

Barbara Hammer's History Lessons as a documentary utopia

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This article is devoted to the third part of Barbara Hammer's documentary trilogy, *History Lessons*. The author analyzes and interprets the form and message of this post-queer essay, with the aim of describing its formula in relation to the mockumentary and found-footage film conventions. She goes back to the pioneer of found footage in the history of world cinema, Esfir Shub, and the position of women in production culture. She refers to Hammer's debut film, *Dyketactics* (1974), to describe Hammer's artistic and political tactic, consisting of intercepting images of women, rooted in visual history, and the subversive quotation of these images against the idea and context of the original. *Dyketactics* in *History Lessons* is about quoting archival materials from the genres of documentary, popular science and pornography with the aim of writing the history of the lives of lesbians in the US from the period before the Stonewall riots, where there is very little coverage of the story. The falsifying of archival materials through the editing manipulation of imagery and sound paradoxically uncovers not so much the truth about the lives of lesbians, as what seems to be hidden in images created with a completely different aim than telling the herstory of American women of various orientations and races.

KEYWORDS: found footage, lesbian film, women's cinema, mock-documentary, Barbara Hammer

*The Americans remind us “We are all lesbians”;
that is, don't denigrate woman, don't make of
her what men have made of you.*

Hélène Cixous

In her famous essay *The Laugh of Medusa*, Hélène Cixous used the symbolism of a thieving magpie to affirm the feminine way of intercepting the signs of culture, “steal and fly.”[1] Although Cixous' reflection was mainly in connection with women's writing, her metaphors, combining language and laughter, which comes after the terror, returns as feminist criticism whenever the artist humorously experiments with art's language at hand. Such artistic gestures are made by Barbara Hammer, the American pioneer in lesbian cinema. Her first film, *Dyketactics* (1974), considered to be the first lesbian film in cinematic history, was made as one of her student short films. The titular *dyketactics*, or “lesbian tactics”, is the act of intercepting images of feminine nudity, divesting the male audience of the power over looking at a woman's body, and documenting relationships between women. As Hammer herself explains, she had not heard of either Laura Mulvey's articles on voyeuristic pleasure in narra-

[1] H. Cixous, *The Laugh of Medusa*, trans. K. Cohen and P. Cohen, “Signs” 1976, vol. 1, no. 4, p. 882.

tive cinema or other feminist theories.[2] Led by intuition, she sought means of expression that would reflect the comfort and erotic freedom of female contacts. How to free the gaze from the regime of being seen, but at the same time, shape the aesthetics of lesbian film? Images of nude women in nature's bosom are, after all, a recurring motif in the history of painting. The viewing of *Dyketactics* is accompanied by a series of subconscious associations with three nudes thanks to which women found themselves in museums – Raphael's *Three Graces*, the anonymous *Gabrielle D'Estres and one of her sisters*, Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, and *Etant Donnes* by Marcel Duchamp. However, instead of the entrapment of their bodies in the frames of the nude or the shell of the sculpture, the artist offers the women the chance to play freely in front of the camera in nature. And, what is most important, it was not the classic *voyeur* looking at them through the lens of the camera, but one of them, with the film equipment nearly touching their bodies and being passed around, changing hands. After these pioneering attempts to make original lesbian films, cinematic archaeology became a passion of Barbara Hammer's – that is, the pillaging of private and public archives with the aim of finding mere fragments from which one could then recreate and understand the history of lesbians. Due to the problematization of the relation between documentaries and history – public and private – within her body of work one can distinguish the *Queer History Trilogy*, which is made up of the documentary shorts *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fiction* (1996) and *History Lessons* (2000). The first two parts concern biographical and autobiographical materials and have drawn the attention of female researchers.[3] The third part, the capstone, or in Hammer's own words, "the mother" of the trilogy,[4] is seen as the most radical proposal of the three. The two former shorts use the resources of individual memory and images of intimate histories, and through this they are placed in the queer cinema niche. *History lessons*, however, is an attack on the public archives and visions of the lesbian past in the US, and uses the familiar formats of mockumentary and found footage for the purpose of creating a minority utopia from an original documentary form. Nowadays, *History Lessons*, as far as programme organisers consider Hammer's suggestions, is shown together with the one-reel *Dyketactics* from 1974, due to their joint motivation, as the author explains, to create a visual history of sexual minorities.[5]

Back at the archive

History Lessons was edited together in its near entirety from archival materials in public archives, enhanced with reenactments of film footage the author did not obtain the rights to or whose narrative

[2] M. Talarczyk-Gubała, *Conversation with Barbara Hammer in the Arts Museum in Łódź*, Poland on Oct 17th, 2016 (unpublished).

[3] A. Chiarini, *Feeling images. Montage, Body and Historical Memory in Barbara Hammer's Nitrate Kisses*, "Feminist Media Histories" 2016, vol. 2, no. 3.

[4] M. Handelman, *Barbara Hammer Teaches (and Titillates) with History Lessons*, <<http://www.indiewire.com/2001/10/interview-barbara-hammer-teaches-and-titillates-with-history-lessons-80703/>>.

[5] Ibidem.

order she wished to deconstruct. Since the beginning of cinema, women have been interested in operating with ready materials, creating cinema without a film camera, and thereby circumventing the production system which both excluded them from positions of power and denied them the financial means to produce films. Turning to rejected materials also had a critical dimension in relation to dominating narratives, both fictional and documentary. Few events in world cinema history are combined with a woman's last name, but found footage is a source in which one can be found. Cinema historians agree that the activities of Esfir Shub (1894–1959) were a milestone in the art of secondary documentary image operation, alongside documentalists as vital to world cinema as Dziga Vertov and Joris Ivens. "Their film expression presents newly calibrated scenes from politically stigmatized materials, thus giving them a different meaning. They made use of materials previously rejected by film chronicles as well as more marginal sources"[6] When thinking in the categories of production culture, it is worth remembering that the position of the cutter in Russian cinema before the revolution was lower than in the age of the avant garde, comparable to that of the assistant editor whose job is cutting and putting the materials in order, and not selecting or combining the shots, which is the function of the director. The Goskino Editing Bureau, where Shub was able to get a position after a series of rejected applications, was an exception in this regard. Women editors did not typically work in the director's shadow; Shub herself realized in practice the revolutionary concept of the film collective, which added to the birth of the "genius" of Einstein, although he did not mention her name among the co-creators of *Strike* (Stollery 2002, p. 94). She went down in the history of world cinema as a pioneer of *found footage* documentary on a full-length feature scale, with a trilogy comprised of compilation films: *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), *The Great Road* (1927) and *The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoy* (1928). From the perspective of women's studies in world cinema, it is worth noting that in 1933 she began working on a script for the film *Women*, which she ultimately did not manage to make. Using the means of film, she sought to document the changes in women's position in society from the beginning of WWI, through the October Revolution, to the 1930s, to showcase how the potential of women's activities set political breakthroughs in motion, with her own self providing both proof and a symbol of the limits of women's emancipation in Russian cinematography.[7]

The digital breakthrough and a return to the archives resulted in another wave of interest in recycled imagery. As Małgorzata Radkiewicz points out, "Modern female artists engage in dialogue with narrative cinema and its 'technologies' with the help of found footage. [...] The result of re-creative projects is a new, alternative cinema of change – in

[6] M. Giec, *Przekształcanie pamięci. Found footage jako machina kulturowej reinterpretacji*, "Images" 2015, vol. 17, no. 26. p. 59.

[7] L. Atwood, *Red Women on the Silver Screen. Soviet Women and Cinema From The Beginning to the End of the Communist Era*, Michigan 1993, p. 98.

form, in intention. [...] Creating cinema ‘without filming’, from appropriated imagery, is seen as an independent and skillful film practice, one of the most anarchist, radical and critical”.[8] Although in modern video-art and critical-film video essays it is a very popular format, similar works on documentary material, in medium and feature length films, are a rarity. What is more, thanks to advanced digital editing, modern mockumentaries are able to perfectly hide the stitches in the falsification of the source material. Hammer, on the contrary, when operating on archival materials from over half a century ago, uses technically unadvanced, but conceptually partisan editing methods, signalling the moment of lesbian interference. The return in memory to Shub’s heritage is doubly justified in relation to Hammer, and the above-mentioned genological and genealogical. The American experimenter, the granddaughter of Anna Kusz, who was born in a small village in the Ukraine, has Eastern European roots. Her grandmother arrived in the New World as a teenager as part of a wave of emigration from Europe to the United States. Having settled in California, she worked as a cook at film studios, cooking for the likes of David Wark Griffith and Lillian Gish. Hammer also remembers her grandmother as an amateur painter[9] and started her own adventure in the arts with attempts at painting.[10] The tradition of women’s film in the Hammer family had immigrant roots in a service job for filmmakers, and that job was a manual sort of labour. In *History Lessons*, female hands manipulate contact sheets and photographs from old albums, and the soundtrack carries the echo of women’s laughter.

From negative to positive history

The decision to operate on found footage was preceded by a five-year query in a search for film materials which could feature the LGBT history in the US from before the Stonewall gay club riot in 1969. This breakthrough moment in the fight for the rights of sexual minorities in the US is approached by those at the sharp end carefully, to say the least. “Indeed, lesbians have consistently noted their ambivalence towards the significance of Stonewall”.[11] Hammer herself has admitted that when seeking representations of women in photography and films from earlier periods, all she found were images of women created by men, and thus strongly criminalized and sexist.[12] What could be a way of working on this imagery to change the negative history[13] into one with empowering qualities? The alternative was, in Hammer’s own metaphor, the unseen screen. In the 1980s, before she started to make documentary post-queer essays, the lesbian imagination seemed to her as an unseen screen, on which markings had been left written in invisible ink (lemon juice). This screen had to be heated up from

[8] M. Radkiewicz, *Władczyni spojrzenia. Teoria filmu a praktyka reżyserek i artystek*, Kraków 2010, p. 143.

[9] B. Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life*, New York 2010, p. 10–11.

[10] M. Talarczyk-Gubała, op.cit., (unpublished).

[11] S. Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture and Difference*, Cambridge 1997, p. 82.

[12] M. Handelman, op.cit.

[13] B. Hammer, *Hammer! Making Movies...*, p. 228.

behind with the light from a projector, to make the image appear.[14] Over the next decade, Hammer went from the unseen screen metaphor to a subversive practice, which was to quote films contrary to the ideological expression of their original version.

The visual leitmotif of *History lessons* is a woman's silhouette coming into the light between the racks of the archive – the author's signature in relation to her self-archiving has become a guiding principle and an everyday practice. She has made Eleanor Roosevelt, the human rights icon, the mistress of mockumentary ceremony. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's wife was one of the most publicly active First Ladies in the US, regularly holding press conferences during her husband's presidency and engaged in minority and women's rights issues long after his death. Her disclosed correspondence with the journalist Lorena Hickok confirmed her previous alleged intimate relations with women and a so-called bisexual compromise, typical of the period. The letters show that this relationship with a woman was already in full bloom during her husband's inauguration, and was not a later choice by a mother of six and the wife of a handicapped husband.[15] In *History Lessons*, the First Lady, already quite advanced in age, opens what we assume to be a women's conference, but the witty editor changes the modifier in her presentation to "lesbian": "No one knew the history of *lesbians* in the US better than her". As a result of the editor's false reverse shot, it is not only middle-aged, privileged white women who are listening to her, but also the heroines of *History Lessons* – WASP pilots, butch & femme couples, African Americans, suffragettes from post-war productions, and many others. She also closes this edit of attractions of the "wonderful *lesbian* conference". The choice of Eleanor Roosevelt as the matron of *History Lessons* is therefore deeply motivated; the documentary forgery does not contradict the facts, but exposes the hypocrisy of society.

As was said earlier, *History Lessons* is made up of the found footage edits, manipulated in terms of sound and image. Apart from the introduction of the phrase "lesbian" into the statement, Hammer achieved an irreverent effect by drawing out the original voice-over commentary, neutral in the frame of the dominating heteronormative ideology, over photographs showing women engaging in intimate relations. Moreover, popular songs performed by female backup singers, such as "People will say we are in love" (the theme song from the musical *Oklahoma*, 1943), are deprived of their neutral expression through editing that couples them with imagery of women joyously frolicking. This manipulated data comes mainly from a rarely visited section of the film archive, namely, documentary chronicles from the period, educational films from family life classes, feminine lingerie ads, pornography distributed today as

[14] B. Hammer, *The Politics of Abstraction*, in: *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. M. Gevert, P. Parmar, J. Greyson, New York-London 1993, p. 70.

[15] L. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: History of Lesbian Life in 20th-Century America*, New York 2012, p. 98–99.

vintage porn and gutter press, and cheap erotica literature – *pulp fiction*. The vastness of the sources, in spite of the lesbians' invisibility, is closer to the genre repertoire of non-fiction films, and becomes, together with the history of sexual minorities, a history of "lesser" genres, starting from the short recording from 1896 of an execution by hanging of an anonymous woman, taken from the Edison archive. It brings us back to the very beginnings of American cinematography, and at the same time leaves open the question of the convicted woman's guilt. According to Hammer, the probability of punishment for sexual deviations at that time was very high.

Film genres and spheres of life

If on the basis of the selected materials one was to conclude what areas of social life the cohabitation of women were possible, it would have been the college dormitories, sport camps and Women Airforce Service Pilots' barracks. Of course, it cannot be directly inferred from the materials documenting or explaining their lifestyles that this situation enabled potential lesbian contacts, but isn't it highly likely that at least some of the women in the photographs would have had these experiences? Putting illustrations and pornographic films with two female partners in the hands of respectable American young women from the 1940s or 1950s has a truly hilarious effect. Apart from female students, consecutively – female cyclists, baseball players, archers and ice skaters all appear on the screen. "Who would dare to call them weak?", a voice off screen asks. "Where do they get their energy?", and here, Hammer suggests a visual answer, showing lesbian sex. When the voice-over sums up, "Wake up, America!", it sounds as though he had been recruited to fight for sexual minority rights. In another fragment, by manipulating the message of educational films about female sexuality, in an actual Health Service Workshops recording, Hammer doubled the drawing of a vagina on the blackboard so that the commentary about achieving sexual satisfaction refers to the exchange of caresses between women. Hammer suggests with her editing that the potential audience for this type of re-created film could differ in gender, race and sexual orientation. She sometimes places the women from the covers of erotic novels in the role of the rulers of the gaze, so that the visual pleasure, according to Laura Mulvey, would be a male-only privilege and not be limited to only narrative cinema.

Hammer decided to reenact scenes in cases where she had not obtained the copyrights for the original materials or, more importantly, where she wished to change or reverse the narrative order of the scenes. Considering the cheerful overtone of the whole, one could add that the reenactment appears where the source material – used as found footage – could seem too graphic or oppressive towards women. What we see are reporter-style, stylized as Weegee's street photography, shots of an attack carried out by the police on lesbian couples appearing in public. This is an example of the media criminalization of a minority. The reenacted scenes are even more memorable, as they are shot in the

style of a popular science film, which showcases the pseudo-scientific medical parametric representation of lesbians. Hammer asked her artist friends to take part in these scenes – a composer played the role of a sexuologist and a female painter and performer couple undergo examination. Their skulls and breasts were measured in the name of some medical interest; moreover their fingerprints were taken as if they were criminals. The shots are interspersed with close-ups of sexuology publications from the period. In the final shot, the lesbians take revenge on the doctor for their humiliations. On the other hand, the medical series also included authentic archival fragments of pornography and erotic films aimed at men, in which women caressing one another played the roles of objects of the gaze. Hammer clearly shows the moment when the female erotic relation becomes the subject of stigma – in medical discourse about sexual deviation, and so in women's autonomous decisions – and when it can be the object of guilty pleasure – in pornography aimed at men, serving their heterosexual fantasies.

The reception of *History Lessons* is accompanied by the irrefutable impression that in spite of the lesbians' invisibility in the audiovisual culture of the early 20th century, the subversive interpretation of the forgotten materials has given the author much satisfaction and put her in a good mood, which can be infectious to the audience. Contrary to the previous parts of the trilogy, in the "mother" there is a transformation of negative energy into a highly positive one. As Michelle Handelman, a younger generation film artist, put it, "Hammer Teaches (and Titillates with) *History lessons*" [16]. Humour is after all an essential part of the imitated documents, based on mockery, ridicule and gag. John Corner explains this genre characteristic more precisely: "The humour of the mockumentary usually stems from [...] the imitation of the seriousness of the documentary discourse, combined with the engagement in a concrete subject, ripe for comical analysis." [17] Undoubtedly, in the age of critical reflection on the representation of minorities in audiovisual culture and the recap of nearly half a century of fighting for their rights, the topic is now ready for this cinephiliac joke. In the editing process, the transparent, years-old ideology of a Hollywood film, just as white, heteronormative and masculine as the fiction film, has been utterly ridiculed.

In conclusion, Hammer's documentary essays appear as not only an attempt to work out a form for recording lesbian experience by "stealing and flying", but also as a starting point for reflection on the hidden foundations of so-called sober discourse, including various genre types of the documentary film. In *Tender Fictions* Hammer foretold: "To question the concept of truth in nonfiction filmmaking is to question the very form of the documentary itself. New meaning requires new form." [18] In *History Lessons* she proves that the mockumentary's editing

[16] M. Handelman, op. cit.

[17] J. Corner, *Documentary Fakes*, in: *The Television Genre Book*, London 2004, p. 128.

[18] B. Hammer! *Making Movies...*, p. 241.

deceits do not have to mean going against historical fact, as much as the blocked out, the undisclosed, the erased or the probable. What is more, she has diversified the docu-fiction genre palette with a utopia, which since the beginning of women's movements, has been a source of political inspiration for feminists, from the idea of matriarchy to visions of social and scientific fantasy. These are connected by the utopian vision of a feminine world where women are the model of humanity and sustained by the conviction that constructing a utopia is the basic form of development for the sociological imagination.[19] *History Lessons* teaches us that the docu-fiction utopia can also expand social sensitivity and audiovisual competence, and above all – reclaim history.

Trans. Kaja Kurczewska

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[19] M. Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Ohio 1995; eadem, *Słownik teorii feminizmu*, przeł.

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