (Johnston 1973). It has therefore nothing to say about the already established hierarchies of power. Therefore, although the 'realist debate' is not anymore an explicitly dominant concern in the field, it still remains a very influential and relevant matter. For these reasons, that debate of three decades ago is still an unavoidable milestone to take into account in any enquiry of feminism and documentary. In sum, both the commonsense perceptions and these theoretical accounts influence, at different levels and in different contexts, the contemporary understanding of what a feminist documentary is or should be.

In this section I explore to what extent, and more importantly from which perspective *Sisters in Law* can be considered as a film that produces feminist effects. It is important to do so especially because Longinotto's style of realism seems to be partly, if not wholly, conflictual with (radical) feminist aims. First, I analyse the documentary in the light of the antirealist standpoints, then from a

perspective that focuses on the content matter of the film. Finally, I argue for another way of approaching feminist documentary. In doing so I outline how this film presents a feminist dimension in the way it engages with materiality (one of the three lenses proposed for identifying a feminist documentary). My aim is not to sketch the guidelines of a potential definition of feminist documentary; rather, it is to test the boundaries of any possible definition. I intend to take this opportunity to stress the complexities of such documentaries and the potentials therein. I propose an interdisciplinary and always partial way to read (and make?) documentary politically. Political is here intended in its broader and more complex sense, in a feminist perspective, as a move towards cultural and social change and the critical re-signification of power, as noted above.⁷³

From the so-called antirealist perspective in Feminist Film Theory (Juhasz 1999a), *Sisters in Law* is not a feminist film. Claire Johnston, as the author of the important 1973 essay "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," would probably criticise Longinotto's film for deploying the same filmic techniques and aesthetics of Cinéma Vérité, the same language of the "male bourgeois cinema" (214). More than thirty years have passed since Johnston's essay, yet her stand against realism is nonetheless still influential for a feminist study of documentary film because, as previously mentioned, there has not been a systematic discussion on this matter ever since. By calling it systematic I refer to the fact that in the late 1970s-80s this feminist quarrel about realism and cinema has been a long and multilayered debate, tightly related to broader concerns of feminist studies and activism of the time, informed by other disciplines and theories, and to which numerous feminist scholars participated. The 'winner' of that debate has been the antirealist approach, and writings from that side of the discussion have certainly circulated more broadly (Juhasz 1999a, 214). In those same years numerous texts criticised the anti-realist perspective: Alexandra Juhasz's (1999a, 1999b) and Julia Lesage's (1978, 1999) just to name the most vigorous. Such scholars have lost the battle, so to say, and accordingly their works have remained relatively unknown for quite some years. Rather, to be more precise, such texts have been read and appreciated, but mainly outside the feminist milieu. Finally, although the last decades have seen a new attention to the relation between documentary and feminism, the more recent scholarship,⁷⁴ important and widely available as it is, seems to be too sporadic to have a significant impact either on the field of documentary studies or on gender studies' approaches to documentary film. The result is that no other stance on feminism and documentary has been so pervasive, persuasive and

⁷³ For some further elaborations on how feminist politics are to be understood in the context of this research, see footnotes 6 and 9 in the Introduction of this thesis.

⁷⁴ For example, as previously mentioned, Juhasz and Lerner (2006), and Waldman and Walker (1999).

acknowledged as the antirealist perspective of the late 1970s-80s, most known via the works of Ann Kaplan (1983), Eileen Mc Garry (1975) and, of course, Johnston (1973). With this in mind let us come back to our film.

I argue, with Johnston, that *Sisters in Law* does not challenge the criteria of realism. However, I also follow Juhasz in claiming that documentaries such as the one in question can be considered feminist in as much as they represent alternative, ignored or concealed realities; they give voices to women who are most often *spoken about*.⁷⁵ Let me make this point explicit: documentary films, insofar as they fit under the label 'realist' often speak *about* certain persons (the Others). This is what makes it problematic from a feminist perspective (as it speaks for the persons, tells 'truths' about them, does not engage with the power relationship at play, and so forth). Now, Longinotto's style certainly risks this result; however, I argue that Longinotto's film is not only speaking *for*, but is also allowing an opportunity, a space for speech for the women themselves. As such, in giving voices to women who have not been able to exercise them before, they have an impact and a power that "comes more from their *use* than from their *form*" (Juhasz 1999, 211). Ask a non-expert audience if they would define *Sisters in Law* as feminist and, given such audience knows more or less what feminism means (a general understanding of a goal for change which leads to equality or better conditions for women), they would mostly agree that it is.⁷⁶

Sisters in Law not only portrays (black) women as subjects (rather than objectified Others), but it offers an example of how two individuals can change the status quo of a given society to the benefit of the women who reside there, namely in Kumba Town, Cameroon. The film engages with gender inequalities and with different cultural understandings of gender roles and gendered subjectivities. The subject positions Vera and Beatrice take up in the film are not the ones ascribed to women in that traditional cultural context. 'Traditional' subject positions for women and for men prescribe certain behaviours which the 'heroines' of the film subvert. The traditional gender roles in Kumba Town are outlined by Longinotto, and their subversion becomes the central theme of the film. For example, some of the issues addressed in the film are the habit of trading of women in marriages, the different roles of mothers and fathers in the family, the independence of women in the house and how to change these 'facts of life.' Moreover, if Longinotto's own reading of her film is to be taken into

⁷⁵ This point should be stressed as it directly echoes Trinh's argument about 'speaking about,' as I will elaborate when analysing her film *Reassemblage* in the next chapter.

⁷⁶ It might not be the most scientifically sound experiment to execute, but in the process of my research, showing the film to colleagues, friends and students stimulated my analysis as it helped me taking some distance, thus watching the documentary with new eyes time and over again. From this experience I can say that the film is generally very warmly received. Furthermore, it functions extremely well to teach undergraduate students about how gender relations are imbued with hierarchy and power and what some women are doing to change the status quo.

account, she declares that she chooses to focus on women precisely because she is mostly interested in change and in how power is gained or subverted (Smaill 2007, 178). In sum, the documentary deals with gender and with alternative possibilities of gender roles. It portrays the success stories of two women as exemplary, while describing how patriarchal rules work and can be subverted, there in Kumba Town (as well as possibly in other patriarchal societies, the film seems to suggest). From these perspectives then, the feminist dimension of this documentary seems quite obvious.

As previously elaborated, in *Sisters in Law* the claim of the invisibility of the filmmaker so as of the camera, and the complete lack of self-reflexivity on the cinematographic process and on the medium itself are, to say the least, problematic, especially when read in the light of the anti-realist feminist perspective. As will be observed in the next chapter, this feminist stance on documentary realism becomes even more obvious when comparing this film to Trinh Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*. However, despite this critique or beyond it, some critics such as Belinda Smaill (2010, 71-94) Patricia White (2006) and Jerry White (*Cinema Scope*, Issue 26), see *Sisters in Law* as undoubtedly a documentary permeated by feminist politics and that produces feminist effects. Whereas the commentary of the latter remains quite superficial, Patricia White's article and Smaill's chapter are definitely more in depth, academically informed, and, at times, quite persuasive. The article by Jerry White simply argues that Longinotto's work is "clearly indebted to feminist documentary" even though there is something slightly anarchic in her approach which differentiates her from earlier generations of feminist film makers (*Cinema Scope*, Issue 26, n.p.). More precise is Patricia White's analysis, in which she articulates that the documentary practice of Longinotto is one of transnational feminism. She argues that Longinotto's filmmaking is readable along the lines of Chandra Mohanty's "feminist solidarity model" as an alternative to and a critique of Western feminism and the Western representations of 'Third World women' as victims (White 2006, 123). It is in this sense that Patricia White considers Longinotto's films in general and *Sisters in Law* in particular as examples of transnational feminist practices of alliances as a means to challenge gendered power inequalities (White 2006, 121). In a similar manner, Smaill interprets this documentary as a case of collaborative feminist video practice. She refers to Alexandra Juhasz's understanding of "feminist collaborative video" (Juhasz 2003) as the manner in which feminist documentary can overcome the tendency documentary films have to objectify and victimise women, and can undermine the hierarchy necessarily at play between the filming and the filmed subjects (Smaill 2010, 89-91). Longinotto's film is taken as an example of how this practice of reciprocity and negotiation – between the filmmaker and the State Prosecutor, Vera Ngassa, for example – could produce feminist, alternative representations of non-Western people and women in particular. Interestingly, in Smaill's

investigation of Longinotto's film, it is specifically when dealing with the representation of experiences of pain and struggle that this feminist collaborative approach is considered to produce the most significant political effects (Smaill 2010, 73). Below I will elaborate on why the representation of pain and the engagement of emotional responses from the audience could be read as one of the feminist effects that *Sisters in Law* produces. Now it is instead important to note that in both Smaill's and Patricia White's texts the "observational," "Cinéma Vérité" or "realist" conventions used in *Sisters in Law* are acknowledged in their tradition of being connected with Truth claims and, more in general, with the hierarchy of documentary representation. Nonetheless both scholars argue that such filmic strategies become, in Longinotto's films, feminist practices, which provoke feminist effects, namely to create new representations of non-Western female subjectivities, to make visible the struggles and achievements of otherwise invisible women and to deconstruct stereotypes of backwardness associated with the Other (Smaill 2010, 72, 74). Whether these interpretations of Longinotto's film and strategies as feminist are considered completely convincing or not, they point at the complexities and ambiguities of *Sisters in Law* as well as of feminist documentary at large. In other words, when observing the film not only at the level of its content, what it is *about*, but in its representational strategies, thus paying attention to *how* the film is constructed, layers of meaning are found that complicate and enrich the relation between this film and the various feminist stances. To add another layer to this discussion, Kim Longinotto replies to a journalist asking her whether she considers herself feminist: "It's to give a voice really, isn't it? I suppose it's very unpopular, it's a kind of unmodern word, isn't it? Feminist? But I suppose if it means that we want women to have an equal part of things, to have an equal respect, an equal power, then yes, you know, I suppose I am a feminist" (Bourke 2001, n.p.). In sum, at this point of the analysis, what preliminary answer can be given to the question of whether and how *Sisters in Law* can be considered a film that produces feminist effects? Thus far I have explained that the film seems to fit in the realist tradition of feminist documentaries: it focuses on "the performance of female subjectivity" (Smaill 2010, 87) and provides a positive and empowering representation of women, while employing and reproducing realist filmic strategies. This, however, is not an uncomplicated labelling of *Sisters in Law*, and before we are through we should consider the materiality of the film and *how* these possible feminist effects are produced.

Materiality as a lens considers many elements. A material element of film concerns what I have named in Chapter 1, namely the *how*. How the film is constructed, how it makes use of the techniques and technology of the audiovisual medium, and how it explores or challenges the limits of the medium are crucial elements to help us explore the status of a film as either (or both) a

documentary/feminist film. This aspect of the materiality of the film has been mentioned previously when elaborating upon the filmic language and its implications: realism and invisibility, and also the literal film making techniques (see the section on indexicality). But from this, the feature of materiality to be taken into account at present is the material (i.e. sensible, as in related to the senses) effects the film produces. Although this research does not occupy itself with audience reception, I deem it important to consider one other aspect of *Sisters in Law*, as it proves to be very particular to the way this film is constructed, namely the way it engages the audience. That is to say, I want to consider how the film engages the audience, and what responses it evokes from them. To do so, I will elaborate on my own experience as a viewer. I delineated in the first paragraph of this chapter that one specific feature of this film, not unique to it in general, but distinctive in comparison with the other two films analysed in this research, is the way the film touches the audience, how it provokes an emotional reaction. Through Bill Nichols' conception of vivification (Nichols 1991) I intend to locate the exact elements of Longinotto's film that are possibly responsible for its critics and audience success.

In my understanding and in my experience as a viewer *Sisters in Law* not only makes the audience believe themselves to be there, in Kumba Town, in the court room (thus stressing what could be considered an indexical relation to the object), but makes the viewer feel *as though* they experience what happens on the screen. In other words, the viewer not only observes the event detachedly by believing that the event has 'touched' the film (as one might typically expect of a classic anthropological documentary film – the rational observer, rather than the emotional participant), but feels the events as if being touched by them directly. The film engages the viewer directly: it produces effects and affects. I have not undertaken an audience reception analysis, and can, as such, only talk about the effects the film produced on me, as a specifically located viewer, from my position as a subject and as a scholar, and about the experiences a few other viewers reported upon watching the film.

One way of describing my experience as a viewer of *Sisters in Law* would be to say that I felt what was happening on the screen. Not only was it that I watched, observed, understood and analysed the film, but I felt, in an embodied sense, some of the situations represented in the documentary. When Vera asks Manka's aunt to reveal the wounds on Manka's body I cringed, awaiting to see such injuries and dreading to experience if only a tiny part of what the pain must have been like. In a comparable manner, when Vera talks in front of the classroom in the last scene of the film I felt the joy, the sensation of accomplishment and the euphoria of success: she declares that the two Muslim women who are with her fought and won and all the girls in the classroom laugh and applaud. For me, as a viewer, it was as if I partook of that achievement and satisfaction. It is possible to explain such an embodied affect of the film on the

viewer, or at least on this specific viewer, particular but certainly not unique,⁷⁷ as simply the result of a very well-made film, *constructed* to make one feel such emotions. Fair enough, the ability of Longinotto is not to be argued with, unless one would decide to dismiss her success as a filmmaker as a whole. But the question remains, how can *Sisters in Law*, again, not as a unique case but as an exemplary one, produce such effects? A way to answer this question is by mobilising Nichols' concept of vivification: "rendering *felt* what representations only allude to" (1991, 231). He introduces the concept in order to go beyond "paradoxes of representation" and understand how formal strategies in documentary representation open up possibilities of apprehension in aesthetic and political terms (Nichols 1991, 240). Vivification then allows for a "political reflexivity" (241) and is mobilised by "the experiential awareness of difference" (235). The paradoxes Nichols refers to are the key concepts and tensions that inform my research and which I have outlined more or less explicitly in this analysis thus far. Although he introduces vivification to discuss "magnitude" (a topic which I do not concern myself with) and I do not share his interpretation of the indexical status of documentary, the following passage vibrantly exemplifies the issues at stake. These are the paradoxes of (documentary) representation:

the presence-in-absence of the referent, and the filmmaker; the indexical illusion of an ontological bond and the textual fact of semiotic production; the dilemma of the one that will speak for the many, saying what other might have said, yet saying it with a self-conceived rhetorical force that renders if felt and believed, not just heard; and so on (Nichols 1991, 241).

Thus, vivification points at the relation between "representation and experience" (Nichols 1991, 231); it has to do with the body, with the emotional and visceral (234)⁷⁸ but it "must be a product of the text" (243); it is not the same as persuasiveness but is part of it.

In this perspective it becomes possible to discern how *Sisters in Law's* vivification produces effects on the bodies of the viewers, engages their senses and their affective reactions and, with them, a specific aspect of materiality. Additionally, I suggest that it is this engagement that eventually provokes the audience response which is then materialised in the many 'audience awards' the film won. More importantly, since these affective ties activated by vivification "must be forged obliquely, between viewer and representation but in relation to the historical referent" (Nichols 1991, 234), in these affective reactions lies what I

⁷⁷ The 'emotional' aspect of *Sisters in Law* is highlighted also in reviews such as "Emotional dramas take top prizes" where the journalist writes that the film, "though emotional, it is a positive and uplifting documentary" (Dundas 2005).

⁷⁸ For other recent important theories that engage with how films trigger the embodied, carnal, sensorial reactions of the viewers see, for example: Vivian Sobchack (2004), Laura Marks (2000; 2002) and Jennifer M. Barker (2009).

see as the strongest potential of this film. The emotional responses (e.g.: empathy, victory, solidarity) the film provokes are very important to consider as possible feminist effects. The consequences of these effects of *Sisters in Law* are, as long as I can envisage them, that the film: creates a sense of possibility, victory and hope that the world can be changed; that gender oppression can be changed, that women could be the driving forces of such changes; manages to represent otherwise invisible struggles; presents another image of Cameroon, of Africa to the West (an image where women react and are not only victims but also active agents); could inspire similar actions as the ones of the protagonists of the film.

In other words, understood through vivification, these effects can have political consequences, incite awareness about power and gender inequalities, provoke reactions and eventually produce change in knowledge and consciousness if not in the social and political arena. This aspect of *Sisters in Law*, I argue, is where the feminist effects are most noticeable and influential.

The relation between emotions and/as the political in this and other documentaries is also the main concern of Smaill's book with the telling title *Documentary: politics, emotion, culture*. The author refers to Longinotto's aim that with her films she wants "to allow the audience to make a sort of leap where they can feel what the person in the film is feeling, through cultures" (Smaill 2007, 181). Through the analysis of some of such statements as well as the study of Longinotto's films, Smaill proposes that the "empathetic engagement" that the documentaries produce, might "engender political action or consciousness" (Smaill 2010, 92). It is especially in the representation of pain and in the emotional effects the film provokes that a correspondence is generated between emotions and the political. Political is in Smaill's text intended as both the feminist commitment to social and cultural change as well as activism and political action. Importantly however, Smaill argues, Longinotto represents pain "so that it might be witnessed and acknowledged by an audience without invoking a fetishising mode of empathy" (Smaill 2010, 93). Therefore it is the representation of female political subjects and not merely the "pain and suffering of the other" (Smaill 2010, 92) that becomes central to the film; it is this "translation" (part of the collaborative practice) of the "subaltern suffering" (Smaill 2010, 93) through the narrative of the film that generates a consciousness that makes such emotions political.

In documentary film the relation between the affective spectatorial response, identification and feminism is also discussed by Walker and Waldman (1999, 12). They argue that this response is too often overlooked or carefully avoided by the advocates of the anti-realist position in the feminist debate of the 1970s. However, this detachment from the spectator's affectivity, in the name of radical feminist deconstruction, runs the risk of ignoring the positive political implications such engagements might have. Namely, as Kaplan writes, this is "the danger of a theory that ignores the need for emotional identification with

people suffering oppression" (Kaplan 1983, 217). More than twenty years later, with the tools of psychoanalysis, Elisabeth Cowie seems to respond to this "danger" in her latest book *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*. Here she works specifically on documentary film and elaborates on how documentary engages us as viewers in its function of both informing and educating as well as mobilising the "scopophilic pleasures of looking" (Cowie 2011, 14) and producing a spectacle of reality. The book addresses the paradox of "the fascinating pleasure of recorded reality as both spectacle and knowledge" (*ibid.*). Cowie explores the rational and emotional processes of identification and recognition and the complex relation between self and other in documentary representations (88). She identifies a "desire for the real" (20) as the main factor at play in the experience of viewing a documentary. Finally she connects these processes of identification and desire with issues of time and temporality, thus focusing on the political and, closing the circle, she argues for documentary as "political art" (153), linking identification with both the political and the aesthetics of documentary.

Accordingly, keeping into account these various approaches to the relation between emotions and the political in documentary, and considering the emotional response the film provokes, *Sisters in Law* can surely be considered a feminist documentary exactly because of these effects. Importantly, this is also the film's specificity in relation to the other two films studied in this research. In the next chapters I will show that the feminist features (so as the documentary ones for that matter) of *Reassemblage* and *Europlex* are of a very different kind.

In this section I elaborated upon the materiality of *Sisters in Law*, and its effects, specifically inquiring into why such affective, embodied reactions to the film can be understood within a feminist framework and how they allow a reading of the film in a feminist light. Finally, the last concept key to my analysis remains to be explored with regards to this film, namely *visuality*.

2.6 On the claim of invisibility

The claim of invisibility condensed in the technical cinematic strategies of *Sisters in Law* can be read as move that situates the filmmaker in an uncritical and neutral subject position, which is problematic from a feminist perspective. More specifically, since Longinotto is carefully and skilfully rendered invisible throughout the making of this film, she inhabits that invisible, unquestionable position of the all-knowing observer: she sees but is not seen. Although the camera was actually filming the events (indexical dimension), such events unravel as if the camera (and the filmmaker) were not there. As such, I argue Longinotto that does not engage with a critique of *visuality* or of the

repercussions of filmic representation. She does not pay any attention to the power dimension implied in the act of seeing, and filming; neither does she try to deconstruct the hegemony of vision as does, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha in *Reassemblage*, as discussed in the following chapter. Longinotto fails, if one wants to give a value judgment to her work, to acknowledge what I have previously outlined as a specific feminist endeavour: criticising the hegemony of vision. Vision is here understood as a tool, the privileged one in western society, to make sense of the world and of reality, and, as such, is entangled in power relations and tightly connected with objectivity claims.

The visual has a privileged relation to reality, facts and that real experience of the world. Mieke Bal summarises the interconnection between vision and truth very convincingly when she writes that “sight establishes a particular subject-relation to reality in which the visual aspect of an object is considered to be a property of the object itself” (Bal 2003, 14). Conversely, Bal argues that other senses such as touch and hearing “are associated with the subjective relation between subject and object” (*ibid.*) Another crucial element gets entangled in this interrelation between the visual and objectivity: the very process of knowing and of knowledge production. From Michel Foucault to Donna Haraway, many theorists have convincingly elaborated upon the implications of vision, knowledge and power. As such, observation, and therefore seeing is always already culturally specific and a process that organises what is made visible and what is left invisible. It is because of this intricate relation between vision, reality and knowledge that in the last decade the senses have become a privileged field of enquiry in feminist studies so as in anthropology and documentary studies. If senses are understood as being deeply connected with the production of meaning and knowledge, to focus on alternative perceptual modalities is to focus on alternative ways in which meanings, and therefore representations are produced.

In this light, I argue that *Sisters in Law* reproduces the hegemonic relation between vision, power and knowledge production. This aspect undermines the possible consideration of this documentary as a feminist one; indeed, I have been making this argument throughout the chapter. However, if the film itself fails to embrace the feminist deconstruction of vision and visibility, it does not mean that it cannot be a very important space to practice and to test the limits of a feminist analysis. In this sense I consider *Sisters in Law* exemplary, if not in what it (re)produces and how, but in what it avoids representing. In other words, I propose a feminist analysis of this film which focuses on what the film *does not* explicitly express, or rather, on what the film *explicitly represses*.

First of all I claim that the film activates an embodied experience, not by virtue of its sensorial reconstruction – as it does not summon or emphasise an aural or tactile dimension in the filmic construction – but by making its indexical materiality so vivid to the viewer as to provoke a sensorial and embodied

reaction. This is the only aspect in which the film (unconsciously?) takes into account the body and experience. For the rest *Sisters in Law* strives to erase any element that would undermine the power of vision and observation by, for example, making such a process of observation, and therefore filming, visible.

One way in which the power of seeing and of vision can be made visible is by directing the gaze back to the seer. Laura Mulvey has taught us that the power of cinema as an apparatus for knowledge production and subjectification (the production of normative subject positions) is founded on the distance between the viewer and the object, between the seer and the seen. Mulvey argues that the power of cinema as a whole, and of fictional Hollywood films in particular is built upon the idea of a subject position made available for the viewer, active, male (white, heterosexual) to look at or upon the object, passive, female, Other. In a rough way this is how she describes the gaze of/in cinema in her most famous 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." From this perspective the subjects and objects of the gaze in *Sisters in Law* are not questioned: the camera, the filmmaker, and thus the viewer hold the power of seeing, of actively observing while remaining invisible. However, to unsettle this scheme, the subjects of such a gaze, namely the women represented in the film, do not perform as passive; moreover, there is no identification possible in any male character. Additionally, Mulvey's paradigm cannot be applied *à la lettre* in as much as there is no male subject position available at the level of the viewer, the camera or the characters: not only the subjects in the film, but also the filmmaker is a woman. Even when men are present in the film they are not given a position as subject (which is indicated by explicit naming through text on the image). However, what does remain applicable of Mulvey's theory is that the camera is made invisible, thus allowing for an equation between viewer and knower, between the film and the audience who holds the knowledge. As viewers we know more than what the filmed subjects know. And, in actual fact, the three gazes of Mulvey's scheme can eventually be found in *Sisters in Law* as the gaze of the audience, that of the camera, and that of the confident prosecutor, Vera. Although the gaze is not gendered as male, nonetheless, the active role is reserved to a somewhat privileged subject position, a Westernised African woman, namely Vera, the main protagonist. Moreover, since the gaze of the camera remains unquestioned, so does the fact that it is a white Western perspective, that of Longinotto, that is ultimately presented. In sum, even though in the film the power of vision and the gaze are slightly unsettled and repositioned, they are not deeply interrogated or deconstructed.

Finally, I argue that visibility is engaged in the film in yet another way. Longinotto strives so much for invisibility, the invisibility of the filmmaker and of the camera, that eventually she reveals such efforts, thus making the whole process visible. In the strenuous defence of invisibility, *Sisters in Law* makes that very invisibility visible. The hand-held camera movements are retained in the

film with the aim – and the result – of the indexical effect of having been there. Such movements also point at the materiality of the act of filming: they make visible that a camera is following the events, they make visible the recording visual device. In this sense, the visual device, the camera, is made visible but is never addressed, therefore is never contextualised or criticised. Importantly, there is another occurrence in *Sisters in Law* where the gaze is made visible, thus, in a way, the whole visual hegemony and the power of seeing without being seen is deconstructed. This occurs at 1 hour and 12 minutes into the film when a man stops in the street to stare at the scene happening in front of the camera and at the camera itself. At this moment, Longinotto immediately turns the camera in such a way to keep this man out of the frame, but he moves as well, and tries and manages to be filmed again.

It is arguable whether Longinotto decided to keep this shot in the final film because of its meta-reflective value, or because the events happening in these frames were too important to be cut from the film. In any case, since the intentionality of the filmmaker has a limited value, in as much as the filmic text becomes meaningful in itself once it is released, I would analyse such frames despite the possible reasons of their presence in the film. When that man looks into the camera, in as much as Longinotto tries to move away, he addresses the viewer. He looks back. This act would deconstruct not only the gaze as elaborated by Mulvey, but also the illusion of the invisibility of the camera in a documentary sense: the camera is there and events happen in front of it because, or despite, the camera being there. When Doan writes that “the disintegration of a look is fatal for the cinema” (2007b, 144), she refers to the complexity of implications of a subject looking back. When the object of the look looks back, s-he disintegrates the gaze of the camera, of cinema, because it questions the medium and its viewer.

In sum, *Sisters in Law* does not criticise the hegemony of vision. However, by reinforcing and defending such power, the film opens up spaces where the invisible gaze could be questioned. This lack of self-reflexivity on the power entangled with film making is worrisome from a feminist perspective, especially when one purposefully makes a film with the intent of being invisible. Yet this is not to say, as I have shown above, that *Sisters in Law* is without feminist value. It is rather to say that the film cannot be called a feminist one without tension.

2.7 Concluding remarks

I have argued that Longinotto’s film, *Sisters in Law*, proves to be a complex and ambiguous example of feminist documentary film when one considers it through the concepts of indexicality, visuality and materiality. In providing these three

lenses for analysis it has not been my aim to create a new working definition of what a feminist documentary film is or looks like. Rather, the purpose of these lenses is to mobilise them to test the boundaries of what can be considered a feminist documentary film.

Sisters in Law can be considered a feminist documentary at the level of its content matter: its occupation with violence against women and striving for women's legal rights. In addition, *Sisters in Law* was made by a woman; its crew was composed by women; and Longinotto herself even accepted the label 'feminist'. Feminist films are generally identified in terms of their content matter or conditions of production/reception: they are films by, about, or for women. Alternatively, they are defined as films dealing with gender issues: gender is the central theme.

It is quite evident that there are numerous pitfalls in equating films made by or about women with feminist films, namely essentialism being one such danger. Not only can the emphasis on the gender of the filmmaker lead to dangerous essentialist perspectives, I argue that the sole attention to the content matter of films can do the same and ought to be criticised as well. Thus, it should not be forgotten that *Sisters in Law* does not directly show a reflection upon of the fictional implications of documentary representations; however the director is clearly aware of these strategies to the extent that she skilfully uses realism as a filmic strategy.

As I have mentioned, *Sisters in Law* as a documentary is both appreciated and criticised by journalists and film experts for its Direct Cinema approach – Longinotto's 'invisibility' as a film maker in order to catch the events in the most unobtrusive way. The criticism is warranted, from a feminist perspective, because of the lack of the self-reflexivity deployed in the cinematographic strategies and the lack of self-reflection on the director's own positioning in terms of gender, ethnicity and nationality (among other axes of difference). *Sisters in Law* can be greatly criticised on this point as its maker refuses to engage with and deconstruct this hegemonic form of film-making. Furthermore, despite Longinotto's explicit intention (it is not her goal to "teach you what to think" in this film, it is supposed to be "just an emotional experience"), the film can be seen as proffering the Western model of women's rights gains as the one (and only) kind to follow, while at the same time, she can be read as potentially reproducing stereotypes about the Other or about (certain kinds of) women.

This is the tension that emerges when observing *Sisters in Law* through a feminist lens: the balancing between the dismissal of realistic filmic strategies and the appreciation of the potential effects they can produce; the fact that, even though the Western gaze is not challenged and the realist language is not deconstructed, the film has and can have feminist effects. I have explained how the filmic strategy of *Sisters in Law* performs a strong indexical bond with the referent, with the object in the world, with reality, and therefore how it can be

clearly considered a documentary film. Furthermore, I have discussed how these cinematographic techniques have consequences in terms of effects and affects produced in the audience.

Sisters in Law can be seen as feminist in the impact, effects, and affects it can produce on the viewers; that is to say, an emotional experience of being there, rather than an experience of being outside, of observing, of rationalising the events of the film and taking them as truth(s). That is, it is feminist in its *materiality* rather than simply by its content matter or production crew. This is certainly an important point to note if we are to avoid the essentialism at risk in identifying what makes a film feminist. Indeed, it is the sensorial, visceral response evoked by the film (rather than positioning the audience as outside, rational, all-knowing, truth-bearers, and so forth) that distances it from a certain tradition of 'scientific,' masculine, objectifying, colonialist, (anthropological) 'realist' film-making.

What we should also note from the analysis of Longinotto's *Sisters in Law* is that the film's status as a documentary is never questioned. As an example of what a documentary film is, *Sisters in Law* seems to fit such a label. But as I have shown through the lenses of indexicality and visuality, although the viewer is left with no doubt of the film maker 'having been there' (the film, in this way, is haunted by reality), and despite the fact that Longinotto does not engage with the realist/anti-realist debate (or any self-reflexive deconstruction of her own film for that matter), the film itself can actually act in a subversive way through its very invisibility.

She fails to criticise the hegemony of vision, yet Longinotto strives so much for invisibility of the filmmaker and of the camera, that eventually she reveals such efforts, thus making the whole process visible. This oxymoronic process leads us, her audience, to deconstruct the film at the level of visual representation in her stead. This is the subversive feminist act which the audience can bring to *Sisters in Law*. Indeed, as I have argued, if the film itself fails to embrace the feminist deconstruction of vision and visuality, it does not mean that this cannot be a highly important space to practice and to test the limits of a feminist analysis. Thus, I restate that in this sense I consider *Sisters in Law* exemplary for testing the limits of feminist documentary: by reinforcing and defending such power of the hegemonic gaze the film opens up spaces where the invisible gaze is questioned.

In summary, it is clear that *Sisters in Law* is simultaneously feminist and documentary, but it is neither of those things unproblematically. Certainly, where the film gains more feminist credibility it seems to lose face value as a

classically-intended scientific or anthropological documentary⁷⁹ (the kind of documentary criticised by Trinh T. Minh-ha, as we will see in the next chapter). However, the film is so aligned with contemporary dominant documentary strategies, that its content matter, its focus on women's issues and gendered power inequalities does not seem enough to effortlessly consider the film feminist. Thus, the reverse is true that when the film is more 'documentary' its credibility as 'feminist' diminishes; the lack of self-reflexivity on the power entangled with film making, especially when one purposefully makes a film with the intent of being invisible, is certainly worrisome from a feminist perspective. Thus, *Sisters in Law* cannot be called a 'feminist documentary' without tension, and it is for this precise reason that it fits into the grey zone outlined in Chapter 1.

To progress with this study on feminism, documentary and the representation of the Other, and on films that fit into the grey zone, I will now proceed with the analysis of a different documentary, namely *Reassemblage* by Trinh T. Minh-ha.

⁷⁹ For example, from the perspective of traditional anthropological documentary, when considering the emotional response elicited from the audience – as opposed to a typically masculine, rational, observant, outsider 'who looks at the Other' kind of response – the ability of documentary to objectively represent the 'real' or the 'truth' of how things actually were seems diminished.

CHAPTER 3

Reassemblage

40 min., colour film (1982)

Shot in 16mm

Directed, Photographed, Written & Edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha

Produced by Jean-Paul Bourdier

The film opens with the superimposed text: “Senegal, 1981.” Ethnographic images and abstract close-ups, sequences of men and women intent in their daily activities, children playing, trees on fire and dead animals; a patchwork of unclear partial images and looped sounds; close-ups of hands, faces and breasts; drumming music and rhythmical noises, natural sounds of birds and insects; undefined languages and a narrating female voice. All these elements and many more are interweaved and edited together, as if in a musical composition, in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film *Reassemblage*.

Reassemblage is the first and most influential of Trinh’s films. This film is as well-known as it is difficult to describe, and, often quoted by feminist scholars and experimental filmmakers alike, it regularly provokes ambivalent reactions as well as animated discussions.⁸⁰ *Reassemblage* could, at a first glance, be described as an ethnographic documentary on Senegal—that is, as a film contributing to an anthropological discourse about culture.⁸¹ However, with its array of themes, stories, images, and sounds, and with its complexity of cinematographic experimental techniques, it promptly *exceeds* such a straightforward description. The film touches upon a multiplicity of themes and theoretical debates at the crossroad of anthropology, feminist studies and documentary theory, but more importantly, it questions the status of ethnographic film. *Reassemblage* is a film about the complexities and pitfalls of filmmaking, about the problems at stake with observing and representing the Other, about the claims of truth and objectivity embedded in certain anthropological approaches, about how power is implicated in the processes of knowledge production, and about how subjectivity is interpellated in such processes. This chapter will elaborate on Trinh’s engagement with such issues.

⁸⁰ Trinh acknowledges this herself, for example in the interviews “Why a Fish Pond?” and “When I Project it is Silent” in: Trinh (1992).

⁸¹ Refer to Chapter 1, Section 1.2.

In short, the film is constructed as an 'assemblage'⁸² of images, sounds, video sequences, and audio fragments, bound together by the filmmaker's narration and edited in such a way as to produce an intense and unsettling viewing experience. The specific cinematographic techniques Trinh deploys in this film will be analysed in the following sections of this chapter, though worth noting here is one editing technique that particularly characterises *Reassemblage*: repetition. At both the aural and the visual level the film rhythmically loops, repeats, overlaps in layers, retells with slight variations and eventually *re-assembles* images, sentences, and sound clips. In this light, the title of the film could not be more appropriate: the film re-assembles a collection of images, sounds, stories and themes and, in doing so, explores, de-familiarises and deconstructs the act of ethnographic filmmaking. The film *is* literally a re-assemblage and for this reason, as will become clear through this analysis, I propose to interpret *Reassemblage* as though it were a musical composition, itself a re-assemblage, with its rhythms, its diverse sources of sounds, voices and tones intertwined and alternated. Loops, repetitions, resonances and pauses, silences and ruptures, timbres and colours are all harmonised together to create a whole that, while representing its subjects, reveals its own strategies of representation, eventually opening up the film and the process of filmmaking to a multiplicity of significations. Key to this understanding of the film is the concept of rhythm.

To further elaborate on the importance of rhythm – as a guiding force in the filmic composition, as a tool to produce alternative representations of the Other, as well as to eventually “solicit a *new seeing*” (Trinh 2005, 13) – it is first necessary to analyse *Reassemblage's* texture and materiality to appreciate in detail *how* it is constructed. Moreover, in addressing how this film belongs to what I have defined as the ‘grey zone’ of feminist documentary, Trinh's concept of the “Inappropriate/d Other”⁸³ (Trinh 1986, 9) is introduced. It will later prove to be

⁸² The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘assemblage’ as “a collection or gathering of things or people; a machine or object made of pieces fitted together; a work of art made by grouping together found or unrelated objects; the action of gathering or fitting things together.” The concept of assemblage has been greatly discussed by scholars in the field of cultural studies and philosophy; it has been redefined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and explored by philosophers such as De Landa (2006). For an overview of the recent scholarly attention paid to the term assemblage see Marcus and Saka (2006). For another discussion on the Deleuzian concept in relation with other traditions and theories on the notion of assemblage see Legg (2011). Finally, the idea of assemblage has been central to several artistic movements and practices of the 20th century, such as Cubism, the Futurism and the Surrealism.

⁸³ As will be discussed later, this “Inappropriate/d Other” is a subject that crosses, unsettles and challenges the self/other dichotomy, and with it other binary categories such as “science and art; documentary and fiction; universal and personal; objectivity and subjectivity; masculine and feminine; outsider and insider” (Trinh 1989a, 133). In this sense, it is inappropriate, but it is a subject position that is also in-appropriated, it resists being seized by either end of the binary: “Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out” (Trinh 1986, 9).

crucial in conceptualising both *Reassemblage's* relation to the documentary genre, as well as the manner in which the film deconstructs the Western, masculine gaze and proposes an alternative way of engaging with the Other. Accordingly, in the following sections, deploying the structure I have already applied to the analysis of *Sister in Law*, I examine the narrative structure of the film, its plot and subject matter in section 3.1. Next, in section 3.2 I progress with the analysis of the cinematographic aspects of the film (such as the filmic language, selection of the images, shooting and editing technique, use of sounds, silences and voice-over).

In section 3.3 the film is discussed in relation to the three disciplinary fields that this research intersects: anthropology, feminist theory and documentary film. Namely, I elaborate on the theoretical knot *Reassemblage* addresses – the relation between subjectivity and the representation of the Other, and the critique of the realistic techniques of ethnographic filmmaking – and on how the film theorises and actualises Trinh's approach to politics and aesthetics. Here I elaborate on how Trinh's film can answer the broader questions of this research: how can documentary film be studied and understood in a feminist framework? How does *Reassemblage* elaborate upon the issue of Self and Other, objectivity and subjectivity, reality and image? In short, how does this film contribute to clarifying or complicating the relation between documentary representation and (politically informed) feminist film? What are the specific feminist aspects and effects of this documentary?

In sections 3.4 to 3.6, to explore further what the film *does*, *Reassemblage* is investigated through the lens of the critical tools of indexicality, materiality and visuality. I first elaborate on how the film performs its indexical value and how it can be read as a sign that is haunted by reality, recalled as the working definition of documentary. Here I discuss how the partial or the undefined images in the film function, together with the use of certain sounds, to stress the relation of vicinity, continuity and contact between the film and the events, people and places represented. This relation of continuity or contact between the (filmic) sign and the (filmed) object is one of the specific features of the indexical sign as theorised by Peirce, as elaborate in Chapter 1. I suggest that this type of relation between object and sign presented in *Reassemblage* can be understood more accurately as pertaining to a specific kind of index, the *trace*. Through Doane's (2007b) and Didi-Huberman's (2009) conceptualisations of the trace, *Reassemblage* is therefore considered as a documentary film that carries traces of its encounter with the reality of the pro-filmic events. These traces hint at a presence that is not quite there though is not completely absent. Thus Trinh's film, by addressing the absences, the gaps, the silences, makes present not the object but the process through which the object partially disappeared from the sign. It is this process that opens up a semiotic space that is at once also political: the in-between space, the interval, where new engagements with reality and with the Other can be

enacted, as well as where other meanings and new subject positions can be imagined. Accordingly, I propose that this film compellingly enacts its political dimension and triggers certain feminist effects exactly because it presents the traces, the marks, the echoes of the material reality that haunt it.

Following from this, in section 3.5 the materiality of the film is further discussed. Materiality is intended as both the texture, medium-specific characteristics and matter of the film (such as the specific traces of the technology used, the substance of the images, the implications of its specific construction, and so on), as well as the e/affects the film produces, how it engages the viewers' positions, and the filmmaker's embodied subjectivity. This feature is crucial to the film and it is here that its feminist commitment can be located most clearly – in its use of the medium and experimentation with the documentary genre, and its engagement with the filmic and pro-filmic materiality. That is to say, the feminist effects of this film are more prominent at the level of *how* the film is made and *how* it reflects on its own construction, rather than in its straightforward content matter and subjects – Senegal and the places, animals, men and women filmed – though it can be found there also. Interpreting Trinh's words, *Reassemblage* can be read as an example of what it means to be “making film politically” as opposite to “making political film” (Trin 1991, 147). In this context the issue of (self-)reflexivity becomes central, and the concepts of interval and rhythm will prove to be crucial in understanding what kind of feminist e/affects *Reassemblage* produces and how it offers new perspectives on the relation between feminism and documentary. The kind of engagement *Reassemblage* has with materiality is also what distinguishes it more notably from the other two films analysed in this research.

Finally in section 3.6 the issue of visuality is addressed. As I will illustrate, *Reassemblage* presents some problematic visual representations of Senegal and of African women. These are images that could be read as both exoticising and eroticising the Other, and that are reminiscent of dominant representations of “underdeveloped”⁸⁴ Africa widespread in the Western media. Additionally, the women represented in this film have no voice. When one might assume their voice is present there are no subtitles or translation to assist the viewer who does not speak that language. These aspects of *Reassemblage's* representation of women ought to be critically analysed since they could arguably reproduce a dominant and subjecting, that is, hegemonic gaze. However, I will argue that this hegemonic gaze is consciously used – in a somewhat exaggerated fashion – to explicitly criticise and deconstruct that kind of patriarchal and colonialist anthropological mode of representation. Therefore, not only is the hegemonic

⁸⁴ This word is quoted with irony, in the same vein Trinh intends it when the voiceover in *Reassemblage* proclaims: “Scarcely twenty years were enough / to make two billion people / define themselves as underdeveloped.” For the script of the film see: Trinh 1992, 95-105.

gaze, with its power implications, critically scrutinised and eventually upturned in *Reassemblage*, but, I maintain, the film performs a critique of the hegemony of vision in its entirety. Through the interplay of the visual and aural dimensions, the specific framing and editing strategies, and the sentences spoken by the voiceover – in short through its rhythmical composition – *Reassemblage* calls into question a multi-sensorial experience. Herein sight is not the prevailing tool of knowledge production and the viewer has to ‘make sense’ of the film by making and remaking meanings through other sensorial perceptions.

Trinh’s film questions the objectifying gaze and goes beyond the hegemonic understanding of vision precisely because of how it performs ‘the interval.’ In other words, it is in the gaps and the pauses, in the space created in between images, sounds, silences and black screens, between the aural and the visual, that the bond between vision and power can be questioned and disentangled. Accordingly, it is also from this perspective, because of the way it enacts and theorises a critique of visibility, that *Reassemblage* can be understood as having feminist effects, doing and being a political as well as aesthetic feminist intervention.

3.1 “I do not intend to speak about/ just speak near by”⁸⁵

When one reads the synopsis of this film, one can be surprised by the fact that commonly no more than two sentences are used to present it. Usually, in a film catalogue, we find a brief description of what each film is about, what story is told and, approximately, how it is told. Instead in the case of *Reassemblage*, the catalogue of one of Trinh’s film distributors (Women Make Movies), for example, states the description:

Women are the focus but not the object of Trinh T. Minh-ha’s influential first film, a complex visual study of the women of rural Senegal. Through a complicity of interaction between film and spectator, *Reassemblage* reflects on documentary filmmaking and the ethnographic representation of cultures.⁸⁶

When I first read this outline, before having seen the film, it seemed a vague and limited way to present it. However, as soon as I had watched the film I had to admit that it would be impossible to summarise *Reassemblage* otherwise.

The question of what this film is about – far from being the unproblematic and the easiest step in the analysis, as it generally is – appears to be a crucial and complex matter to examine. *Reassemblage* works at many levels to displace and

⁸⁵ Voice-over in *Reassemblage*. See: Trinh 1992, 95-105.

⁸⁶ The online version of this catalogue is available on the website: <http://www.wmm.com>

confound the viewer: it plays with the conventions of the genre of ethnographic documentary, subverts the rules of classic cinematographic techniques⁸⁷, and disrupts viewers' expectations and certainties. This effect of uncertainty is already activated at the narrative level of the film. In *When the Moon Waxes Red*, Trinh explicitly expresses her critique towards traditional narrative, as she condemns "the commercial and ideological habits of our society" that favour narratives with a "clear line entirely digestible" in order to consume it quickly and buy another (Trinh 1991, 147). Understandably then, *Reassemblage* does not follow an explicitly narrative form, or better, the film does not present a causally related organisation of events; there is no linear, self-evident, so-called 'classic' narrative structure: no clear beginning, no central development, no climax or build-up of tension, no manufacturing technique to examine or complex ritual to discover, no direction, no conclusions and no definitive ending. The 'classic narrative structure,' as elaborated here, is that scheme followed in most fiction Hollywood movies, but also in most mainstream documentaries: a chain of events in a cause-effect relationship, occurring in a defined time and space (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 60). This classic narrative structure is found in *Sisters in Law*, for example.

The narrative construction of a film usually follows a dominant set of specific rules and principles. Narrative films have been codified and spectators are acquainted with such principles to the extent that they have anticipations and build expectations about what will be seen in the film, what will happen, when, and which character is going to perform which role (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 59-61). Importantly, however, the fact that the narrative structure of *Reassemblage* does not comply with the expectations characteristic of the genre does not mean that the film has no narrative. *Reassemblage* does have a narrative structure, which surely plays with the conventions of the genre, but it is precisely because it has a specific construction that the sequence of events and images become meaningful. In other words, the film does not present a random succession of sounds and images, it is constructed to produce or stimulate certain effects (displacement, critical reflection, new connections between sounds and images, possibility for new meanings or new perspectives, and so forth), just not the ones coded in the narrative film canon (such as confirmation of cause-effect relations, plot development, viewers' identification, erasure of the presence of the camera, continuity of space and time, sense of realistic progress, and the like). It is only because most viewers have certain implicit expectations of how to make sense of a film that *Reassemblage* can subvert these and provoke viewers to take new, uneasy, positions. To make my argument, I am here adopting Mieke Bal's approach to and definition of narrative as elaborated in *Narratology: introduction*

⁸⁷ For a summary regarding 'classic techniques' of film making and documentary please refer back to footnote 13 in Chapter 2.

to the theory of narrative (1997). In short, a narrative text is understood by Bal as a text (and film would classify as such) in which a narrative agent, a subject, tells a story. In this framework, and not in the traditional 'narrative film' sense, it is possible to talk about the narrative structure of *Reassemblage*.

As already mentioned, the sequences of images and sounds presented in the film are not organised according to a strict criterion of cause-effect; the plot and the story are difficult to pin down and identify. Although the images are of houses, villages and people in Senegal, the development of the film does not construct a distinct representation of Senegal rural societies: the 'contours' of some villages are sketched but nothing seems to distinctly appear 'within.' Michael Hill perceptively connects the form of the film with its title, and observes that so as *Reassemblage* has neither a beginning nor an end, as well 'reassemblage' is neither a noun nor a verb, but both: "It is neither fixed, nor a process," it is always on the move (Hill 1993, 23). The process of making visible, when, and how, is the strategy which drives the construction of *Reassemblage*, as well as the content matter. More precisely, what is questioned is the way something becomes (in)visible, the manner in which an image, a subject, a sound, takes shape. This interpretation of the film echoes Trinh's own words when she writes that "taking shape is not a moment of arrival, and the question is not that of bringing something vague into visibility. Rather, the coming into shape is always a way to address the fact that there is no shape" (Trinh 1999b, 132). If causality and linear temporality are not the most important principles that inform the editing and narrative structure of the film, I propose rhythm to be the driving force around which *Reassemblage* unfurls.

Rhythm is elaborated on throughout the chapter, but for now I will first continue with the analysis of the specific narrative structure of the film. *Reassemblage* is organised in sections, delimited by a few seconds of black screen, without text or other elements that clearly define these partitions. Hill argues that it is possible to identify four sections, each of them beginning with the disruption of the sound=image equation (Hill 1993, 23). That is to say, there is a sound but no picture to which the sound refers, or there is only an image and no sound to match it. However, I disagree with Hill's scheme since the black screens are repeated more than four times, the equation sound=image is disrupted continuously throughout the film, and the introduction of new sounds occurs more than four times and not necessarily in connection with the black screens. In trying to identify other criteria of *Reassemblage's* narrative structure, it is possible to consider the black screens alone as the markers of the separation in 'chapters' or sections. Accordingly, it would be possible to identify six separate sections in the film. If further evidence for the interpretation of the black screens as pointers were necessary, Trinh confirms as such by stating that the screen going black works as a visual pause and a transition from one geographical area to another (Trinh 1992, 228). Alternatively, reckoning the moments when a 'new' sound is

introduced as markers – that is to say, the passages from silence to the combination of various sounds – the film appears in fact to be divided in seven parts. These are but two criteria by which to hypothesise a structure and identify separate sections within a film that anyway maintains a unity of location (Senegal), and more importantly, a unity of rhythm.

Finding a scheme, a division of ‘chapters’ in *Reassemblage* is, however, not enough to illustrate what the ‘subject’ – or the subjects – of the film is or are: what is the film about? What story is told? “What about Senegal?”⁸⁸ To investigate the film further and explore what kind of representation Trinh offers the viewers, it is insufficient to look at the subject matter and its division. It is necessary to behold how all the different layers are constructed and intertwined: the montage and the soundtrack, the camera-movements and the silences, which I will do in the next section. First I shall consider the use of the commentary voice in *Reassemblage* because it is one of the first elements taken into account in film analysis to trace the narrative of documentary film (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 74-5). Here the focus is on the content of what the voice-over says and not on the materiality of this voice. In other words, in this context I treat the voice-over for *what* it says, the text it reads; later I analyse the voice-over as one of the tracks of the editing texture of the film, paying attention to *how* it sounds, how it is manipulated and how it functions in relation to the other sounds and the images.

In the anthropological documentary tradition the vocal commentary, the voice-over, when present, is considered a crucial element to give unity to the film and often stands for, or is, the narration (Bruzzi 2006, 47-60). Traditionally the voice-over is an extra-diegetic soundtrack added to the film and, in classic documentary, it is that of a “disembodied and omniscient narrator” (Bruzzi 2006, 47). It can function as the leitmotif to connect diverse sections, as the voice that provides an explanation of what is visually re-presented, as an aid to include the subjective perspective, the voice of the filmmaker (Nichols 1988), as a tool to present an objective reading of the events shown, or as the dictatorial Voice of God (Renov 2004, Bruzzi 2006, 47). The voice-over is considered ‘dictatorial’ or ‘omniscient’ by its critics because, by means of this commentary, a film compels – more than it invites – the viewers into understanding the ‘right’ sequence of events and the ‘right’ interpretation of seen and heard signs. However, there are many different kinds and styles of voice-over, for example: authorial, of one of the filmed subjects, of an unseen and unidentified person, of the filmmaker, of a witness, of a trained actor, or of an expert. In any case, “voice-over” is often used as a synonym of “narration” especially in documentary-making manuals, and is understood as one of the best ways to move the story along (Bernard 2007, 211-

⁸⁸ Voice-over in *Reassemblage*. See: Trinh 1992, 95-105.

212). As such, it decisively provides a sense of cohesion to the film and contributes to characterise it. For example, according to Nichols' (2001) model, the use of the voice-over is one of the elements that helps identify the different "modes" of documentary: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive or performative.

Because it so explicitly guides (or determines) the narrative development of a film, the voice-over commentary has been at the centre of academic discussions and disciplinary quarrels for decades. Among the harshest critics of the voice-over is Diego Carpitella (1981), a renowned Italian ethnomusicologist and filmmaker, who considered the voice-over as a device to blatantly instruct, or to fill the gaps of what was not otherwise represented in the film because of perceived ineptitude. Alternatively, Jean Rouch, father of the French *cinéma vérité*, though he criticised and dismissed "the trap of commentary" (Rouch 1975, 92), performed in his films a new style of authorial voice that eventually rehabilitated the use of voice-over in documentary, but he did so in a subjective and situated manner that can be considered the predecessor to contemporary modes of video-making (Renov 2004, xxi). His position is important to keep in mind as Rouch's use of the authorial voice resonates, in some ways, with Trinh's commentary in *Reassemblage*. Worth mentioning is the fact that the discussion around the use of the voice-over intertwines with the question of (self-)reflexivity in anthropology, and specifically in anthropological filmmaking (for example: Nichols 1988). Such a debate is still current, as exemplified by Stella Bruzzi's recent book, *New Documentary* (2006), which extensively focuses on the uses and implications of the voice-over.

Having outlined some of the ambiguities of the use of voice-over narration in documentary, I shall now return to Trinh's film and observe if and how the voice-over commentary in *Reassemblage* constitutes its narrative backbone and ask: if the narration contributes to unfolding the story, what is this story about? Is it about Senegal? And, is it about women? Which women? Is it about Senegalese women? Or is it about the broader issue of the relationships between women and representations? Is it, instead, a critique on ethnographic filmmaking? A reflection on how anthropological documentaries are traditionally constructed? To help provide an answer to these questions I now focus on two specific parts of the film, namely those fragments of a narrative structure that retain a crucial importance because of the positions they occupy: the beginning and the end. Trinh, elaborating in an interview about her work as a filmmaker, comments that, because there should always be a beginning and an ending, "making a film is already to stop the flow or to offer a form" (Trinh 1999b, 133). However, she continues, the act of framing, enclosing and concluding in a film, in her films, points at the limits of such limiting, at the impossibility of interrupting the flow, of capturing (as in: making captive)

reality: “rather than reaching a point of completion where form closes down on form, a closure can act simultaneously as an opening when it addresses the impossibility of framing reality in its subtle mobility” (*ibid.*).

The beginning of *Reassemblage* is disorienting: silence and opening titles, then the sound of drums and a black screen for a long while, then silence again and several extreme close-ups of hands working, then images of an old man and some children; fire in the forest, a woman walking; then the voice-over starts talking, assertive, breaks the silence and states: “scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped.” In contrast, the final words, instead, pose a question asked by ‘a woman’ presumably one of the filmed women. The closing scenes show close-ups of young adults’ faces, men and women, their mouths, eyes, smiles. The voice-over states: “a woman comments on polygamy: ‘it’s good for men...not for us. We accept it owing to the force of circumstances. What about you? Do you have a husband all for yourself?’” The very last shot presents part of the face of a woman who looks straight in the camera with a luminous and questioning smile; next, suddenly, without any prior notice, the screen fades to black. This ending is more similar to a ‘deceptive cadence’⁸⁹ – speaking in musical terms – than a closure.

In *Reassemblage*, from beginning to end, albeit not constantly, one voice-over is present: it is at the same time the voice of the narrator, of the author, and of the subject behind the camera: it is Trinh’s voice. In Trinh’s book, *Framer Framed*, the script of the film is published. This is the text of the commentary, the words of the voice-over, with the additional descriptions of the diegetic music, voices and sounds. Even if the importance of such film scripts is recognised by Trinh herself, on more than one occasion she stresses that the scripts were written during shooting or editing, therefore not written before the film was made: “they are tools that one works with rather than texts that one tries to conform to” (Trinh in Spangler 1993). This means that the script does not determine how and which images and sounds are shot and selected; rather, it takes shape alongside the images and it is intertwined in the filmic composition at a later stage. Reading *Reassemblage*’s script/voice-over text, it is apparent that Trinh is not *only* talking about Senegal. She surely tells the viewers stories and anecdotes about it as she informs about a local tale, about the cultural connection that links women and fire, about the habits and everyday life experiences of Maning and Peul people,

⁸⁹ The *Oxford Dictionary of Musical Terms* defines interrupted or deceptive cadence as one of the four principal forms of cadence in harmony. Cadence has to do with the sequence of chords concluding a musical piece: “The cadence is called ‘interrupted’, ‘deceptive’, or ‘false’ when the penultimate, dominant chord is followed not by the expected tonic but by another chord” (Latham 2004, 25). The effect of such cadence on the audience is one of incompleteness, that is to say, the audience’s expectations of a final and definitive closure are not met. This provokes a feeling of suspension and the idea that the piece is not finished and there is more to come.

about how western people (Peace-Corps and missionaries) who settled in Senegal behaved. She also tells many other stories: she describes the 'typical' reactions of Western audiences to certain anthropological films, reveals her personal experiences in the field, reflects on the work of anthropologists, on objectivity, on how African women are usually represented in ethnographic films, on "the habit of imposing a meaning to every single sign" (Trinh 1992, 96), and on the "ABC" of photography. Trinh never explicitly answers the questions *Reassemblage* raises. Instead of giving a final statement or an all-inclusive reading, the film ends pointing the attention to the individual's role, maybe to the position of Trinh herself, maybe questioning the viewer. Instead of affirming objectivity it questions subjectivity.

Even now that several elements of *Reassemblage's* narrative structure have been explored a question remains, the same one as Trinh's voice-over exposes in the film: "A film about what? My friends ask." If the subject-matter now appears a little clearer, the plot, story, let alone the 'meaning(s)' of the film do not appear evident yet. Later on in the film the voice-over seems to answer her friends' question by saying: "I do not intend to speak about / just speak near by." This statement can be interpreted as an affinity with Roland Barthes' *Alors la Chine?* In an interview, Trinh affirms Barthes' difficulty in finding the "right" discourse to talk about China. Like him, Trinh shares an "attempt to suspend utterance – neither affirm nor negate – in other words, the refusal [...] to speak about the other" (Trinh 1992, 233). She further elaborates on "speaking near by" by describing it as a great challenge, as "an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world," therefore it is not just a technique or a statement, and "the challenge is to materialize it in all aspects of the film – verbally, musically, visually" (Trinh in Chen 1992, 87).

This refusal of "talking about" can therefore be interpreted as a refusal to create a univocal, 'right' discourse about Senegal as well as the attempt to not reproduce the objectifying approach – and claim of objectivity – that Trinh attributes to ethnographic films. I suggest that 'speaking nearby' brings the filmmaker next to the subjects filmed in an attempt to overcome or at least to complicate the hierarchical relation embedded in filming and the rigid dualism of Self and Other.⁹⁰ This vicinity, this proximity in which *Reassemblage* positions

⁹⁰ It is interesting to note that although Trinh positions her film as a critique to ethnographic filmmaking, at around the same period, and already before that, some ethnographers such as Rouch were exploring new possibilities – within and against dominant ethnographic film theories – that echo Trinh's critiques and concerns. The concept of 'speaking nearby' that characterises Trinh's approach to filmmaking has often been compared (see for example: Martin 1997 and Hikiji 2010) with Jean Rouch's shared anthropology and David MacDougall's conception of the polyphonic, dialogic film and of the cinematic encounter (MacDougall 1991, 2-10). At stake in the work of these three filmmakers is the problem of authority and ownership in filmic representations and similar, or at

the filming and filmed subjects is confirmed when the voice-over states: "I look at her becoming me becoming mine. Entering into the only reality of signs where I myself am a sign." Here "her" are the women filmed, the object of the cinematic gaze and "I" is Trinh as the filmmaker and narrator. I read this as an occurrence of Trinh's key concept of what she calls the Inappropriate/d Other, the outsider in, insider out. So as the Inappropriate/d Other can be read "as someone whom you cannot appropriate, and as someone who is inappropriate" (Trinh 1998), simultaneously such inappropriate/d-ness is a space where power is deconstructed, where the dominant set of criteria are ineffective (Trinh 1991, 71). Therein, power, as well as the criteria of analysis and knowledge production can be, or rather *must be*, carefully inspected and re-evaluated. The filmmaker/narrator is this Other in the above quote that at once becomes the object of her own gaze, becomes a sign (to be interpreted, studied, given meaning), while nonetheless remaining aware that she is also the filmmaker, the "I", and is attentive to the appropriation that the act of filmmaking entails: "becoming mine." This tension, identifiable in the aforementioned lines, is the challenge of speaking nearby: the filmmaker is next to the subjects of her film, she is the Other, she becomes them on the other side of the camera. However, the risk of speaking about, the tendency to impose a meaning when filming, a discourse on the Other, remains present.

3.2 Filmic language and strategies of representation

I would say that the strategies used are almost the same for the images, the music and the voice-over... creating consisted not so much in inventing something new as in rediscovering the links within and between images, sounds and words.

– Trinh, *Framer Framed*, pp. 225-226.

In order to deepen the understanding of how Trinh represents her subjects, to appreciate how *Reassemblage* performs 'the interval' as a critical space, and finally

least comparable, is the way in which they work on decentring authoritative voices and opening a space of negotiation. Albeit their academic, political and personal positioning, as well as the results of their film are all but similar, I agree with Hikiji that a certain continuity can be drawn. Trinh's speaking nearby relates to the way MacDougall and Rouch are concerned with making films that construct a 'dialogue with' rather than a 'discourse on' (Hikiji 2010, 332). Moreover, the critique of a rigid separation of the positions of insider and outsider, and the conception of the space in-between filmmaker and subjects, are another two themes these three filmmakers have in common. The latter is directly conceptualised by MacDougall in *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) and the former is summarised by Rouch when he writes that ethnographic filmmaking is a matter of "digging from within rather than observing from without" (1975, 120).

to explore how it relates to the broader issue of feminist documentary I will now explore *Reassemblage's* visual and aural recording and editing strategies. As Trinh affirms, through her films she aims to raise the awareness of “representation as representation, that is to say, the cultural, sexual, political inter-reality of the filmmaker as subject, the reality of the subject film and the reality of the cinematic apparatus” (Trinh 1988). Therefore, it is on the cinematic apparatus, on the filmic language, on the ‘how’ of the process of forming representations and meanings through the cinematographic medium that I now focus my analysis. I consider, separately, three components of her film: images, sounds and words. Then I propose a possible interpretation of how they are related and interact with each other: the underlying arrangement that organises their relations is rhythm; hence it is productive to consider *Reassemblage* according to ‘musical’ needs and criteria. That is, to deem the film structured as though it were a musical composition.⁹¹

Images: framing and composition

The foremost aspect of *Reassemblage* that strikes the viewer from the first seconds of the film is the unusual selection of images and framing of the shots. After the long opening black screen, in the following one minute, we are presented with diverse images of men working wood, extreme close-ups of body parts, a man smoking a pipe, fire in the forest, very long shots of women and children walking on a path, and huts and pots piled around in the village. Not only the sequence but the duration of these images seems to be either too lengthy or too short; they are not distinct enough to last that long or they are too rapid to actually grasp their content. As mentioned above, the shots in the film are mostly views of parts: pieces of actions or fragments of bodies. Moreover, in this same one minute, and frequently throughout the film, there are moments when the camera is not aligned on the horizontal axis – so that some shots are slanted – and other occasions when the *pans* (panoramic camera movements from side to side) lead to nowhere and seem uncertain and interrupted. These two aspects of *Reassemblage's* photography are contrary to classic filmmaking rules. First, it is commonly understood that the camera should be horizontal to the ground. For what concerns panoramic movement instead, it is frequently considered ‘good practice’ to conclude the movement on a clear cue or on a subject in full frame. According to the basic rules of photographic composition most handbooks for filmmaking prescribe that the last frame of the shot should contain a clear indication of conclusion: the pan should ‘land’ on a definite element and, if this element is a human figure, for example, it should be fully visible in the frame

⁹¹ Rhythm is considered one of the main elements of music and music theory. Other elements include, for example, harmony, melody, timbre and so forth. See, for example, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (2003).

and not so that only an arm or half of the subject's body is visible.⁹² Although clearly spelled-out rules about these techniques are hard to find, they seem to be common knowledge and common practice, to the extent that most viewers would notice something is wrong when watching a film wherein such standards are not followed.

From these features it is already quite easy to understand that *Reassemblage's* style of shooting and framing does not follow the conventions of classic filmmaking. This was just shown in the above paragraph with relation to cinematic photography, and was shown earlier still with regard to the classic narrative voice. Certainly Trinh disrupts, at once, one of the primary rules of standard and 'correct' framing and composition, namely that the subject represented needs to be clearly visible within the margins of the frame. These rules prescribe that the central figure can either be portrayed entirely (very wide shot or long-shot), or has to be 'cut' in certain specific ways: the way a figure is cut, which implies how close or how far the subject appears in the camera, determines how the different shots are defined (close-up, medium-shot, and so forth). In each of these cases, the figure, especially in the case of a human being, should be framed in such a way that it is clearly distinguishable and identifiable as the focal point, the centre of the image, where the gaze focuses the attention.⁹³ Some of the general and most common framing and composition rules are, for example, that the main object should be in the foreground, fully in focus, occupying the most important part of the frame; or, for example in the case of a medium shot or a medium close-up of a person, that shot should never leave out part of that person's head (Barbash and Taylor 1997, 102).

Trinh disregards all those classic cinematographic rules which control and organise the configuration of borders, margins, and edges of an image, and therefore, the position of the subject within the frame.⁹⁴ It seems as if her subjects exceed the space of her shots or as if "the film prohibits the urge to create and connect whole pictures by presenting a continual array of extreme close-ups and partially disclosed identities" (Hill 1993, 23). Both the framing and the timing of the shots seem to cut through movements and bodies, sections that make for some "indefinite wholeness" (*ibid.* 24). These close-ups and partial images, not only "bring a materiality to the image," as Hill states (*ibid.*), but, they work to provide a sense of closeness and vicinity that is one of the main performances of *Reassemblage's* indexical status.

This way of framing is for Trinh a way to make familiar images look unfamiliar. Consequently, the act of framing (i.e. selecting, choosing, excluding,

⁹² These rules are not so much explicitly stated as they are implied, but can be found, for example, in Barbash and Taylor (1997, 113-118).

⁹³ These criteria follow from the so-called "rule of thirds" (Barbash and Taylor 1997, 96).

⁹⁴ The topic of transgressing borders also finds an interesting echo in Biemann's *Europlex*.

addressing), usually implicit and imperceptible, is exposed and unveiled in all its materiality and consistency. Trinh explains her way of shooting and framing as “a process...in which the filming subject and the filming tools are always caught in the subject filmed” (Trinh 1999b, 134). This style of framing is therefore functional to revealing, to literally bringing into the picture, the tools and the act of filming. As already observed about the narrative strategies, also this aspect of Trinh’s filmic technique is indicative of how the film executes, within itself, a reflective movement: at the same time as the film is shown it shows (some of) the mechanisms of its construction. Accordingly, *Reassemblage* seems to fulfil the demands of the feminist film theory of the 1970s for the deconstruction of the realistic language of cinema. In other words, this film presents itself as a “documentary aware of its own artifice” (Trinh 1990, 89). Apart from these theoretical grounds there might also be other, more practical, reasons behind this style of filming, namely related to the way Trinh uses the camera. She affirms that both *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces* (her second film) were shot intuitively and with the camera placed very close to ground level:

I usually shoot with no forepractice and often with only one eye – the kino-eye, as Vertov called it. I may at times shoot the same subject more than once, but well, the first time always turns out to be the best, because when one repeats the gesture one becomes sure of oneself, which is what most cinematographers value—the sureness and smoothness of the gesture” (Trinh 1999b, 135).

The kino-eye (cinema-eye) is a term coined by Dziga Vertov, in the 1920s, to signify first the merging of the human eye (the eye of the filmmaker/cameraperson) with the eye of the camera, the “symbiosis between the human eye and the camera objective” (Barsam 1992, 70). This is what the term commonly refers to and how Trinh uses it: when one eye of the filmmaker is closed and the other one looks into the camera objective. For Vertov, however, the term came to signify a technological, more-than-human, higher eye that would allow the man to become, through the machine, “the perfect electric man” (Vertov and Michelson 1984, 8), virtually limitless and capable to “penetrate the essence of actual events” (Barsam 1992, 70). It is important to stress that this is not Trinh’s understanding or use of the concept; she refers to it only insofar as it is a literal merging of the human and camera eye. It becomes clear why Trinh only refers to this aspect of the concept when considering that the kino-eye method used by Vertov, as a “scientifically experimental method of exploring the visible world” (Vertov and Michelson 1984, 87), became the centre of his theory about *Kinopravda* (cinema-truth): the capability of the kino-eye to transform reality thus revealing and capturing its deeper ‘Truth’. He also names his crew of technicians and cameramen, *Kinoki* (kino-eyes).

Trinh's choice to refer to her way of filming as kino-eye is nonetheless important as it can be read as a way to stress a certain genealogy or at least proximity between her project and Vertov's. While this is slightly unsettling to the feminist critique of Truth claims, their proximity is however meaningful when considering the political dimensions of both filmmakers' approaches. Vertov's intent in filmmaking was to "aid each oppressed individual" (Vertov and Michelson 1984, 49). Similarly, Trinh's films have an explicit political goal, although hers is not the proletarian and workers' revolution, but revealing relationships of power between self and Other more generally. Moreover, since Vertov is considered the first documentary experimentalist (Gaines and Renov 1999, 12), as well as "the father of observational cinema" (MacDougall 1995, 117), it becomes significant that Trinh positions herself in this lineage of radical political documentary. What makes the citation of Vertov even more salient is that he writes about rhythm and the interval (Vertov and Michelson 1984, 8) in such a way that strongly echoes *Reassemblage's* construction and supports my interpretation of how these two concepts are crucial to analyse this film. Another aspect of the kino-eye is also significant: how it points the attention towards the filmmaker's body movements, the physical interaction between Trinh and the camera, and how this carries implications for the film's construction and its broader effects. For the moment, I shall focus on the more practical consequences this kino-eye way of shooting has on the successive editing of the film.

Editing

Reassemblage's editing is characterised by jump-cuts,⁹⁵ juxtapositions of apparently incoherent images, sequences of different takes of the same event from the same point of view and the same distance, passages in which the angles of the shots change less than the standard 30 degrees; "and the shot sizes vary more in accordance with rhythm than with the need to come in for a closer view or pull back for a more inclusive one" (Trinh 1992, 225). These are the most evident experimental techniques Trinh uses at the level of the visual editing. With 'visual editing' I indicate the practice of selection and assemblage of shots in sequences along the time-line. The further stage of editing is the process through which such images are connected to the soundtrack and the commentary. For the sake of the analysis it is useful to separate these different levels. Nonetheless, it remains important to keep in mind that they are always

⁹⁵ A jump cut is an editing technique in which "two shots of the same subject are cut together but are not sufficiently different in camera distance and angle" (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 281), which produces a noticeable jump on the screen and is considered a device of discontinuity. These cuts are considered a violation of the classical continuity editing, and as such they affect the spectator's experience, force the viewer to participate actively in understanding the film and thus point to the constructed nature of films (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 281-285).

deeply intertwined and that they 'work together' at the moment of the film's editing as well as at the moment of the film's projection and perception.

One of Trinh's reasons behind her strategy of editing is – as she regularly explains in interviews, and as several critics have pointed out – to open her film to a multiplicity of meanings, or better, to offer the possibility of multiplying the readings of a sign, of an image, and therefore of the film as a whole. Moreover, as previously mentioned, she aims at making explicit the processes of selection, interruption and composition, usually camouflaged in classic documentaries. Classic documentary usually employs mainstream or traditional techniques;⁹⁶ the conventional set of rules concerning editing is called 'continuity editing.' It is a technique that entails connecting, as seamlessly as possible, one shot to another, with the precise purpose of not calling attention to the editing and producing instead an effect of constant flow and intelligibility of the cause-effect development of the film, thus also emphasising the coherence of the narrative (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 249-278).

Contrarily, Trinh's editing procedures "are aimed at unsettling our habit of seeing through the documentary 'object-oriented' camera eye.... They lead us right into the image, into the texture of things instead of giving us just an image or focusing on the object filmed (end point)" (Trinh 1992, 226). Therefore, this practice of revealing that moment of construction and mediation – the texture of the image – that is situated between the experienced reality and the representation of it, is ultimately a tactic to avoid and to deconstruct the tendency of documentary to objectify its subjects. Additionally, these editing strategies (as already observed for how the images are shot and framed), focusing on "the cinematic apparatus as a signifying machine" (Kaplan 1988, 93), work to "challenge the depiction of reality" (Johnston 1973). They unsettle the realist language of cinema that feminist theorists, in the 1970s and 80s, had indicated as a capitalist and patriarchal language that any feminist film must

⁹⁶ To summarise a point previously made in this research, in this context the 'traditional' techniques or rules are: those that define a correct anthropological/ethnographic film, as they have been outlined in, for example, Paul Hockings' *Principles of visual anthropology* (1975), as well as those for narrative fiction films and classic narrative cinema as are presented in cinema introductory handbooks or outlined in popular and important film theory texts such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art* (2001, first appearing in 1979). Examples of these standards will be explored later on in the chapter when discussing how *Reassemblage* disregards or criticises them. It is important to note that such rules could also be described as 'normative,' 'standard' or 'classic'. Matter of fact, they are the criteria that inform most films and documentaries, those that are easily recognisable as belonging to their specific genre: narrative or ethnographic film. Even though the set of norms and criteria for these two genres of films are very different, I connected them here since their commonality is in the fact they are the taken for granted. These are the rules and strategies of filming that, as common as they are, become neutral, invisible, and yet they are the most crucial to identify as they set the standards to distinguish other kinds of films: these traditional rules are the norm upon which differences are perceived and evaluated.

dispute. At these levels, *Reassemblage* can, therefore, surely be considered a feminist film.

As already described, Trinh's style is experimental and innovative and to further demonstrate this it would be sufficient to look at the reactions and critiques her film provoked, especially, but not only from anthropologists.⁹⁷ Nonetheless her cinematographic approach is not new. The so-called alternative, intellectual, or experimental montage has been theorised and applied in art and fiction films by film directors such as Lev Kuleshov, Sergei Eisenstein, early surrealist and dada filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel, the French New Wave filmmakers Jean Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, as well as by Andy Warhol and John Cassavetes in the USA. From the 1920s through to the 1970s many films appeared which criticised and refused to conform to the traditional protocol (that is, the classical narrative Hollywood style) of editing. Nonetheless, despite the enormous differences between them, the main characteristics of those pioneering experimental films can be condensed to the following: a lack of a clear continuity and cause-effect relations in the narrative; a demystifying (self-)reflexive component; the use of jump cuts and of juxtaposed, apparently unrelated images; a disruption of the time-space linearity; a certain degree of experimentation in the soundtrack through noises; and non-synchronous sounds (among other defining characteristics). Reflexivity came about due to the deconstruction of dominant film language and, more specifically, of patriarchal implications intrinsic in realist documentary style. These were the foremost features of realism to criticise and dismiss according to scholars such as Mulvey (1975), Johnston (1975), and Kaplan (1983). Consequently, reflexivity is intended, in this context, as the awareness of the medium's complicity with power relations, and as the necessary strategy and aim of any feminist film.

These features are rather similar to the ones I highlighted in *Reassemblage*. Furthermore, polyphony, fragmentation, and reflexivity – and with them, multiperspectivism, discontinuous narrative and simultaneity – are, according to George Marcus, “the defining moves announced and practiced by experimental ethnography” (Marcus, G. E. 1990, 8). In his article, “The Modernist Sensibility in Recent Ethnographic Writing and the Cinematic Metaphor of Montage,” Marcus considers montage⁹⁸ the key theoretical concept of cinema. He examines its influence – and its validity as a metaphor – to explain the emergence of what he calls a “kind of modernist sensibility in ethnography” (*ibid.*, 4). The interesting association Marcus draws between ethnographic work, film, and montage is significant to support my argument about Trinh's editing style being innovative

⁹⁷ See for example the debate, mentioned in paragraph 3.3, in the journal *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 9, n.2, 1990.

⁹⁸ Montage, in the English usage, has two different meanings: it is a synonym for editing, as well as a specific cinematic principle that through editing emphasises the juxtaposition of images to create new associations (Bordwell and Thompson 2001, 342).

and not new at the same time. According to the anthropologist, “montage lends technique to the desire to break with existing rhetorical conventions and narrative modes through exposing their artificiality and arbitrariness” (*ibid.*). He goes on to affirm that “usually, a critical intellectual montage becomes, in the contemporary idiom, a deconstruction in action, and its aim is to decompose categories that construct basic ideological concepts of common sense such as the individual, gender, or class” (*ibid.*, 8). Deconstructing these normative categories is an evident aim of *Reassemblage*.

In the above passages Marcus suggests that a certain deconstructive and reflexive stance is intrinsic to the potentiality of the cinematographic medium as such. More importantly, montage becomes the very actual technique, as well as the metaphor, which prominently serves to actualise deconstruction as well as reflexivity in (documentary and anthropological) film. Noteworthy is that both anthropological documentary filmmaking and ethnographic writing, in the 1970s and 1980s, started to explore the reflexivity and polyvocality that Marcus links with montage. However, the degree of experimentation ‘allowed’ at the level of the editing in ethnographic films in the 1980s (and, in many instances, until nowadays) is quite controlled and limited judging, for example, by the criteria described in Hockings’ prominent book *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (1975). The consequence of transgressing these limits and of fully embracing the practical and critical potential of montage is for such films not to be considered scientific (that is, anthropological) enough. For these reasons, Trinh’s film, made in 1982, can be considered innovative as well as challenging and provocative⁹⁹ to the ethnographic film canon dominant in that period. It is in this way that she both exceeds and fails to meet strict categorical definitions. The film is inherently interdisciplinary.

When talking about editing and montage the visual aspect of a film is what first comes to mind and what it most often refers to. However, an additional level of the editing that plays a great role in the overall construction of a documentary and in its (aesthetic, critical and political) effects is its acoustic dimension. It is this aspect of *Reassemblage* that is now taken into account, namely the arrangement and choice of sounds, silences, music, and voice-over commentary. Although both sounds and voice-over participate and interconnect to create the aural dimension of the film, they are productively separable in this investigation because of the different functions they assume. Additionally, in the reception of the film they are clearly isolatable into Trinh’s voice on the one hand, and the diegetic sounds and voices recorded on-field on the other.

⁹⁹ An example of the extent to which *Reassemblage* unnerved some anthropologists can be inferred from Alexander Moore’s 1990 article discussing Trinh’s film, published in *Visual Anthropology Review*.

Sounds and silences

The primary impressions connected with the acoustic dimension of *Reassemblage* are confusion, repetition and pulsation. Following the development of the film, concentrating exclusively on its sounds and music, the viewer perceives, in order: diverse rhythms of drums and other percussion instruments blended with voices, screams, whistles, various singing and clapping. Next are sounds of animals which soon after are mingled with the recording of a dialogue between some men and women. Again, another change, other dialogues mixed with the noise of pestles beating in mortars, laughs, children's chuckles; the voice of a woman is looped and repeated many times only with slight modifications. Loud sounds of cicadas. After that a patchwork of drums clanging, a woman hooting, and men singing and playing music. From this moment, around the twenty-fifth minute of the film onwards, it becomes hard to recognise and distinguish the many different sounds. All the ones previously heard are now alternately looped, merged, repeated and overlapped.

The film is punctuated by numerous moments of silence. These soundless insertions are of the greatest importance. Continuous throughout the film, at times they last a few seconds, other times they seem never-ending. All these elements are interwoven with the voice-over commentary. In the script Trinh provides in *Framer Framed* the beginning of a new sound is indicated between brackets. These sounds and voices are described in relation to their specific geographical location, ethnic origin or personal name, for example: Joola drums, Sereer language, voice of Djumalog of the village of Boucoum, hooting of Bassari women (Trinh 1992, 96-105).

I propose to identify two main qualities of the audio editing of *Reassemblage*. The first one regards how the single sounds are used in relation to the others, while the second pertains to the interrelation of the soundtrack and the images. I attend to the former here. As described above, especially the second half of the film is characterised by a rich acoustic environment composed of an abundant mix of sounds, diverse in source and geographical origin, fused and blended together. The result is a rhythmic, dynamic, syncopated and bewildering mixture. This disorientation is amplified by the fact that all these sounds seem to have been recorded on field. However, because they appear to be hardly synchronous with the images they can be read as non-diegetic elements. This results in a profound ambiguity, which seems to be unsolvable, about the diegetic or extra-diegetic value of the soundtrack. A further factor that works to complicate the viewer's reading of the film is the use of silences. Similar to the 'black screens' in the film, silences do not occur specifically to separate sections of the film or to mark 'changes of settings.' In fact, sometimes the music or the voices stop brusquely even though the scene on screen continues unchanged. *Reassemblage* is filled with these moments which create either suspense and questioning, or discomfort and distress, or which compel the viewer to focus

more on the images on the screen. "Silence is an important part of the work, it makes it breathe" (Trinh 1992, 227). Acknowledging the fact that silence can be disquieting and disorienting for her audience, Trinh insists that it has more to offer: "it suspends expectations (music usually tells you what to expect) and is necessary as a moment of restfulness or pause, just like the black spaces in the film" (Trinh 1992, 227-228). Pause indeed. Just like pauses in a musical composition, these silences contribute to the overall construction of the rhythm of *Reassemblage*.

Rightfully, Jaishree K. Odin (1997) associates Trinh's style with John Cage's composition principles. He extensively worked on the notion of silence, considering it not as an empty space but, on the contrary, as an impossible state to actually attain, given its potential to reflect the continuous flux of internal and external ambient sounds.¹⁰⁰ In her article, Odin asserts that, because of Cage's influence on Trinh's work, in connection to the fact that Cage was inspired greatly by Zen's understanding of emptiness, "both visual saturation and aural silence, then, function as part of Trinh's transformative aesthetic that produces fragmentation and difference" (Odin 1997, 601-602). The presence of silence in Trinh's work has an aesthetic function as well as a political relevance, because it creates the possibility, or rather *opens* to the possibility, of alternative and transformative meanings yet to be imagined and created. It is a plentiful silence.

To return to the second quality of the audio editing, namely to the way the soundtrack and the images interrelate. As mentioned before, in the final editing of this film audio and images are virtually constantly not synchronous. This means that we do not hear the actual sounds produced by the man carving a piece of wood, or the exact words the pounding women are saying. Or do we? It is useful to present two examples to clarify these sorts of configurations. First, in the second minute of the film, we see a man sculpting a piece of a trunk with a small axe, we hear the sounds of Joola drums; for some seconds the rhythm of his movement is synchronous with the beats of the music, not constantly, but again and again. Second, around the twelfth minute, the film portrays a woman holding a baby in her arms, we see her lips moving, we hear a female voice talking; the movements of her mouth are visibly synchronous with the words heard. Is that her voice? Is that woman actually speaking those words in that moment? The ambiguity remains and is stressed by the fact that many sounds, actually recorded on-field, are used in the film but not in connection with 'their' images. Moreover, the soundtrack, created by the many different sounds and

¹⁰⁰ "The concept of silence evolved in his thinking: first, he viewed sound and silence as excluding each other, then he went on to see them as existing together, and finally, he arrived at the concept that silence or emptiness is full of sound" (De Visscher, E. 1993, *Writings about John Cage*, p.129, as quoted in Odin J.K. 1997, 602). Many of Cage's pieces of music are built around these concepts, his most notorious one being '4'33". He also wrote about his own theories in the book *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (1961).

rhythms described above, assumes a brand new aural dimension and a new rhythm. This rhythm develops throughout the film as a rich and intricate composition, animating the different images and actions, and modulating according to them. Eventually it becomes difficult, and perhaps useless, to retrace and disconnect the visual from the acoustic element.

Michael Hill accurately exemplifies this reciprocal influence of rhythmic images and sounds when he writes: "In this mingling between the synchronous and non-synchronous, knowing whether the dancers, drummers or pounders are all working according to one rhythm, or are an effect of the rhythm which we try, however unsuccessfully, to recollect, is impossible" (Hill 1993, 23). Whether these synchronicities are accidental or carefully constructed by the director remains uncertain. However, Trinh affirms that "creating consisted not so much in inventing something new as in rediscovering the links within and between images, sounds and words" (Trinh 1992, 226). Trinh's use and understanding of sounds in *Reassemblage* does not remain isolated in her work. For example, almost ten years after this film, in the chapter "Holes in the Sound Wall" in *When the Moon Waxes Red* she discusses sounds; what she writes there is helpful to deepen the comprehension of the film in question:

Move from that which is easily identifiable to that which is at the limit of being identifiable. Listen to them [sounds] non-knowingly but alertly. Enjoy their materiality.... Cutting, a sentence at different places for example, assembling it with holes, repeating it in slightly different forms and in ever-changing verbal contexts, helps to produce a constant shift and dislocation in meanings.... [Y]es, sounds are sounds and should above all be released as sounds. Everything is in the releasing. There is no score to follow (Trinh 1991, 205-206).

This quote perfectly describes what happens in *Reassemblage* and clearly highlights the relation between her way of working with sound and the effects it produces: the shifting and dislocating of meanings. When considering the aural dimension of the film, rhythm, links, limits and materiality are the recurrent concepts that emerge.

Voice-over, commentary

The function of the voice-over has already been described regarding the narrative structure of the film in the previous section (3.1). There, I analysed the content of the text uttered by the commentary voice. Here, the way this voice is presented and when is instead considered. Trinh, with her manner of performing the voice-over in *Reassemblage*, entirely deconstructs this illusion of objectivity: "The word-image relationship in my films has always been one that refuses the use of the voice as being homogeneous to the image, and vice-versa" (Trinh 1992, 207). Her voice operates precisely against the idea of providing a univocal

reading of the images, against the habit of "imposing a meaning to every single sign" (Trinh 1992, 96). Trinh achieves this effect by two means: how she performs the voice-over (that is, the materiality of her voice) and when she utters which sentences.

As already noted, the voice of the commentator is Trinh's own voice: a female voice with a non-native English accent. The quality of this voice, soft and almost whispered, with a monotone and slow-paced intonation, together with the specific gendered and ethnic connotations, and the not always clear articulation of the words, wrap the film in a sense of intimacy and emphasise the subjective perspective. Usually, the documentary commentary is instead uttered by an assertive (often male) voice, neutral in terms of accent, and strong and clear. The 'neutrality' of such a voice works to confirm the objective and scientific tone of such anthropological films. Accordingly, the connotations of *Reassemblage's* voice-over stress instead the situatedness of the filmmaker, hence pointing at the partiality of the knowledge presented in the film.¹⁰¹ In short, the quality of the voice of *Reassemblage* becomes another sign of Trinh's feminist approach to documentary making in particular, and to knowledge production in general. Summoning up Donna Haraway's famous article, this strategy of *Reassemblage* can be interpreted as a sign of and a tool for the privileging of "partial perspectives" and therefore for the production of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988).

What is left to say is how she unfastens the voice-over from the visuals. In the same way as with the sounds, the words uttered by the voice-over are non-synchronous with the images they refer to, or better, with the images we are led to think they should refer to. In other moments of *Reassemblage* instead the words are (apparently) completely disconnected from anything that is represented on the screen; the voice-over seems to be telling an entirely different, parallel story. With a certain criticism Henrietta Moore examines *Reassemblage* and writes that the beautiful visual images "are accompanied by a commentary which has no discernable narrative form and which is juxtaposed to, and often in conflict with, the visual images" (Moore 1991, 68). Throughout the film, repetitions and loops of the sentences articulated by the voice-over can be identified. These repetitive patterns are, as Trinh states, "not just the automatic reproduction of the same but rather the production of the same with and in differences" (Trinh 1992, 114). In this way no meaning is definitively assigned to any of the images in the film; the result is one of displacement and of creative production at the same time. Once again, it is through these strategies, which evoke a rhythmical and musical composition, that Trinh "avoid[s] any sureness of signification" (Trinh 1992, 228).

¹⁰¹ An interesting parallel can be found in how Jean Rouch conceptualises the use of his own voice in some of his documentaries and in relation to other anthropological films (Rouch 1975, 92).

One clear example of Trinh's use of fictional techniques is at the fifteenth minute of the film. Here the voice articulates: "Is that something else I've lost?" (Trinh 1992, 98); immediately after this, the same sentence is cut and repeated, using a technique similar to the one described for the voice of Djumalong. The phrase is thus modified and the voice seems to accentuate it differently, almost transforming its signification: "something else I've lost?" This is just one example of other similar events in the film. I concur with Penley and Ross' interpretation that these repetitions are a method to unsettle the fixed relation generally established between the words of the commentary and the objects on the screen, "and to perceive the plural, sliding relationship between ear and eye, image and word" (Penley and Ross 1992, 228). Through this strategy the overall meaning of a sentence vanishes and the deeper materiality and sonority of each word becomes perceivable. Moreover, in a comparable manner to the functioning of the images and the editing strategies of *Reassemblage*, these repetitions open spaces, intervals, where the spectator can choose what to make of the statements, the images, and their relations.

3.3 Making films politically

More and more, there is a need to make films politically (as differentiated from making political films). We are moving here from the making of a genre of film to the making of a wide range of genres of film in which the making itself is political.

– Trinh, *When the moon waxes red*, p. 147.

Reassemblage was shot using a 16mm camera, and both produced and released in 1982. Trinh filmed it in Senegal where she was teaching for three years at the Dakar Conservatory of Music. The 40-minute film was assembled with a low budget, with Trinh fulfilling all the functions of the crafting. Like an artisan she performed all the aspects of the making: the cinematography, the writing, the editing, the conforming of the negative of the film, and so on. What makes the film exemplary, albeit not unique, is not its straightforward subject-matter but the meta-discourse on filmmaking it performs, and the manner in which it addresses broader issues, such as: subjectivity, the Other, Truth, the authenticity and objectivity of the ethnographic practice, the production of meaning, the very possibility of filmic representation, and the politics therein. Particularly a target of *Reassemblage's* critique is the anthropological claim of objectivity: "She compares anthropologists to fishermen who locate themselves as observers in alien cultures, and then, in the name of objectivity, cast a net (their theoretical framework) to capture the culture they are observing" (Odin 1997, 620).

Reassemblage puts into practice the reflections about what a documentary is and tests the boundaries that separate objectivity from fictionality, science from experimentation. Discussing with Akira Mizuta Lippit about the binary conceptions of fiction/realism, synthetic/naturalistic, and experimental/documentary, Trinh argues that in her work those apparently conflicting approaches become “one and the same”: “To call attention to the subjectivity at work and to show the activity of production in the production is to deal with film in its most natural, realistic and truthful aspect. So I don't see the separation” (Trinh 1999b, 137). *Reassemblage* and her second film *Naked Spaces* (1985) have circulated in documentary, art and avant-garde film milieus. This variety of screening circuits confirms the multifacetedness of these works, making it difficult to label Trinh's films. More importantly this also contributes, when considering Laura Marks' theory on intercultural cinema, to the film's proliferation of layers and meanings. When writing about the audiences of what she calls intercultural cinema, where Trinh's production can be located, Marks elaborates on how “each viewing expands the meaning of a work,” how each discursive context of screening becomes part of the *material* of the film or video (Marks 2000, 20). The variety of audiences and meanings, and the crossing of genres, can also be read as two aspects of the same phenomenon: traversing boundaries and limits. Accordingly, I would agree with Trinh's framing of her films as “experiences of limits,” realised at the frontiers of several cultures, genres, disciplines, realms, and investigating these frontiers (Trinh 1996). Furthermore, I argue that such investigation is not just a sterile, self-reflexive exercise on how to cross limits. Quite the opposite, Trinh's work in general, and *Reassemblage* specifically, aims not only at challenging existing territories, but at opening new spaces for “creative critical reflections on cinema, art, feminism, and cultural politics” (Trinh 1996). Once again, the emphasis on the political dimension of her film becomes of the foremost importance.

Two sets of motives make *Reassemblage* highly suitable for analysis in the context of a research on feminism and (anthropological) documentary. First, the location of the filmmaker proves to be relevant when considering the disciplinary debates about the film: Trinh moves at the crossroads of anthropology, feminist studies, philosophy, art and literary theory, music composition and ethnomusicology, professional filmmaking and experimental arts production. Second, it is the inner characteristics of the film, *how* the film is constructed, that make *Reassemblage* an extraordinarily rich and complex documentary, as seen in previous sections. As for the other filmmakers examined in this research, the aim here is not to provide a comprehensive monographic account of Trinh's biographical experiences and production,¹⁰² rather the focus is

¹⁰² Trinh's production includes books, multimedia installations and feature-length films. Ranging from entirely theoretical books to books about her films, from analogue to digital films, from music

on one of her films. Therefore, in this paragraph, only some aspects of her creative and academic background are taken into account, namely, those which contribute to deepen the investigation of the feminist political effects of *Reassemblage* and its strategies of representation. The elements of Trinh's work that are relevant for the purpose of this study are the different intellectual locations she inhabits, namely her position as a filmmaker, as a feminist, and as a scholar nearby anthropological debates.

Trinh is an independent filmmaker, writer, composer and feminist post-colonial theorist; for the last ten years she has been a professor in the Rhetoric and Women's Studies departments at UC Berkeley. Born in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 1953, she grew up in Saigon. She moved to the United States to study in a small school in Ohio, where, she recalls in an interview, as an 'international student,' she was put in contact with other foreign students, as well as with 'minority' students. She continues the interview stressing how "the kind of education I got in such an environment (more from outside than inside the classroom) would not have been as rich if I had stayed in Vietnam or if I had been born in the States" (Chen 1992, 83-84). Continuing to study in the USA, Trinh gained an MA in French Literature and Music, a Master of Music in Composition, and a PhD in Comparative Literatures. Subsequently she decided to go to Senegal to live and teach. For a short period Trinh also went to France as an exchange student, and studied in Paris at the Sorbonne Paris-IV. Reflecting upon her paths of education she stresses how her nomadic experiences, her traversing of a multiplicity of geographical and disciplinary locations, inform her work. She affirms: "everything that I have done has always been a leap away from what I have learned, and nothing in my work directly reflects the education I have had except through a relation of displacement and rupture" (Chen 1992, 84). This brief overview of her biography is telling since it provides an account of her interdisciplinary training, including her musicological education.

What emerges from these few sketches of her life is a leitmotif that forged her future theoretical elaborations: the experience of the paradoxes of (post)colonial societies. Unquestionably, one should be cautious in incorporating the personal life of an author in the reading of her work, considering that Roland Barthes convincingly killed the author more than thirty years ago (1977). Nonetheless, I defend the possibility of recognising the importance of Trinh's biographical context, but only to the extent that it is considered *but one of the possible interpretative lenses*, and since she explicitly acknowledges its importance

compositions to audio-visual installations, her multifaceted work is too vast to allow for a comprehensive overview. Thus far, no book has been published that coherently presents all of Trinh T. Minh-ha's work. Therefore, for an exhaustive account, refer to her personal website on the Berkley University web.

for her thinking. As a post-colonial subject, or rather as an “Inappropriate/d Other” herself, Trinh’s personal experience appears to be crucial to her position as a filmmaker.¹⁰³

Trinh is involved in anthropological debates although intentionally remains at the margins of this discipline. Interestingly enough, her name figures in several articles of leading visual anthropology journals. Those articles, either in the form of interviews with her, or written by Trinh herself, or scrutinising her work, nearly every time set off animated debates and a sequel of other articles commenting on her concepts or discussing her films. Remarkable is the collection of texts published in *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 9, n.2, 1990: pieces by Christopher Pinney, Henrietta Moore and Alexander Moore are grouped together under the subheading “Trinh Minh-ha Observed.” Other articles followed these, and Trinh’s work is animatedly considered in some of the succeeding issues of the same journal, and also within *Visual Anthropology* (Desmond 1991, Russell 1992). It is therefore unquestionable that some of her films, *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces* in particular, can be considered ethnographic documentaries, or anyhow interesting anthropological works. However, it is striking that none of her titles have ever been screened at a major, specialised ethnographic film festivals. This ambivalent reception of Trinh’s productions may be better understood when considering, through her own words, how she regards anthropology as a discipline.

In an interview published in the *Visual Anthropology Review* she affirms that anthropology is indeed a component of her work, but “just one site of discussion among others” (Chen 1992, 84). Soon after in the same text she clearly voices her critiques declaring that Euro-American anthropologists and cultural experts are so busy defending the discipline, the institution, that their reaction to her works is nothing but a reaction to protect their own comfort and interests (*ibid.*). Such an assertion alone would be enough to make her be unpopular among anthropologists. But the following statements for sure validate her ambiguous relation with the discipline:

to simplify a complex issue, I would just say here that if the tools are dealt with only so as to further the production of anthropological knowledge, or to find a better solution for anthropology as a discipline, then what is

¹⁰³ In this sense, as pointers of her nomadic experience, it is worth noticing that Trinh often mentions events of her life, which she presents as ironic occurrences, when discussing her films. For example, reflecting on her education she states: “it was one of these phenomena of colonialism: I was sent there to teach English to French students (*laughter*).” Or, talking about the happy encounter with a renowned Vietnamese scholar and musician, with whom she studied ethnomusicology, she declares: “So you go to Paris, finally to learn ethnomusicology with a Vietnamese (*laughter*)” (Chen 1992, 84).

achieved is either a refinement in the pseudo-science of appropriating Otherness or a mere stir within the same frame (Chen 1992, 84-85).

Trinh's engagement with anthropology clearly has a feminist influence. Therefore, I intend to focus on how she situates herself within and outside the feminist debate, or more precisely, how she defines herself as a feminist.¹⁰⁴

Coherently with her theoretical conception of 'inappropriate/d other,' "not quite other, not quite the same" (Trinh 1998), Trinh's position toward feminism, so as toward other identity labels, is one of mobile, shifting boundaries.¹⁰⁵ Discussing the issues at stake in calling or not calling herself a feminist, seeing or being seen as part of the East or of the West, she makes clear what this shifting of boundaries entails: "It is not a question of blurring boundaries or of rendering them invisible. It is a question of shifting them as soon as they tend to become ending lines" (Trinh 1998). Accordingly, in numerous interviews, Trinh reaffirms that defining oneself or accepting to be defined as a feminist depends on who is saying it, in which context and how. Nonetheless, in another interview, she does offer her definition of what it means to be a feminist, namely "being a critic of society in its oppressive workings" (Spangler 1993).

To talk about feminist positioning means talking about the political viewpoint and responsibility. Hence, Trinh's feminist perspective is tightly intertwined with her political commitment as a filmmaker. In the book *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991) she gives an exemplary account of how the two aspects are tightly interconnected. As in the opening quote of this chapter, Trinh writes that "there is a need to make films politically (as differentiated from making political films)." This is not just an estimate of a need; I argue that making film politically is the very drive and goal of her work. In a discussion published in the student journal *Latent Image* (1993), Trinh answers her interviewer in an eloquent and passionate way that almost seems like a manifesto of her approach to, and vision of, her activity as a feminist filmmaker. There she quotes Jean-Luc Godard's distinction between making films politically and making films that focus on a political subject or have a political content. Stressing the limits of this second approach, she mentions how the feminist movement has contributed to revealing that power relations are everywhere and that technology, for example, is not neutral, is always interpellated by ideology. Therefore making a film politically means to question one's own position as filmmaker and to politicise all aspects of filmmaking. Even though the content matter of a film can be a political subject, this is not enough to assure the political commitment of a film.

¹⁰⁴ The book in which Trinh directly addresses feminist theories, feminisms and the issue of how to represent the 'Third World' feminine 'other' is the renowned *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (1989).

¹⁰⁵ The issue of borders and boundaries is one of the common elements that I have identified in feminist documentaries, and is explored further in Chapter 4 with regard to *Europlex*.

Echoing Johnston's 1975 article, Trinh concludes her argument by declaring that the risk in making film is to uncritically use the "language of the mainstream ideology reproducing thereby its oppressive mechanisms" (Spangler 1993). This point – that making a film politically (in my framework, this means making film in a feminist way) means to question one's own position as a filmmaker and to politicize all aspects of filmmaking – should be strongly stressed as it is of the foremost importance for all three films I study. Furthermore, it is crucial for any understanding of feminist documentary and of feminist approaches to documentary.

Trinh explicitly engages with documentary as a genre both in and through her films, but she also specifically addresses this topic in many of her articles. In "Documentary is/Not a Name" (1990), for example, Trinh elaborates on the limits of realism and on the longing for objectivity. There she challenges the typical definition of documentary as belonging to the category of non-fiction films. She asserts that "a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction" (Trinh 1990, 89). Thus, again, revealing the artifice becomes crucial. The artifice can be understood as the process of construction of the film, of how it is shot and edited; it also concerns the technologies used, the implications of such technologies, and the context of production. More importantly, the artifice is also connected with the social and cultural connotations of the medium, as well as with the locations of the subject behind the camera. Finally, the artifice is related to the entire apparatus surrounding and shaping the filmic representations: the economical aspects, the production-distribution system, the audience reception, and the disciplinary paradigms.

I here intend apparatus in the Althusserian sense, in its connection with what he calls ideology (Althusser 1971), as has been elaborated specifically in relation to cinema (Metz 1981; Stam 1992) and to gender (de Lauretis 1987). It is in this sense that the political dimension of *Reassemblage* can be fully appreciated as a film attentive to the workings of representation because it enacts a continuous meta-reflection on the medium itself, on the cinematic apparatus and its complicities with ideology in hailing and shaping subjectivity. Importantly, this conception of ideology and subjectivity is tightly intertwined with the issues of objectivity, reflexivity and the representation of the Other. Trinh explicitly elaborates on her understanding of subjectivity in relation to the cinematic apparatus, again, when describing her concept of Inappropriate/d Other, arguing that the subjectivity at work here cannot be submitted to the old subjectivity/objectivity paradigm (Trinh 1988). What is at stake is a subjectivity aware of its role in the production of meaning, and aware of filmic representation as a mediation and a technique, rather than merely as a representation of *something*. Accordingly, all of Trinh's films can be considered as

“attempts to bring out that process with and within the image. Because of the very tight ‘always-in-relation-to’ situation, it is also difficult to simply indulge in the subject matter, as if it pre-exists out there, waiting to be retrieved ‘as it is’” (Trinh 1999b, 134).

Reassemblage is at once too feminist, too anthropological, and too fictional. However, its overall ‘excessiveness,’ I argue, allows *Reassemblage* to perform within and outside of, as well as challenge all three fields (anthropology, documentary and feminist film) and therefore *must* be regarded as producing feminist e/affects. It is because *Reassemblage* resides in the intersections of these three categories that it should be understood as belonging to what I have called, in Chapter 1, the ‘grey zone’. This ‘grey zone’ is this very interdisciplinary area where clear-cut disciplinary investigations are uncomfortable, thus where new explorations are made possible and where the relation between power, knowledge and documentary can be critically analysed. In short, the film itself is “inappropriate/d” (Trinh, 1986-87); it (as well as the other films in this research) resists appropriation, labelling, and makes any rigid disciplinary reading uncomfortable: the film is “outside in” and “inside out” of the boundaries of definitions and genres (Trinh 1991).

3.4 Indexicality as ‘trace’

In this section I elaborate on how *Reassemblage* presents its indexical dimension, thus how the images and sounds in the film perform their relation with the object, with reality. As explained in Chapter 1 and as demonstrated with the analysis of *Sisters in Law*, I maintain that documentary is a sign that is in an indexical relation with its object, and that this indexical bond is specific to documentary as different from fiction film. Finally, it should be recalled that I have identified various manners – interrelated but with different implications – in which the documentary indexical sign refers to its object. To summarise, the index is understood as a sign that is in a relation of physical contact and co-presence in space and time with its object; the index as a trace is a sign that entails a previous temporal contact or existential connection with the object; finally, the index as deixis occurs where the sign indicates the existence of, directs, or forces attention to its object.

Departing from an examination of the quality of the images and the sounds, what they reveal or hide, and how they are edited, I propose that *Reassemblage* performs its indexicality predominantly in the first two ways: as proximity and co-presence, and as trace. Although as I have indicated previously (section 1.5) the three aspects are interconnected and, therefore, the deictic “pointing finger” is also always present in the way documentary presents indexicality. Through

the analysis of these two types of indexical relations I articulate how *Reassemblage* can be read as a film that performs indexicality, and therefore as a film that is *haunted by reality* (recalled as the working definition of documentary as seen in Chapter 1). Accordingly, I first discuss how the close-ups and the partial, intimate, images in the film function together with the use of certain sounds (or lack thereof) to stress this relation of vicinity, continuity, and contact between the film and the actual events, or the people and places represented. Secondly, I suggest that that other images, words and sounds indicate a relation between object and sign that can be understood as pertaining to another specific kind of index, the *trace*. The trace occurs from those instances when “something of the object leaves a legible residue through the medium of touch” (Doane 2007b, 136). In other words, this specific kind of indexical relation entails that the object left a trace on the sign; however, the sign does not necessarily *show* its object in its entirety. It rather shows a record, an imprint, of the *fact* that a contact between sign and object indeed took place. In this kind of index the object is materially recorded in the image, but only so because of the impressions it left behind. What is made visible, then, is the absence of an object that was once there.

The close-ups, the partial images, the relation between absent and present bodies in the frame, the diegetic, ‘natural’ sounds of animals are all elements that provoke at once a sense of estrangement and of proximity, of ‘being there.’ These images (so as some of the sounds) work not only to direct our attention to the Object, they not only ‘indicate the existence’ of the Object, but they present and confirm the moment when the contact occurred between the camera and the filmed reality. Throughout the film close-up shots of, for example, hands working wood and weaving, or of feet stomping, dancing and playing jump-rope, show fragments of bodies, of people performing mundane daily tasks. It is because these shots appear to entail that the camera-eye is close to the objects, and because these tasks are so mundane, so necessary, that they lend validity to the perceived ‘being there.’ Other images instead show close-ups of mouths, eyes, facial expressions, usually laughter. The sound is non-synchronous to the images, and therefore the audience cannot ‘hear’ such laughter. Furthermore, the editing lacks any narrative indication as to who is laughing or what about. Nonetheless, the close-ups of faces themselves convey a sense of intimacy. This intimacy is not established between the audience and the subjects on screen, as in the way an audience member may identify with a fiction film’s character so to say, but rather the intimacy is recognised by the audience as pertaining to and embedded in that moment when the film was shot. What is represented is the intimacy of that moment, in that specific space and time, between the subjects filmed, and to which the filmmaker/the camera somehow participated.

Both examples seem to confirm that the camera was there, amidst the objects filmed, ‘in’ the reality: close enough to focus on the details of hands and feet, and

in a relation of vicinity, both physical and emotional, to allow the intimate moment to take place in front of the camera-eye.¹⁰⁶ It should also be remembered how nearness is an aspect of what I have outlined as the “speaking near by.” It seems therefore possible to connect this performance of proximity, which is now being associated with the indexical bond between sign and object, with the “speaking near by” that Trinh describes as her way of filming and as “an attitude in life” (Trinh in Chen 1992, 87).

It should be stressed that proximity and contact are commonly considered the main indicators of documentary’s referentiality, of that “special indexical bond” that conveys the sense of ‘having been there’ and therefore the warranty of documentary authenticity. In other words, images ‘touch’ the real thus assuring us not only that the object, the reality, was there, but that the camera too was present in that space and time. Moreover, both the fragmentation (close ups and images of bodies only partially framed in the shot) and the vicinity work to expose the materiality of the bodies and of the objects framed, as well as the materiality of the images themselves – their matter, grain, as if they could be touched. These close-ups and partial images, then, “bring a materiality to the image,” as Hill states (1993, 25). In other words, the haptic bond between sign and object – the indexical relation – is mirrored in the haptic quality that the images in the final film product have.¹⁰⁷

While the previous paragraph promotes *Reassemblage’s* indexicality in terms of co-presence and vicinity, I now elaborate of the second kind of indexical relation, namely that of the index as trace. The simplest and most common way to explain the trace is to consider a footprint in the snow or a piece of mould with a bullet hole in it (Peirce 1955, 104). The footprint is a trace, insofar as it clearly indicates the presence of, for example, the moose that left it. It represents that the moose was there, in that very place, at a specific time, though the trace itself does not actually *show* the moose (which incidentally would make the sign have more of an iconic quality). Similarly, traces are found in *Reassemblage*. Take, for example, the trace of the colonial encounter. At the level of the signs in the film (visual and aural), traces of the history of the colonisation of Senegal are present in both voice-over text as well as in the images. Also at the level of editing Trinh plays with the notion of presence and absence, visible and invisible. For example,

¹⁰⁶ Much has been written about the connection between the actual technological medium, the 16mm camera, and intimacy (see for example: Nichols 2010, 159-160; Barbash and Taylor 1997, 222-223; Zimmermann 1995, 82-83). The lightness, method of looking through the ‘viewfinder’ and the way the camera influences the cameraperson’s movements while shooting, for example, can be read as specific features of 16mm that enable a certain kind of intimacy produced during the shooting or in the final film.

¹⁰⁷ The ‘haptic’ and ‘haptic visuality’ are central concepts to some of the recent scholarship on film and embodiment (Marks 2002; Sobchack 2004; Barker 2009). For an elaboration of the qualities and implications of haptic images see, for example, Marks (2000, 162-164) and Papenburg (2011).

the western (post)colonial subject is present in the voice-over of *Reassemblage*; we find hints of him when the voice over elaborates about the Peace-Corps Volunteer who teaches the women how to grow vegetable and that “it’s the first time this has been introduced into the village” (Trinh 1992, 97-98), or when the voice-over narrates anecdotes about missionaries, traders, ethnologists and tourists. He is also present or, rather, his prior existence appears to be present as a trace where the images of the film show some of the people of the villages wearing western-style clothes. No western subjects are *seen* in this film, yet the missing coloniser is ever-present, visible in its traces and in its invisible previous presence. Among other themes *Reassemblage* also represents, points at, a post-colonial situation where traces of colonisation are still felt. Finally, the idea of disappearance and in/visibility could also be found in those sequences in the film where the jump cuts in the editing produce the illusion of people’s sudden vanishing from the frame as if by ‘magic.’ An example of this effect is when, towards the beginning of the film, there is a scene with a woman and some children are walking on a path. We see two exact same shots in sequence, but in the first one the people are there and, in the following one, in the blink of an eye, they are not there anymore.

In sum, Trinh’s film, by addressing the absences, the gaps, the silences, makes present, not the object, but the process through which the object partially disappeared from the sign. Moreover, the trace has been connected with absence and death by several scholars, such as Doane (2007b), Didi-Huberman (2009) and, specifically for what concerns the association of the photographic medium with death, famous is Barthes’ elaboration on photography (considered the indexical medium *par excellence*) as a “return of the dead” (1981, 7). Finally, Mulvey connects the indexical and the uncanny with death in cinema (2006, 54-66), and Alisa Lebow refers to death as “the arbiter of documentary’s indexicality to reality” (2006, 234). From this perspective then, in *Reassemblage*, the traces of the colonial encounter, as well as the way bodies are represented – as fragments, images of sections of bodies that barely make the actual human figure recognisable – can also be connected with the experience of death, and with the unrepresentability and the unspeakability of historical collective traumas.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, in *Reassemblage*, indexicality works to create, and draw attention to the intervals, the in-between spaces between visible and invisible, presence and absence. Thus, in the light of the “politics of the index” that Doane outlines, I

¹⁰⁸ In this sense, but considering photography rather than film, Marianne Hirsch writes: “More than oral or written narratives, photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’” (2008, 115). For an elaboration on the interconnections between the medium of photography and the representation of trauma see for example Baer (2002) and Zarzycka (2011).

suggest that the film opens a semiotic space that is at once also political. It is a space in which new engagements with reality, with representation and with the Other can be enacted, as well as where other meanings and new subject positions can be imagined. Therefore, I propose that this film compellingly enacts its political dimension and triggers certain feminist effects exactly because it presents the traces, the marks, the echoes of the material reality that haunts it.

3.5 Self-reflexivity: deconstructing the medium and the materiality of the image

Now the quest is to put representation under scrutiny and to bring the mechanics of their inner workings to the fore.

– Trinh, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” p. 90.

In *Reassemblage*, so as in her other films and art installations, Trinh aims at offering a critical space to the viewer, “in which the tensions between the political and the personal are played out” (Trinh in Spangler 1993). This relation between the political and the personal is actualised, for example, in how the filmmaker and the filmic process are positioned and how this positioning is presented within the film. To reflect on the “artifice” (Trinh 1990, 89), as already mentioned, means to engage with the relation between *how* the film is made, the material reality of the filmmaker, and the broader cultural and social power relations therein. Materiality, as elaborated in the introduction, is intended in two ways. It pertains to the texture and medium-specific characteristics, that is, the ‘matter’ of the film. It also pertains to the affects the film produces and its engagement with the viewers’ and filmmaker’s positions, that is to say, with the ‘material realities’ of the subjects implicated. The feminist effects of this film are most prominent at the level of *how* it reflects on its own construction and *how* it is assembled, rather than in its straightforward content matter (as was the case for *Sisters in Law*), though it can be found there as well.

I shall start with an account of what I have called the ‘matter’ of the film. A clear political positioning combined with a reflection on the inner workings of documentary representation is what characterises *Reassemblage*’s strategy of filming. Moreover, not only does the film perform self-reflexivity, but, I maintain, it can be appreciated specifically as a film that point towards the possible perils of a self-referential, and thus not politically engaged, reflexivity. This wariness towards the risks of a practice of knowledge production (that deploys reflexivity to the damage of political and committed action) echoes the debate that started in the late 1980s within anthropology: the so-called ‘reflexive’ turn. There is no agreement that such a turn actually took place, since it is

arguable whether it is possible to talk of anthropology, or even of American anthropology as *a* discipline, a whole, or a unity.¹⁰⁹ However, the 'reflexive turn' has found its place in anthropology and ethnography handbooks, and several are the texts¹¹⁰ that evoke the phrase 'reflexive turn' with little or no explanation, thus assuming that the reader is well-acquainted with such a concept. Therefore, while this turn towards reflexivity is commonly understood as having taken place at one point in the discipline of anthropology, there is not necessarily an agreement about what exactly it entailed, or about its consequences.

Nonetheless, this reflexive perspective can be understood as a shifting of the focus, of the gaze of the researcher, the anthropologist, from the Other cultures studied to the researcher him or herself: the observer is now observed while (s)he is studying a certain 'object.' Even further, the anthropologists reflect on themselves while performing their field-work. In the late 1970s, anthropology, particularly in the USA and from there in Europe, became aware of the situatedness and partiality of ethnographic texts (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Stocking 1983, among others); many scholars started revealing and questioning the rhetorical strategies used by anthropologists in their account of other cultures (Rabinow 1977; Fisher and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988). It can be argued that this 'turn' happened when postmodern anthropology embraced the Foucauldian lessons about power and knowledge, and the feminist critiques of the neutral, objective observer (Behar and Gordon 1995; Song 2006). While the importance of such a perspective is undeniable, especially considering the complicities the discipline had (and perhaps still has) with colonialism and colonial practices, nonetheless, many voices have been cautious and critical of the implication of such a reflexive approach.

Particularly relevant in the context of this chapter are the critiques voiced by, for example, Clifford Geertz and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. The former, in his book *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author* (1988), while practicing a severe close-reading analysis of some key anthropological texts, warned that an excessive, introverted, attention to the rhetorical writing strategies could undermine the relevance of the anthropological project. The latter instead focused her critique on what she names "moral and cultural relativism" (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 414). Scheper-Hughes, in her provocative article entitled "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," argues against the erasure of the ethical and political dimension from anthropological studies. She claims such erasure is a consequence of the postmodernist reflexive turn, which also resulted in a caution to engage with the Other. Scheper-Hughes claims that an effect of being overly conscious of one's situatedness as a

¹⁰⁹ See for example the argument Vincent Crapanzano suggests in his comment to Scheper-Hugs' article (1995, 420-421)

¹¹⁰ As in Newton (2006, 170), Song (2006, 470-471) and Højbjerg (2002, 1-2), just to name a few.

scientist/anthropologist can lead to the paralysis of any ethical or political commitment and intervention towards the Other. She argues for an anthropology that is at once, reflexive and responsive, wary of one's own Western cultural presuppositions, of the objectivity claims, yet committed and active (interestingly she equates "objective" with "uncommitted") (418-19).

These are precisely some of the central issues at stake in *Reassemblage*. Not only was this anthropological debate about reflexivity taking place in the very same years Trinh was shooting her film, but, as I have shown with the detailed analysis of its narrative and editing strategies, *Reassemblage* confronts the objectivity claims of anthropological knowledge while performing a self-reflexive gaze. In these two aspects the film can be read as being perfectly in line with what Scheper-Hughes advocates. However, it can also be argued that *Reassemblage* does not talk about Senegalese women at all, that it is so self-reflective, so wary of the situatedness of the filmmaker, and so concerned with meta-level of anthropological representation and the deconstructing the medium, that it does not actually engage with or allow the voice of the Other. In other words, the film can also be criticised along the lines of Scheper-Hughes' argument regarding the drawbacks of reflexivity – that self-referentiality can paralyse any actual militant commitment towards the Other. In short, deploying this critical argument, it can be said that *Reassemblage* is a film in which the Other, the women, the African people, are taken as a trigger to reflect on the processes of anthropological knowledge and filmic mediation but they are not allowed their own voice, and likewise, their experiences are not made visible. Therefore, the subjectivities of the filmed subjects are not taken into account; rather, they are only functional to the filmmaker's own self-reflection.

These "tensions and ambiguities" of Trinh's film – that also Henrietta Moore identifies and explores (Moore 1990) – allow for multiple and contradictory interpretations and appreciations of *Reassemblage*, even from within the perspectives of a political, feminist, or 'militant' approach. In other words, the film is vulnerable even from feminist perspectives. Certainly, *Reassemblage* opens questions and indicates problems rather than resolving them. Nonetheless, it is precisely because of its capability to address and highlight the contradictoriness and the tensions that erupt when occupying the 'grey zone' that it is worthy of analysis. It is because the film is able to point towards the tensions and paradoxes of filmic representation of the Other and of reality, that it has a feminist potential: the pointing itself is one of the feminist effects of the film.

The rhythm of the film contributes to how it engages with the viewers' and filmmaker's embodied subjectivity, that is to say, with the 'material realities' of the subjects implicated. It is the actual effects on the subjects, emanating from self-reflexivity as a practice. That is, the meanings it produces through the unsettling of dominant signifying practices of knowledge production. Thus,

rhythm functions on at least two levels: as a compositional force of the visual and aural editing strategies, and as a critical and signifying tool. The first level is at play in the construction of the film; it is at the core of the musical quality of *Reassemblage's* structure. Namely, rhythm is the criterion that informs how images, words and sounds are chosen and combined, as opposed to classic filmic techniques and technologies of realism. Second, rhythm as a critical device is at play in the way the film produces meanings and effects; it is because rhythm is the film's organisational criterion that it is able to perform what Trinh has called, in different contexts, the gap, the space in-between, the silence, or the interval.¹¹¹ These two aspects of rhythm in *Reassemblage* are tightly interconnected, the second following from the first. It is because of how the film is edited, because of its rhythm, that it manages to open up this in-between space and thus make the interval a critical and theoretical tool.

In *Cinema Interval* Trinh writes: "I would say that creating rhythm is a way of working with intervals – silences, pauses, pacing – and working with intervals means working with relationships in the wider sense of the term" (Trinh 1999a, 38). This "interstitial space" (Trinh 1992, 173) is both a theoretical and an actual space, which has at once an aesthetic value and an epistemological and political dimension. The interval allows for a proliferation of interpretations, unsettles dominant conceptions, and creates the space for new meanings and new subject positions to be imagined. In other words, it is through this space in-between that materiality is engaged in the film, that the film addresses the audience and its own strategies of representation, thus triggering material effects. As we have seen in the discussion on reflexivity above, in relation to working with rhythm, alternative strategies of filmic representation are at once political and aesthetic. That is to say, reflexivity and rhythm, as explicitly employed techniques, create the feminist effects specific to this film. The materiality of the film is crucial to its feminist effects. Furthermore, as is shown in the next section, from the perspective of visibility and the critique of the masculine and colonial gaze, rhythm – and therefore the interval – is also the theoretical tool that stimulates a going beyond vision and observation as hegemonic practices, facilitating a critical engagement of other sensorial dimensions.

3.6 Beyond vision and observation: the interval in making sense(s)

The final topic to be addressed in this chapter is that of visibility. *Reassemblage* undoubtedly presents some problematic visual representations of Senegal and of

¹¹¹ See for example, Trinh, T. Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed*, Routledge (New York, 1992); *Cinema Interval*, Routledge (New York, 1999); or *The Digital Film Event*, Routledge (New York, 2005).

African women. These are images that could be read as both exoticising and eroticising the Other, and that are reminiscent of dominant representations of underdeveloped Africa common in Western media. Additionally, as previously highlighted, the women represented in this film are not given a voice, and when one might assume their voice is heard, there are no subtitles or translations. In my brief auditory overview of *Reassemblage*, I mentioned the presence of voices speaking in what Trinh, in the script, reveals to be Sereer language. These dialogues are not translated nor subtitled; the viewer who is not familiar with this idiom is not able to understand how many people are talking, or what the general tone of the conversation is. Comprehension is further hampered by the lack of images synchronous to these sounds, sounds that could provide the audience with such hints. This manner of handling a language is, although extremely debatable and problematic, as seen above, is nonetheless fascinating due to the outcomes it produces. In particular, in one section of the film (from the 11th to the 18th minute) the conversation in Sereer language is so continuous and intricate that it becomes, to an unacquainted ear, purely rhythmical, abstract and alienating. These problematic aspects of *Reassemblage's* representation of women, as highlighted above, again ought to be critically analysed since they could arguably contribute to a reproduction of a dominant and subjecting, that is, hegemonic gaze. As such, this too may undermine the feminist potential of Trinh's film.

However, I argue that this hegemonic gaze, much like the technique of reflexivity, is consciously used by Trinh – in a somewhat exaggerated fashion – to explicitly criticise and deconstruct that kind of patriarchal and colonialist anthropological mode of representation. Confusion and defamiliarisation of the voices appears to be precisely Trinh's goal. Accordingly, in one section of the film, we hear a woman's voice, probably "the voice of Djumalong, *femme savante* of the village of Boucoum" (Trinh 1992, 98). One of her sentences is extrapolated from the context and looped, cut, edited and repeated over and over. If there could have been any doubt so far, now it is evident that Trinh's intention is to emphasise the sounds, tones and rhythms of this language. She treats "language as musical communication and information," "bringing out the music in the language and challenging the tendency to consume language exclusively as meaning" (Trinh 1992, 226-227). Ultimately, she aims at disrupting the notion of language as transparent, that is to say, unambiguously meaningful and univocal. Furthermore, not only is the hegemonic gaze, with its power implications, critically scrutinised and eventually upturned in *Reassemblage*, but the film performs a critique of the hegemony of vision in its entirety. Trinh's film questions the objectifying gaze and goes beyond the hegemonic understanding of vision precisely because of how it performs 'the interval.' In other words, it is in the gaps and the pauses, in the space created in between images, sounds, silences and black screens, between the aural and the visual, that the bond

between vision and power can be questioned and disentangled. Furthermore, from the perspective of visibility and the critique of the masculine and colonial gaze, rhythm – and therefore the interval – is the theoretical tool that stimulates a *going beyond vision and observation* as hegemonic practices, and that facilitates a critical engagement of other sensorial dimensions. Through the interplay of the visual and aural dimensions, the specific framing and editing strategies, and the sentences spoken by the voiceover – in short through its rhythmical composition – *Reassemblage* calls into question a multi-sensorial experience in which sight is not the prevailing tool of knowledge production, and where the viewer has to ‘make sense’ of the film, has to make and remake meanings through other sensorial perceptions. In this way, Trinh’s film again creates feminist affects and effects. In a similar vein, other forms of (non-visual) perceptions have been considered as “feminist visual *strategy*” which supplant phallogocentric models of vision by recent scholars, such as Laura Marks (2002, 7; 2000).¹¹²

I have already introduced how the concept of the interval, the space in-between, the gap, the silence, is crucial in Trinh’s work as a whole and in *Reassemblage* specifically, thus I move straight to my reading on this notion of the interval as a critique of the hegemony of vision and the engagement of the senses. With this move I intend to link the materiality of how the film is constructed, with the question of vision and of (multi)sensoriality. As previously discussed with regards to *Sisters in Law*, the issue of vision is tightly interconnected with that of gendered power relations and knowledge production, and is therefore of crucial concern for a feminist approach. Moreover, together with what I have examined so far about materiality, self-reflexivity and the critique of anthropological representations, visibility might provide a further multilayered lens to discuss Trinh’s film.

The previous analysis of *Reassemblage*’s construction and use of the commentary/narrative voice, interestingly enough, is what leads into this debate on the hegemony of vision. The narrative structure of *Reassemblage* points to the limits of what can be represented, at the caveats of capturing reality through film. Moreover, addressing the issue of documentary objectivity and the anthropological concerns with facts, meanings, and Truth, the story *Reassemblage* tells is also a story about (the impossibility of) objectivity. Along these lines Hill writes that “the wavering in continuity between sound and image suspends and highlights the urgency of maintaining a storyline.... It frustrates a sense of progression, and obscures an ability to locate the signposts which enable narrative objectivity – or ‘speaking about’ – to emerge” (Hill 1993, 23). This is not to say that *Reassemblage*’s development is casual or unsystematic, rather that it is not organised around the urge for linearity, coherence, and eventually, objectivity. I argue that every image, sound or word is precisely positioned to

¹¹² Marks specifically refers to the ‘haptic’ as a feminist and alternative tool of perception (2002, 7).

combine and resonate with the others: "Every event in the film can be given an intention"¹¹³ (Trinh 1992, 237). The overarching intent of the film, through these resonances, is to open up the signs to multiple possible interpretations, to avoid prescribing one objective, univocal reading – often representing the dominant interpretation, that of the anthropologist or of the filmmaker – which becomes the 'True' meaning. In order to understand how this opening up of meaning is connected with the critique of the hegemony of vision, it should be remembered that the act of observing is deeply intertwined with the production of anthropological knowledge, taken to be scientific knowledge. Thus it is vision that is commonly considered as the most reliable medium through which to realise an objective knowledge.

One of Trinh's strategies to open up signs to multiple possible interpretations is to directly include the spectator in the process of meaning production, to engage the viewer as a crucial actor in the narrative structure itself. Once again, the space in which this inclusion of the viewer can take place is an actual and conceptual space, it is the interval, and its effects are not only functional to the inner workings of the narration, but they are also political. The occurrences of this invisible but direct inclusion of the viewers in the flow of the film are several. I shall elaborate on one of them as an example. After the first ten minutes of the film, the spectator sees a medium-shot of a woman holding a small baby in her arms, then some close-ups of parts of her body, then some seconds of her face, taken from a low angle, where her head is not fully framed in the image but her naked breast is in the focal point of the shot. Next, an extreme close-up of one of her breasts. The following images are two children riding a mule, cows, other women and children, fragmented bodies of women working and talking, hands, faces, shoulders, breasts again, shots apparently out of frame – always missing the whole figure, focusing on the torso of another half-naked woman; then a black screen. The images reopen on a close-up of a naked breast, women pounding, again the same close-up, then others of women beating maize grains with children around them. In this way the film continues, adding new shots and images of other men and women working in the village for around three minutes.

The voice-over starts: "Filming Africa means for many of us / colourful images, naked breast women, exotic dances and fearful rites / the unusual." Until this moment the soundtrack of the film was constructed by voices, conversations in Sereer language, not subtitled and non-synchronous with the images. As a result, Trinh's voice emerges even more clearly and powerfully. In the following two minutes of the film we see children eating, a group of women feeding chickens, another group is hoeing the ground; others clean and ground nuts, and images of pots and hands cooking are shown. Then the voice-over: "Nudity does

¹¹³ Notice that she writes *intention* and not *meaning*.

not reveal/the hidden/it is its absence.” These words are accompanied by a medium shot of another woman’s breast, extreme close-ups again, for another full minute, then other images, other bodies, the focus is still on the naked breasts. Next the voice-over states: “A man attending a slide show on Africa turns to his wife and says with guilt in his voice: ‘I have seen some pornography tonight.’”

What is Trinh doing in this sequence of little more than five minutes? She is showing, even if framed differently, exactly those images that the audience of a traditional National Geographic¹¹⁴ documentary is used to seeing when watching a film on Africa. However, she is stressing those naked bodies and breasts, exaggerating their representations, zooming in as much as possible. In this way they become too much, redundant, almost irritating in their incessant rhythmical repetition. It is now that the filmmaker involves the spectator: almost wondering what the effect of these images is going to be, Trinh, silently, seems to read the viewers’ possible responses, the most probable ones: ‘this is too much! Why this emphasis on naked breasts? It is offensive,’ or, ‘it is not feminist, not anthropologically or politically correct, not new, not ground-breaking, not radical.’ Trinh waits just long enough to let us, the viewers, formulate such thoughts, before revealing what until that moment had remained unsaid: the viewers find themselves discovered, exposed, used. Nonetheless, Trinh does not give an answer or an explanation of the images screened, or of her reasons behind them; she just adds other traces, other signs, other points of view. This is the unsettling dialogue Trinh activates for the spectator within her film. A comparable analysis could be done, with the same results, for what concerns the use in *Reassemblage* of colourful images, laughing children or exotic dances. In this way, through this interpellation and involvement of the viewers, the film dismantles the traditional rules, language and structure of ethnographic film and deconstructs the claims of objectivity: meanings are shared and created, through the engagement of multiple subjectivities and subject positions. Therefore, and more importantly, the film creates a space for multiple signifying practices and for new meanings to be activated.

Not only does Trinh, as the filmmaker of *Reassemblage*, seem to foresee the audience’s expectations and responses to certain images, but she also includes such expected reactions into the substance and the rhythmic development of the film. These reactions can be somewhat anticipated and thus become part of the film texture because, as Henrietta Moore notices, “viewers are used to a cinematic form with a strong narrative structure, and indeed to ethnographic films with a fixed didactic line, and consequently they seek out narrative even where it does not exist” (Moore 1990, 68). In this light, addressing viewers’

¹¹⁴ For a feminist study of National Geographic’s representation of non-Western cultures to the West and its subsequent consequences, see Lutz and Collins (1993).

expectations becomes a political act, as it is linked to the reflexive and deconstructive approach towards documentary film as a hermeneutical tool that *Reassemblage* plays out. Furthermore, in this way the viewer also loses the safe, active, dominant, masculine subject position attached to being an observer who sees without being seen¹¹⁵ (Mulvey 1975). The spectator's gaze, then, loses its power, its privilege; hence, the subjectivity of the spectator is questioned: (s)he is seen, pointed at.

It is rhythm that enables this deconstruction of the processes of observation allowing the critical filmic strategy to work: the spectator is 'used' as a participant/interlocutor in order to make the film progress. (S)He is called in at the right time, following the right tempo. A totally different effect would have resulted had those words in the above-mentioned sequence – 'I have seen some pornography tonight' - been uttered by the voice-over exactly at the same time as when the images showed the first naked breast. If this were the case there would have not been any time for the spectators to react, no interval, no thinking pause, no tension and no suspension, therefore no critical movement or destabilising of the viewer's subjectivity and privileged position.

Such a deployment of the spectator's thoughts is loaded with consequences, not only for the structure of the film but for the viewer herself. An effect of this direct involvement of the viewer in the film might be an awkward and displacing feeling, or even the sensation of being misused or abused. The opening of this meaning-making space for the spectator in the material substance of the film has another complex and ambiguous outcome: now that the traditional forms of ethnographic representations are broken down and the film does not present information in a straightforward sense, spectators have to make the connections – they need to find their own interpretations of the facts happening on the screen. This destabilisation of meaning can lead to some sort of signifying freedom, while it can also lead to an unproductive, complete displacement, and to an "endless oscillation of uncertainty in the spectator" (Anne Rutherford in Trinh 1992, 168). It is important to stress that this deconstruction, this breaking of the dominant documentary structures is not done by Trinh in order to better grasp reality or to reveal some new, deeper truths. She warns against "Indulging in the illusion that if you break with dominant narrative traditions...reality will yield itself up in its spontaneous, most authentic form" (Trinh 1992, 221). On the contrary, this break is done in order to multiply truths and to allow new shared meanings to be created; it is both a deconstructive move – of claims of objectivity and of the patriarchal and normative Truth – and a constructive one. It does not simply replace old

¹¹⁵ This is one of the conditions of the cinema apparatus (the darkness of the auditorium, for example) which, in Mulvey's theory has as its precondition an arrangement that enables voyeurism and scopophilia (Mulvey 1975, 9).

authoritative meanings with new ones, but dismantles the very process of how *a* certain meaning becomes the *right* meaning and thus of how a certain Truth comes about.

Not only is the filmmaker accountable for the representations she produces, also the spectators are implicated and responsible for what they see, thus a middle ground, an in-between space is created. This is a space where the filmmaker and the audience both have the possibility of unfolding the text and creating their own signifying maps, and where one's interpretation does not appear to be 'better,' more plausible or more 'true' than the others'. In this way, the viewer is at once prevented from becoming the active holder of the omniscient, Western, masculine gaze, as well as (s)he is actively involved in the shared production of knowledge through the film. The viewer is freed from a rigid (and comfortable) subject position, is not trapped in the inaction of just watching a reaffirmation of the already known, which, in this case, would be the ethnocentric Western perspective and representation on/of the Other. Therefore, the viewer is not any more, or not only, the active bearer of the gaze, but is active in a broader, more embodied sense. Trinh, more than once, compared her films to paper sheets that need to be unravelled and unfolded: "A film is like a page of paper which I offer the viewer. I am responsible for what is within the boundary of the paper, but I do not control and do not wish to control its folding. The viewer can fold it horizontally, obliquely, vertically. They can weave the elements to their liking and backgrounds" (Trinh 1992, 173; Trinh 1991, 109).

Nonetheless, as I have indicated, when the structures of interpretation are broken down, the result can be that of leaving the audience in discomfort and lacking agency, due to an endless search for a meaning that seems never definitive, or unattainable in the first place. It is from this perspective that I understand Hill's reading of *Reassemblage's* narrative strategy when he affirms that the film "massively complicates the agency of seeing and significance" (Hill 1993, 25). I concur with his interpretation in as much as it points to the fact that, through these narrative and editing strategies, the film makes "cultural representation necessarily a political affair" and that it seeks alternatives to the "current cultural order" (*ibid.*). However, I disagree with his conclusion about this aspect of the film when he states that, because the viewers' desire to find causal connections is always frustrated, "it is clearly not the spectator's role to make an independent choice" (*ibid.*). Although Hill argues that both passivity and action are demanded of the spectator, I would rather be in agreement with Trinh's evaluation of her own films, as she leans toward the more positive and creative of these two positions. The political dimension of her work with representation in relation to the active engagement of the audience is, for example, clear in this statement:

[My films] seek to enhance our understanding of the heterogeneous societies in which we live, while inviting the viewer to reflect on the conventional relation between supplier and consumer in media production and spectatorship.... [Here] this audience is also treated as active social subjects engaging with film and the arts in diverging and critical ways.... [My films] offer a mutual exploration (between filmmaker, the filmed material, and the filmviewer). (Trinh 1996)

It is possible to link this treatment of the audience as active subjects with what I have described as *Reassemblage's* deconstruction of the dominant, Western, masculine gaze. In this sense, I deem that it is a new feminist subjectivity that Trinh offers to the viewers, rather than the masculine, hegemonic subjectivity attached to being forced to identify with the dominant cinematic gaze.

Taking a further step, it is possible to connect the issue of visual representation with a renewed approach to the senses. This is why I consider the 'interval' a useful practical and conceptual tool to explore alternative understandings of sensoriality. If senses are understood as being deeply connected with the production of meaning and knowledge (Howes 1991, 3-11), to focus on alternative perceptual modalities is to focus on alternative ways in which meanings, and therefore representations, are produced. In this light, I would propose that it is in the cracks between what is rendered (not) visible in narrative construction that other senses have to be engaged in order to produce meanings. To acknowledge the invisible is, therefore, a synaesthetic endeavour, an engagement of all the senses. This occurs, in my reading of Trinh's work, through what she calls the gaps, the intervals, the silences or "the space in-between." In these intervals alternative and feminist images, imaginations, and imaginaries can be produced.

3.7 Concluding remarks

Reassemblage engages with a multiplicity of themes and techniques at the crossroads between anthropological, feminist and filmmaking debates. From such complexity follows the aptness of this film for this research: the difficulty of clearly labelling the film as documentary, as feminist, or as anthropological, is precisely what makes it such a rich example. Indeed, it is important to recall the pressing questions of this research in relation to *Reassemblage*. How does this film contribute to clarifying or complicating the relation between documentary representation and (politically informed) feminist film? What are the specific feminist aspects and effects of this documentary? How does Trinh engage with the issue of Self and Other, objectivity and subjectivity, reality and image?

While *Reassemblage* can certainly be labelled an ethnographic documentary, that is, a film contributing to an anthropological discourse about culture, and also reality, at the same time it promptly *exceeds* such a straightforward description. Indeed, *Reassemblage* questions the status of ethnographic film as it subverts the rules of classic cinematographic techniques. *Reassemblage* does not follow an explicitly narrative form, does not present a causally related organisation of events; there is no linear, self-evident, so-called 'classic' narrative structure: no clear beginning, no central development, no climax or build-up of tension, no manufacturing technique to examine or complex ritual to discover, no direction, no conclusions and no definitive ending. Yet, the film is specifically constructed to produce or stimulate certain effects, just not the ones coded in the narrative film form canon.

In *Reassemblage* Trinh is not only telling a story about Senegal; at the same time she tells many more stories: she describes the 'typical' reactions of Western audiences to certain anthropological films, reveals her personal experiences in the field, reflects on the work of anthropologists, on objectivity, on how African women are usually represented in ethnographic films, on "the habit of imposing a meaning to every single sign" (Trinh 1992, 96). Trinh is able to tell these stories because she does not speak *about*, rather, she speaks *nearby*. 'Speaking nearby' brings the filmmaker next to the subjects filmed in an attempt to overcome or at least to complicate the hierarchical relation embedded in filming and the rigid dualism of Self and Other.

In as much as *Reassemblage* fulfils, exceeds, and undermines the category of anthropological documentary, Trinh's creation is also feminist. Indeed, *Reassemblage* seems to fulfil the demands of the feminist film theory of the 1970s for the deconstruction of the realistic language of cinema. It is reflexive and aware of its own artifice. 'Partial perspectives' are privileged herein, and the result is the production of "situated knowledges," in the sense Haraway (1988) intended. In this way no one 'True' meaning is definitively assigned to any of the images in the film, and the result is one of displacement and of creative production at the same time. Trinh's film both exceeds and fails to meet strict categorical definitions, and thus *Reassemblage* is inherently interdisciplinary.

For these reasons *Reassemblage* is located in the gap, the grey zone identified already in Chapter 1, and where *Sisters in Law*, too, resides – albeit in different ways. Helpful to understanding this 'being in the grey zone' is Trinh's concept of the 'Inappropriate/d Other.' The Inappropriate/d Other is not appropriate and it also cannot be appropriated. This Other resists labelling, is "outside in" and "inside out" of the boundaries of definitions and genres (Trinh 1991). Such inappropriate/d-ness is a space where power is deconstructed, where the dominant set of criteria are ineffective (Trinh 1991, 71). Therein, power, as well as the criteria of analysis and knowledge production can be carefully inspected and re-evaluated.

Through the three lenses this research departs from one can see clearly that *Reassemblage* at once earns the title 'feminist,' 'documentary,' and 'anthropological,' while at the same time eluding them all. Take indexicality: *Reassemblage* carries traces of its encounter with the reality of the pro-filmic events. These traces hint at a presence that is not quite there though is not completely absent. These images are haunted by reality. Through these traces a semiotic space opens up that is at once also political: the in-between space, the interval, where new engagements with reality and with the Other can be enacted, as well as where other meanings and new subject positions can be imagined. This accords well with Trinh's own position to feminism, one that is of mobile, shifting borders, one that traverses boundaries and limits.

It is in the film's materiality, though, that its feminist commitment can be located most clearly. Understanding this involves interpreting *Reassemblage* with the concepts of rhythm and interval in mind. It is precisely because rhythm is a tool and a metaphor in the film that the intervals, the spaces in-between, can be opened. That is to say, the feminist effects of this film are more prominent at the level of *how* the film is made and *how* it reflects on its own construction. It enacts a continuous meta-reflection on the medium itself, on the cinematic apparatus and its complicities with ideology in hailing and shaping subjectivity. *Reassemblage* is not merely a self-reflexive exercise on how to cross limits, though. Quite the opposite, Trinh's work in general, and *Reassemblage* specifically, aims not only at challenging existing territories, but at opening new spaces for "creative critical reflections on cinema, art, feminism, and cultural politics" (Trinh 1996).

Finally, through the lens of visuality, and with reference to the film's rhythm, one can make sense of how *Reassemblage* manages to offer a multi-sensorial experience where sight is not the prevailing tool of knowledge production and where the viewer has to 'make sense' of the film. In other words, the visuality of the film is not privileged by Trinh. While from a feminist perspective some issues of what is represented in *Reassemblage* can be found – specifically, images that can be read as exoticising and eroticising the Other – I argue that this is a method consciously used with a goal to explicitly criticise and reveal the hegemonic gaze. The purpose of this is to multiply truths and to allow new shared meanings to be created; it is a new feminist subjectivity that Trinh offers (to the viewers), rather than the masculine, hegemonic subjectivity attached to being forced to identify with the dominant cinematic gaze.

Reassemblage is at once too feminist, too anthropological, and too fictional. However, its overall 'excessiveness,' I argue, allows *Reassemblage* to perform within and outside of, as well as challenge all three fields (anthropology, documentary and feminist film), and therefore *must* be regarded as a documentary with feminist effects. In a certain sense, Trinh does in her film, in but one of many possible ways, what I have set out to achieve with this research:

exposing and questioning the 'how' of (ethnographic) documentary from a feminist perspective, in such a way that new tools are provided and alternative spaces can be created.

CHAPTER 4

Europlex

Video Essay, 20 Min. (2003)

Digital video

Directed by Ursula Biemann

Co-Directed by Angela Sanders

Theory and video can be an effective alliance in redefining the documentary. In this instance, we can speak of the convergence of a theoretical analysis of globalization, the ethnographies of the material reality of women in areas of crisis, the abstraction of technological representations as well as the critique of their function as hegemonic visualizations.

– Ursula Biemann, “Writing counter-geography,” p. 1.

Europlex, directed by artist and filmmaker Ursula Biemann and co-directed by anthropologist Angela Sanders, is a self-described “video essay” (Biemann 2005) about the border between Morocco and Spain; about the transformation of liminal territorial space through the movements of people and the interests of capital. The multilayered and often obscure processes at play at the border are explored, analysed and performed in this 20-minute-long digital film.¹¹⁶ Economical, geo-political and cultural dynamics are made visible, defined and re-defined in and through the border(s) between Africa and Europe. Across checkpoints, black markets, labour demands and transnational interests the lives and bodies of men and women are “shaped and re-shaped” (*Europlex* voiceover) by the back-and-forth passages through these borders.

The ‘video essay’ is described by its practitioners (including Biemann herself) as a genre of film in between documentary and video art; it is an art practice that is also political intervention and ethnographic enquiry. Biemann calls it a “video practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political” (Biemann 2003b, 8). For the ‘video essayists’ – the artists, filmmakers, activists, and researchers that use this medium – video becomes a cognitive tool, a means to

¹¹⁶ For convenience, in this chapter I use the terms video and film interchangeably although I am aware that the two terms refer to two different kinds of technologies and, accordingly, are two different media. From this perspective it is then important to keep in mind that, since video specifically refers to audio-visual representations shot, edited, stored and transmitted through electronic (and later digital) technology, *Europlex* is a video. In a more general sense, however, as a series of moving images recorded through a camera, it is possible to use the term film despite the specific technology used in the process.

gain and produce new knowledge. Likewise, the essayistic approach is considered a way to reflect on the world, not with the aim to achieve a final objective representation of reality or “to advance truth claims” (Alter 2003, 12), but by wandering and making connections between concepts, events, images and sounds, through subjective juxtapositions and analyses, using humour, satire or paradox (Biemann 2003b). *Europlex*, as a video essay, is therefore located at the intersection of documentary and fiction, ethnography and art, theory and practice.

Being at the crossroads of art, anthropological practice and documentary is one of the reasons why this video can be understood as belonging to the ‘grey zone’ of feminist documentary as I have previously described.¹¹⁷ *Europlex*, like *Sisters in Law* and *Reassemblage*, can also be considered a feminist documentary. While I shall elaborate further in the following paragraphs on the precise reasons why and how this video is definable as such, it will be sufficient to briefly note the three key reasons why *Europlex* can be considered a feminist film. Biemann’s video practice is always feminist in terms of content matter: her films focus on women, more precisely, on female workers, migrants, prostitutes, and illegal travellers; they take a “gendered look at globalization” (Biemann 2005); and in the most diverse geographical contexts she traces the “routes of women in the global flow of information and capital” (Biemann in Szeman 2002, 98). Each of her videos explores and visualises the entanglements between female subjectivities, migration, women’s lives and economical circumstances. In some cases, she also addresses how migration today is not just feminised, but it is such that women are specifically addressed in their sexuality.¹¹⁸ The feminist political agenda of *Europlex* is therefore quite apparent, in a manner comparable to Longinotto’s *Sisters in Law*. Second, this video reflects on its own language and technological construction – it is a film “aware of its own artifice” (Trinh 1990, 89). In this sense, *Europlex* fulfils the imperative of deconstructing the patriarchal (realist) filmic language, as it had been endorsed by many feminist film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹⁹ In a manner comparable to Trinh’s *Reassemblage*, this video performs a critique of genres and of the medium in its entanglements with power and knowledge production. As such, it echoes some of the claims made by Trinh’s film, while also introducing brand new themes and questions in the field of feminism and documentary, on which I shall later elaborate. Finally (and

¹¹⁷ I have identified this ‘grey area’ as a conceptual space at the crossroads of documentary, anthropological and feminist film. This is the place, the category, where the three films I discuss, so as several others, enter because of their resistance to fit under the label of these genre. It is an area where labelling and clear-cut disciplinary investigations are uncomfortable, a space that because of its complexity has been too often left uncharted or purposefully ignored.

¹¹⁸ Biemann’s video essays that specifically address this issue are: *Performing the Border* (1999), *Remote Sensing* (2001) and *Writing Desire* (2000).

¹¹⁹ Refer to Chapter 1 for more on this issue.

crucially), *Europlex* also questions the function of (visual) technological representation “as hegemonic visualizations” (Biemann 2003a, 1). As elaborated for the other two films in this study, the question of visibility in its interconnections with culture, power, and technology is topical in numerous feminist theories in general and, more importantly, I regard it as crucial for the feminist critique of film and documentary. The reasons for this will be made evident throughout this chapter.

In section 4.1 and 4.2, adhering to the structure employed to dissect the previous two documentaries, I elaborate on *Europlex*'s filmic construction. The narrative of *Europlex* and its content-matter will first be explored; next, the focus will be on the images, the film's framing and editing techniques, including the aural dimension and how the visual and audio tracks are layered and interconnected. Thus, not only *what* the film is about, but *how* the film is composed is the focus of these two sections. A close-observation of the video allows for an in-depth understanding of how the film works. This entails that the material specificity of the film 'as text' is taken into account. Section 4.3 deals with the 'grey zone' of feminist documentary, and explores further the three themes of *Europlex* as highlighted above. Then, recalling the methodological framework that informs this research and the conceptual tools that have been mobilised in the analysis thus far, paragraphs 4.4 to 4.6 explore how *Europlex* engages with the notions of indexicality, materiality and visibility.

Briefly, on indexicality: Given that the genre of this film is an 'in between,' and given the variety of sounds and images used in *Europlex*, the indexical status – the physical relation or “existential connection” (Peirce 1958, 2.283-287) between sign and object – of this film is not immediately apparent. It has to be found between the use of artistic experimental strategies, documentary footage and the mediated technological signs produced by digital devices. I maintain that *Europlex* functions as a video essay precisely because of its indexical relation with reality, as its cinematic (digital) image “touches the real” (Doane 2007b, 140), although the materiality of this relation is very different from that of the other documentaries analysed in this research. This section focuses on how *Europlex* touches the real through an analysis of its classic documentary filming techniques, which is then complicated, though not undermined, by its simultaneous employment of fictional strategies.

This leads to the discussion on materiality. As previously explained, the materiality of a documentary is intended in a twofold manner. It refers not only to how the video is constructed, shot and edited, its fabric and the implications of its technologies so to speak, but I understand materiality as concerning the way the film engages with the material reality of its subjects and the effects it produces: in other words, how the film interpellates bodies and matter. Because the filmic construction is elaborated on in section 4.2, this section will focus on the latter aspect of materiality. *Europlex* presents “ethnographies of the material

reality of women” (Biemann 2003a, 1), it directly addresses the material interconnections between the bodies of (men and) women and the economical and geo-political forces at play at the border, and how they shape each other. Such layers of powers and significations, although they are not immediately visible or directly accessible, nonetheless have very real effects on the bodies of those who travel across the time and space of territorial borders. Therefore, I propose to talk about this video in terms of what it performs¹²⁰ and not only in terms of what it represents. Given that the film makes visible the invisible (but all too real) relations of forces, I will maintain that *Europlex* performs, creates, and enacts the invisible realities of the border so they become filmable.

Finally, on how the concept of visibility is deployed as a useful critical tool in the study of this video: I maintain that *Europlex* engages with the issue of vision and (in)visibility on at least three different levels. Firstly, at the level of its content-matter, the film directly deals with the problem of making visible the interrelations between bodies, the global economy, and geo-political power dynamics. This act, as previously mentioned, is a process of visualising what is not directly visible either because little attention is generally paid to the borders as meaningful spaces,¹²¹ or because of the actual complexity of such dynamics that produce effects while remaining unseen if not purposefully concealed. Importantly, this process of ‘making visible’ is not a neutral one and it is, therefore, where the activist and political commitment of the two filmmakers lies. This is tightly connected to the film’s material aspects, and therefore shall only be discussed briefly.

The second aspect pertains to the specific technologies used and questioned in this video essay. In *Europlex* a variety of visualisation devices are addressed and the images such technologies produce are intermingled, mashed and overlapped. Through the use of satellite images, digital animations and infra-red cameras questions are raised as to what kind of representations they produce: what does become visible when different technologies are used? How do control and security devices function at/in relation to territorial borders? How can such technologies, created to track, discipline and control bodies and movements, be deployed and re-appropriated in a politically committed documentary? Finally,

¹²⁰ The concepts of performance, the performative and performativity have a history that would be impossible to summarise in this context. Suffice to recall a genealogy of the concept that from John Austin, via Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault, arrives to Judith Butler and her famous definition of performativity. When writing about her reformulation of the materiality of bodies in *Bodies that Matter* she states that performativity is intended “not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 1993, 2).

¹²¹ If the border is not considered in mainstream media as a space that is inhabited by people and that shapes experiences as well as meanings and subjectivities, the opposite is true for cultural and feminist analyses of such borders. See for example: Balibar (2002); Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler (2002) and the issue of the *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 2002, 9(3); Andrijasevic (2003).

what kind of reality is reproduced or performed through devices that explicitly alter what is considered straightforwardly real or realistic (i.e.: infra-red cameras make visible what the naked human eye cannot see), or that show the world in a way that only an electronic eye (the satellites' cameras) can perceive? These back-and-forth transpositions between the human and the electronic eye, between bodies in their material existence and the disembodied machineries' recordings are what constitute *Europlex's* filmic fabric as well as its critical target and the field of its political intervention. This is tightly connected to the indexicality of *Europlex* and discussion from the perspective of visibility will further previous elaborations from the semiotic angle.

The third level in which the issue of visibility is engaged in the film is the meta-reflection on the medium itself. This is where the bulk of the topic of visibility will be addressed. The filmmakers in this video essay present a self-reflection on their own practices of filming and editing, and thus a critique of the claims of objectivity in classic documentary. On account of being a video *essay*, the precise aim of *Europlex* is to present a subjective account of issues of borders, which is directly related to geo-political power dynamics as well as the relation between Self and Other. In doing this the filmmakers also actively reflect on how the medium of video contributes to these categorisations. More precisely, the claims of objectivity embedded in several of the visualising and filming techniques used in *Europlex* are addressed in their interconnection with issues of knowledge production and power. Accordingly, I suggest it is in the multiple ways it critically addresses the question of vision and visibility that this video can be understood as a documentary producing feminist effects.

Ultimately, this study of Biemann's video essay gives new insights which help to answer my main research questions: how can we identify how a feminist documentary works? What are the e/effects of feminist documentaries? And, how can a feminist approach to documentary mobilise at once our understanding of the interrelations between reality, fiction, politics and aesthetics? In order to show how *Europlex* contributes to answering these questions, I now turn to a more in-depth elaboration on the film itself and its specific cinematographic strategies.

4.1 Performing realities and organising complexities

The essayist approach is not about documenting realities but about organizing complexities.

– Ursula Biemann, "Writing counter-geography," p. 3.

Europlex explores how the border between Europe and North Africa is constructed, geographically, economically and symbolically, both by

transnational corporations and international power relations, and by the actual people who live and traverse that space everyday. At the same time, the video investigates how such a complex liminal space shapes and is inscribed in the imaginary, the lives, bodies and subjectivities of the people, specifically of the women, who experience and cross the border in multiple ways and for different reasons. To represent such a complex - though seemingly easy to summarise - subject matter, director Biemann develops a multilayered narration, clearly organised and intricate at once. Although the narrative structure of *Europlex* is fairly linear, its relatively short length (20 minutes) and the variety of visualisation technologies and editing techniques make this video particularly dense as well as very different from the other two films previously analysed. The filmic and artistic strategies are the topic of the next section, while here I intend to further explicate the subject matter of the video and elaborate on its narrative structure.

As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, Biemann defines her films as 'video essays.' The reasons behind this definition, its implications and the relation between this "in-between genre" (Biemann 2003b, 1) and that of documentary will be elaborated further in this chapter. Nonetheless, it is useful to recall here that a (written) essay is usually defined as a short written text, on a particular subject, always critical, often fragmentary and frequently presenting a personal view of the author, with a clear structure consisting in an introduction, body and conclusion. In this fashion, *Europlex* explicitly deploys a linear arrangement and is divided into six sections: "prolog," "Sahara," "border log I, II, III" and "epilog." This clear narrative structure, however, does not imply a univocal or simple narrative trajectory: on the contrary, this basic arrangement allows for rich and multilayered filmic strategies, for "a density of the texture" (Adorno quoted in Alter 2003, 13), that makes this a very complex video and that opens up the possibility of multiple readings and interpretations. I will now elaborate in more detail on the six sections of the film.

Before the opening title appears on the screen, the video starts with electronic music and a short sequence that shows a group of men – whom would later be identified as 'nomads' (according to the voice-over commentary) or Berbers (as in one of the informant's account of the events) – dancing, singing and drumming on plastic tanks. On a black screen the title of the first section of the video reads: "prolog," in English, subtitled in Arabic. This first part of the video is dedicated to the reconstruction of the fall of a meteorite on a desert territory, at the Moroccan-Algerian border, on 10 February 2002. The voice-over gives an account of the different stories and interpretations that such an event caused. Various witnesses and protagonists are involved in the process of giving meaning to the fall of the meteorite: Omar, the nomad who first found it and thought it was a military vehicle being shot down; dealers who sold pieces to the

tourists; the museum of the University of Washington that acquired the main bulk of the meteorite; and the scientists who labelled the stone with a scientific code and named it 'Bensour.' The words of Omar and of the voice-over narration are accompanied by sounds and images that provide a visual counterpart, almost an explanatory illustration, to what is said. Next, the voice-over connects the various agents involved in this process, stating that "the fall of the Bensour meteorite makes a set of spatial and material relations visible." Accordingly, the narrating voice traces and interprets the convergences between "Science, Military, Living Space and Market": they give meaning to the space and to each other. At the same time, a composite sequence of juxtaposed and overlapping texts and images exemplify this fourfold set of agents and relations.

The second section of *Europlex* is introduced with the title 'Sahara,' subtitled in Arabic. Slowly the two words shift place and 'Sahara,' in English, becomes the subtitle to the Arabic title. "Someone is always subtitled someone else," states the voice-over. This short section of *Europlex* introduces Biemann's understanding of the border, of the space and of how it is made and re-made by the movements of people and the disciplining and control of such movements.¹²² The voice-over does not explain the specific images in this section, but narrates how borders function in general, how such spaces are constructed, controlled and come into existence through the movements of people and things.

The subsequent section commences under the title 'border log I. Smuggling, a cartography of struggle' (all titles are subtitled in Arabic). 'border log I' opens with the satellite image of the Strait of Gibraltar, where the European and the African continents adjoin. The voice-over explains how the border follows the coast line, with the exceptions of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish sites on the Moroccan territory. In this section of *Europlex* the smuggling activities at the Spanish border of Ceuta are explored. The aim of the border crossing is not to get into the Spanish cities or to leave Morocco in any definitive or linear way. The goal of the people who, several times a week, cross the checkpoints is to look for good deals, purchase semi-legal products at the warehouses or at the street grey market located a few meters from the border, and to then proceed to traverse the checkpoint again and bring the purchases back. It is this circular movement of people that *Europlex* observes, performs and discusses. Both the images and the texts superimposed on the screen follow the travel towards the border of Ceuta, across it, inside the warehouses, to the trading places and back into Moroccan territory. These sequences are surprising and almost unsettling because the filmed material is hard to read, difficult to decode and interpret. Not only are the shots, as in the previous section, somewhat grainy, moved and taken

122 It is important to keep in mind that the issue of the border, with its cultural and symbolic meanings and its economical and social repercussions, is one of the core concerns and recurring themes – if not the crucial one – in Biemann's work.

from far away, but the content of such images is generic, ambiguous: people walking and talking, and soldiers at what appear to be the checkpoints, cars parked or queuing. One is left wondering what it is that they are watching: what shall I read in these images? What am I seeing? This is where the superimposed texts become crucial to interpret the images, to decipher them. For example, while the text on the screen reads "5:40 smuggling activities are in full swing," all that is visible are cars parked, police officers controlling the checkpoint and people crossing the border, women and men talking and walking back and forth. The smuggling activities remain invisible. Biemann, in this part so as in the rest of the video, focuses specifically on the activities of the women. Women are the ones who mainly carry on the smuggling activities. After having purchased their goods, many of which are shirts, blankets and textiles, they wear as many items of clothing as possible in order to cross the border more easily. Layer by layer, the bodies of these women are covered and modified, until they double their body volume. Through this process, the voice-over elaborates: "the economic logic of this border inscribes itself onto every level of the transforming mobile female body" (*Europlex* voice-over).

The next section of the video is titled 'border log II,' 'domesticas living in a time lapse.' Shot in Ceuta, this log describes the lives of the many Moroccan women who cross the border every day to work as domestic servants in the Spanish enclave. As the written texts on a black background explain, these women commute between two time zones that have a two-hour difference. Throughout this section of the video, two clocks, on the top part of the screen, keep track of the two different times: the Moroccan and the Spanish (although named 'European' in the video) time.

Log III is set in Tangier, where many Moroccan women work, processing biological and technological products for European subcontractors. The names of some international and transnational companies appear on screen. The film then focuses on groups of women workers. They are filmed, in colour, in the streets, at the exit of a factory in the harbour of Tangier, smiling and talking. With the same strategy used for the previous multilayered sequences, on their images appear numbers, graphical waves and the definition of their job: gamba manipuladoras, semi conductoras, and so on. Seventeen minutes into *Europlex*, once again, another border is crossed, that of the Strait of Gibraltar: women are part of the technological economy on both sides of the sea. So as some Moroccan women work in the factories on this side, other undocumented, Moroccan women work in the plantations in Spain. The narration explains how the European Union as an economical entity has already expanded outside the borders of Europe, into North Africa. The two sides of the Strait are connected and crossed by the economy, by people, by goods. The filmed parts of the video, the 'documentary' footage so to say, become scarcer in these last minutes of 'log III.'

Finally, the “epilog”: in the last minute of the film a story is recounted, told by a male voice, in Arabic, with the written English translation appearing on the screen. While making a film about clandestine migration, a Moroccan director hired local people for a scene on a boat and he surprisingly noticed that, the next morning, some of the actors had taken their role so very seriously that they had actually crossed the sea and migrated to Europe. With these last words, *Europlex* comes to a conclusion with the usual closing credits, which tellingly start by stating: shot, logged, written, cut, Ursula Biemann and Angela Sanders.

At this point it proves to be quite easy to answer the question that Trinh poses throughout her film *Reassemblage*: “what is the film about?” *Europlex* is a video about the border between Europe and Africa and the people (specifically, the women) who traverse it, caught within complex interconnection of symbolic, economic, geographic and political relations. I suggest that three are the main themes addressed and intertwined in the film: the territorial border, being the first and most apparent of them; women, as being both the main agents of the material and symbolic exchanges taking places at the frontiers, and being the ones whose lives are most affected by the transnational and economic discourses at play; finally, the role of visualisation and control technologies in monitoring the movements of people, and in defining and protecting the geo-political boundaries. These themes will contribute to the analysis of *Europlex* as a film that resides in the ‘grey zone’ of feminist documentary film.

It is now clear that the border is the main theme of *Europlex*; it is also the case that women are a specific focus of the video, and therefore another crucial subject. I shall however elaborate further on the role women play in this film when discussing the feminist dimension of *Europlex*. Importantly it should be recognised that although women are the main protagonists, as they are immersed and inscribe themselves in the major changes taking place in the social, cultural and economic dynamics of the border (i.e. becoming “time travellers”), nonetheless they do not have a voice or a name. This issue is addressed specifically in section 4.6. The last of the three intersecting themes to be considered, technology, also takes place in the final section of this chapter, though it is tightly connected to the issue of indexicality, also.

Having seen the richness of issues and subjects addressed in the twenty minutes of the video, it becomes apparent that the narrative structure of *Europlex* does not imply a linear and univocal narration, nor present a simple and straightforward argument. On the contrary, the film is made complex by the simultaneous use of different visualisation technologies and multiple layers, thus creating several possible intertwined narratives. To better grasp this complexity it is necessary to zoom in on the framing and filming strategies, and the editing techniques employed in the video.

4.2 Layering and mixing: strategies of representation of the digital video

The Spanish Moroccan borderland is not a linear formation, nor is this video. Dislocation is one of the specific practices of the video essay: diverse places, topics, discourses and arguments are interconnected in *Europlex* through different filmic styles, editing techniques and multilayered visual and audio representations, all tied together by the subjective narrative of the voice-over. The video disrupts and upsets the boundaries between documentary and fiction film, while, in its experimental mode, it makes use of both documentary techniques and digital fictional practices. Animation sequences, extra-diegetic sounds, direct footage as well as computer generated images, infrared cameras and standard digital cameras, satellite visualizations, slow-motion, freezes, video collages, voice over, manipulated photographs and superimposed texts are some of specific cinematographic features that make *Europlex* a video essay, a film between experimental art and documentary. Neither in *Sisters in Law*, nor in *Reassemblage* is this variety of filmic techniques present.

Additionally, another important element distinguishes *Europlex* from the other two films studied thus far: its digital medium. Although *Sisters in Law* has been shot on video (i.e. not on film) and processed in digital format, it does not – at least explicitly – present any trace of extreme computer manipulation. On the contrary, *Europlex* makes all these stages of modification and intervention visible: they are the very texture of the video. *Europlex* performs its digital materiality and, in so doing, it dislocates, disrupts and reveals all the steps of the filmmaking creative process. The relation between digital technology and documentary will be explored later in this chapter. Now, to better understand how the possibilities of the digital medium are used in *Europlex* it is necessary to pay closer attention to the film's images, sounds and editing strategies. Again, I will proceed through the six sections of the film.

Images, framing, editing, layering

As already mentioned, the video starts with electronic music and a short video sequence that shows a group of men dancing, singing and drumming on plastic tanks. There is no direct audio connected with these images. There is a non-synchronous, looped audio track. Combined with the fact that this sequence is shot with an infrared camera, and that the editing includes some 'drop-outs'¹²³

¹²³ A drop-out in digital video editing is a loss of a portion of a signal, a loss of data, usually due to a damage of the magnetic support, dirt or grease covering a portion of a tape, or a lack of memory on the computer while capturing the recorded material. The result is that one or more frames are missing. The effect is a gap – black screen and no audio – that interrupts, for few seconds or less, the flow of the video.

and slow motion, a surreal effect is produced, giving to this scene an almost a-temporal, repetitive, mechanical-like quality. Then the title of the film eventually appears, superimposed on these images. This is followed by diverse shots and still images of the desert, of the nomads, of the pieces of the meteorite in the museum, and a computer animation of the 'Bensour' meteorite heavily falling to the ground. This sequence visually reconstructs the event and the multiple processes of giving meanings to it. Already it is clear that *Europlex's* construction is one which combines several types of technology and filmic techniques.

'Sahara' is presented on an "electronically generated, organically moving pop striped background" (Biemann 2003a, 4), with electronic music in the soundtrack. A series of long and very-long shots show 'the border' with its fences and walls, gates and people crossing them, the street, police cars and officers. The images are grainy and moved because of the extreme zoom-ins; some frames stream in slow-motion, as though they are almost frozen. Again, this is where the concept of the border is introduced to the audience, thanks to the voice over, which narrates how borders tend to function, how they shape and control space/s, and come into existence through the movements of persons and objects.

In 'border log I' the camera offers several panoramic shots of the border, buildings, fences, people and the sea just next to the border; the soundtrack consists of the direct audio of the images, the sounds and noises registered 'in loco.' But it is only thanks to the written explanations, over the images, at the bottom of the screen, that the viewers can have an idea of what is actually happening, of what they are seeing. The written texts provide a meaning to images otherwise cryptic. The apex of this process of giving meaning, through written text, to 'empty' or ambiguous images is the scene inside the Spanish warehouse. The sequence consists only of a black screen and background, probably diegetic, noises and voices. The writings explain that the warehouse owner confiscated the footage because pirates dislike media publicity: the narration continues despite, or thanks to the fact that there are no images. The scenes of the trafficking and trading activities are interrupted only by a digital animation of a map of the border. This part, albeit quite short, is very dense since it consists of several different audio and visual layers mingled and overlapping. The reconstructed map of the border and of the smuggling routes is laid over a panoramic shot of the harbour, tinted blue, and it is mixed with a dotted moving green pattern that looks like a code. The audio is composed by Biemann's voice-over, electronic music and a distorted voice as through a radio transmitter: these (at least) three audio tracks are layered one on top of the other.

This sequence is followed by others, different in content, but similar in the layering strategy. Codes, technologically mediated information, waves and signals fuse with the video footage of women trafficking at the border. A specific characteristic of this video consists in the fact that the media used 'mirror' the

subject-matter. To be more precise, it is possible to trace numerous moments in *Europlex* where the filmic strategies are carefully chosen and modified according to, or to reflect, the content matter and the subjects represented. The layering¹²⁴ mechanism present in 'border log I' is an example: so as the women wear layers and layers of clothes, also the film is constructed by superimposing several different audio and visual layers on top of each other: two different video footages, a black and white picture, the narrating voice-over, electronic sounds and occasionally dots and waves evoking scanners and recording devices.

Following this, we see that in 'border log II,' with electronic music in the soundtrack, the filmed images follow the travel the women undergo every day, back and forth. Black and white shots of the streets, of the checkpoint, of the busses the women travel with, of the domesticas walking and working, and of the city of Ceuta, are at times interrupted by overlaps with other clips, crossfades, freezes, texts, various subtle video effects and digitally animated fragments. In these computer-animated sections a Moroccan woman speaks, on a colourful electronically generated striped background similar to the previous one: her lips are moving but her words are not audible, at times the voice-over and always the music occupy the soundtrack. Her movements are fragmented by an editing style that makes use of loops and drop-outs, and reproduces the images in slow motion, forwards and backwards. Through this editing the woman's gestures and her smile appear unnatural and repetitive, as to suggest robotic features. As a result, the woman is represented in a timeless dimension: time traveller across times and spaces. "Permanent time travellers," is how Biemann describes the domesticas. Consequently, time, the in-between, across time, shapes their lives and their location: "deferred time becomes the mode of their cultural positionality" (*Europlex* voice-over).

'border log III,' 'the transnational zone,' opens with a panoramic shot of Algeciras harbour, the images are tinted blue and the soundtrack is composed by fragments of a radio communication. On the screen, numbers, codes, the time and other data (about the ship shown? probably also the same one that is communicating via the radio transmission?) are superimposed on images of ships. The video continues with shots of the harbour, where carriers arrive and leave, and big containers are loaded and unloaded. Every ship is identified by name, alphanumeric codes, origin, company and destination. The film then focuses on groups of women workers. Once again these women are represented with 'robotic features,' their images looped and fragmented. On some close-ups

¹²⁴ Layering has become a very common practice in the last decade, with the multiplication of easily available editing and post-production software. Although combining layers of images and sounds within a film was possible also before digital video technology became available, convenient and affordable digital devices made this feature the specific characteristic of digital editing and post-production processes. In other sections of this chapter I elaborate further on the impact of digital technology for documentary film.

of these workers the film freezes and the background becomes blurred, fragmented in coloured pixels. In Biemann's words, these visual effects, accompanied by electronic rhythms, suggest: "labor hours and performance statistics. In this fragmented composition her presence is decontextualized, her body entirely technologized" (Biemann 2003a, 5). Shots of a map and of plantation workers filmed in negative,¹²⁵ digitally animated graphical lines resembling women, and codes superimposed to blue tinted pictures of fields and greenhouses, are edited with the usual electronic music and the voice-over.

Finally, in the "epilog" documentary images of the shores and the sea are but the background scenery to the story narrated by a male voice about how the actors of a film by Moroccan director Mohamed Ismail took their roles as fleeing clandestines all too seriously. The images show a panoramic shot that from a coastline pans onto the sea and fades into a white screen. Superimposed on this sequence, in the middle of the screen is the Arabic text of what the voice-over narrates, while English subtitles appear at the bottom of the screen. The boundaries between fact and fiction are crossed again in the content matter of this concluding scene: a fiction film gives rise to very real experiences of migration, actors literally become illegal immigrants and so a created story becomes an actual reality.

One of the factors that makes *Europlex* a "hybrid" (Dimitrakaki 2007, 205) video essay is the multiplicity of visualization technologies used. The video deploys and interconnects documentary footage – sequences of actual events such as people in the streets, movements at the border, views from a moving car filmed through long shots, hand-held camera and synchronous sounds – and fictional techniques such as computer-generated imaging, animation, coloured screen with superimposed video recordings and texts. These two sets of filmic strategies, which can be roughly defined as 'non-fictional' and 'fictional' are used and explored throughout the video. However, rather than being simply deployed alongside each other, these various video techniques and genres are intertwined in such a manner that the boundaries between them, the differences and separation between what are arguably two poles of the fact/fiction dichotomy, are continuously questioned, blurred, used and reproduced as well as deconstructed and complicated. In this sense, *Europlex* is a hybrid – and also political – practice, as it crosses genres and interweaves diverse technologies, interrogating the boundaries between fictional and non-fictional strategies to the point of making them indistinguishable. Most sections of the video combine

¹²⁵ 'Negative' here refers to the effect of inverting the colours and the light of a video or photographic image: light areas appear dark and vice versa. With this effect also the colours change (e.g. blue appears yellow) but in this video the colours seem to have been manipulated anyway; therefore the final effect might not necessarily be connected with the 'negative image' but with other filtering or colouring post-production digital techniques.

documentary footage with other visual techniques to question and complicate the matter: freezes, slow motion, coloured filters, fragments played fast backwards and the blending of these images with others reveal the digital and ductile materiality of the video. Additionally, the layering of non-diegetic sounds or music with these sequences enhances a sense of estrangement and provokes a reflection on what kind of images are actually shown. It is of interest now to explore how and why Biemann's film fits into the 'grey zone' of feminist documentary film that has been the central concern of this book.

4.3 Being in the border: the 'grey zone' of *Europlex*

As explained already, there are three themes central to Biemann's film *Europlex* which render it as belonging to the grey zone of feminist documentary film. These themes were first that it is concerned with the territorial border; second, it is to do with women being the main agents of material and symbolic exchanges at the border, as well as those who are most affected by the transnational and economic discourses at play; and finally, the role that visualisation and control technologies play in monitoring movements of people and protecting geopolitical boundaries. Thus, Biemann's video describes and analyses the actual workings, material implications and global significance of the border zone between Morocco and Spain, and the economical transactions taking place at the checkpoints.

However, beyond making visible the events occurring in that zone, *Europlex* brings about what I interpret as a twofold signification of the frontier space: the border is treated as a material and discursive space as well as a representational and metaphoric space. Firstly, it becomes the space where material relations come into being and where identities are inscribed and redefined. At a second level of interpretation, in this video so as in most of Biemann's art projects, the border becomes a metaphor. I have already observed that metaphor as a strategy has been used to feminist ends as in *Reassemblage*. There, the metaphor of montage, intended as a reflection on a documentary's own material construction, is central. Here it is the border which acts as a metaphor for the power of discourse in the organisation of space and disciplining of subjects. It points at the performative dimension of bodies in these transnational movements, and it is a metaphor for conceptualising the crossing of boundaries, being them the boundaries between nation states, between identities, between global economy and local experiences, between control and resistance or between humans and machines. Thus the notion of a border is central to the overall content of the film, and is so in a very specifically feminist way.

According to Étienne Balibar every discussion of borders relates to the establishment of definite identities, but then notes that paradoxically these identities are not well defined (2002, 76). Balibar nonetheless identifies three aspects of the equivocal character of borders in history: their overdetermination, polysemic character, and their heterogeneity. But the “border” of the nation-state (for example) is also not only an external reality. While a border exists to demarcate zones in the external world, notions of identity also become appropriated and internalised by individuals. In Balibar’s words, the internalisation of this national identity becomes a condition for one’s collective and communal sense of identity, and thus “as a consequence, borders cease to be purely external realities. They become also – and perhaps predominantly... ‘inner borders’... invisible borders, situated everywhere and nowhere” (Balibar 2002, 78). If borders cease to be purely external realities but are also situated within oneself, then how one defines oneself and is defined by others, the internalisation of identities (in all its multiplicitous complexity), creates subjects who embody the being of a border. Thus, borders demarcate identity and contribute to a politics of inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, borders work by simplifying definitions and attempting to strictly apply these definitions. This, of course, creates a paradox, as the subjects themselves are never reducible to the simplistic definition that the border requires to mark out a specific identity. Finally, the gendered aspect has to be added to Balibar’s notion of the border. It is specifically female subjects and subjectivities that are shaped by and affected most by the experience of and the discourse around borders.¹²⁶

To elaborate further now on the first feature of the border in *Europlex*, that is, the border as a material space: through the border, Biemann mobilises a specific political and economical critique to understand how real lives and daily experiences of people are connected with globalisation, multinational corporations and Capital. It should be mentioned that in this sense her approach has also been read as a “materialist” approach to social reality (Dimitrakaki 2007). More specifically, the women who inhabit and cross the margins of Europe are affected in their real existences; their bodies, daily lives, subjectivities, and perception of time and space are marked by their movements across the geopolitical territorial boundaries. Biemann writes, referring to her first video *Performing the Border* but applicable to an analysis of *Europlex* nonetheless, that the border zone transforms everyone into “transnational subjects” (Biemann 2002b, 30). The border has material effects (in the double meaning of the word, that is, both as physical effects and as referring to the Marxist confrontation with Capital); its discourse is articulated specifically on and about ethnic and gendered axes of difference, and it is enacted on the body: “Only bodies that allow themselves to be marked, to be exchanged, to be turned into a commodity,

¹²⁶ See previous notes for some of the feminist perspectives of the concept.

and to be recycled will be granted the visa for mobility in the transnational space” (Biemann 2002b, 30). Moreover, the actual geographical space and the transit of goods, cargos and information are also redesigned and modified by the forces of inclusion and exclusion at play in these zones.

Take border logs I and III as examples of this aspect of a border as material space and the way *Europlex* is able to film something quite invisible: One scene in ‘border log I’ shows women donning layer upon layer of items in order to smuggle them. ‘border log I’ is constructed, as seen above, using a mirroring technique: so as these women literally perform the border through their bodies (and the border literally shapes their bodies), so this sequence of the film performs and makes visible the various material and immaterial signifying practices at play in the border. The footage of these women merges with, is ‘reshaped’ by, other digitally simulated images of codes and other electronic data. This is possibly what Biemann refers to when she talks about visualising the border or “producing knowledge and visual intelligence about the course and meaning of these border circuits” (Biemann 2003a, 5). Accordingly, this video essay aims to be not only a visual *recording* of what is happening in and around these complex liminal spaces, but it is an attempt to visualise, ‘put into images,’ or eventually *perform*, what is not at all, or not immediately, visible: how bodies are transformed, the processes of scanning and control, the economical and geo-political dynamics, the cultural meanings that are hidden or created.

The same can be said of ‘border log III’ which is concerned primarily with the Moroccan women workers who produce biological and technological products for European subcontractors. The narration continues explaining how the border shifts, it spreads, does not follow the geographical or geo-political limits; it occupies and creates other territories. These spaces are connected and created by economical interests, but it is the people’s material existence and movements that eventually shape the territories. This relates back to the way Balibar describes the actualisation of borders. Arguably, so as the video adds layers to the cultural meaning of the border, the border is also described as more and more technologised and entangled in multiple networks of visible and invisible dynamics. I will return to this issue of making visible what is not immediately so in the last section of this chapter.

On the second aspect of the ‘border,’ that is, the border as a metaphor: it is a metaphor of the power of discourse in the organisation of space and disciplining of subjects; of the performative dimension of bodies in these transnational movements; and it is a metaphor for conceptualising the crossing of boundaries, being them the boundaries between nation states, between identities, between global economy and local experiences, between control and resistance or between humans and machines. The border stands as a space for negotiation as well as a “metaphor for various kinds of marginalizations” (Biemann 2002b, 29). Accordingly, the border is both a site of anxieties and the

metaphor of the possibilities of change that can occur in hybrid and in-between spaces. On the one hand “the border is always represented as a wound, that needs to be healed, that needs to be cleaned, that needs to be protected” (Bertha Jottars’ voice in the video *Performing the Border*, as quoted in Biemann 2002b, 30), on the other it is a creative space where new meanings, alternative subject positions and strategies of resistance can come into being.

Bringing this argument further, it could be argued that the border is an in-between space so as the video essay is an in-between genre. In other words, the form of the film echoes, repeats or performs its content matter. In this sense, albeit the space in-between that *Europlex* engages with is different from that addressed in *Reassemblage*, nonetheless a parallel could be drawn between these two films. Trinh theorised what she has called, in different contexts, as the gap, the interval, the silence, the intra or “the space in-between” (see: Trinh 1992; 1999; 2005) as “a space in which meaning remains fascinated by what escapes and exceeds it” (Trinh 1990, 96), it is the space between viewer and film, image and text. Furthermore, she writes that “working with intervals means working with relationships in the wider sense of the term,” relationships within a text, or a film, and between one’s voice and the others’ voices, between oneself and the other (Trinh 1999a, 38). The interval therefore is a concept that refers, simultaneously, to the content matter of a film, to its techniques and to a certain understanding of feminist documentary-making itself, as elaborated in the analysis of *Reassemblage*.

Expanding this concept further, with regards to *Europlex*, I propose that the border as a geo-political as well as metaphoric space strongly resonates with Trinh’s understanding of the interval. A further confirmation of this could be found in one of Biemann’s articles, in which she writes: “I want to elaborate on the space of negotiation in-between because that’s where the complexity of our lives is located” (Biemann 2005, 4). Ultimately, the border is a space in-between, and the interval, the gap, is located at the border: they both are, physically as well as symbolically liminal spaces. More importantly, these are the spaces, the fissures where encounters and redefinitions take place and where alternative images, imaginations and imaginaries can be produced. It is within this framework that I propose to interpret *Europlex* and Biemann’s endeavour to write counter-geography (Szeman 2002, 7; Biemann 2003a). In fact, Trinh’s concept of the interval adds interesting layers to the definition of counter-geographies intended as the act of recognising “agency and resistance where everything seemed already mapped out by the powerful players” (Szeman 2002, 9). In other words, the focus on the existing frontiers opens to a redefinition of such spaces and to alternative representations, thus to other material and symbolic realities to be traced and performed.

However, although *Europlex* can be considered a feminist film for the attention that it pays to the political nature of the border, and how the border

affects women specifically, it is not unproblematic in other areas. Similar to the criticism of Trinh's film *Reassemblage*, although *Europlex* is also feminist in its construction and in being reflexive on its own artifice, like Trinh, Biemann fails to give a voice to the women who are the focus of her film. That is to say, although women are the main protagonists, as they are immersed and inscribe themselves in the major changes taking place in the social, cultural and economic dynamics of the border (for example becoming "time travellers"), nonetheless they do not have a voice, or a name. Quite literally, in the video their voices are not heard. However, when these women are filmed, the images suddenly 'freeze' and the background gets blurred, so that their faces and gazes are portrayed as in close-up pictures, sharp and at the centre of the screen for a few seconds. They are presented at once as an indeterminate group, and as individualised subjects. It thus becomes important to reflect on this strategy of representation especially taking into account how these women appear to be considered as constituting mere numbers in the social reality *Europlex* sets to analyse and deconstruct. This will be done at a later stage of the chapter, while I firstly turn to the topic of indexicality to prove further how *Europlex* fits into the 'grey zone' of feminist documentary, touching on the fields of feminist film, classic documentary, and ethnographic film.

4.4 The fictions of indexicality

As mentioned above, the indexical status – or the 'physical' relation between sign and object – is not immediately apparent in *Europlex*. It has to be found between the use of artistic experimental strategies, documentary footage and the mediated technological signs produced by digital devices. Nonetheless, its cinematic digital image "touches the real" (Doane 2007b, 140), despite the fact that a number of 'fictional' techniques are also employed in the video's construction. As stated, neither in *Sisters in Law*, nor in *Reassemblage* is this variety of filmic techniques present. The first one adheres very closely to the traditional documentary style, whereas the latter experiments with such style yet reproducing, albeit to criticise them, some of the strategies used in ethnographic film and some early 20th century avant-garde techniques, thus remaining within the boundaries of what an analogue, low-budget, experimental documentary could generate. Regarding *Sisters in Law*: although its images and sounds have been adjusted, modified and corrected via digital technologies, the film does not fully present the degrees of alteration and experimentation that digital video can execute. The sequences in the final film look like they could have been captured by the camera as such; the mediation between what the camera recorded and what is screened as a final product is not immediately perceivable and, more

importantly, the film is made in such a way that these steps of mediation are made as invisible as possible.

When referring to traditional documentary film techniques I intend these images and sequences that are, or appear to be, recordings of real people, of actual events that are happening in front of the camera, and that haven't been manufactured for the camera. Additionally, such sequences and events have been shot and edited in such a way that they are made easily recognisable as factual or realistic and convey the "feeling of being there" (Bachman in Winston 1995, 149). These are images – framed and selected – and sequences – shot and edited – that have not been simulated or assembled for the camera or through a computer software, but that have taken place in actuality. In other words, documentary techniques, for the sake of this analysis, are here understood as those that are recognisable according to the most basic and widespread definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality," in Grierson's famous terms, or, in a less theoretically nuanced definition as a recording of reality. Additionally, and more importantly, I argue that such shots can be read as 'documentary' because of the indexical relation they imply or clearly perform. Considering indexicality both in terms of causality and of co-presence¹²⁷ it can be said that these sections of *Europlex* confirm that a physical link exists, or existed, between the object recorded, the camera and finally the images as they are edited and presented in the final video. The concept of 'performance' in relation to this film will be elaborated on in the next section, whilst here I want to discuss a specific example of how *Europlex* can be seen as 'touching the real,' albeit in a complicated way, due to the fictional elements it also deploys.

'Log' is the term Biemann and Sanders choose to indicate three separate parts of the video, the three central chapters. They prefer 'log' rather than a more common term such as chapter, part or act. The word 'log' means more than just 'section': it refers, at once, to travel logs, ethnographic recordings and the practice of video editing (Biemann 2003a, 3). Log refers indeed to the detailed records, timed and numbered, of a voyage of a ship or aircraft; it refers to the data gathered by control devices to track paths of movements or information; and, in video editing, it refers to the list of the recorded material, of the segments of video that are captured from the tape. Logging is one of the first steps necessary to proceed with the montage of a film. From this term it is possible to infer some of the filmmakers' intentions. Firstly, they link the act of filmmaking to that of tracing and recording. It should here be recalled how the trace is indeed one kind of indexical sign. Moreover, such recording is both the ethnographic one, the attempt of a human being, of a scientist, to record reality, and the technological one, radars and other control devices tracing movements

¹²⁷ For the various aspects of the index, as defined by Peirce and understood in this research, see subchapter 1.5 of this research.

and producing data. Secondly, by juxtaposing the term 'log' to titles such as "prolog" and "epilog" – which commonly refer to the closing and opening sections of literary texts (novels, poems, plays, etc.) or music compositions – *Europlex* combines and contrasts a concept that denotes objective or scientific methods with terms that point towards literary, fictional and creative texts. Hence, through the titling, the filmmakers already directly address the question of fact and fiction, a matter that is at the core of this specific video as well as crucial to the video essay in general, as a genre and a project.

For example, the first border journal, "log I," is presented as an observation, a registration of the activities at the border to the city of Ceuta. The shots are moved, taken with a hand-end camera, from inside a car, from a distance; long and very long shots, the images are grainy. The superimposed text guides, by the hour and by the minute, the reading of the images, describes what is not clearly visible. The sound is synchronous: noises of cars, birds, voices, background noise of the streets and the wind. In these scenes little editing occurs, the cut between one shot and the other follows the narrative and chronological development of events that the text describes: first one scene, one step of the trading takes place, one shot; then the next one, one shot, one scene, one action, and so forth. These images are also 'properly' framed (for example, the central subject of the image is in the right section of the frame, they are not slanted, and so on), and even though they are moved they keep a sharp focus. In other words, they do not present traces of experimental techniques (if considered, for example, in comparison to *Reassemblage's* style of framing): these sequences are as correctly shot, as good as they can be given the circumstances. Indeed, as Biemann explains, because filming in that area is prohibited, the images have been recorded from a distance or with a hidden camera (Biemann 2005).¹²⁸

Although this is the reason behind Biemann's style of filming these sequences, they seem to follow one of the rules of ethnographic filmmaking as summarised by Margaret Mead, in 1975, in her introduction to the prominent book *Principles of Visual Anthropology*: "If a tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the film-maker or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed" (1995, 9). Surely, Biemann's filmmaking cannot be accused of such naivety and her approach does not strive for scientific objectivity. However, although the camera is not positioned and left in the same place but held by the filmmaker, because of the secrecy of the filming, the result is the same: the subjects are not conscious of being observed and the effect is that it seems that what the camera records "did happen" (Mead 1995, 9) and thus material is *collected*. These kinds of strategies can be therefore

¹²⁸ It is interesting to note the connection between migrants illegally crossing literal borders, and Biemann literally crossing the border of the law in filming sections of this video.

read along the lines of documentary's indexicality, where the sign is understood as an index because of a perceived and presupposed direct referentiality to the object.

To be clear, I do not maintain that in *Europlex* these long and slow-paced shots are preferred as a technique because they are believed to be truthful or able to capture reality unmediated. Nonetheless, it is the effects of such filming style that are comparable to the anthropological documentary practice auspicated by Mead. The effects are: to emphasise a certain immediacy, to stress that the events at the border did take place and appeared as we see them in the video, and that they have been recorded with little or no mediation. In other words, it is because of the shooting and editing method that Biemann can describe this section of *Europlex* as one that is "accurately registering," that "allows an unhurried interpretation of the event," and where "video becomes a cognitive tool" (Biemann 2005). In this sense, the video is not only a specific kind of theoretical analysis, of essayistic study, but it becomes a tool to see, to understand reality. Once again this statement at once echoes and criticises the approach of ethnographic filmmaking that considered the camera as a passive recording device (see, for example, Balikci 1995, 183-184). Moreover, the statement that the video is a cognitive tool to enable an interpretation of the event seems to evoke a use of the videocamera comparable to that of a scientific¹²⁹ device (a microscope, for example) that makes visible what is not visible to a naked eye, or, as Biemann writes "at first sight" (2005). I am identifying the similarities between *Europlex* and a certain kind of ethnographic film, and her proximity to the debates within documentary studies not to undermine Biemann's claims of questioning and refusing the documentary approach. On the contrary, my intention is to stress how some sections of this video essay can be read through the lens of indexicality, and how the indexical relations so constructed mirror those of the documentary genre.

Zooming back into *Europlex*, in the same excerpt from "log I," another element deserves some attention: the use of hidden cameras in relation to the control and disciplining of bodies. The hidden cameras and CCTV that, in the last decades, have been placed in the streets of most Western cities by the police, the camera controlling systems in private and public spaces, even the invisible cameras used to 'spy' on the participants of reality shows like *Big Brother*, all these elements make the use of hidden cameras a highly problematic matter that points directly to questions of surveillance and discipline, and thus to Foucauldian concepts such as the panopticon (Foucault 1977 [1975]) and biopower (Foucault

¹²⁹ The discussion of what is to be considered a scientific approach is too extensive to be tackled here. However, it should be noted that Biemann's conceptualisation of the video as a "cognitive tool" could be read both along the lines of new scientific elaborations about the role subjectivity plays in laboratory experiments in the hard sciences, and in physics in particular (e.g.: Barad 2003) as well as in anthropology (e.g.: Renov 2004, particularly pp. 171-181).

1978 [1976]). This points towards another ambiguity and tension of the film, because hidden cameras (which make visible the invisible) can be read simultaneously as a political and feminist strategy (recording realities otherwise unseen), whilst being complicit in discourses of control and discipline.

The preliminary distinction between factual (documentary) and fictional techniques becomes immediately confused and ambiguous when having a closer look at the various strategies Biemann deploys. Two recording devices used in *Europlex* complicate further this fictional/non-fictional dichotomy: satellite imaging and infra-red night vision camera recordings. Both kind of images presuppose that a physical relation (of vicinity and co-presence) occurred between the event recorded, the objects/subjects in front of the camera, and the recording device, thus the images produced by satellite or infra-red cameras could be simplistically defined as indexical and possibly non-fictional (because they capture and record the events as they occurred, events that have not been purposefully fabricated to be filmed). Nonetheless, the kind of sequences thus produced and the history, legacy, and tradition of the devices used to record, therefore open up the question of fictionality. To different degrees but in a comparable manner, both satellite and ultra-red visualisations appear somewhat abstract (as opposed to realistic). The former literally so, as people, objects and places are translated and presented as codes, lines, and numbers; the latter instead carry a closer resemblance to the object, are more figurative, so to say, but definitely not realistic. In the case of satellite digital visualisations then, it might be useful to recall Doane's interpretation of the index as deixis: a sign that is not in an actual relation of contact, or vicinity with its object, but points towards a presence, makes present the object it refers to (Doane 2007b, 136-140). A similar problem occurs when trying to position ultra-red night cameras within a fictional/non-fictional categorisation. Ultra-red camera images are not uncommon in documentary film or non-fiction TV programmes (examples can be found in programmes such as *Tribe*, in reality shows, as well as in news broadcasts). They are also often connected with situations of survival, or secrecy, thus again they seem to convey a sense of presence, contact and immediacy.

In short, *Europlex* engages with indexicality, is haunted by reality at various levels and in different ways, namely in occurrences of the index as trace, the index as a sign entailing proximity and co-presence and the index as deixis. Indexicality is performed by reproducing strategies traditionally understood as connected with objectivity while at the same time undermining them. However, the extent to which this performance of indexicality can be seen as successful is questionable, as arguably *Europlex* reproduces far more than it undermines such strategies traditionally used to present objective Truth. Nonetheless, the aspect in which the film deploys the political potential of indexicality concerns the use of digital technology. This will be explored further in the visuality section adding another layer to this analysis. Before that, I turn again to the materiality of the

film in order to further consider this film as a performance in which the material reality of the border is made visible.

4.5 Performing material realities

I maintain that through how the video is constructed, shot and edited, its fabric and the implications of its technologies so to speak, that is, how the film interpellates bodies and matter, *Europlex* performs, creates, and enacts the invisible realities of the border so they become filmable. This film makes visible the invisible (but all too real) relations of forces. It is important to briefly clarify here what is intended with ‘performing’ with regards to Biemann’s works. ‘Performing’ is a concept that Biemann explicitly uses both in her video projects and in her texts. She does not provide a univocal definition of the term, nor a clear reference as to what kind of theoretical framework she is summoning. However, in an article about her first video *Performing the Border* (1999), she writes that “the discursive representational space” and “the material space which is constituted through the crossing and the halting of people (at the borders)” is understood as performative (Biemann in Sollfrank 1999, 36). In other words, the territorial border – in its implications with power and the global economy – is understood as “the perfect stage” where (gendered) power relations are performed on bodies¹³⁰ (Biemann 2002c, 116). This approach could thus be read, in a Foucauldian and Butlerian sense, in terms of how discourse constitutes, disciplines or normalises subjects, produces events and “brings about effects” (Foucault in Marshall 1999, 309). Nonetheless, the performative element is also in Biemann’s video-making itself. Not only “her approach is a way of performing theory in the field of art and to extend it via video” (Volkhart 2001, 6), but her filmmaking can be understood as an action that produces effects, as a *doing*, an activity that performs what it describes, that makes realities or, at least, makes them visible.¹³¹ Thus, along these lines, I refer to the performative (in regard to both Biemann’s filmmaking approach and the functioning of the border) as both a social and semiotic process. In other words, talking in terms of ‘performing’ means, in this specific context, to point the attention to the material effects of discourse on bodies as well as to the potential counter-representations, counter-realities, counter-geographies produced through documentary and filmmaking in general, and through this video essay in particular. Furthermore, the video essay,

¹³⁰ The body is specifically addressed in some of the feminist elaborations on borders as loaded spaces and therefore on the significance of (the control) spaces in disciplining bodies. See section 4.3 of this chapter.

¹³¹ In this sense ‘performing’ perfectly combines with the genre of the video essay, as both problematise, if not collapse, the differences between ‘fictional’ and ‘real.’

the filmic performance, becomes more concerned with the invisible or 'otherwise made visible' realities: the use of digital manipulation of the images, of animation and layering strategies increases as *Europlex* approaches the end.

I will now offer a specific example of the use of performance in the film, and its contribution to the materialisation of borders, their experiential realities, as well as the multiplicity of discourses and powers at play there. Thus, Biemann also makes material power relations. Consider again the "prolog" of *Europlex*. This is where Omar's story of the meteorite is recounted, as recorded by a scientist who interviewed him. Throughout the telling of this story we see colour footage of the desert, a video sequence of an explosion in space, of nomads walking with camels, then black and white shots of traders talking in a circle as well as a pan across the desert. The film then cuts to a black and white satellite image of the desert. Atop of this image cut-out pictures of stones are overimposed, reminiscent of a collage. Then a repetition of the desert in black and white, slightly altered by the animated fall of the meteorite appears. Following this the satellite image of the desert appears, this time in sepia, and four titles are superimposed on the image dividing the screen in four sections: science, military, living space, and markets. The narration at this point makes explicit the crossings between the four seemingly unrelated categories, all effected by the fall of the Bensour meteorite. The titles fade, and in their place appear, in order: a picture of part of the meteorite linking the scientist to the nomad as witness; footage of the nomads from the opening scene speculating on the military's involvement; a clip moving across a map while the voice-over notes the military's failure to track the event, and I would add, this is despite their access to observational and controlling technologies; and finally a repetition of the black and white clip of the traders, who assimilate the event into the local economy. This sequence is highly performative with its inclusion of footage disconnected from the story told, but is nonetheless used as an aide; with its overimposed pictures and texts recalling a collage, a piecing together of information to present and overall story; its repetition of images, but with slight variations; and also its recalling of images that have come before, that is, the footage of the nomads, to indicate that the story being told has relevance that far surpasses this specific context. Furthermore, the audio track is repetitious in this section also behind the informative narration which first tells the story of the fall of the meteorite, and then later draws the connections between seemingly unrelated cultural and social domains. This is the *how* of the film, its material construction, that is, indeed, performative rather than mere description of 'Fact.'

Yet a performance is supposed to present a story, so what (re)presentations is Biemann offering in this section of her film? As I have previously argued, borders are the central concern of *Europlex*. What Biemann is doing here, I argue, is *performing the border*, or performing borders. Indeed, there is not only a literal representation of borders as geographical spaces, but the

borders that separate and distinguish persons into categories are also first made visible, and then later blurred. However, borders are not only the loci of separation, but also of crossing. Thus, the crossings that occur in this sequence, as well as throughout the film, are often more invisible than the borders and boundaries themselves, which is why Biemann has to perform such crossings rather than simply illustrating them. Some of the borders first made visible through this performance are geographical, including the border between city and desert, and the border between Africa and the West made present by images (in the first instance) and through voice over and connections drawn by the audience (in the second instance). To be more specific, the fact that the Bensour meteorite was transported in its majority from the Sahara to the University of Washington means it has crossed transnational borders. Other borders present are those which distinguish, for example, the scientists from the nomads, the military from the traders, and so forth, confirming specific cultural, linguistic, and social categories. Yet the fact that the scientists must interview the nomads in order to perform their role, that the nomad Omar automatically assumes military involvement, and so forth, is indicative of the fact that these borders are porous. Crossing of borders, blurring of lines then happens at the level of both geography and lived experience.

It is the crossings, indeed, which are the most invisible, and therefore the aspect that *Europlex* has to expose the most through its performances. These crossings are loaded with political implications due to the power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of Othering. Thus, despite the conception that borders separate, Biemann is making a point, through this performance, that it is *at the border* that all these axes of signification and power converge most forcefully. To recall Balibar's words, though in a slightly different context, "borders are situated everywhere and nowhere" (2002, 78). The interesting observation to make is that for Balibar these borders are predominantly invisible, whereas Biemann shows that through performance they can be visualised and exposed. It is this exposition that is at once political and feminist.

Thus, it has been shown in this section on materiality that the *how* of the film, its construction, is organised in such a way as to offer the audience a performance of reality, rather than constructed in order to illustrate objective 'facts' about reality. This is the first aspect of level of how the film engages with materiality. The second level follows from the first, in that it is due to the film's very performative nature that it is able to make visible the invisible. It is in the effects of the performance that the borders are materialised as discursive realities, and therefore that the film can be read as having political feminist effects.

4.6 Visibilities, visuality and visualizations

As explained in the introduction, there are three aspects of the visuality dimension of *Europlex*. They are the content-matter, the specific technologies deployed in the film and the film's (self-)reflexivity. The content matter of *Europlex* has been explored extensively throughout the chapter; here I will briefly restate the conclusions drawn thus far. I have maintained that *Europlex* engages with the dimension of visuality through a process of performing and thus making visible what appears to be an invisible actuality: the border. The border is revealed as a space where what is visible and what remains invisible are normatively determined. The actual complexity of such dynamics that produce effects, effects of inclusion and exclusion, of Othering, of shaping bodies, subjects and subjectivities, while remaining unseen if not purposefully concealed, are exposed in Biemann's video. Importantly, this process of 'making visible' is not a neutral one and it is, therefore, where the activist and political commitment of *Europlex* lies.

The process of visualising and concealing is deeply connected with the technologies used to record, control and monitor the passages of people, goods and spaces. Some of the questions directly relating to the use of digital technology were identified in the introduction of this chapter. Through the use of satellite images, digital animations and infra-red cameras what is made visible and how? Moreover, considering the implications of some of these technologies, how do control and security devices function in relation to territorial borders? Furthermore, how can such technologies created to track, discipline and control bodies and movements, be employed and re-appropriated in a politically committed documentary? It is to these specific technologies I now turn.

Technology is somewhat more implicitly addressed in the film and pertains at once to the subject matter of *Europlex* as well as to its self-reflective meta-perspective. At the border zone, the relation between body, vision, vigilance, power and technology becomes explicit. It is the crossing of people that makes the borderland culturally meaningful, and it is this crossing that prompts the need for vigilance and control. The movements and paths of people are traced, recorded and regulated through technology, through devices such as satellites, cameras, radio recordings, computers and other electronic machines. And it is specifically, although not exclusively, the visual technologies that *Europlex* engages with. These are treated as technological hegemonic visualisations and as part of the performance of the border. In a double move, *Europlex* makes use of the same visualisation techniques it observes and analyses: satellite images, data recordings and electronic maps are used in the video alongside other kinds of media, artistic strategies and documentary images. Moreover, because of the specific genre of the video essay and because of Biemann's feminist political

sensibility, these representations are not merely repeated and neutrally reproduced: “Essayist practice is highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning. It is consciously engaged in the activity of representation itself” (Biemann 2003a). Indeed, in this reflexivity the film questions the very use of such technologies, juxtaposition and irony being two of the ways in which *Europlex* critically addresses the use of this control apparatus.

For example, Biemann does this in “border log III” when she shows women workers outside a factory. In this section the various multinational companies and various job titles of the women are listed in the film. These sequences give detailed factual information about the women’s labour: such factual elements are presented in the film by superimposing graphics and numbers that appear to have been recorded by some digital statistical tracking device to images of women talking and laughing. An objective presentation of data is juxtaposed with subjective images of real women and the intimate moments between them. These women, Biemann shows us, are not just ‘data’ as the external technologies would have you believe. The irony is perceived in the fact that the data seem to be sterile and serious, almost disciplining, whilst the women continue to laugh. Thus Biemann is also making a political point here about how particular technologies track, discipline and control persons by making them into collective entities and disembodied numbers.

The relation between digital technology and documentary is far from simple and unproblematic; it gave rise to rich debates within the fields of anthropology, documentary studies, film studies and game studies.¹³² One of the main issues the advent of digital cameras brought to the fore is the possibility for documentary film to claim that “unbiased capacity to mirror the profilmic with no fictional artifice” (Landesman 2008, 33), which had (or has) been the parameter to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of documentary film for decades. Digital technology has played a crucial role in complicating and redefining the distinction between fact and fiction in cinema.¹³³ Fuelling an “epistemological distrust” (Landesman 2008, 35) and suspicion towards

¹³² The prominent journal *Anthropology Today* hosted a debate on this topic, led by one of the most renowned anthropologists and filmmakers, namely David MacDougall (2001) and only three years ago a thematic issue of *Studies in Documentary Film* (Vol. 2(1) 2008) was fully dedicated to this matter. For the relation between documentary and video games, see for example Raessens (2006). From within film studies several feminist scholars engaged with the relation between the digital and indexicality, among others: Sobchack (1999) and Doane (2007b), the latter also edited an issue of *Differences* entitled “Indexicality: Trace and Sign” (Vol. 18 (1) 2007), where the implications of digital technology are addressed at length.

¹³³ Other approaches to the advent of the digital in documentary are more concerned with the financial aspects (i.e.: cheaper and more available technology), the easiness of reproducibility and distribution, or the possibility of considering digital technologies as a space for open and collaborative practices for indigenous documentaries and media activism (Ginsburg 2006).

documentary, the digital seemed to undermine the possibility of any indexical relation between the filmic sign and reality. The privileged relationship that documentary is supposed to have with reality had been either completely denied or at least questioned when digital film entered in the arena of documentary. The high degree of manipulation made possible by digital technologies has been read as the process that would – potentially or unavoidably – erase the relation between image and reality. The possibilities for altering the film images seemed to be so countless that any claim of realism, factuality or actuality of the digital documentary would be liquidated as unfeasible. The reactions to this digital revolution range from the complete disavowal of any possibility of talking about documentary at all¹³⁴, to the acknowledgment that digital technology produces a new aesthetic style (Landesman 2008, 33) yet without leading to the removal of the distinction between documentary and fiction film.¹³⁵

The main concern of this trend of scholarship focuses on the status of documentary image as truth, evidence or document and the risk that this specificity of documentary would be “radically challenged by the new ontological status of digital imagery” (Landesman 2008, 35). It should be stressed that it is because of the complex relation between reality and the digital sign and because of the specific possibilities opened by digital technology, that *Europlex* manages to perform the visible and invisible complexities of the border space and the material reality of the subjects who inhabit this space, as the arguments of this chapter thus far have shown. It is specifically the invisible realities, created by the interconnections between control technologies, the global economy and the social and cultural relations, that can be, if not documented – to paraphrase Biemann’s quote that opens this chapter – then enacted in such a way as to organise and present their complexities. In other words, the digital technologies deployed in this video essay make visible what would otherwise probably escape the lenses of an analogue video-camera. So while Biemann herself is using these control technologies, she is doing so in such a way as to produce counter-geographies. She is revealing how these technologies can be used for subversive purposes, for opening spaces of alternative meanings.

The other political and feminist strategy that Biemann uses in relation with visibility is the reflexivity on the language of cinema. Such a critical approach to the cinematic strategies of representation and apparatus is precisely what feminist film theorists from the 1970s onward have promoted as a necessary political action. I will now offer an example of how this film engages in a reflection on its own artifice. As discussed earlier in this chapter, ‘log’ is the term Biemann and Sanders choose to indicate the three central chapters of *Europlex*. In

¹³⁴ Among the scholars who embraced the first option are new media theorist Lev Manovich (2001) and Winston (1995).

¹³⁵ This theoretical knot has been considered in section 1.5 of this dissertation.

addressing the process of video editing, as seen in the previous discussion of the use of 'logs,' the artists hint at a meta-reflection on the process of filmmaking itself, or, more precisely, on the act of selecting and digitally modifying the filmed material. Thus, in the use of the word 'log' are comprised both the issue of the (im)possibility of objective recording and that reflection on the filmic medium advocated by feminist film theorists. In short, the meta-reflection on the medium implied by the concept of 'log' resonates with feminist perspectives such as Johnson's claim that for a film to be revolutionary, the language of the cinema and its coded depiction of reality must be interrogated (Johnston 1973, 215); Trinh's understanding that a feminist documentary needs to be "aware of its own artifice" (Trinh 1990, 89); or Mulvey's elaboration that a crucial endeavour of feminist film is to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space" (Mulvey 1975, 18), just to mention some examples.

Importantly, Biemann does not attach any claim of authenticity or objectivity to her video, subjectivity being one of the most crucial aspects of the video essay practice. However, theorising the video as a tool that *registers* events, she stresses the documentary aspect of it, how this style of filming has some sort of direct relation to reality. Since the 1970s, the subjective dimension of documentary has been widely explored and agreed upon; authenticity, however, is the arena in which the specificities of documentary film are still debated. Virtually all studies on documentary and on visual anthropology, in the last fifty years, deal with this issue, with the tension between subjectivity and authenticity, the paradox and the negotiation between image and reality, and the problem of how to identify the specificities of documentary (Bruzzi 2000, 4-7). When taking these debates into account, Biemann's *Europlex* is not only a practice of but also a theorisation on the contradictions of representing reality embedded in documentary filmmaking.

However, like *Reassemblage*, *Europlex* does not offer a space for the voices of the women filmed to be heard. As identified already in the introduction, although women are the main protagonists, as they are immersed and inscribe themselves in the major changes taking place in the social, cultural and economic dynamics of the border (i.e. becoming "time travellers"), they are not given an opportunity to tell their own story. These women do not speak, rather they are spoken about. This is the same problem encountered in the analysis of *Reassemblage* with relation to the filmmaker's reflexivity on the filmmaking process; however Biemann does not suffer this criticism to the same extent as does Trinh. This is because in terms of content matter she addresses women's subjectivities because the film is literally about women's experiences at the border, whereas *Reassemblage's* content matter does not directly deal with women's subjectivities. *Europlex* is also different from *Reassemblage* on this issue because the women directly engaged by the filmmaker very much address the camera. This is a matter of 'the gaze.' In other words, these women return the

gaze of the camera. Recalling how 'to be looked at' without looking back is one of the main conditions for the normative gaze to function as an objectifying practice. It can be said that this return of the gaze is interpretable as somewhat empowering, solidifying the women's status as subjects. Moreover, the medium itself, that of a video essay, informs the audience that this is a subjective rather than objective account of women and the border, rendering the lack of specific female voices within the film less problematic once again.

Thus, at the level of content matter, digital medium and reflexivity, visibility is a crucial lens through which to identify the political and feminist aspects of *Europlex*. The content matter makes visible the politics of borders and how this affects women's lives; the digital technologies employed also serve to make visible what could not be grasped at first sight, while at the same time are employed in such a way as to make explicit the problematic aspects of control and discipline; finally, the self-reflection on the filmmaking process by Biemann in the video points towards her own awareness of the problems of documentary and anthropological film and the interconnection between aesthetics and politics in these genres. However, like Trinh's film *Reassemblage*, the emphasis on a film's own construction of representation can be read as detrimental insofar as it neglects to give a space for the stories of the women filmed, and their voices to be heard directly. This giving of voice, on the other hand, is precisely what Longinotto manages to do in *Sisters in Law*, whilst interestingly the film presents a far lesser degree of self-reflexivity. This is indicative once more of the difficulty and contradictions that can emerge when residing in the grey zone, as these three films do.

4.7 Concluding remarks

Europlex is a video essay about the border between Morocco and Spain; this is how Biemann's 2003 video could be summarised. However, as straightforward as this summary might sound, through this analysis the film proved to be a complex and multilayered feminist documentary that mobilises at once questions of representation, technology, power, subjectivity and reality. In this chapter I have explored these different issues that *Europlex* touches upon and, I argued, theorises about.

I started with a study of the content matter of the video, of its different sections, 'logs,' and of how they address the material and discursive dimensions of the multiple kinds of borders, as well as the various facets of the specific activities that take place through and around the border zones between Africa and Europe. The story of the Bensour, a meteorite that fell in the Sahara desert, and the consequent actual events and signifying practices that occurred after its

discovery are narrated and visualised first. Then the border, as a material as well as discursive and symbolic space is the topic of the video. Next, the smuggling activities and passages of people back-and-forth through the checkpoints are described by the voice-over commentary rather than visually represented: the issue of invisibility is therefore addressed in this section of *Europlex*, so as are the material effects the border has on the lives and bodies of the women who cross it. Women are also the subject of the next two 'logs.' The daily routine of the 'domesticas,' Moroccan women who cross the border to go to work in the European enclaves, is analysed first. These women, in Biemann's video become "time travellers," crossing not only the spatial geographical boundaries but also the temporal margins of two different time-zones. The following log takes place in the transnational zone near Tangier where Moroccan women work in factories producing products for European subcontractors. Here the borders addressed are the invisible, yet highly controlled and secured economic borders of the geopolitical powers and of Capital, where things and standards of quality travel much easier than people. *Europlex* comes to a closure, in the "epilog" wherein a story is told. The story of some people, hired as actors to perform as illegal migrants in a film, who become actual migrants, clandestines who fled on the boats that were meant to be props for the film. Yet another border is presented: that thin edge between fiction and actuality, between stories and reality, which is also the issue *Europlex* addresses throughout its twenty minutes in its filmic construction between documentary strategies and digital manipulations.

The strategies of representation, the filmic techniques and the visualisation technologies deployed in the video were the topic of the second section of this chapter. There I analysed the way *Europlex* is constructed, the selection of images, framing and editing. The multiplicity of techniques has also been studied, focusing particularly on the fact that this is a digital video and thus exploring the specificities of the medium, the possibilities it offers and their implications. The practice of layering has been examined as an important feature of the film. In that occasion I noticed how layering relates to the digital editing technique but is also addressed as a topic in the content matter of the film. Similarly, I noted how *Europlex* echoes its subject matter in its own filmic materiality: its specific cinematographic strategies are hybrid, they cross the borders of different genres and technologies so as the film portrays the realities of the border. Not only the film performs the border, but the film, with the use of so-called fictional and non-fictional strategies, is itself situated in a liminal zone. I discussed how direct footage as well as computer generated images, infrared cameras and standard digital cameras, satellite visualizations, video collages, voice-over, manipulated photographs and superimposed texts are some of that make *Europlex* a "hybrid" (Dimitrakaki 2007, 205) video.

Moreover, I discussed how the hybridity of the film is a representational as well as a political practice. *Europlex* is a 'video essay,' a genre of film in between

documentary and video art, ethnographic enquiry and political intervention. Biemann calls it a “video practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political” (Biemann 2003b, 8). Departing from an investigation of this genre I elaborated how the border is a material space as well as a metaphor. In the first instance, it becomes a space to explore the interconnections between the real lives and experiences of people, and globalisation and Capital. The border as a metaphor instead mobilises the performative dimension of bodies in these transnational movements, and the relations between power, the organisation of space and disciplining of subjects. It becomes a metaphor for conceptualising the crossing of multiple boundaries: between nation states, identities, global economy and local experiences, between control and resistance, between humans and machines. The border stands as a space for negotiation as well as a “metaphor for various kinds of marginalizations” (Biemann 2002b, 29). It is this second aspect that led me to draw a connection between Trinh’s theorisation of what she has called, in different contexts, as the gap, the interval, the silence, the intra or “the space in-between” (see: Trinh 1992; 1999; 2005) and the border as theorised and performed through *Europlex*. For Trinh, the space in-between is a space that opens to the possibility of meaning(s) that escape or exceed it. Similarly, the border for Biemann is also a space of possibilities – alongside it being a space of control and disciplining – and therefore a political space.

Then, repeating the framework that I applied to the analysis of the other two films, I mobilised the three critical lenses of indexicality, materiality and visibility to further explore *Europlex*. Therefore, the indexical status – the physical relation or “existential connection” (Peirce 1958, 2.283-287) between sign and object – of this film was studied. I demonstrated that the video engages with indexicality at various levels and in different ways. Through a scrutiny of the fictional and non-fictional strategies deployed in the film I argued how indexicality is performed by reproducing, while critically deconstructing, those strategies traditionally understood as connected with documentary’s objectivity. In short, I indicated how the relations between filmic signs and filmed objects in *Europlex* – because of the multiplicity of technologies used – explicitly present all the various instances of indexicality as they have been outlined in subchapter 1.5 of this study.

In the discussion of materiality, it has been shown that the *how* of the film offers the audience a performance of reality. I referred to the performative (in regard to both Biemann’s filmmaking approach and the functioning of the border) as both a social and semiotic process. Consequently, I illustrated how the film manages to address and to make visible the invisible material realities of the border. Through its performative mode *Europlex* manages to engage with materiality, that is to say, the power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, the economical and cultural discourses and the economical and material invisible realities of the border.

Finally, I observed how the video engages with visibility. I illustrated that *Europlex* engages with the issue of vision and (in)visibility on at least three different levels: the level of its content matter, in the critical uses of digital technologies and in the way that the film deploys reflexivity and performs a meta-reflection on the filmic medium. In all these three aspects, visibility appeared to a crucial lens through which to identify the political and feminist aspects of *Europlex*. In its content matter the film literally makes visible the politics of borders; the various technologies used in the film are addresses in their problematic aspects of control and disciplining, while they are also deployed to visualise what can not be straightforwardly or easily seen at first sight. Finally, the reflexive approach *Europlex* presents towards the filmmaking process itself points at Biemann's awareness of the problems of realism and documentary film, and of the feminist debates on what I have called 'the artifice' of documentary.

In sum, I have described and analysed the feminist effects this film has and how it mobilises at once our understanding of the interrelations between vision, power, subjectivity, representation and reality. It is in the way *Europlex* engages vision, visibility and (in)visibility that I have located its most significant feminist effects. Ultimately, this study of Biemann's video essay illustrated how a feminist film – as well as a feminist approach to documentary film – can contribute to performing invisible realities, can disclose and engage the interconnections between aesthetics and politics, and ultimately, can produce political effects.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to open a field of enquiry, namely that of feminism and documentary, and to draw attention to the productive and underexplored area at the crossroads between feminist theory, documentary film and visual anthropology. The intra-actions between these three domains and the theoretical tools available therein have been explored, specifically focusing on the issues of reality, truth, representation of the Other, power and knowledge production. I have discussed how, in this liminal area that I named 'grey zone,' theoretical tensions arise and disciplinary assumptions are unsettled. I have also argued that it is precisely because of its complexity that this proves to be a space where a feminist, critical and affirmative understanding of documentary films is offered as means to produce new knowledge and alternative imaginaries.

Of foremost importance in this research was the reinterpretation of the notion of feminist documentary. I have proposed that, rather than defining what a feminist documentary *is*, it would be more productive to ask what a documentary *does*, or can do; that is to say, the effects it generates, *how* it engages with reality, with the filmic medium, and with broader social, cultural and political discourses and practices. Accordingly, I have proposed an interdisciplinary methodological framework to analyse documentaries that enables an account of what the specific feminist effects of documentary film are, what they could be and how they come about. I have proposed and discussed that some of these effects are: giving testimony to marginal voices and subjectivities; representing struggles and the material existence of Other realities; making visible the invisible yet very material dimensions of cultural, geo-political and social power inequalities; reflecting critically on the filmic medium, the documentary genre, and the relation between strategies of representation and their socio-political implications; and finally, stimulating change and creating new imaginaries and knowledges.

I have proposed *indexicality*, *materiality* and *visuality* as the three main lenses to study and think with, through, and about how documentary film about the Other can produce feminist effects and affects. These concepts have been selected in order to offer a viable toolbox to study the interrelations between the materiality of documentary film, representation, reality, vision, and relationships of power between Self and Other, observer and observed, filming and filmed subjects.

This framework entailed adopting an understanding of documentary as a means for the production of anthropological knowledge (McDougall 1998; Ruby 2000; Heider 2006) as well as a genre of film with a specific history, tradition and set of techniques (Renov 1993; Nichols 2001; Ellis and Mclane, 2005), which, on

account of its privileged relation with reality (Nichols 1991), and its technologies of truth (Trinh 1993), constructs and influences social realities, in the moment it represents them, in a manner that is different from how other genres of film do (because of its indexical quality). Finally, I have introduced and deployed a conceptualisation of (feminist) documentary as a film that is *haunted by reality*.

Foregrounding this research, then, is a theoretical approach that, departing from a feminist and post-structuralist framework, explores documentary film focusing, implicitly or explicitly, on the relations between systems of representation and subjectivity (subchapter 1.2); between textual (and visual) practices and discourse (subchapter 1.3); between ideology, images and imaginary (subchapter 1.4); between sign and reality (subchapter 1.5); between the material (reality) and the symbolic (language) aspects of culture (subchapter 1.6); between vision and practices of knowledge production (subchapter 1.7).

From the wide and diverse corpus of films that inhabit the liminal space in-between labels and genres, and belong to the 'grey zone,' I have selected three films – of different authors, periods, geo-political contexts, produced through diverse technological media and about different subjects and cultural locations – as the main focus of the research: *Sisters in Law* (Longinotto 2005), *Reassemblage* (Trinh 1982) and *Europlex* (Biemann 2003). I have shown how these three films, albeit very diverse, can be read as *films haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues to do with the politics of the Other and processes of Othering*. Next, through a close observation of their technical elements and through the theoretical lenses of indexicality, materiality and visuality, these multifaceted and "inappropriate/d" (Trinh 1986, 9) documentaries have been approached in their materiality and from the perspective of *how* they are constructed, the strategies of representation they employ, in order to examine if and what kind of feminist effect they provoke, hence to appreciate how they theorise and perform the connections between politics and aesthetics.

Through the analysis of these three films, then, and the exploration of theories and debates in the fields of semiotics, feminist film theory, anthropology, cultural studies, visual studies, feminist philosophy and film studies, I have demonstrated that documentary film is a site of critical and political potential for engaging with reality, and challenging socio-political power relations and patriarchal and ethnocentric discourses. In other words, throughout this study I have illustrated what the potentials of feminist documentary are, as well as of the encounter between feminism, visual anthropology and documentary.

In the first chapter I have identified and contextualised the three fields this research intersects – feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology – and the 'grey zone' that exists between them. To show that such a 'grey zone' does

indeed exist, I have examined some of the tensions and progresses that have emerged in these three fields in recent decades.

Next, I have discussed how 'anthropological' was to be intended in the context of this study: as referring specifically to representations – knowledges – produced about the non-Western Other and engaging with the tradition and the legacies of the discipline of anthropology in a broad sense (Fabian 1983; Hall 1992; Said 1979, 1994). Furthermore, recalling how the Other as a concept has been extensively investigated both from a post-colonial studies perspective and in feminist theory, I have stressed how this Other constructed by Western dominant discourses – anthropological film being embedded in such discourses – is always already gendered and sexualised as well as ethnicised (McClintock 1995; McClintock et al. 1997). Through some of the major feminist theories on the matter, I have adopted an understanding of the Other as the opposite to the Self, the imperfect copy of the ideal singular Subject (Irigaray 1995, 7), "constructed as 'different from' the expected norm" (Braidotti 2011, 97), where this difference is understood hierarchically as pejorative. Hence, the concept is necessarily engaged with questions of power and dominance as well as with the politics of inclusion and exclusion. This conception of the Other then brings together issues of knowledge and representation, of oppression and western colonisation, as well as those to do with the construction of subjectivity and processes of subjectification. It is in this framework that I first approached anthropological filmmaking in general, and the three selected film, as films concerned with the Other, later in the study.

Therefore, another theoretical knot addressed in Chapter 1 was the question of how to produce reliable (or scientific) knowledge about other cultures through films, whilst at the same time being aware of the multiple processes of selection, mediation, and manipulation at place in the filming process. This led me to address the difficulty in defining documentary as a genre (Nichols 1991; Renov 1993; Gaines and Renov 1999; Ellis and McLane 2005, among others). In the vast academic production of theories, definitions and categorizations about documentary film, I chose to approach documentary through a semiotic lens. Hence, I focused on two of the many features specifically attributed to documentary understood in relation to, or as different from, fiction film: what has been considered typically characteristic of documentary is that it has a privileged relation to reality – its *referentiality* – and that its subject matter is *actuality*: actual events and people in their everyday experience and lived world. In line with Doane's theorisation of the index as a sign that is "haunted by its object" (Doane 2007b, 134), then, I have considered documentary as a specific genre of film which is haunted by reality.

Furthermore, I have addressed documentary from a feminist perspective, arguing that it can be a privileged strategic site to examine the relations between the uses of cinematic technologies and the (re)production of discourses on the

Other. Indeed, it has been taken into consideration that feminism has been greatly concerned with the politics of images, and of representation more broadly. In feminist film criticism, the relations between patriarchal structures of oppressions and documentary representations have been directly addressed in one of the most influential debates in the field, the so-called 'realist debate' (Kaplan 1983). I have discussed how the anti-realist side of the debate became so prominent as to greatly influence the subsequent feminist investigations, or lack thereof, of documentary film. This stance considered a realist aesthetic to be unavoidably embedded in the capitalist and patriarchal representations of reality (e.g.: Johnston 1973). While I have argued that this approach was somewhat too simplistically equating documentary with strategies of filmic realism, and the latter with patriarchal language – intended as a language that required normative identification and claimed to represent the Truth – I nonetheless appreciated the emphasis these scholars placed on the “cinematic apparatus” (De Lauretis 1987, 13; Kaplan 1988, 93). How films were constructed was considered a crucial feature to pay attention to, as filmic representational strategies were shown to be able to shape subject positions, as well as produce and reproduce power inequalities and patriarchal oppressions. Thus, through the investigation of this debate, I stressed the importance of focusing on *how* films work when aiming at identifying the relation between visual representations and their effects on lived experiences and reality. It is in this sense that I cited Trinh's observation that “a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction” (1990, 89). Finally, I maintained that a feminist approach to documentary is not only valuable and enriching, but also necessary. In doing so, I have also defended that the kind of interdisciplinary approach this research proposes can contribute to important debates in the field of gender studies, visual studies and cultural studies at large, namely those concerning: the politics of representation, the interconnection of social power relations and/in visual strategies, contemporary processes of Othering and the political implication of the use of (new) technologies.

In Chapter 1 I have also introduced and explored my semiotic framework to approach documentary, the framework I then actualised and assessed in the analysis of the three films. The aim was to delineate a definition of *index* and *indexicality* specific to documentary film, a notion of the index that would enable a conception of documentary as being both a creative mediation of reality (a film), as well as a sign that has a privileged relation with reality, one of contact and continuity. It is this indexical relation between the sign and its object, between sign and reality, which I have maintained is specific to documentary as opposed to fiction film. I have taken into account Peirce's (1958) multiple definitions of the index, and some of the interpretations of his theory. In these texts, the index is defined as a sign that, for example: has a real connection with the object, is determined or really affected by its object, or is forced to correspond

to its object, or directs the attention to its object (see subchapter 1.5 for the references to each of these explanations). I have first explored the implications of some of these definitions for documentary film, then, I have refined the definition of indexicality by adding that, in a Peircian perspective, the object – the historical referent – of the (documentary) indexical sign can be understood as being, or *referring to* an actual object that exists or existed in actuality and that has not *solely* been created for the camera. Thus, I have argued that indexicality is specific to and relevant for documentary film: the index is a kind of sign that is “haunted by” the object. I have proposed that the indexical documentary sign is to be understood in a threefold way, and that these three aspects are always interconnected: as a sign that is in a relation of physical contact and co-presence with its object, as a trace, and as deixis. I have concluded that the indexical documentary sign makes present the object it refers to (Doane 2007b, 136-140). In this ‘making present’ lie the specificities of documentary film and, more importantly, its political potential from a feminist perspective.

The second theoretical tool, materiality, was also introduced in the first chapter of this research. I have advocated a feminist approach that remembers to focus on the materiality of the sign and I have proposed a methodology and a theoretical perspective that considers documentaries in their media-specific (Hayles 2004) features and takes the ‘how’ into account as a crucial element of the analysis. Furthermore, I argued that it is not language or the sign which constructs reality, but that reality presents itself in the sign, or that the object *determines* the sign (Peirce 1958, 8.177). Reality, then, is not just a passive unknown or unknowable, this is why I concur that, in indexical signs, reality *haunts* the sign, affects it, presses on it. Thus, the issue of representation becomes of crucial concern. Regarding this second point, the post-structuralist conception of the relation between language and reality was considered (Coward and Ellis 1977). I went on to discuss that post-structuralism seemed to imply a conflation of the two Peircian objects – the Dynamic and Immediate Object (Peirce 1958) – where the former disappears from the equation. This conflation of Immediate and Dynamic Object, which results in the erasure of the latter, logically implies that all documentaries could be considered as fiction films: both fiction and documentary film would stand for a narrative, a representation, a fictional and creative account. Hence, I have discussed how this conception would lead to a complete erasure of any distinction between the two genres, which also erases the political potential documentary film can (and does) have. Thus, it is this conflation I have been cautious to avoid. The semiotic framework I have articulated in Chapter 1, through an exploration of Peirce’s theory of the sign in relation to the so-called crisis of representation (Nóth 2003; Santaella Braga 2003), is one where great attention is paid to not erase reality, to not discard the Dynamic Object. It is a semiotic feminist framework that, by using theories of representation and of the sign, proves to be useful to study documentary because

it is aware of the power of language, of the process of semiosis, yet remains attentive not to confound or conflate documentary and fiction film.

Finally, in Chapter 1, I elaborated on the last of the three lenses I proposed to study the selected corpus of films: the concept of *visuality*. In section 1.7, I considered the interconnections between vision, documentary representation of the Other, power, and gender. Here I introduced why and how a feminist framework to study documentary could be understood as a practice that challenges the hegemony of vision. In order to show how *visuality* is a crucial concept to articulate an analysis that connects issues of gender, with issues of power and with anthropological documentary, I first discussed the primacy of vision contemporary Western society (Ong 1982; Howes 1991; Jay 1993). From an understanding of vision as one of the senses, the one that became the primary means to make sense of the world, I went on considering “the technical and cultural mediation of visual experience” (Jay 2002, 270). This entailed addressing how vision is historically and culturally determined, and the role of culture, discourse or ideology in influencing or determining “scopic regimes” (Metz 1981), the mechanisms of sight, visual representation, visual practices or visual technologies.

Next, I showed how power functions in relation to vision and observation as a practice of knowledge production: from the primacy of vision, I focused on the hegemony of vision. Two main feminist perspectives have been here brought into play. Having articulated the connection between, observation, claims of objectivity (Bal 2003) and a certain tradition of anthropological enquiry, I introduced some of the feminist critiques to scientific observation and objectivity. Particularly, Donna Haraway’s conception of “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988) has been summoned to summarise a feminist account of *visuality* that challenges the patriarchal and colonialist metaphor and practice of objectivity and that proposes instead a feminist objectivity: connected with a vision that is always particular and embodied, and with “partial perspectives” (*idem*). The second concept addressed in this section was the gaze. Understood mainly from a feminist and post-colonial framework, it served to further show how *visuality* and the act of looking are connected with hierarchical social power relations. Whether it is the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1975) or the Foucauldian disciplining gaze (Foucault 1977), the act of looking is encoded in hegemonic norms. The normative gaze, hence, defines, interpellates or objectifies the Other, being it the woman on the screen (as in Mulvey’s theory) or the non-Western subject (as for example in: Shohat and Stam 1994). From this kind of feminist critique I showed that not only vision is always, at least to a certain extent, culturally determined and situated, but that observation and the technologies of visualisation are never neutral; that is to say, power is enmeshed in *visuality* and in the practices of knowledge.

In sum, in this study I proposed a feminist approach to anthropological documentary with the aims of challenging dominant representations and conceptions of the Other; defying normative implications of truth claims through offering an alternative aspect to study the relation between reality and documentary; casting new light on the materiality of documentary film in its specificity as a genre; and critically looking at the hegemony of vision. I have suggested *indexicality* as a renewed framework to identify the specificities of how documentary works and how it could be understood. Finally, I have introduced and assessed a working definition by which to consider the three films I have selected and studied in this research: they are films *haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues to do with the politics of the Other and processes of Othering*.

The first film I analysed was Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law*. This film, like the other two, has been examined in order to locate how a documentary can produce feminist effects, and what these effects are, while also identifying the specific traits that make the film a documentary thus testing my conception of documentary indexicality. Moreover, through the study of the three films, I have explored how a feminist approach to documentary can mobilise at once our understanding of reality, fiction, politics and aesthetics.

Studied through the concepts of indexicality, viscosity and materiality, *Sisters in Law* proved to be a complex and ambiguous example of documentary provoking feminist effects. I have shown the various levels at which the film could be considered a feminist documentary: first, at the level of its content matter, with its occupation with violence against women and striving for women's legal rights in Cameroon. In addition, I have noted that *Sisters in Law* was made by a woman; its crew was composed by women; and Longinotto herself even accepted the label 'feminist.' However, it was made evident that there are numerous risks and pitfalls in equating films made by or about women with feminist films, essentialism being but one such danger. I have also argued that a sole attention to the content matter of films can lead to these very same consequences. My analysis of *Sisters in Law's* narrative structure, and framing and editing techniques has shown that the film does not directly show a reflection on the fictional implications of documentary representations; even though the director, Longinotto, is very aware of these strategies to the extent she skilfully uses realism as a filmic strategy. Indeed, as a documentary, *Sisters in Law* has been appreciated as well as criticised by journalists and film experts for its Direct Cinema and fly-on-the-wall style. Hence, I have outlined the history of Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema, and their differences (Winston 1995), to address how these approaches to filmmaking tackle in specific ways questions of truth and realism and have therefore been the object of feminist criticism. I have then presented how, from a feminist perspective, a criticism to the film is warranted due to its lack of reflexivity on the use of the filmic medium, as well as

the lack of attention to the director's own positioning in terms of gender, ethnicity and nationality. *Sisters in Law* was further criticised on this point as Longinotto refuses to engage with and deconstruct claims of realism and invisibility in her documentary filmmaking. Thus, in my reading, the film became exemplary to identify a tension that emerges when observing classic documentary films through a feminist lens: the balancing between the dismissal of realistic filmic strategies and the appreciation of the potential effects they can produce; the fact that, even though the Western gaze is not challenged and the realist language is not deconstructed, the film nonetheless *does* and *can* have feminist effects.

From the perspective of indexicality I articulated how *Sisters in Law's* classic documentary strategies seem to claim or confirm that a contact between the object – the filmed reality – and the filmic sign took place; the film emphasises and evokes a sense of 'having been there.' As a result then, the question as to whether some of the events have been fabricated, or if some of the protagonists at times perform, for the camera, does not challenge the indexical dimension of this documentary. In other words, it is not in terms of its authenticity or truth claims that this film can be clearly considered a documentary. Rather, it is in its representational strategies, editing, framing and camera movements, that film presents and performs a strong indexical bond with the referent, with the object in the world, with reality.

Furthermore, I have discussed how these cinematographic techniques have consequences in terms of the effects and affects produced in the audience. It is at the level of these effects that I have discussed *Sisters in Law's* engagement with *materiality* and it is here that I have also identified the film's feminist potential. Indeed, it is the sensorial, visceral response evoked by the film (rather than positioning the audience as outside, rational, all-knowing, truth-bearers, and so forth) that distances it from a certain tradition of 'scientific,' masculine, objectifying, colonialist, (anthropological) realist film-making. Through mobilising Nichols' concept of vivification (Nichols 1991) I showed how formal strategies of documentary representation can provoke aesthetic as well as political effects. The emotional responses (e.g.: empathy, victory, solidarity) the film provokes have been considered in terms of their possible feminist effects. In other words, understood through vivification, these effects can have political consequences, incite awareness about power and gender inequalities, provoke reactions and eventually produce change in knowledge and consciousness if not in the social and political arena. Expanding on Nichols' theory, I have also shown how emotions and pain (Smaill 2007), or emotional identification and desire (Cowie 2011) are tightly connected with the political effects of documentary, even more, they are political. In this way I have articulated on the relation between the politics and the aesthetics of documentary in general, and of *Sisters in Law* in particular.

Finally, observing Longinotto's film in terms of how it engages with visuality, I argued that the documentary fails to critically reflect on the implications of its technologies of observation and representation, and that it does not address or criticise the hegemony of vision. However, the film strives so greatly for the invisibility of the camera and of the filmmaker that eventually it cannot but reveal such efforts, thus making the whole process visible: the film itself can actually act in a subversive way through its very invisibility. This oxymoronic process opens to the possibility for the audience to deconstruct the film at the level of its visual processes of representation. This is the subversive feminist act which the audience can bring to *Sisters in Law*. Indeed, as I have argued, if the film itself fails to embrace the feminist deconstruction of vision and visuality, it does not mean that this cannot be a very important space to practice and to test the limits of a feminist analysis of documentary.

In my study of Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* I discussed how the film engages with a multiplicity of themes and techniques, at the crossroad between anthropological, feminist and filmmaking debates. Importantly, I argued that *Reassemblage* questions the status of ethnographic film as it subverts the rules of classic cinematographic techniques. The film is specifically constructed to produce or stimulate certain effects, but not the ones coded in the narrative film form canon (Bordwell 2001). Focusing on the narrative structure of the film and the implications in the use of the voice-over narration (Carpitella 1981; Rouch 1975), I stressed how the director, Trinh T. Minh-ha, is able to tell many stories because she does not speak *about*, rather, she speaks *near by* (Trinh 1992, 233) the filmed subjects. I have argued how this 'speaking nearby' can be read, also in relation to David MacDougall's conception of the polyphonic, dialogic film (MacDougall 1991), as an attempt to overcome or at least to complicate the hierarchical relation embedded in filming and the rigid dualism of Self and Other, observer and observed.

In as much as *Reassemblage* fulfils, exceeds, and undermines the category of anthropological documentary, Trinh's film also explicitly presents a feminist approach to documentary representation, as it is reflexive and aware of its own artifice (Trinh 1990, 89) and it directly addresses issues of objectivity, reflexivity and the representation of the Other. I elaborated how the artifice is not only the process of construction of the film, how it is shot and edited, but it also refers to the social and cultural connotations of the medium, as well as with the locations of the subject behind the camera. Finally, talking about the artifice also entails reflecting on the entire apparatus (Metz 1981; de Lauretis 1987; Stam 1992) surrounding and shaping filmic representations: the economical aspects, the production-distribution system, the audience reception, and the disciplinary paradigms. It is in this sense that the political dimension of *Reassemblage* has been fully appreciated, as a film attentive to the workings of representation because it

enacts a continuous meta-reflection on the medium itself, on the cinematic apparatus and its complicities with ideology in hailing and shaping subjectivities. Moreover, I argued that “making film politically” (Trinh 1991, 147), which means indeed to question one’s own position as filmmaker and to politicise all aspects of filmmaking, is the very drive and goal of her work.

The other crucial concept I have presented in this chapter is that of the “Inappropriate/d Other:” it is a subject that is not appropriate and that cannot be appropriated; this Other resists labelling, is “outside in” and “inside out” of the boundaries of definitions and genres (Trinh 1991). I also proposed this conception of inappropriate/d-ness as referring not only to the subject positions mobilised by *Reassemblage* but to the film itself. Furthermore, I adopted this conception of the “Inappropriate/d Other” to understand the specificities of feminist documentary: it is as a space where power is deconstructed, where the dominant set of criteria are ineffective (Trinh 1991, 71). Therein, power, as well as the criteria of analysis and knowledge production can be carefully inspected and re-evaluated.

Applying the theoretical tools of indexicality, materiality and visibility once again, I explained how *Reassemblage* can be read as a film that is haunted by reality as it carries traces of its encounter with the reality of the pro-filmic events. Trace is one of the kinds of index Peirce talks about (Peirce 1955; 1958). These traces hint at a presence that is not quite there though is not completely absent. Therefore I have shown how Trinh’s film, by addressing the absences, the gaps, the silences, makes present, not the object, but the process through which the object partially disappeared from the sign. Moreover, I have proposed that, since the trace has been connected with absence and death by several scholars (Doane 2007b; Didi-Huberman 2009), *Reassemblage*’s indexicality can also be interpreted as referring to the experience of the colonial encounter, and to the unrepresentability and the unspeakability of historical collective traumas. Additionally, since the film plays with presence and absence, visible and invisible, I proposed that through this understanding of the documentary sign as trace, a semiotic space opens up that is at once also political: the in-between space, the interval. To better explain the feminist political potential of this space, I have discussed how materiality and visibility are engaged in the film.

I have argued that it is in the film’s materiality that its feminist commitment can be located most clearly. This involved interpreting *Reassemblage* with the concepts of rhythm and interval in mind. What Trinh has called, in different contexts, the gap, the space in-between or the interval (Trinh 1992; 1999; 2005) is a space where new engagements with reality and with the Other can be enacted, as well as where other meanings and new subject positions can be imagined. Moreover, it is precisely because rhythm is a crucial tool and a recurrent metaphor in the film that these intervals and spaces in-between can be opened. As already recalled, I focused on how *Reassemblage* enacts a continuous meta-

reflection on the medium itself and on the cinematic apparatus. However, it should be stressed that the film is not merely a self-reflexive exercise on how to cross limits. Quite the opposite, I have shown that Trinh's work in general, and *Reassemblage* specifically aims not only at challenging existing territories, but at opening new spaces for "creative critical reflections on cinema, art, feminism, and cultural politics" (Trinh 1996).

Finally, with reference to the film's rhythm and its musical dimension in relation to visibility, I considered how *Reassemblage* challenges the hegemony of vision. In my reading, the film manages to offer a multi-sensorial experience where sight is not the prevailing tool of knowledge production and where the viewer has to 'make sense' of the film. Considering how the issue of visibility is tightly interconnected with that of gendered power relations and knowledge production, I stressed the strategies through which Trinh does not privilege the visual dimension of the film. Hence, I argued that *Reassemblage* can be interpreted as deploying a "feminist visual strategy" which is critical of and alternative to phallogocentric models of vision (Laura Marks 2002, 7).

In sum, my analysis has explored *Reassemblage's* overall 'excessiveness,' and clarified how it is this very characteristic that allows the film to perform within and outside of, as well as challenge, the three fields of anthropology, documentary and feminist film. Finally, I have shown that the inappropriateness of this film and the ways it engages with the concepts of rhythm and the interval are what make this film a documentary that incites feminist effects.

Europlex is a video essay about borders. However, as straightforward as this definition sounds, my analysis has shown the film to be a complex and multilayered feminist documentary, mobilising at once questions of representation, technology, power, subjectivity and reality. In the video the borders addressed are the invisible, yet highly controlled and secured economic borders of the geo-political powers and of Capital, where things and standards of quality travel much easier than people.

The multiplicity of techniques used in the construction of the film was of central concern to my analysis. The practice of layering was one such important feature of the film. I argued that layering relates to the digital editing technique, but is also addressed as a topic in the content matter of the film. Similarly, I elaborated how *Europlex* echoes its subject matter in its own filmic materiality: its specific cinematographic strategies are hybrid, they cross the borders of different genres and technologies so as the film portrays the realities of the border. Not only the film performs the border, but the film, with the use of so-called fictional and non-fictional strategies, is itself situated in a liminal zone.

Moreover, I discussed how the hybridity of the film is a representational as well as a political practice. *Europlex* is a "video essay" (Biemann 2005), a genre of film in between documentary and video art, ethnographic enquiry and political

intervention (Alter 2003; Biemann 2003b). Departing from an investigation of this genre, then, I have elaborated how the border in *Europlex* is a material space as well as a metaphor (Balibar 2002). It becomes a metaphor for conceptualising the crossing of multiple boundaries: between nation states, identities, global economy and local experiences, between control and resistance, between humans and machines. It was this second aspect that led me to draw a connection between Trinh's theorisation of what she has called 'the space in-between' and the border as theorised and performed through *Europlex*. My analysis has focused, therefore, on the political relevance and the feminist potential of this approach to the border. It is within this framework that I also interpreted Biemann's endeavour to write counter-geography (Szeman 2002; Biemann 2003a). Observing *Europlex* through the lenses of the so-called anti-realist feminist film theories, I elaborated on how it can be considered a feminist film in terms of how it challenges realistic documentary techniques, and is aware of and reflexive on its own artifice. However I noted that, like Trinh in *Reassemblage*, Biemann fails to give a voice to the women who are the focus of her film.

In Chapter 4 I also demonstrated that *Europlex* engages with indexicality at various levels and in different ways. Through a scrutiny of the fictional and non-fictional strategies deployed in the film, I argued how indexicality is performed by reproducing, while critically deconstructing, those strategies traditionally understood as connected with documentary's objectivity. In short, I indicated how the relations between filmic signs and filmed objects in *Europlex* present instances of indexicality, namely, in occurrences of the index as trace, as a sign entailing a relation of proximity and co-presence with the object, and as deixis. Moreover, I questioned the extent to which this performance of indexicality can be seen as successful in challenging the strategies traditionally used in traditional documentary to present accurate and 'truthful' accounts of reality. Instead I argued that *Europlex* deploys the political potential of indexicality in its use of digital technology, specifically in terms of how the film makes invisible realities visible. Because of the high degree of manipulation and reproduction possible with digital video, several reactions to the advent of digital video-recording devices entailed a complete disavowal of any possibility of talking about documentary at all (for example: Manovich 2001; Winston 1995). I instead suggested that the use of digital technology in *Europlex* can be interpreted as generating a new aesthetic style (Landesman 2008, 33), yet without leading to the removal of the distinction between documentary and fiction film.

My discussion of materiality in *Europlex* has shown that because of *how* the film is constructed, it offers the audience a performance of reality. I referred to the performative, in regard to both Biemann's filmmaking approach and the functioning of the border, as both a social and semiotic process. The territorial border is understood as a material and symbolic stage where power relations are explicitly performed on bodies (Biemann 2002c, 116) and where, therefore, it

becomes possible to observe how discourse constitutes, disciplines or normalises subjects, produces events and “brings about effects” (Foucault in Marshall 1999, 309). Therefore, I argued that the performative element is, not only in the border as a geographical space, but also in Biemann’s video-making itself. Not only she performs “theory in the field of art” (Volkhart 2001, 6), but her filmmaking can be understood as an action that produces effects, as a *doing*, an activity that performs what it describes, that makes realities or, at least, makes them visible. In sum, I showed that through its performative mode, *Europlex* manages to engage with materiality, that is to say, the power dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, the economical and cultural discourses and the economical and material invisible realities of the border.

Finally, I observed how the video engages with visuality. I illustrated that *Europlex* engages with the issue of vision and (in)visibility on at least three different levels: the level of its content matter, in the critical uses of digital technologies and in the way that the film deploys reflexivity and performs a meta-reflection on the filmic medium. In all these three aspects, visuality appeared to be a crucial lens through which to identify the political and feminist aspects of *Europlex*. Given that the film makes visible the invisible (but all too real) relations of forces, I explained that *Europlex* performs, creates, and enacts the invisible realities of the border so they become filmable. It is in the way *Europlex* engages vision, visuality and (in)visibility, that I have located its most significant feminist effects.

All these examples have shown that a feminist approach to documentary films enables an exploration of how the material world “presses on” cinematic representations (Comolli 1999) and how the documentary sign is *haunted* by reality. Consequently, I have explored how these films provoke political feminist effects, that is to say: how they, directly or indirectly, address the relations between practices of representation, power, discourse and subjectivity; how they stimulates critical spaces of resistance to hegemonic discourses; how they produce alternative representations, images and realities; and eventually, how they bring about changes in “our collective modes of relation to the environment...to our cultural norms and values [and] to our bodies” (Braidotti 2011, 74-75).

I have shown how all the films studied engage with the concepts of indexicality, materiality, and visuality, and how these theoretical tools prove to be useful to explore the feminist dimensions of documentary. However, I also illustrated how each of the three films reveals its feminist potential in different, at times even contradictory ways, when observed through each of these three lenses. It is therefore interesting to now draw some conclusions comparing how *Sisters in Law*, *Reassemblage* and *Europlex* can be read transversally, through the three concepts.

To look at the lens of indexicality first, it has been discussed that *Sisters in Law* presents its indexical dimension in a traditional documentary style. A direct referentiality to the object and to real world is implied and stressed through its filmic language. This has been shown to be problematic from a feminist perspective that focuses on the critique of realism. Nonetheless, although somewhat paradoxically, the film produces feminist effects regardless, because of the affects it provokes, the emotional responses it evokes, and because of its ability to reach a broad audience. I have shown that it is in the way *Sisters in Law* engages with indexicality that its feminist political potential can be identified more powerfully. *Reassemblage* instead performs its indexicality in a manner almost entirely opposite to that found in *Sisters in Law*. It mobilises another aspect of the indexical relation between sign and object: the trace. Although the indexical bond between sign and reality seems at first quite difficult to find in this film, *Reassemblage* shows how an understanding of the documentary sign as trace can be crucial to point the attention towards how it represents, or evokes, a specific colonial history, collective traumas and the processes of construction of the Other. Finally, I have shown that *Europlex*, because of its use of multiple visualisation technologies, performs all the various aspects of the indexical relation: it implies a connection of proximity or contact with, as well as it points the attention towards, the object. Accordingly, I have elaborated how the video points towards complexities and performs realities. While at times presenting instances in which the object actually 'touched' the film, thus leaving a visible trace; the specificity of *Europlex's* performance of indexicality lies in the way it directs attention towards those realities that are invisible.

Taking into consideration now the three films in relation to the lens of materiality, it can be seen that for *Sisters in Law* its feminist potential does not reside in *how* the film is constructed, since it does not appear to be explicitly self-reflexive, or aware of its artifice. Nonetheless, the film retains feminist implications in its material construction because it interpellates bodies and affects, specifically the embodied experience of pain. In *Reassemblage*, instead, I argue that it is at the level of materiality in which the most important feminist effects are produced. It is from this perspective that the film shows a high degree of reflexivity, it challenges the claims of objectivity common in traditional anthropological documentaries, and thus the film creates alternative representations of the Other through this deconstruction. I have however also noted that this self-reflexive approach constitutes a downside of the film, as it only emphasises its own filmic construction and the location of the filmmaker, thus somewhat denying the possibility of the voices of the women represented to be heard. Finally, *Europlex* engages with materiality at two levels: it is situated in and *performs* the material realities of borders, and it creatively and explicitly addresses the materiality of various digital and analogue visual media. Both aspects can be read as feminist approaches to the issue of materiality, as the film

critically and politically engages with the relations between social power relations and their implications in the technologies of knowledge production.

Finally, visibility or the critique of the hegemony of vision has been another element crucial to each of the three films analysed. I have discussed how, in *Sisters in Law* the claims of the invisibility of the camera and of the filmmaker are problematic from a feminist anti-realist film perspective. However, I also interpreted this same invisibility as a tool to point at the limits of traditional documentary, thus stimulating a critical reconsideration of what a feminist documentary could be. Thus visibility is crucial in *Sisters in Law* because it points towards these limits. Similarly, in *Reassemblage*, visibility proves to be a crucial theoretical aspect to study the film. I have shown how this film goes beyond visibility: it engages other sensorial and perceptive tools through the way the film deploys rhythm as a compositional method and well as a concept. By pointing at the gaps in-between what is visible and what is not, the film creates spaces for other senses to be engaged; and through these, it opens possibilities for new feminist and multiple meanings to be imagined. Finally, I have shown that the most prominent feminist effects within *Europlex* are to be found in the way the video engages with the lens of visibility. This is, first, because the video directly addresses how various technologies of visualisations are implicated in processes of control and disciplining of bodies; second, because it is able to make use of these same available contemporary technologies, whilst doing so in a politically aware and critical manner; and finally because *Europlex* also directs the attention towards what is not visible, and therefore is able to *perform* the invisible. Through the analysis of this video, I have also argued that the quest of making the invisible visible is a crucial feminist concern.

In sum, this research has shown how the inter-actions between feminist studies, documentary film theory and visual anthropology constitute a rich field though which it becomes possible to address crucial and current theoretical concerns. At the crossroad of these three domains, I have proposed a feminist approach to documentary and I have introduced and assessed this framework in the analysis of three selected films. I have elaborated on the reasons why, and how, this kind of study could offer fruitful insights on, and contribute to, important contemporary debates; such are those concerned with the politics of representation, the relations of power and/in visual strategies and technologies, the social and cultural processes of Othering, and the relation between politics and aesthetics.

I then studied three films in depth, namely *Sisters in Law*, *Reassemblage* and *Europlex*. Albeit very different from each other, they have in common the fact that they address and cross borders, labels and domains. I have argued that it is exactly because these three films perform and challenge standard definitions and boundaries that they have proven to be exemplary sites to articulate how the

interconnections between the politics and aesthetics of documentary could and should be a feminist concern. Indeed, through this study I have shown that these films are all, in different ways, 'excessive,' or, borrowing Trinh's concept, "inappropriate/d" (Trinh 1986, 9) and as such they should be regarded as examples of feminist documentary. In other words, they are documentaries that "provoke, facilitate, and solicit a new seeing" (Trinh 2005, 13), and by doing so, they produce feminist effect, they open political spaces of resistance to hegemonic discourses and eventually, promote change.

To conclude, in this study I have shown how the three selected films – which are exemplary yet not unique – are not only determined by the social world, as they are *haunted by reality*, but they can also be "transformative of that same world" (Gaines 2007, 19).

To cross and perform borders; to imagine invisible realities; to point the attention to the power of visuality; to provide the space to redefine meanings and realities. These are some of the main potential effects of such "inappropriate/d" films, as well as the possibilities opened by a critical perspective that inhabits the space between feminist theories, documentary studies and visual anthropology. Ultimately then, this was the aim of this research. Exploring the interconnections between the politics and aesthetics of documentary, this study has pointed the attention to what documentary films can *do*, to the links between documentary practices and the processes knowledge production and, finally, to the critical and transformative promise that resides in the encounters between feminism and documentary.

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SAMENVATTING

Feminisme, documentaire films en visuele antropologie zijn de drie gebieden die in dit onderzoek doorkruist en verbonden worden. De veelzijdige relatie tussen deze drie gebieden kenmerkt zich door vraagstukken over realiteit, waarheid, representatie van de Ander, kennisproductie en macht. Dit onderzoek verkent de ingewikkelde onderlinge relaties door middel van een analyse van drie films: Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law* (2005), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) en Ursula Biemanns *Europlex* (2003). In verschillende mate, en op meerdere en overlappende wijze, houden deze films zich bezig met de problematiek van de representatie(s) van niet-westerse, en in het bijzonder vrouwelijke, subjecten, de relatie tussen teken en realiteit en de impliciete machtsdynamiek gedurende het maakproces van documentaires.

De algemene doelstelling van dit onderzoek is, door middel van het onderzoeken van deze drie films, de documentaire film terug te brengen naar het gebied van de feministische interventie. Ik herinterpreteer het begrip feministische documentaire, door te peilen wat een feministische documentaire *doet*, namelijk de representatie die het voortbrengt, de effecten, en *hoe* het zich verhoudt tot de realiteit, tot het filmische medium en tot het bredere sociale, culturele en politieke milieu.

De voornaamste vragen die dit onderzoek aansturen zijn: hoe gaan deze documentaires om met problemen betreffende macht en gender, oftewel met de relatie tussen macht, kennis en de samenstelling van gegenderde subjectposities? Hoe bevragen de films de relatie tussen teken en realiteit? Uit deze vraagstellingen ontstaat een nieuwe reeks van vragen: Wat kunnen feministische onderzoeken doen voor de documentaire studies en vice versa? Wat kan antropologische kennis over het zien en de documentaire an sich ons vertellen over het feministisch filmmaken? Kan een feministische benadering tot documentaire films over de Ander een nieuw licht werpen op antropologische observatie en visualiteit in films? Maar vooral: Hoe kan een documentaire feministische effecten tweebrengen? Hoe kan een feministische benadering tot de documentaire tegelijkertijd ons begrip met betrekking tot de realiteit, fictie, politiek en esthetiek mobiliseren? Voor het beantwoorden van deze vragen concentreert dit onderzoek zich specifiek op de wisselwerking tussen de materialiteit van de documentaire film, de realiteit, de visie, en de machtsverhoudingen tussen het Zelf en de Ander, de waarnemende en waargenomen subjecten en de filmende en gefilmde subjecten.

Tussen feminisme, de documentaire film en de visuele antropologie bemerk ik een 'grijze zone' of een 'kloof.' Het is een tussengebied waar categorieën, vastomlijnde disciplinairiteit en algemeen onderzoek zich ongemakkelijk voelen,

een gebied dat vanwege de complexiteit te vaak onbehandeld is gebleven of doelbewust is genegeerd. In deze kloof ontstaat er ruimte voor een kritisch, bevestigend en feministisch begrip van documentaires als instrument om nieuwe kennis, alternatieve beelden en verbeeldingen te produceren, en uiteindelijk 'een nieuwe manier van zien te verwerven' ("to solicit a new seeing," Trinh 2005, 13).

Dit onderzoek stelt allereerst een theoretisch en analytisch kader voor, waardoor de studie van de filmdocumentaire door een feministische lens kan worden bekeken. Dit kader is interdisciplinair en doorkruist visuele antropologie, documentaire film studies, semiotiek, culturele studies en gender studies. Daarnaast presenteer ik een diepgaande analyse van de drie eerdergenoemde films. Deze films functioneren zowel als bronnen om de noodzakelijke vragen en handvaten te definiëren om dit specifieke genre te benaderen, evenals als casus om de grenzen van de huidige definities van de (feministische) documentaire te testen. De films bevinden zich allemaal in het 'grijze zone' en beantwoorden mijn vragen op specifieke, meervoudige en soms overlappende wijze.

Het is belangrijk te benadrukken dat het exact schetsen van wat een feministische documentaire *is*, voorbij zou gaan aan, of beter gezegd tegenin zou gaan, aan de bedoeling van dit onderzoek. Ik formuleer geen nieuwe normatieve verzameling van regels om te bepalen wat een feministische documentaire is, of zou moeten zijn; toch is het wel noodzakelijk om voor de context van dit onderzoek een werkdefinitie vast te stellen. Allereerst stel ik voor dat de relatie tussen realiteit en het teken documentaire kan worden verondersteld als een relatie berust op opjagen. Opjagen verwijst hier naar de specifieke indexicale kwaliteit van de relatie tussen teken en object, de manier waarop het object van invloed of bepalend is voor het teken (Peirce 1958, 8.177), of de manier waarop 'de wereld nadruk legt op' het cineastische teken (Comolli 1999, 40). Lenend van en uitbreidend hierop met betrekking tot de definitie van Mary Ann Doane tegenover het indexicale teken als een teken dat wordt 'opgejaagd door zijn object' ("haunted by its object") (Doane 2007b, 134), geef ik verschillende voorbeelden waar de gefilmde realiteit zichzelf inderdaad opdringt en in stand houdt, en zich continue een plek verwerft in het filmische documentaire teken.

Daarom beschouw ik de feministische documentaire als een film *die opgejaagd wordt door de realiteit, en betrekking tot feministische kwesties*, namelijk de problematiek van gender, macht en processen van insluiting en uitsluiting. Nog specifieker, aangezien de focus van dit onderzoek gericht is op antropologische feministische documentaires, worden deze documentaires beschouwd als *films die opgejaagd worden door de realiteit, en betrekking tot feministische kwesties in verband met de politiek van de Ander en processen van Othering*. De drie bestudeerde films zijn ondanks dat ze niet uniek zijn niettemin een voorbeeld van de diverse stijlen en verschillende gradaties van complexiteit van wat wil ik identificeren als een manier van film maken die een kruising bevat tussen de documentaire, kunst

en antropologie, en die feministische effecten heeft of kan hebben. Ik duid aan dat het feministische potentieel van de documentaire politiek van aard is, en schuilt in de mogelijkheid om getuigenissen af te geven van gemarginaliseerde stemmen en subjectiviteiten, van het vertegenwoordigen van strijd en het materiële bestaan van andere werkelijkheden, van het zichtbaar maken van de onzichtbare maar toch materiële dimensies van culturele, geopolitieke en sociale machtsongelijkheden, en ten slotte het creëren van nieuwe verbeeldingen en kennisvormen. Vanuit dit perspectief illustreer ik hoe *Sisters in Law*, *Reassemblage* en *Europlex* verschillende feministische effecten produceren. Iedere film is, op zijn geheel eigen wijze, excessief. Ze gaan, te veel of te weinig, verder dan bepaalde labels en disciplines: of ze zijn te nadrukkelijk een documentaire om serieus genomen te worden door de heersende feministische filmtheorie (*Sisters in Law*), te feministisch om daadwerkelijk als antropologisch beschouwd te kunnen worden (*Reassemblage*), of te experimenteel om simpelweg als documentaire te kunnen worden betiteld (*Europlex*).

Ik beschouw een vernieuwde feministische benadering voor dit soort audiovisuele representaties niet alleen als waardevol en verrijkend, maar ook als noodzakelijk. Daarom stel ik een mogelijke wijze van kijken naar een documentaire film voor, door deze uit te voeren in een kritisch, interdisciplinair en feministisch perspectief en onder de huidige geopolitieke en academische omstandigheden. Contextueel laat ik zien waarom documentaire films, vooral de zogeheten antropologische documentaires, een gebied bestrijken waar tegelijkertijd verscheidene cruciale theoretische en methodologische kwesties kunnen worden aangepakt: problematiek betreffende realiteit en representatie, subjectiviteit en controle, audiovisueel technologieën en de impact hiervan op de culturele verbeelding en op de constructie van de Ander. Het erkennen van het opjagen van de realiteit in de (feministische) filmdocumentaire is essentieel voor een analyse waarin rekening wordt gehouden met zowel de inhoud als de constructie en materialiteit van de film als een audiovisueel medium. Dienovereenkomstig richt dit onderzoek zich op de wisselwerking tussen de *indexicale* aspecten van de documentaire film, die ik voorstel als een vernieuwd kader om de specificaties te identificeren die beschrijven hoe een documentaire werkt en hoe het begrepen kan worden; *visualiteit* en de feministische kritiek tegenover de hegemonie van visie; en de *materialiteit* van de film. Materialiteit wordt hier op twee manieren bedoeld. Het betreft hoe de film is geconstrueerd: de technologieën, beelden, montage, geluiden, voice-over, het gebruik van realistische of fictionele beelden en geluiden en het gebruik van verschillende filmische strategieën. Daarnaast verwijst materialiteit ook naar de manier waarop documentaire film engageert met lichamen en met de wereld als geheel. Met *visualiteit* verwijs ik naar het domein van hoe visie, als een van de zintuigen, een specifieke geschiedenis heeft en een cultureel fenomeen is. Visie wordt daarom besproken als fundamenteel verbonden met de productie van wetenschappelijke

kennis. Daarom toon ik aan, met het gebruik van feministische kritieken van vooral Donna Haraway (1988; 1991), dat 'het zien' sterk verbonden is met sociale machtsverhoudingen en dominante gewoonten. Gebaseerd hierop bespreek ik de behoefte om visualiteit in documentaire film mogelijkwerijs in verband te brengen met sociaal-culturele ongelijke machtsverhoudingen, Eurocentrisme en de processen van Othering; met andere woorden, ik laat zien hoe de focus op documentaire als een technologie van visie noodzakelijk is voor een feministische en kritische blik.

De vernieuwende feministische benadering van de documentaire die hierbij wordt voorgesteld is daarom een zeer belangrijke onderneming, aangezien ik me kan voorstellen dat een dergelijk onderzoek vruchtbare inzichten kan bieden op, en kan toevoegen aan, belangrijke debatten op het gebied van gender studies, visuele- en culturele studies in het algemeen, en met name over de politiek van representatie, het verband van macht en/in visuele strategieën, hedendaagse processen van Othering en de politieke implicatie van het gebruik van (nieuwe) technologieën. Ten slotte, wil ik duidelijk maken dat het is precies omdat deze drie films definities en grenzen zowel uitvoeren als uitdagen, dan dat ze beschouwd moeten worden als voorbeelden van feministische documentaires, oftewel documentaires die bepaalde culturele en politieke effecten produceren.

Deze films zijn, om het concept van Trinh te gebruiken, "inappropriate/d" (Trinh 1986, 9): zowel ongepast als niet passend. Ze doorkruisen labels en categorisaties, onderzoeken grenzen en werpen deze ook op; ze laten zichzelf opjagen door de realiteit zonder verloren te gaan in de dominante valkuilen van realisme; ze verbeelden en representeren onzichtbare werkelijkheden terwijl ze aandacht schenken aan de macht van visie en visualiteit; ze ontsnappen aan rigide definities terwijl ze ruimte bieden om betekenissen en werkelijkheden te herdefiniëren. En hoewel deze films gevormd zijn door en ontstaan uit de sociale wereld, zijn ze ook in staat om 'diezelfde wereld om te omvormen' (Gaines 2007, 19). Dit zijn de potentiële effecten van dergelijke "inappropriate/d" films, net als de mogelijkheden die ontstaan door een kritisch perspectief dat het gebied bestrijkt tussen feministische theorieën, documentaire studies en visuele antropologie. Uiteindelijk is dat wat dit onderzoek exploreert en laat zien. Door het verkennen van de verbanden tussen de politiek en de esthetiek van de documentaire, legt dit onderzoek de aandacht op wat audiovisuele representaties kunnen *doen*, op de verbindingen tussen de documentairewereld en de processen van kennisproductie en, uiteindelijk, op de kritische en transformatieve belofte die schuilt in de ontmoetingen tussen het feminisme en de documentaire.

SUMMARY

Feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology are the three domains that this study crosses and connects. The multifaceted relation between these three fields can be summarised as turning around the debates on reality, truth, representation of the Other, knowledge production and power. This research explores such intricate interrelations through the analysis of three films: Kim Longinotto's *Sisters in Law* (2005), Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) and Ursula Biemann's *Europlex* (2003). To different extents, and in multiple and overlapping ways, these films address the issue of representation(s) of non-Western, and especially female, subjects, the relation between sign and reality and the power dynamics implicit in documentary filmmaking.

The overall goal of this research, through the examination of these three films, is to bring documentary film back into the arena of feminist intervention. I reinterpret the notion of feminist documentary by studying what a feminist documentary *does*: the representations it produces, its effects, and *how* it engages with reality, with the filmic medium, and with the broader social, cultural and political milieu.

The foremost questions that drive this study are: how do these documentaries deal with issues of power and gender, that is to say, with the relation between power, knowledge, and the constitution of gendered subject positions? How do these films negotiate the relation between sign and reality? From these, a new set of questions emerges: What can feminist studies do for documentary theory and vice versa? What can anthropological knowledge about vision and documentary tell us about feminist filmmaking? Can a feminist approach to documentary films about the Other shed a new light on anthropological observation and visibility in film? And ultimately: how can a documentary produce feminist effects? How can a feminist approach to documentary mobilize at once our understanding of reality, fiction, politics and aesthetics? In answering these questions, this study concentrates specifically on the interrelations between the materiality of documentary film, reality, vision, and relationships of power between Self and Other, observer and observed, filming and filmed subjects.

Between feminism, documentary film and visual anthropology I detect a 'grey zone,' or 'gap'. It is an in-between area where labelling and clear-cut disciplinary and generic investigations are uncomfortable, a space that because of its complexity has been too often left uncharted or purposefully ignored. It is in this gap that a space is offered for a critical, affirmative and feminist understanding of documentaries as tools to produce new knowledge, alternative images, imaginaries, and ultimately "to solicit a new seeing" (Trinh 2005, 13).

This research first proposes a theoretical and analytical framework which enables the study of documentary film through a feminist lens. This framework is an interdisciplinary one, traversing visual anthropology, documentary film studies, semiotics, cultural studies and gender studies. Second, I present an in-depth analysis of the three aforementioned films. These films function both as sources to identify the questions and tools necessary to approach this specific genre, and as cases to test the limits of current definitions of (feminist) documentary. They all inhabit the 'grey zone' and each of them answers my questions in specific, multiple, and occasionally overlapping ways.

It is important to stress that to precisely delineate what a feminist documentary *is* would be beyond, or rather against, the intention of this study. I do not fix a new normative set of rules about what feminist documentary is or should be; nonetheless, a working definition, in the context of this research, is necessary. I first propose that the relation between reality and the documentary sign can be understood as one of 'haunting'. Haunting here refers to the specific indexical quality of the relation between sign and object, the manner in which the object affects or determines the sign (Peirce 1958, 8.177), or the way in which "the world presses on" the cinematic sign (Comolli 1999, 40). Borrowing and expanding upon Mary Ann Doane's definition of the indexical sign as one that is "haunted by its object" (Doane 2007b, 134), I present several examples where the filmed reality indeed inhabits, intrudes upon, and makes itself continually present in the filmic documentary sign.

Therefore, I consider feminist documentary, then, as a film that is *haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues*, namely, issues of gender, power, and processes of inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, as the particular focus of this research is on anthropological feminist documentaries, these documentaries are understood as *films haunted by reality and regarding feminist issues to do with the politics of the Other and processes of Othering*. The three films studied, although not unique, are nonetheless exemplary of the diverse styles and the various degrees of complexity of what I propose to identify as a kind of filmmaking, at the crossroad between documentary, art and anthropology, which has or could have feminist effects. I articulate that the feminist potential of documentary is a political one, that resides in the possibility of giving testimony to marginal voices and subjectivities, of representing struggles and the material existence of Other realities, of making visible the invisible yet very material dimensions of cultural, geo-political and social power inequalities, and finally, of creating new imaginaries and knowledges. From this perspective, I illustrate how *Sisters in Law*, *Reassemblage* and *Europlex* produce different feminist effects in diverse, manifold ways. Each film is, in its own specific way, excessive. Too much or too little, they exceed labels and disciplines: either too documentary to be taken seriously by prevailing feminist film theories (*Sisters in Law*), or too feminist to be

considered properly anthropological (*Reassemblage*), or too experimental to be easily labelled as documentary (*Europlex*).

I deem a renewed feminist approach to these kinds of audio-visual representations not only valuable and enriching, but also necessary. Therefore I suggest a possible way to look at documentary film in a critical, interdisciplinary, feminist perspective, in the contemporary geopolitical and academic situation. Contextually, I demonstrate why documentary films, particularly so-called anthropological documentaries, are an exemplary site that allows tackling, at once, several crucial theoretical and methodological matters: issues of reality and representation, subjectivity and control, audio-visual technologies and their impact on the cultural imaginary and on the construction of the Other. To acknowledge the haunting of reality present in (feminist) documentary film is crucial for an analysis that takes into account the content matter as well as the construction and materiality of the film as an audio-visual medium. Accordingly, this research concentrates on the interconnections between the *indexical* aspects of documentary film, which I suggest as a renewed framework to identify the specificities of how documentary works and how it could be understood; *visuality* and the feminist critique of the hegemony of vision; and the *materiality* of the film. Materiality here is intended in two senses. It concerns how the film is constructed: its technologies, framing, editing, voice-over, use of realistic or fictional images and sounds, and use of different filmic strategies. Materiality also refers to the manner in which documentary film engages with bodies and with the matter of the world. With *visuality* I refer to the domain of how vision, as one of the senses, has a specific history and is a cultural phenomenon. Vision is therefore discussed as being fundamentally linked with the production of scientific knowledge. Consequently, through feminist critiques, particularly Donna Haraway's (1988; 1991), I elaborate on how vision is deeply connected with social power relations and hegemonic practices. Hence, I discuss the need to consider *visuality* in documentary film in its implications with socio-cultural power imbalances, Eurocentrism and processes of Othering; in other words, I elaborate on how a focus on documentary as a technology of vision is necessary for a feminist and critical outlook.

The renewed feminist approach to documentary hereby proposed is deemed to be a most needed endeavour, as I suggests that this kind of study could offer fruitful insights on, and contribute to, important debates in the field of gender studies, visual studies and cultural studies at large, namely those concerning: the politics of representation, the interconnection of power and/in visual strategies, contemporary processes of Othering and the political implication of the use of (new) technologies. Finally, I articulate that it is exactly because these three films perform and challenge standard definitions and boundaries that they should be regarded as examples of feminist documentary, that is to say, documentary that produces certain cultural and political effects.

These films are, to borrow Trinh's concept, "inappropriate/d" (Trinh 1986, 9). They cross labels and categorization; explore and perform borders; let themselves be *haunted by reality* without falling flat into the hegemonic pitfalls of realism; they imagine and represent invisible realities while pointing attention to the power of vision and visibility; they escape rigid definitions while providing the space to redefine meanings and realities; and while these films are determined by the social world, they can also be "transformative of that same world" (Gaines 2007, 19). These are the potential effects of such "inappropriate/d" films, as well as the possibilities opened by a critical perspective that inhabits the space between feminist theories, documentary studies and visual anthropology. Ultimately then, this is what this research investigates and performs. Exploring the interconnections between the politics and aesthetics of documentary, this study points the attention to what audio-visual representations can *do*, to the links between documentary practices and the processes knowledge production and, finally, to the critical and transformative promise that resides in the encounters between feminism and documentary .

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Domitilla Olivieri graduated in Anthropology at Sapienza University of Rome in 2005 with a thesis entitled *Hearing/Feeling, Observing, Filming. Anthropology of the Senses in Vallepietra*. After having been awarded, in 2005, a Marie Curie Fellowship for Early Stage Training in Gender and Women's Studies (EU Sixth Framework Programme), she accomplished in 2008 a RMA in Gender and Ethnicity and started her PhD research at the History and Culture Institute (OGC) and the Graduate Gender Programme (GGeP) at Utrecht University. She is currently a lecturer at the department of Media and Culture Studies (MCW) at Utrecht University, where she has been teaching since 2007.

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