

'Her, Her, Me, It, Them, There: Scripto-Visual, Socio-Economic, Post-Partum, East End, TV'?

-Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document is an intervention into motherhood and knowledge systems executed by the artist over a period of several years in the mid-to late-1970s. She documented the infancy of her son and the development of the relationship between them with the accreted evidence of these processes- stool samples, first words, her own copious notetaking; other physical and epistemic traces. A conceptual art milestone at the time, it enunciated ideas about the feminine, language, psychoanalysis, intimacy and communication that are still salient nowadays.

-Bred and Born, a documentary produced over several years in the late 1970s and early 1980s at Four Corners Film Workshop and televised on Channel Four in 1983, was a co-production by Joanna Davis, Mary Pat Leece, and every woman who watched it being made, some of whom appear in the film. It is an unstable amalgam of a women's group at an East End community centre meeting to discuss mother-daughter relationships, and a documentary enfolding its own making-of praxis exploring these relationships in four generations of women from the same working-class family on a Shadwell estate. Its heterogeneity of registers, politicised formalism, and analytic tone tell us something about programmers and audiences of that era that is not altogether encouraging to ours.

-On the most basic level, these two texts are 'about' discourses of femininity. In the former, it is how femininity, motherhood, is "metaphorically, set on the side of the heterogeneous, the unnameable, the unsaid," yet how it is always already inscribed within language, a condition that is constructed as essentially feminine by the social; that requires a whole host of explanatory narratives (psychoanalysis, medicine) to naturalise and homogenise the inevitably culturally mediated instances of motherhood. The symbolic must intervene in the economy of the pre-symbolic for the psychoanalytic device to function. In Bred and Born, other variants of disciplinary discourses (sociological, educational) are enunciated in the space of the film to reflect on their ideological efficacy for producing social and subjective paradigms of mother-daughter relationships. But here the mother and daughter are also determined by a vital 'further' consideration: class. Here we have a discussion group of mothers and daughters from diverse backgrounds talking about their experiences, but the major thematic element of the film is a fictional documentarian applying herself to a study of mother-daughter relations in one working-class family that has lived on the same estate in Shadwell for at least four generations.

-Here I am interested how in both projects, theory acts as the 'third term.' In an interview with Hal Foster towards the end of the book *Imaging Desire*, Mary Kelly describes how she interprets the use of theory in Post-Partum Document, but more generally in feminist politics and aesthetics, as a distancing device that acts in an analogous manner to the interposition of the father, or of the Symbolic, in the pre-linguistic immediacy of mother and child, that acts both to dissolve this relation and form a new conduit that ushers the child into language, culture, sublimation, the social. The Oedipal triangle, or constitutive 'family romance.' Theory as a means for the female subject to gain distance from 'the anxious proximity of her body- ultimately, the mother's body. . . .the body too close to see . . .which bars access to sublimated pleasure'. Theory is the thing that allows you to see by distancing, or, allows you to look at something else. She was a mother; she was using theory and highlighting the function of mediation in the mother-child relationship, the mediation of documentation as well as that of the psychoanalytical schema, or even the mediation of artwork in the site of the most properly feminine creative act, childbirth. But theory was also a means to pleasurably preoccupy herself, to distract her from the daily exigencies of motherhood, amalgamating these with theory to conjugate the maternal position in language and in the social, a node of instability for cultural discourses about nature, about women. Theory allows you to make an object of study. She was also parodying the nature of the scientific gaze, with all the obsessively detailed and methodical record-keeping of her child's daily life. How is the experience different from itself? How is motherhood an experience that unites women, and yet is something that cannot be spoken except through standardised forms? Is motherhood then metonymic for all the ways in which women are divided, that biology and culture do not adhere?

Bred and Born is salient on this point, the point where women's differences disrupt the continuity of experience imputed as the necessary first step to feminist consciousness. It is both a rupture in



Still images from *Bred and Born*, Joanna Davis and Mary Pat Leece, 72 mins, 1983 UK

this politics, and the beginning of a more complicated, maybe more trenchant process, a process whose open-endedness could lead to a more forceful collectivity that is driven by its singularities, or a fragmented and de-politicised consensus, which is perhaps closer to where we've ended up today.

In *Bred and Born*, we are witnessing a middle-class documentary film-maker going to make a film about working-class mothers and daughters. She is motivated to do this for political reasons, but her intervention is underwritten by sociological texts that establish both the difference of the population to be observed and their internal consistency (working-class women are different from me, but they are all alike), as well as by media theory that allows her to be aware of how problematic such an exercise is, and that stratum of self-reflexivity is always with us in the film in one or another way. How does this (fictionalised) woman position herself as site of authoritative gaze? What happens when the gaze is dispersed from a gender polarity to one reversed, then complicated, by class?

-But the 'third term' works in another way also: Kelly describes it as not just an access into the symbolic, but also as the point of departure from the affective plenitude of early feminist groupings that located the moment of oppression in the subjective, but were as yet unwilling or unable to acknowledge that the feminist community was already stratified by disparities in class, race, age and sexual orientation, among others. But the trope of psychoanalytic theory filters through Mary Kelly's practice, a device that is always bracketed and figurative, rather than an unexamined trace. She also positions her involvement with this 'third term' very provocatively in the same interview with Hal Foster:

HF: "...in the narrative of the mother-child relationship in *Post-Partum Document*, theory occupies the position of the father in the Oedipal triangle - the "term" that the mother both refers the child to and struggles against ...

MK: You could say this: that theory, like the 'third term' of the Oedipal triangle, was the distancing device that made separation from the child possible, but this is simply an analogy. In another sense, though, you could say that psychoanalysis itself became the "third term" in the feminist debate, and provoked a separation from the mother's body - that is, the utopian community of all women - by providing a vantage from which to look at the tentative, constructed nature of femininity and sexuality."

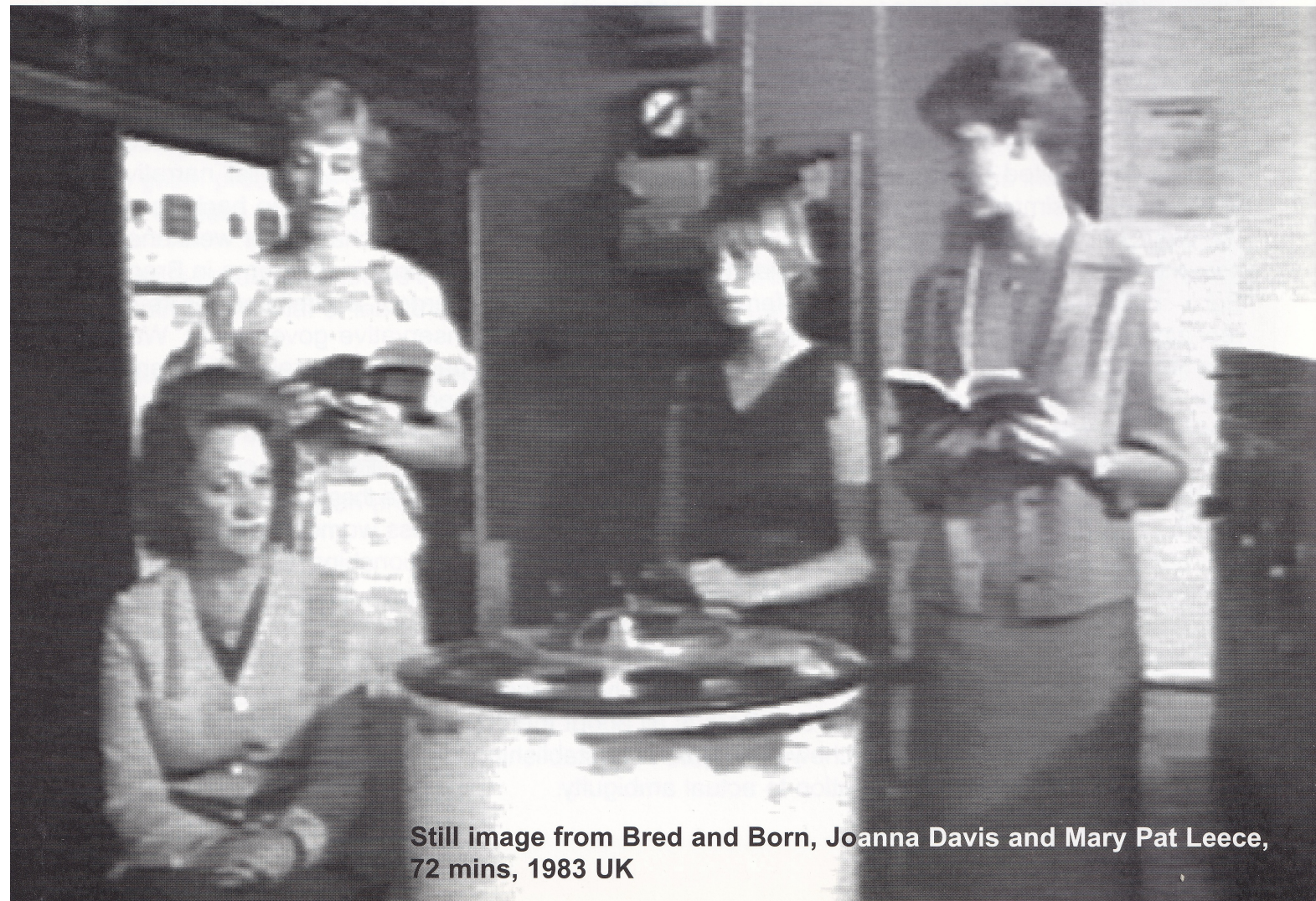
Which is not to say that the critique was never expanded - consciousness-raising groups were laboratories for all the different tendencies of feminism that would later turn around and diagnose those divisions, partially through the readings of Marx and Lacan that Mary Kelly and Laura Mulvey, among many, foregrounded in their practices at that time. To them, the psychoanalytical was intensely political, perhaps due to its conceptual malleability and formatting of social and intersubjective relations as necessarily imbricated at the level of psychic organisation. It was also political because it highlighted the socially constructed nature of women's oppression, making the first-wave feminist narrative of women united simply as women seem somehow apolitical and insular against the background of the panoply of social struggles happening then, its contestation of patriarchal power weakened by essentialism. The slippage of an assumed female univocity is also a prominent theme in *Bred and Born*, made early in a decade where feminism was getting submerged, assimilated, or its gains receding under the malignant social engineering of a radical Conservative government. We see how in the discussion group sequences, women from different backgrounds relate differently to their mothers, as their mothers were brought up with different expectations - middle-class women wanted a career and resented their families, working-class women were content with their lot. Here it emerges that class and race (though the latter is not really explored in the film) stratifies the commonality of women along lines of economic and subjective potential. But it also contains a thesis about working-class women that would idealise while patronising them, painting middle-class women as nostalgic for, if not baffled by, the intimacy of working-class mother-daughter relationships without holding to account the economic realities/social ideologies that keep women in their place(s). This mystification is questioned towards the end of the film, but it is problematised throughout, via distancing techniques like getting the women from the working-class family to read aloud the sociological texts that describe their relationships, texts which are themselves transcribed oral accounts given by other women to other 'fieldworkers.' *Bred and Born* is all about the imperative to know who is speaking, positionality, even if formally it eschews the option of establishing the provenance of the voice at all times, opting for a mimetic relation to actual ambiguity.



-I want to think about the notion of temporality and periodicity, viz. Mary Kelly's projects being undertaken by her and exhibited over a period of several years, and analyse that in conjunction with how *Bred and Born*, and other instances of feminist countercinema in the 70s and 80s were made over a period of several years in the context of group discussions and the making and unmaking that resulted from these conversations, how the notion of process is developed along these ways of working, the expression of form and content in process, the indexicality of a documentary that is at the same time a documentation,, in a way that is not an arid exemplar of self-reflexivity but invokes those strategies in a very integral way. I'd also like to investigate the use of time as part of the filmic exegesis and the use of time as a structuring device outside the film (the temporality of the ongoing discussion group that was first talking about mothers and daughters, then about the documentation of this discussion group on film) that moves into the space of the film in the group sequences.

-My intention for the screening of *Bred and Born* is that it happen tactically in the courtyard on my estate. The estate is immanence and also representation. It testifies to its own history and the history of other estates, a history effaced by the triumphal chronicles of development and economic cleansing, its habitats selectively left standing. Similarly, the history of a community is ellided by the exchange-value of mediated memory, dispersed into consumption patterns. Whereas an excursion to the estate portrayed in the film might betoken an unwarranted degree of literalism, should that estate still exist, a screening on an estate in the East End seems generally the right idea. The materiality of this space is perceptibly different though: beaux-arts red brick rather than functionalist pre-brutalism, transplanted media labourers rather than tight-knit East End matriarchies. *Bred and Born*'s processual and provisional approach seems to call for a number of ways to extend its critique into real space, so I will attempt to introduce texts, some centring on local history, in order to induce reflection on where we live. This would be especially interesting to me as I am a stranger in the area. I would also like to invite Anna Eager, who appears in the film as one of the participants in the discussion group, to come to the screening. Her ongoing engagement with local politics might provide some insight into many if not all of the above topics.

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Still image from *Bred and Born*, Joanna Davis and Mary Pat Leece, 72 mins, 1983 UK