

How does feminism influence documentary?

Theory Supervisor: Dr Matthew Bannister

Wanyue Zhang (Elly)

Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec)

New Zealand

May 2024

Content

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Theory	5
Documentary	5
Feminism	8
Feminist Film	10
A self-portrait of a woman - <i>Women</i>	13
Sense the power of women - <i>Ruth Bader Ginsburg</i>	19
Diverse representation of women - <i>Still Tomorrow</i>	24
Conclusion	29
Acknowledgment	30
References	33

Abstract

This paper mainly takes three women documentaries *Women*, *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*, and *Still Tomorrow* as cases to analyze the female images and female consciousness written in their stories and discourses and discusses the feminist expression in them. The research results show that the emergence and development of feminism and documentary not only provide women with more extensive and free expression space, but also provide the possibility to break the monopoly of male discourse and create a new perspective.

Introduction

With the development of social economy and the spread of mass culture, it provides more possibilities for the transformation and prosperity of documentary.

Since the birth of feminist theory and the development of women's liberation movement, feminism has also become an important force leading gender equality and social change. Feminists challenge sexism in society through various forms of expression, including art, literature, documentaries and films.

In traditional documentaries, the female images are presented less frequently, and they are mainly in the supporting position to foil the male roles. In recent years, with the rise of women documentaries, women have gradually become an important symbol representing social culture and become one of the hot topics. In this context, female-themed documentaries present a variety of female stories and images, such as the diversity and complexity of women in society through the discussion of women's family and career, identity and rights. Therefore, these works, by changing people's perceptions of women and promoting the emancipation of women, also made a powerful voice for the realization of gender equality.

Based on the relevant theories, this study analyzes three feminist documentaries. The first film, *Women* (2019), was produced by Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Anastasia Mikova, who spent three years visiting more than 50 countries and interviewing 2,000 women. The film covers many topics, including female self-evaluation, menstruation, female circumcision, sex and love, domestic violence, appearance anxiety, and more. The film attempts to put together the fates of women of different colors, countries, nationalities and classes around the world, making us aware of the similarities and differences in the fates of different women. The second film, *Ruth Bader Ginsburg* (2018), tells the story of female Justice Ruth's struggle for equal rights for men and women in the legal profession. She was deeply influenced by her mother and feminism, and after repeated sexism, such as being stopped from the library, being considered that women should not study law, etc., she decided to apply her legal skills to the actual work, and successfully defended many women and even men throughout

her career. This documentary mainly tells the story of Ruth's happy life from a gentle perspective. Her happiness is not only the happiness of her family, but also her persistence and efforts on equal rights. The last film, *Still Tomorrow* (2018), was directed by Chinese director Fan Jian. The film tells the story of Yu Xiuhua, a poet with cerebral palsy in rural Hubei Province, as she becomes famous and financially independent, tries to regain control of her destiny through divorce and end her loveless marriage. In the film, she presents a breakthrough image that breaks the common impression of a rural woman, but also shows her toughness, talent and longing for love. The emergence of these documentaries has triggered important discussions on various aspects of women, and also triggered the public's reflection on the situation of women.

By authentically documenting the experiences and challenges faced by women in different fields, it arouses people's attention and reflection on gender inequality. As an important form of cultural expression, feminist documentary plays an important role in shaping female image and social concept. Therefore, this paper aims to deeply analyze the content and impact of feminist documentaries, in order to explore how feminism has an impact on documentaries including the representation of women.

Theory

Documentary

Compared with the feature film, the audience of documentary is smaller, and its theory has been lagging behind the film theory which mainly focuses on the feature film. Until the 1990s, researchers led by Bill Nichols, Mike Renov and Brian Winston appeared, and their series of important works laid the foundation of contemporary documentary theory research. Including Nichols' groundbreaking *Representing Reality* (1991) and *Blurred Boundaries* (1994), as mentioned by Renov (2004, p. 22); Gaines (1999) refers to the *Theorizing Documentary* (2012) edited by Renov, and Winston's *Claiming the Real* (1995), which has been called 'the first theorized

documentary history in the English-speaking world' (p. 84).

Nichols (2010) defines documentary from four aspects: institutional framework, filmmaker, text and audience. Institutional framework is a description of the institutions that produce, distribute and show documentary films. The second is the filmmakers, who usually gather at special film festivals and often discuss the film with the public after the screening. About the text, Nichols points to conventions, patterns, such as the use of the voice of God in interpretation, or the fact that many documentaries show more diverse scenes and shots than feature films, and allow for free jumps between different characters and locations, as long as they help illustrate the film's argument. Finally, Nichols believes that identifying a work as a documentary cannot leave the consciousness of the audience. As British editor Dai Vaughan says, "Documentary is not a style, method or type of filmmaking, but a reaction to the material" (Vaughan, 1999, p. 58). For example, people usually think that only a story that is related to history and actually happened can be called a documentary. Compared with feature films, audiences watch documentaries more out of the desire to learn, especially documentaries about historical topics. For example, Nichols (2010) mentions that *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) proposed the idea that 'war is hell', and the film demonstrated this point to the audience through close-ups of dead soldiers, rather than only distant battle scenes, because this would diminish the horror of war (p. 38). Therefore, Nichols (2010) summarized the above aspects of the discussion and made a definition of documentary:

Documentaries present the audience with situations or events experienced by real people (social actors), who also present themselves in the story. These stories convey a plausible view or suggestion of the life, situation, and events depicted in the film. The creator's unique perspective shapes the film directly as a way of looking at the historical world, rather than as a fictional fable (p. 14).

Another major theoretical contribution of Bill Nichols was his theory of typology. Nichols divides documentaries into six types: expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative, and poetic.

The purpose of an expository documentary is to convey or persuade, the

commentary is prominent, sometimes with a strong didactic color. Through the voice of God narrative, that is, the commentary explains the picture. TV news or traditional Chinese feature films such as *Hexi Corridor* (2015), directed by Xinjian Wang and Qichen Zhao, fall into this category.

Observational documentaries emphasize that the camera is a quiet recorder. Examples include *Primary* (1960) by Robert Drew, and Frederick Wiseman's *State Legislature* (2006), *Boxing Gym* (2010). This type of documentary conceals the existence of the film creator and excludes the interpretation outside the picture. Berg (2015) refers to it as a 'fly on the wall' with the principle of not disturbing the subject (p. 40).

The creators of participatory documentaries actively intervene in events, conduct interviews or collect information, and interact with other characters. Examples include the *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960), directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Moran. Interview and narration are important signs of participatory documentary.

Reflexive documentary is different from other modes in that it shifts its focus from the subject to the process of film creation, making the act of shooting and the film itself the object of reflection. Chinese director Ju Anqi's *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing* (1999) can be attributed to this genre.

Performative documentary emphasizes the subjective experience and subjective feeling of the creative subject. Some elements of expressionism, such as subjective shots, impressionistic montage, dramatic lighting, and moving music, come in handy here (Nichols, 1994, pp. 92-106). For example, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971), directed by Stan Brakhage.

Poetic documentary, according to Nichols' interpretation, first appeared in The 1920s, typical works such as Joris Ivens' *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929). The emergence of this type of documentary was related to the avant-garde art of the time, whose expression preferred "fragment collage, subjective impression, incoherent action and loose connection" (Nichols, 2010, p. 164).

These six types of documentaries constitute an important branch of documentary, and provide a basic thinking framework for the study of documentary forms. For the

women's documentary we will discuss today, on this basis, women can present their lives and experiences through their own voices and perspectives, which helps to expand the representation and voice of women; the direct participation of the director and the protagonist can also enhance the interaction between the documentary and the audience, so that the audience can more easily resonate with the film, better understand the experience of women, and thus arouse the reflection of the audience and society.

Feminism

Feminism originated from a series of movements of women fighting for their rights. In this movement, most of the goals pursued by women were to obtain democratic political status, and then gradually developed into theoretical research results and political demands on all aspects of women's survival, thus developing into today's feminism. In addition to criticizing social relations, many feminists have focused on analyzing gender inequality and advancing women's interests and rights. The aim of feminist theory is to understand the root causes of inequality and to focus on important issues such as power relations, gender politics, and sexual consciousness. Chinese feminist Li Yinhe (2005) wrote in the book *Feminism*:

Across the globe, women face oppression and discrimination in what the feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir described as the 'second sex'. This unequal status between women and men is universal and long-lasting in many fields such as politics, economy, culture, thought, cognition, concept, and ethics, even in the private sphere such as family life (p. 1).

French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who put forward the idea of "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" in her book *The Second Sex* (2010, p. 234).

It seems to me that Beauvoir speaks of the second sex is addressed to the first sex. In a literal sense, the first sex refers to the physiological distinction between men and women, such as the absence of breasts and reproductive organs. The second sex refers to the difference between men and women in social characteristics, including behavior, social responsibility, etc. Beauvoir (2010) said:

The great advantage of a boy is that the way he survives with others makes him exist for himself. He is free to embark on a journey of exploration of the world as an apprentice, and he is no less resilient and independent than any other boy of his age... When a girl is growing up, it is wiser to mold her into a 'ture woman', for this is the way in which she can best be accepted by society... The virtues of womanhood were presented to her, and she was taught to learn the skills of cooking, sewing, housework, and the importance of personal image, charm, and humility... (p. 242-243).

Thus, 'women are transformed' mainly emphasizes the influence of social environment on women, that is, women gradually transform from a child into a socially expected female image.

In the United States in the late 1960s, according to Douglas (2017), Robin Morgan and other feminists organized a demonstration against the Miss America pageant (p. 68). During the demonstration, they set up a 'Freedom trash can' and threw feminine objects like underwear and curling irons into it, and held a sign saying 'Welcome to the Miss America Cattle Auction' (Douglas, 1994, p. 139). Douglas (2017) mentioned that in 1970, female employees of *Time* and *Newsweek* sued the magazines for gender discrimination; *the Women's Strike for Equality* satirizes the objectification of women in the media (p. 68). It is clear that the mass media is seen as the cause of sexism against women. The researchers found that women in the early stages of television, film, advertising and magazines were predominantly young, thin and white, and appeared almost as passive, assistants and even sexual objects (p. 68). Dominici and Rauch (1972) reported that 75% of all advertisements using women were for products found in the kitchen or bathroom (p. 261). Gerbner and Gross (1976) coined a term for this, 'symbolic annihilation', where systematic underrepresentation of one or more specific groups and/or media representations favor stereotypes over portrayals of reality (p. 182).

In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey explored how audiences perceive the women they watch in the cinema and divided their 'gaze' into three aspects: Male directors, cinematographers, and male actors,

then positioned these looks as heterosexual male looks. Mulvey (1975) believes that Hollywood films portray women as a kind of ‘watched’ sexual object, and men play the role of actively promoting the plot development in the film narrative, while women are the role of opposing or interrupting the development of the story (p. 11-12).

The documentary *Miss Representation* (2011) shows the biases that the media often have when reporting women, such as appearance and body shape. The film addresses the disappointing notion that the media sends to young girls: that a woman's worth is determined by her youth, sex appeal, and beauty, not by her willingness to lead or her ability to lead. For a long time, society has been dominated by the patriarchal ideology, which makes people see the world from a male perspective. Feminists have questioned and challenged these ideas. Their goal is the same: to fight for gender equality and change the situation of discrimination and oppression of women.

Feminist Film

When feminism moved into the cultural field, documentary researchers paid more attention to the artistic and social value of female documentary. In practice, the creators try to draw materials from real life, combine the female consciousness in the film with the female documentary, and reflect the real life through non-fictional artistic means. As far as the current definition is concerned, feminist documentary is connected with feminist film, so it is necessary to understand feminist documentary with the help of feminist film theory.

Driven by the feminist movement in the 1960s, women’s studies rapidly advanced to various disciplines, and film was one of the important aspects, that is, feminist film. In China, researchers have their own opinions on the definition of female films. In his book *The Chronology of Women’s Films*, Yuli Ying (2005) defines women’s films as “films, DV and multimedia experimental works directed by women, with female topics as the creative perspective and with clear female consciousness” (p.

1). Jinhua Dai believes that on the one hand, only the films created by women and with women as the theme can be called women's films; on the other hand, any film presented from a feminist perspective can be called a women's film (Shuhui Li, 2012, as cited in Xia Liu, 2007).

In the West in the early 1970s, 'women and film' was formed as a critical concept and analyzed from a feminist perspective. Mayne (1985) said:

The American women's movement calls attention to the political connotations of culture and the neglect of women in the creation of mainstream art, and encourages critical thinking based on gender positions. This criticism involves the gender oppression reflected in film works, as well as the operation mechanism of the entire film production industry that is not conducive to the protection of women's survival rights (p. 84).

Therefore, the initial feminist film criticism mainly focuses on the difference between the female image in the film and the real life and reveals its potential anti-female nature through deconstructive criticism of the audiovisual language of the film text.

Men are "eye bearers" and women are "eye objects", which is what Laura Mulvey (1975) used to describe the visual functions in traditional films. This statement perhaps sums up the scope of feminist film criticism most succinctly. British artist John Berger explores the portrayal of women in oil painting in the documentary *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Berger (1972) points out in the film that in the European painting tradition, a woman's body (nude) is the object of a man's appreciation for the purpose of arousing his sexual desire, and has nothing to do with her own sexual desire. Because only by weakening female desire can the viewer monopolize this pleasure.

Every time there's a sexual assault, you hear some criticism, "Who let her hang out alone so late?" "Who let her dress so skimpy?". The documentary *India's Daughter* focuses on the 2012 rape case in Delhi, with interviews with one of the rapists, his lawyer and the victim's parents. In the film, Mukesh, one of the perpetrators, gives an interview in which he blames the girl for his actions. Mukesh said: "A decent girl doesn't hang out at 9 o'clock at night. Women are more

responsible for rape than men” (Udwin, 2015). In his opinion, they had done the right thing, and the girl deserved to be taught that lesson. The rapist’s defense lawyer also directly compares women to objects, treating women as appendages of men.

According to the lawyer, “A woman is sex in the eyes of a man. We have the best culture. In our culture, there is no place for a woman” (Udwin, 2015).

The idea that men are inferior to women is deeply rooted in Indian society. Women are taught from an early age that girls are less important than boys, that girls come into this world with the obligation to take care of their families and have children, and that they cannot survive without men (Idlemovie, 2018, para. 41). Therefore, the greatest tragedy of a country is that its people never realize that there are many bad things in their culture.

In the Second Women’s Liberation Movement, feminists added a fourth, equality between men and women, to the original three demands for equality in occupation, economy and politics. Inspired by independent filmmaking and the women’s movement, a number of female-conscious documentaries from this period were shown publicly, which also aimed to reject stereotypes about women. Mayne (1985) states that films like Julia Reichert and James Klein’s *Growing up Female* (1971) and Geri Ashur’s *Janie’s of Janie* (1971) brought feminist issues to light in straightforward and accessible ways, such as by raising political awareness (p. 84). The emergence of female documentary is of great significance, movies, magazines, books, stage plays and so on have begun to take the initiative to pay attention to women. Documentary enriches film and television creation with its unique truth, which also determines the difference between female documentary and female film in a certain sense. With the above researchers’ definition and criticism of feminist film theory, we can define the scope of female documentary as the works created by female directors; Or not limited to the gender of the creator, but with women as the subject of expression, describing their lives, revealing their hearts, with female consciousness of the documentary. Feminist documentaries have an equal attitude towards men and women, and show women’s life pursuit and social value from a female perspective.

A self-portrait of a woman – *Women*

‘Women exist, so their voices can be heard’. This is the opening sentence of the documentary *Women* (2019), a seemingly well-deserved sentence that reveals the long-hidden fate of women. French director Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Ukrainian director Anastasia Mikova spent three years visiting more than 50 countries and interviewing 2,000 women to complete this documentary, which paints a huge and powerful ‘self-portrait of women’.

The whole film is composed mainly of close-ups of women’s faces and their interviews, and when you watch this work on the big screen, when the 2,000 powerful faces are magnified tens of times, people will realize that they can no longer ignore what they are saying. The film does not deliberately play up the pain and hardships experienced by women, nor does it excessively present women’s dissatisfaction with the world. It takes an ordinary perspective to convey the feelings of women of different races, colors and ages from all over the world about themselves, the people around them and the world, emphasizing the inherent strength of women in the face of difficulties and their ability to change the world. The directors use a black background panel, high-definition macro lens and delicate portrait lighting to bring out the women’s narratives and emotions. This arrangement of black background and basic lighting makes the interviewees’ portraits more three-dimensional, as if the interviewees are communicating with the audience face to face. Although it is a close-up shot, for women of different identities, the director uses the same scene to reflect the principle of equality, treats each interviewed woman in a fair way, and magnifies their experience and emotions that have long been covered up or ignored. In terms of interviews, the director focuses on the relationship between women and men, women and nature and society, and especially emphasizes the urgent need to solve the problem of gender violence, which makes the work more specific and profound, and also more realistic significance.

“I’m proud to be a woman”. The women in *Women* said.

Figure 1

[A woman's account]



(Arthus-Bertrand, Y., & Mikova, A, 2019)

By listening to the voices of women around the world, the film seeks to awaken gender equality, social justice and environmental justice. When some audience members criticized the documentary for including too many themes, director Anastasia Mikova retorted:

For me, the central theme of the film is the female body and the violated body. Just like in Daesh, in domestic violence or related issues such as incest, it involves the relationship between body and self, the way women see themselves in their bodies, and how we relate to our bodies. On the other side is sex, which includes pleasure, the discovery of pleasure, and its impact on society. From the moment a woman grows up and her body changes, she becomes a woman. All of these topics are interrelated and there is no inconsistency. To me, there's continuity (Xin Shi, 2022, p. 101).

Women not only presents the external contradictions between women and men, women and others, or women and society; it also deeply explores the inner of women

and awakens the inner self-consciousness of women. By exploring physical topics such as menstruation, sex, and pain, the film interprets the uniqueness of women's will, not only allowing men to better understand women and reflect on themselves, but also helping many women to heal wounds or re-examine their relationship with the body. In the film, there is an interview with a woman with cancer, she said that she used to focus on her family and work, she had no time to focus on herself, but when she got sick, she had a whole day to dress up, she felt that cancer gave her a new life, let her find a new self.

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power (2022), a documentary directed by Nina Menkes and akii Chun, examines how the male gaze has been engineered through audiovisual language throughout the history of film. For example, the transition from the subjective male perspective to the objective perspective of the female body is often a close-up of the female body parts such as the chest, legs or buttocks; Or maybe the camera is so far away when the woman is talking that you can't hear what she's saying, but so close when the woman is undressing or dancing.

In *Women*, women not only fully control the dominance, get rid of naturalization and standardization, but also have the initiative of discourse expression, and bravely tell the humiliation they have experienced in the face of the camera and the audience's gaze, realizing the essential exchange of gaze perspectives. As the last scene in the documentary *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* (2022) says: "The first feminist act is looking. To say, you're looking at me, but I'm looking right back". Women who have been passively immersed in male fantasies for a long time are finally facing the reality related to themselves. With their firm and courageous voices, they present a richly layered group of contemporary women. Director Mikova said:

We really felt the invisible connection between all the women in the filming process. Even when I'm on the other side of the world as a woman, facing women who have nothing to do with my life, I feel completely connected to them. After every screening, dozens of women tell me that they have a strong connection with all the women on screen (Xin Shi, 2022, p. 102).

Two thousand women is two thousand kinds of difficulties, the film tries to put the

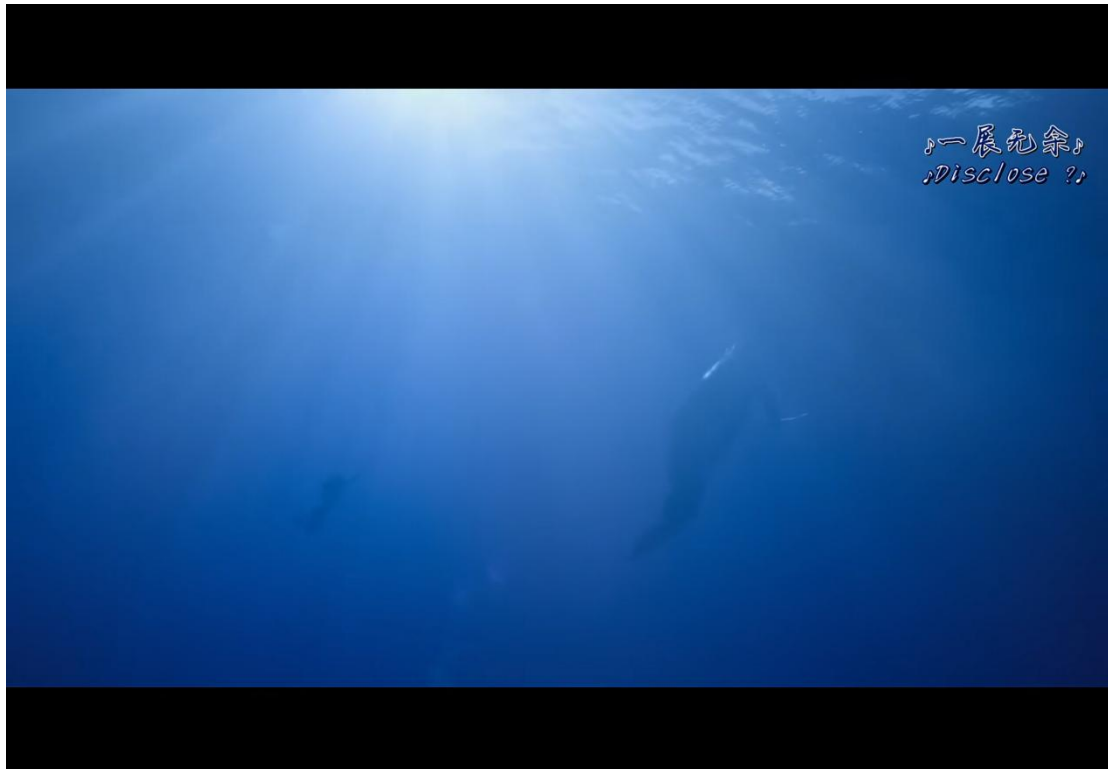
fate of women of different colors, countries, nationalities and classes in the world together, so that we realize the similarities and differences of different women's fates. The documentary *Women* presents: In India, brides are doused with acid by their grooms simply for expressing an undesirable dowry; In some parts of Africa, women are raped and killed like cattle. In parts of the Middle East, women are considered the private property of their husbands and cannot even be seen with their faces. In countries and regions that are supposedly more civilized and governed by the rule of law, these abuses play out in more insidious forms, including workplace sexual harassment, domestic violence, and deprivation of reproductive rights. So what *Women* does, as the woman at the beginning says, is: "Because what I wanted was to break the silence, that all of this was possible, violence only thrives in silence, when we don't talk about it, people always say the victims have no voice, we do have a voice, you just don't want to hear us" (2019).

Women provides a platform for women to have the opportunity to talk about the unfair treatment suffered in life, touch those long scars, so as to provide some comfort for women who have suffered similar situations, but also let more people face up to the existing experience of women and examine the existing social mechanism.

Rudolf Arnheim said, "Every work of art must represent something" (Fei You, 2010, P. 78). Behind the images of all works of art are the thoughts and emotions that the creator wants to express, that is, the image expression. In the *Women*, the film opens with a naked woman curled up in the deep ocean, then rolls over and waves her arms as she swims with the whale toward the sun.

Figure 2

[A woman swims out into the sunlight with the whale]



(Arthus-Bertrand, Y., & Mikova, A, 2019)

It may reflect the female consciousness from chaos to awakening, began to seek female liberation and gender equality course. The whale in the image may symbolize the male and patriarchal society, and the women swim with the whale to the sunny sea, which is to speak for women, but also to convey the beautiful vision of gender equality and harmonious society.

At the end of the film, a group of women leap from the ground at the same time, stretching their limbs as if they were dancing.

Figure 3

[A group of women seemed to be dancing]



(Arthus-Bertrand, Y., & Mikova, A, 2019)

Although there is always an invisible force in the sky to bind them, but they show unlimited passion and vitality, just to show the charm of women. In my opinion, this scene sums up the theme of the film, the constant struggle of women against traditional rules and institutions, the struggle to escape the constraints of discrimination and prejudice, although it is not easy, but they will not give up.

In summary, *Women* presents a wide range of themes, including women's roles and challenges in society, the workplace and the family, and their struggles in the face of social pressure, sexism and violence. The film uses Nichols' participatory mode. Although the director does not appear in front of the camera, through the communication with women from different regions, cultures and backgrounds, presenting their unique life experiences and values, and calls for social attention to women's rights and interests through some of the sad stories. The film also uses Nichols's poetic mode, using artistic visual styles such as swimming in the sea at the beginning and dancing in the air at the end, to show the beauty and diversity of women.

Sense the power of women - *Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

In the male-dominated social structure, women have always been regarded as the appendages of men, unable to enjoy full civil rights and facing unequal treatment at different levels. Therefore, in order to promote the liberation of women, American feminists set off a fierce struggle.

According to Jie Zhang (2016), in the West, feminism is divided into three main factions: 'liberal feminism', 'radical feminism', and 'socialist feminism' (p. 1).

Liberal feminism is the first to examine and think about feminism, and it advocates "rationality, justice, equality of opportunity and free choice" (Yueming, 2020, p. 16), which has a profound impact on the formation and development of Ginsberg's feminist thought. As the leader of the women's equality movement and the second female justice in the history of the United States Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg has devoted her life to improving the status of American women and eliminating potential gender discrimination in society.

In this section, we will discuss the documentary *Ruth Bader Ginsburg* (2018), which tells the story of female Justice Ruth's struggle for equality between men and women in the legal profession, which not only has a career, but also includes education, love and life values.

Ruth was born in Brooklyn in 1933 into a traditional Jewish family. Her mother was her first teacher, and she says she taught her two things, to be a lady and to be independent.

Being a lady means not being dominated by negative emotions like unnecessary anger; being independent means that if you can meet Prince Charming and spend the rest of your life with him, that's great, but you also have to learn to live on your own (Cohen & West, 2018).

In 1950, Ruth entered Cornell University; she attended Harvard Law School in 1956. Studying at Harvard changed the course of Ruth's life. She was clearly aware of the sexism around her, not least because her school had a strict male-to-female quota

(4:1), and the law school admitted only nine women out of 500 students in the year she enrolled; She was once stopped by the librarian when she went to the library because she was a woman. During the class, the professor deliberately did not allow the girls to answer questions, because he did not think they could understand the content. There were many moments of humiliation. Even the dean of Harvard Law School, at a dinner for Ruth's grade, once asked: How do you explain your occupying a law school seat that belongs to men? This incident deeply hurt Ruth's heart, but also caused her to ponder the inequality between men and women in the United States.

American scholar Kate Millett (2000) put forward the concept of 'patriarchy' in *Sexual Politics*:

Patriarchy refers on the one hand to the dominance of men over women, and on the other hand to the dominance of older men over younger generations; At the same time, male domination is not limited to the public sphere such as politics and work, but also exists in the private sphere such as family and sex (p. 82).

Ruth tried to break it all down, as she put it: "I wanted to get men's feet off women's necks. I don't want women to have power over men, I want them to have power over themselves" (Cohen & West, 2018).

Figure 4

[Ruth studied law]



(Cohen, J. & West, B, 2018)

In 1960, at the start of the second wave of the feminist movement, Ruth graduated from Harvard and was rejected by law firms because she was a woman. Ruth knew very well that being born female meant difficulties. “Typical rules of the day, for example, were that the husband was the head of the household, that he should choose the home address, and that women had to obey him unconditionally” (Cohen & West, 2018). At that time, there were even absurd laws in the United States, such as companies could fire pregnant women, and marital rape was not illegal. In this era, American women began to wake up and use protest marches to fight for their rights, and Ruth also used her own way to fight for women’s rights - applying legal skills to practical work.

Ruth argued her first case before the Supreme Court in 1973. Ruth defended the rights of female Air Force Lieutenant Sharon Frantillo, winning her the same housing benefits as her male colleagues. When Ruth made her case in front of male judges, she realized that they were not aware of the existence of sex-based discrimination, and it was her job to make them aware of that fact. Ruth’s concern in her career was not the exclusive rights of women, but the principle of equality between men and women.

n her opinion, sexism is harmful to both men and women. The enemy of the feminist movement is not male supremacy, but stereotypes about the division of roles between men and women in the family and society. Men and women should not stand on opposite sides, but should fight side by side. In 1975, Ruth fought for low-income Stephen Wiesenfeld's single-parent insurance benefits. The social services agency rejected his application because the insurance money is reserved for single mothers and does not apply to men. Ruth thought it was sexist and a social stereotype, so she fought hard to secure welfare for Stephen. Ruth tells everyone in a clever way that tacit unfairness to women will condone the existence of a lot of unfairness in society, and this gender inequality will hurt not only the rights and interests of women, but also the rights and interests of many men. Real feminism is committed to building real equality.

Ruth's happy marriage also vindicates feminists. Equality for men and women never mentions that women should not fall in love, marry or have children. Instead, it empowers women with independent personalities and enables them to achieve the kind of love and marriage that supports each other's progress. In the documentary's footage, whenever Ruth and Martin are together, his eyes are always smiling, his eyes are always following her, and the corners of her mouth are naturally raised. Even when Martin died, Ruth wore a shy smile every time she talked about him, as if happiness were deeply etched in her life. Despite her professional aura, Ruth is a sweet and real old lady. She has all kinds of necklaces, and you can tell whether she's for or against it by the necklaces she wears on court day; She loved opera and art and was drawn to the power of sound; She works out every day and does planks; She once had cancer, but eventually beat them.

Figure 5

[Ruth keeps working out]



(Cohen, J. & West, B, 2018)

Through the above discussion, we can see how the documentary presents the image of women, and how it shows the role and influence of women in the legal field and society through Ruth's personal story. Unlike common biographical documentaries, *RBG* does not use serious events to build a lofty image of its protagonist. Using Nichols' participatory mode, interviews with young students, the film portrays Ruth as an 'Internet celebrity' who has gained popularity among young people on social media. Sketch her character through real everyday situations, such as showing the clothes in her closet, falling asleep during the State of the Union address, and attending an opera performance. The film shows the dilemmas and challenges Ruth faced in the male-dominated society of the time, but also highlights the images of courage and resilience she displayed; she has always stood firmly on the side of justice and equality, fighting for the rights and fair treatment of women and vulnerable groups. The film also contains Nichols' expository mode, which shows Ruth's outstanding achievements and influence in the field of law through a review of important legal cases in which she was involved. Just like the Chinese translation of the title, 'Female Judge' is enough to reflect the focus of this documentary, starting from Ms. Ruth Bader Ginsburg herself, to explore the theme of gender equality, and

also show the important status of women in the legal field and society.

Diverse representation of women - *Still Tomorrow*

When the poem *I Crossed Half of China to Sleep With You* (2014) became popular, its author Yu Xiuhua became famous. Her story was made into a documentary by Chinese director Fan Jian, called *Still Tomorrow* (2016). The film tells the story of a marginalized woman who uses her talent to grow from a rural woman who grew up in a secluded area to a public figure.

Feminist documentaries mainly focus on women and reflect specific female images in real life, including the consciousness of resistance and fighting for gender equality, and the firm attitude against the injustice of society and fate. Since the western women's liberation movement, films and television works representing feminism have emerged in batches. As one of the typical works, *Still Tomorrow* shows Yu Xiuhua's tenacity, talent and longing for love.

Being an ordinary rural woman and a cerebral palsy sufferer at the same time, all this seems to be unconnected with her identity as a poet. In her poems, she dares to explore love, but also expresses a deep understanding of life. Her appearance breaks the common impression that rural women are familiar with, such as selfless dedication to the family, obedience etc.; she presents a breakthrough image, for example, she does not care that others look at her differently, she also dares to fight against her own unfair destiny. She lived in an environment of muddy roads, old houses, and large herds and crops, which did not look like a place to write a poem like 'Come, call me a slut'. Then, people to become curious about Yu Xiuhua, discussing with each other online and even criticizing the person, calling her poems rogue poems and calling her a slut. Under such public opinion, we see the strict requirements of the public for women and the ideological shackles that women bear, but also let more people begin to examine the gender culture of the whole society.

Under the influence of the new recording movement, more and more

documentaries begin to shift from observing the macroscopic subject of society to individual expression. In the past, the mainstream media paid little attention to rural women, who were often portrayed as members of a group of women or as supporting roles in family life. Although the director of the film is a man, he always tries to experience the world from the point of view of the main character Yu Xiuhua. It is precisely because of such efforts that the emotion conveyed in the film is more delicate and rich, and echoes with Yu Xiuhua's poetry, completing the unified expression of concept and reality.

In the film, Yu Xiuhua wears a yellow dress in front of the door, writing with a laptop, the wind blows her skirt, the poplar trees outside the house are swaying gently in the wind, and the lotus leaves in the pond and chickens feeding in the grass are all beautiful and vivid pictures. When she walked on a snowy country road, the back of her fading red dress appeared in the picture of snowflakes flying, "Bearing, anyhow, the withering solitude: the dazzling solitude, the unregrettable solitude" (Jian Fan, 2016). This poem, which is full of helplessness and loneliness in life, also appears in front of the screen, and the audience can deeply understand her feelings.

Figure 6

[Yu Xiuhua lonely back]



(Jian, F, 2016)

When she asked her husband for a divorce for the first time, her husband's disagreement led to a fierce argument in the back, resulting in conflict and cold war with her mother, the picture showed her sitting alone by the lotus pond, and the poem appeared: "Sitting for long, the two clouds are still not closing up, the wound emptied out in the sky never grows new flesh" (Jian Fan, 2016). Here she expresses the helplessness that she wants to get rid of this marriage but can't get rid of it. Behind these actions is her dual helplessness as a rural woman and a disabled person: she longs for a loving marriage and family, but seriously lacks the ability to obtain love.

In the film, the protagonist Yu Xiuhua and her mother Zhou Jinxiang form a sharp contrast. The experience of writing poetry and a broader vision make Yu Xiuhua full of female autonomy and resistance, while the mother shows the traditional outlook on life, obedience and acceptance. Traditional motherhood is a kind of discipline given to women by the society, women's role and positioning is to be a mother and handle housework in the family. Therefore, in order to maintain the integrity of the family and the healthy growth of the child, mothers have gradually formed a kind of traditional maternal femininity such as tolerance, silent dedication,

gentle obedience and so on. In the film, Zhou Jinxiang repeatedly blocked Yu Xiuhua's divorce in order to maintain a complete home. In Yu Xiuhua's life, Zhou Jinxiang has been quietly selfless tolerance and love of the cerebral palsy daughter, take care of her life, and even arranged marriage for her, standing behind the mask of the mother, Zhou Jinxiang body has long been no woman and wife characteristics, only the traditional maternal temperament. This is the epitome of 'Chinese traditional mother', which reflects the positioning and discipline of women in social and cultural traditions for thousands of years. In the film, when the director mentioned that 'Yu Xiuhua is successful now and makes money', Zhou's mother replied, 'This is not important'. In the traditional concept of Zhou Jinxiang, family harmony is the life should be pursued, even if your life is not satisfactory, but also should maintain the integrity of the family. This view treats women as vassals of the family, leaving them with no respect for their personal worth, but this sad reality is common among rural women.

In the male gaze, women are always in the position to be seen and watched. The character image of Yu Xiuhua with incomplete body does not conform to the characteristics of voyeurism, but it is such a disabled woman who has a strong temperament of daring to resist the patriarchal society. For example, in the film, she struggles to resist the people around her and moral control, giving voice to her reluctance through writing, and bursting out her own female power through poetry.

In Fan Jian's shots, Yu Xiuhua is not afraid of the traditional norms of society and the oppression of the patriarchal society. Despite many obstacles, she still dares to stand up and say 'no' to the patriarchal system, which is her unique femininity.

The appearance of a series of water and fish in the film not only adds to the beauty of the film, but also serves as a potential metaphor and symbol. When Yu Xiuhua and her husband talk about divorce, the picture shows a trapped fish, like Yu Xiuhua's helplessness and despair in this marriage, but also like a heart-wrenching question why the man does not want to divorce.

Figure 7

[A trapped fish]



(Jian, F, 2016)

The last time the picture of the fish appears is at the end of the film, she crouches in front of the door to slaughter a big fish, and in the process of washing the fish, she plays happily with the cat with the guts, which is probably the most relaxed she has ever been at home, because she is finally free.

Figure 8

[Yu Xiuhua plays with the cat]



(Jian, F, 2016)

This documentary mainly uses Nichols's observational mode. The director shows the real state of the protagonist Yu Xiuhua by shooting her life for a long time, and the audience can directly feel the emotional fluctuations and life details of Yu Xiuhua. The film also uses Nichols' participatory mode, with the director interacting with Yu Xiuhua and her family in some scenes, which provides more background information for the film. In general, compared with women of the same social status, Yu Xiuhua is still lucky to be able to express herself freely in her poetry. But this also comes from her courage, in the process of watching the film, we do not seem to deliberately care about her disabled identity, because she has a complete and strong soul. When she became famous, she began to have independent thinking, became an independent individual, and no longer depended on her family and men financially. With the awakening of female consciousness, she also began to dare to pursue her inner emotions and express her survival predicament, which are her defense of self-power.

Conclusion

With the development of feminism and the continuous improvement of female consciousness, women's status has been improved. Feminism is no longer just a theoretical framework, but also a social movement and ideology, which has an important impact on the creation and performance of documentaries. Documentary directors break the stereotype of traditional women in their creation, vividly show the emotional changes of different women's hearts, and make the female image more rich and diversified. Through documentaries, the creators show women's power, self-exploration and resistance, presenting a critical perspective of gender inequality and unfair treatment of women in society, and promoting social change and progress.

But at the same time, feminist documentary is also facing difficulties and challenges. For example, whether documentary can become a weapon for women to resist traditional patriarchal discourse and completely change the subordinate status of women's 'other' needs further discussion. Female directors may also face multiple challenges from funding, resources and marketing. Therefore, we also need to continue to support and promote feminist documentaries, and provide more opportunities and resources for female directors.

This study uses case analysis to summarize the content and character images of feminist documentaries and summarizes all aspects of the expression of female images. Although as an immature researcher of documentary creation, I still have certain limitations in the perspective of feminist documentary research and thinking. However, I believe that the awakening of female consciousness will prompt more researchers to pay attention to such topics, and feminist documentaries will become more and more abundant.

Acknowledgment

This is the end of the article, which means that I will say goodbye to my postgraduate stage. I am so grateful for this experience, for everything that has happened here and

for everyone I have met.

In terms of learning, I am not a smart person, and I will be upset because I cannot find appropriate materials, and I will be upset about the application of theories. I would like to thank Dr. Matthew Bannister, my thesis supervisor, for his careful review of the whole process of selecting and revising the thesis, and for his patience in correcting my mistakes and giving me directions. I am also very glad that although I have affected the mood, but I am not defeated, I hope to have better growth in this process. In addition, I would like to thank my project supervisor, Dr. Tamisin Green, who has always been very gentle and patient to help me, so that I was greatly encouraged and gave me confidence in the completion of the work. I would like to express my sincere thanks and wish the teachers success in their work, and peace and happiness.

I would like to thank my parents, who have always supported me quietly behind me. It is your full trust and love that let me have the courage to move forward and be alone in a foreign country. It's home that gives me a sense of psychological security. You are the people who love me the most in the world, and I love you too. I will be grateful and try to be your pride. I hope you will always be safe and healthy.

I would like to thank my friends, who make my ordinary life more interesting, and always appear at the first time when I need help, so that I feel a lot of warmth and happiness. May our friendship last forever, and may we all have a bright future.

Finally, I want to thank myself, these two years can not be said to be very hard, but also not easy. Thank you, even if suffering, collapse, confused, never give up; Thank you, growing braver and more independent. I am especially grateful for this life experience, which allows me to constantly understand myself and know myself, so that I can meet the new chapter of life with a more calm and peaceful attitude. I also want to take this opportunity to say to myself, you are great.

Once again, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the teachers, family members and friends who care about and support me, as well as to all the teachers who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in the review and defense of my essay and project.

Happy graduation, the future is promising!

References

- Anqi, J. (Director). (1999). *There's a strong wind in Beijing* [Documentary]. Trench Film Group.
- Arthus-Bertrand, Y., & Mikova, A. (Directors). (2019). *Women* [Documentary]. France.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (2010). *The second sex* (Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-chevallier, Trans.). Random House.
- Berg, J. (2015). *About looking* (Huiyuan, Trans.; p. 40). Guangxi Shi Fan Da Xue Chu Ban She.
- Cohen, J., & West, B. (Directors). (2018). *Ruth Bader Ginsburg* [Documentary]. America.
- Dominick, J., & Rauch, G. (1972). *The Image of Women in Network TV Commercials*, 16(3), 261. *Journal of Broadcasting*.
- Douglas, S. J. (1994). *Where the girls are: Growing up female with the mass media* (p. 139). Times Books.
- Douglas, S. J. (2017). "Feminism". *Keywords for media studies* (L. Ouellette & J. Gray, Eds.; pp. 68–72). New York New York University Press.
- Fei, Y. (2010). The image and imagery of the film. *Modern Communication*, 000(006), 78–82. <https://doi.org/10.19997/j.cnki.xdcb.2010.06.020>
- Frederick, W. (Director). (2006). *State legislature* [Documentary]. America.
- Frederick, W. (Director). (2010). *Boxing gym* [Documentary]. America.
- Gaines, J., & Renov, M. (1999). *Collecting visible evidence* (p. 84). University of Minnesota Press.

- Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, 26(2), 182.
Journal of Communication.
- Geri, A. (Director). (1971). *Janie's of Janie* [Documentary]. America.
- Idlemovie. (2018). *What is scary is not rape, but culture*. Sohu.
https://www.sohu.com/a/233391262_445274
- Jean, R., & Edgar, M. (Directors). (1960). *Chronicle of a Summer* [Documentary]. France.
- Jennifer, S. N. (Director). (2011). *Miss representation* [Documentary]. America.
- Jian, F. (Director). (2016). *Still tomorrow* [Documentary]. 1 Verge Information Technology Co., Ltd.
- Jie, Z. (2016). *A study of liberal feminism in the U.S. feminist movement of the 1960s-1980s* (p. 1) [Master Thesis].
- John, B. (Director). (1970). *Ways of seeing* [Documentary]. Britain.
- John, H. (Director). (1945). *The battle of San Pietro* [Documentary]. America.
- Joris, I. (Director). (1928). *The bridge* [Documentary]. America.
- Joris, I. (Director). (1929). *Rain* [Documentary]. America.
- Julia, R., & James, K. (Directors). (1971). *Growing up female* [Documentary]. America.
- Mayne, J. (1985). Feminist film theory and criticism. *Signs*, 11(1), 84.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174288>
- Millett, K. (2000). *Sexual politics* (S. Wenwei, Trans.; p. 82). Jiang Su Ren Min Chu Ban She.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(no.3), 6–18.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality*. Indiana University Press.

- Nichols, B. (1994). *Blurred boundaries* (pp. 92–106). Indiana University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2010). *Introduction to documentary 2nd*. Indiana University Press.
- Nina, M., & Ackii, C. (Directors). (2022). *Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power* [Documentary].
America.
- Renov, M. (2004). *The subject of documentary* (p. 22). University of Minnesota Press.
- Renov, M. (2012). *Theorizing documentary*. Routledge.
- Robert, D. (Director). (1960). *Primary* [Documentary]. America.
- Stan, B. (Director). (1971). *The act of seeing with one's own eyes* [Documentary]. America.
- Udwin, L. (Director). (2015). *India's daughter* [Documentary]. Berta Film.
- Vaughan, D. (1999). *For documentary: Twelve essays* (p. 58). University of California Press.
- Winston, B. (1995). *Claiming the real*. British Film Institute.
- Xia, L. (2007). *Analysis of female images in Chinese mainland female films in the new century* [Master Thesis].
- Xin, S. (2022). French documentary women: Ecofeminist listening and staring.
Contemporary Television, 02, 99–103.
<https://doi.org/10.16531/j.cnki.1000-8977.2022.02.007>
- Xinjian, W., & Qichen, Z. (Directors). (2015). *Hexi corridor* [Documentary]. Beijing Bojing
Culture & Media. Co. Ltd.
- Yinhe, L. (2005). *Feminism* (p. 1). Shandong People's Publishing House.
- Yueming, Z. (2020). *A study on Justice Ginsburg's thought of equal rights* (p. 16) [Master
Thesis].

Yuli, Y. (2005). *The chronology of women's films* (p. 1). Shanghai Translation Publishing House.