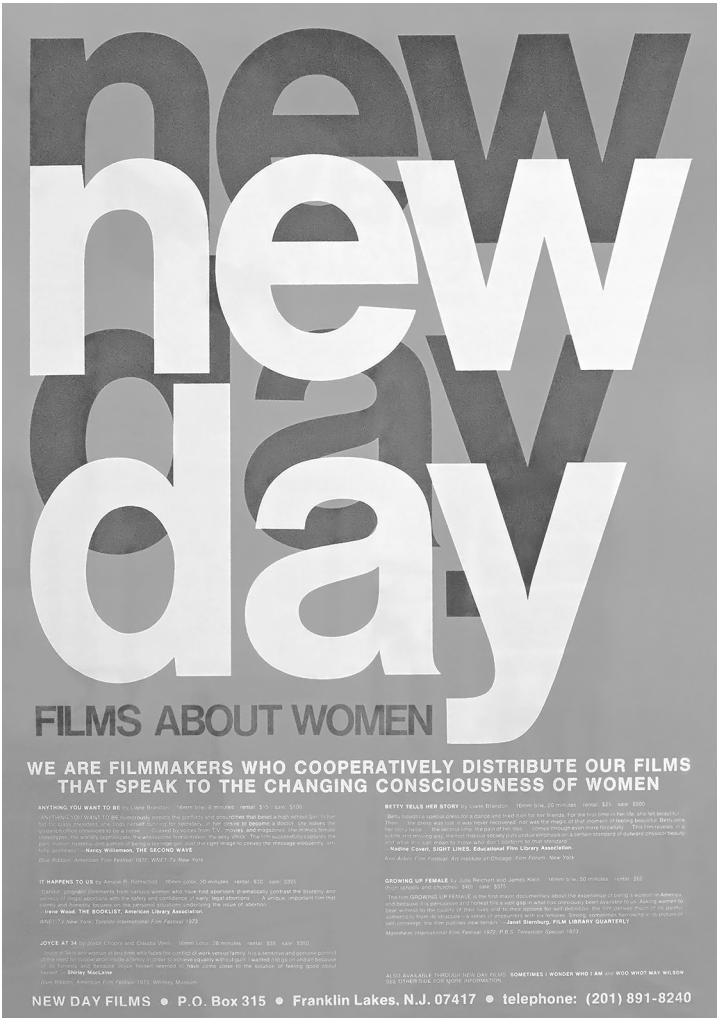

Figure 1. New Day Films poster, 1973. Commissioned by Liane Brandon, Jim Klein, Julia Reichert, and Amalie R. Rothschild. Designed by Liane Brandon and Mickey Myers. Photo and permissions by Liane Brandon.

IN PRACTICE

New Day Films, Digital Distribution, and Collective Aesthetics

Elizabeth Coffman and Erica Stein

Cinema is rarely produced as a singular operation. The director may attract the most obvious credit for creative filmmaking choices, but the figure of the auteur does not begin to capture the collaborative forms of decision making and influence that occur at all stages of media production—both in the hierarchical, financially driven Hollywood production environment and the looser, idea-driven forum of the media collective. With opportunities on the set and screen still restricted for women in the 1970s, and 16 mm Bolex and Sony Portapak cameras becoming readily available, women began to form media collectives. These collectives, such as New Day Films, Iris Films, and Women Make Movies (WMM), taught production skills to women and other populations often denied access to production technologies and distributed materials that were perceived as being too controversial for television or movie theaters.

As feminist film scholars and media makers, we often foreground the idea of the media collective in our teaching and prac-

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tice. We use it to inspire ourselves and our film students to work together, to guide our choices and interactions while planning and shooting a film, to elucidate what lies outside the political economy of contemporary Hollywood, and to illuminate both the aesthetic form and exhibition context of alternative cinemas. In teaching documentary studies and production courses, we have often drawn on the independent distributor New Day Films, whose particularly strong emphasis on collective governance by its membership is matched not only by the articulation of a collective aesthetics and mimetic politics in its work but also by the institution's deliberate construction of its output as a carefully curated collection.

New Day Films was formed in 1972—on the cusp of sweeping changes in documentary and feminist filmmaking practice—by six documentarians who found themselves unable to gain distribution in the bottleneck of the New York nonfiction filmmaking scene. Nevertheless, their films about the everyday texture of women's lives were in demand as the women's movement grew across the country.[1] Today, it is one of the most financially stable nontheatrical distribution collectives in North America, boasting more than 165 members and $1 million in yearly revenue.[2] Films distributed by New Day have been screened and broadcast around the world, written about in media journals, discussed at conferences, showcased in museums, and collected by libraries. New Day's collective (and its collection) supports independent filmmakers looking for distribution for their work and audiences seeking media that elicits discussions, fosters political organizing, and engages students.

In interviews spanning thirty-five years, from 1978 to 2014, founders and newer members alike attribute New Day's success not only to its identity as a collective but also to two specific forms this category implies. First, New Day is a vehicle for self-distribution, wherein each member is responsible for the reproduction, audience engagement strategies, and direct marketing of his or her own film. Yet each member is also a part owner, and both individual profits and the collective's overhead are calculated through a share ladder, a transparent division of New Day's total profits, voted on by the members every year.[3] Second, while New Day's institutional identity and practices are derived from a model of participatory democracy (e.g., content is voted on by committee) and the plu-

ralism it values, one of the collective's most prominent features is its highly unified presentation of its content—its films—on the Web, in promotional materials, and in other venues. The collective's titles, honored with three retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art and recently acquired by Duke University's Archive of Documentary Arts, are marketed and often consumed as a historically significant curated collection with a distinct house style. This complex play between individualized activism and collectivity threads through New Day's identity as both a dominant US independent educational film distributor and one of the few surviving feminist documentary collectives so important to the early 1970s.[4] This creative tension carries through to New Day's current, socially integrated business practices, which are constituted around branding the exclusivity of its film titles as a curated collection, the participatory democracy implied by its bylaws, and its pioneering of digital distribution and exhibition possibilities.

Realist Polyphony

Three years after its founding, New Day released *Chris and Bernie* (dir. Bonnie Friedman and Deborah Shaffer, US, 1974), a short documentary about two single mothers who live together so that they can afford to raise their children. The two young women, both divorced, have children under the age of six. Chris is trained as a nurse but is on welfare, while Bernie is trying to learn carpentry. As Chuck Kleinhans described in his 1975 review of the film in *Jump Cut*, "We see Bernie building a stairway while she tells us, in voice-over, that she didn't want to be a secretary and fought the welfare bureaucracy to get into an OEO (Office of Equal Opportunity) carpentry training program that was 'only for men.'"[5] The film demonstrates a documentary aesthetic that is neither expository nor overtly experimental—an observational slice of single parenthood and poverty in the 1970s. "What we have in this new genre of political documentary, the discussion film," Kleinhans continues, "is the process and political struggle of everyday life" (6). The film initially proved difficult to distribute, a challenge familiar to New Day's founders. Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, filmmakers who later received Academy Award nominations

and Emmy Awards for their work, claimed that in the world of New York documentary filmmaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s, professional distributors barely paid filmmakers after the company took its cut and that some distributors, such as the Film-Makers' Cooperative in New York, were "so into underground and experimental film that we could see our potential audience would never get that catalogue."[6] Instead, Reichert and Klein, along with other founding members Liane Brandon and Amalie R. Rothschild, developed aesthetic and economic strategies that addressed and created not only a wider audience interested in the women's movement, labor issues, and political debates about birth control and abortion, but also an audience that could be constituted as a politically active community through their engagement with the films themselves.

For example, Reichert identifies New Day as a crucial player in the development of second-wave feminism: "The whole idea of distribution . . . was to help the women's movement grow. Films could do that; they could get the ideas out. We could watch the women's movement spread across the country just by who was ordering our films. First it was Cambridge and Berkeley. I remember the first showing in the deep South" (21–22). Reichert also describes getting "30–40 bookings a month" in 1971–72 for one of the first and best-known New Day films that she directed with Klein, *Growing Up Female* (US, 1971). An attempt to chronicle the social development of girls and women through a range of cultural, economic, and racial contexts, *Growing Up Female*'s initial bookings were at universities such as Harvard and Vassar College but then expanded to "churches, nursing schools, technical schools" and "junior colleges, Catholic high schools" (22). For her part, Brandon recalls that, while it was a for-profit business (as it remains to this day), New Day negotiated fees with exhibitors on the basis of need "so that consciousness-raising groups and anyone we thought would be interested would have the tools to educate, organize, and spread the word. Different groups used [the films] in different ways—to educate, to plan 'actions' (if the group was so inclined), to plan screenings in schools, churches, union halls, local theaters, etc."[7] As Brandon suggests, the exhibition venue and

the films' content encouraged the audience to act as a collective, especially in their immediate response to the screenings. In 1975 Kleinhans distinguished both *Growing Up Female* and *Chris and Bernie* as exemplary "discussion" films that appeal to "ordinary working people," whose "unpretentiousness of form and subject should not be mistaken."[8] He implies that discussions among audience members could lead to debate, dissent, or even organizing. At their height, these audience actions amounted to what Jane Gaines calls "political mimesis," in which the bodies of the viewers and the bodies on-screen are linked in a reproduction of actions.[9] The moment of political mimesis may occur through an orchestrated rejection or resistance to charged, overdetermined images on-screen, such as images of dolls or pornography, or the use of voice-overs. The New Day films that helped the women's movement grow in the 1970s tended to show that, as Kleinhans argues about *Chris and Bernie*, "Small changes [are] the very stuff of change, the foundation for those dramatic public and mass activities called demonstrations, strikes, and revolutions. Small changes are no small thing."[10] This mirroring between the institutional structure of the organization producing the films and the audiences viewing them had a crucial intermediary: the aesthetics of the films themselves.

While New Day's early catalog contained a variety of media works on a number of topics, the best known films—*Growing Up Female*, *It Happens to Us* (dir. Amalie R. Rothschild, US, 1972), *Anything You Want to Be* (dir. Liane Brandon, US, 1970), and *Chris and Bernie*—all display elements of what Bill Nichols calls "the third style."[11] This mode exhibits the influence of both expository and observational techniques while subordinating them to its use of interviews. In so doing, this mode transfers "the voice of the documentary" from a central point of authorial enunciation in voice-over or in the camera's objective gaze to a decentralized and subjective experiential authority held by a variety of talking-head interviewees.

From the beginning, New Day was dedicated to preserving and disseminating a wide variety of feminist creative output, and just as the exhibition contexts encouraged a range of responses to its films, so too were the aesthetics of the films themselves col-

lective. Early New Day films present a range of women's everyday experiences, often using a collage aesthetic that precludes an identification of any one subject or experience as normative, while simultaneously insisting that each experience is delimited by a patriarchal society. Thus, the films retain a sense of the individual need and possibilities for collective support within a system while showing the force of that system as it is felt on the individual level—similar to how self-distribution within a cooperative structure preserves the specificity of individual projects while allowing for their proliferation and recognition as part of a broader strategy, form, or mode. The films effect a political mimesis that runs not only from the screen to the audience but also from the institutional structure to the screen.

This is particularly evident in *Growing Up Female*, whose structured play of unity and disharmony chronicles the lives of women in the US from age four to thirty-four. Although its subject is human development, the film's logic is circular rather than linear, emphasizing that the issues presented are collectively, as well as individually, experienced. This resonates with the film's audiovisual strategy, which produces the film's interviews as extremely ambiguous. The interviews feature both the six primary subjects and those figures of authority who embody the institutions with the most impact on their lives. These figures often voice the conventional patriarchal wisdom surrounding feminine development. For example, the elementary school teacher in the opening segment notes at length in voice-over that little girls are "mean," "jealous," and "competitive" in comparison to little boys, with whom they do not like to play. The voice-over is accompanied by a series of shots of the teacher's classroom. The master shots display mixed-gender groups of children playing together while two-shots and close-ups show little girls sharing with, grooming, and comforting one another. The scene challenges one of Nichols's critiques of the third style, namely that it does not question or evaluate the authority of interviewees (25–27). Here, the film utilizes audiovisual montage to cast doubt on the teacher's assessment and to emphasize the selective and constructed nature of the social reality she reinscribes, implying its effects on a collective, as well as individual, level.

These films and others are consistently represented not only as products of a collective but also as entries in a collection. New Day sells its works to educators and scholars as an impeccably curated collection, assuring its users of a certain level of quality—and even predictability—and of bold, insightful content. This is evident in the collective's promotional materials and in its digital extensions, including the descriptions of the films within its archive. While collective action and governance are hallmarks of both New Day and feminist politics in general, the collection as an organizing structure tends toward an erasure of such possibilities. To collect is to forget, so that a collection stands for an entire experience, position, place, or moment. It also requires forgetting the tensions and differences among the collection's constitutive elements, downplaying them in favor of the impression of univocality projected by the whole. The collection claims to make history as action or process superfluous by demonstrating that signifiers of individual events—and thus the event itself—may be extricated from history and preserved intact.[12] Such a notion may seem at odds with the kind of political mimesis attempted by New Day's preferred exhibition contexts and its best-known aesthetic style, yet it is key to its institutional branding. The apparent contradiction between a collective that reaches its audience through the mode of the collection is nevertheless central to New Day's continued economic success and its most important new initiative, the digital platform.

Collecting Small Changes

The aesthetic strategies displayed in many of the founding films and the mimetic tactics employed by the directors who first distributed them remain key components of New Day's activity today, although the membership, the aesthetic modes employed, and the films' exhibition contexts have all diversified. New Day's pioneering digital distribution platform weaves together the collective's past and future by emphasizing the discussion aesthetic of many of its films. The digital platform simultaneously renews and invents possibilities for how those discussions can occur: in single-channel and interactive screenings among a geographically scattered, sometimes atomized audience.

New Day Digital, spearheaded in 2008 by New Day filmmakers Paco de Onís, Jeff Tamblyn, and Peter Cohn, was an early streaming platform for independent documentaries that was hosted by Seattle Community Colleges television.[13] Recognizing the importance of and possibilities for the digital platform, New Day promotes films that facilitate the forging of connections, dissemination of memories, or sharing of political strategies among digital visitors. Some of the most compelling interactive documentary projects connected with New Day filmmakers are *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (dir. Pamela Yates, US and Guatemala, 2011), Rebecca Snedeker and Luisa Dantes's *Land of Opportunity* (US, 2010), Dawn Valadez's transmedia project *Turn It Around* (US, in progress), and Theo Rigby's *Immigrant Nation* (US, 2012–). Through their content platforms, these New Day documentaries allow for collective and interactive feedback surrounding issues of poverty, education, and citizenship—a logical expansion from New Day's initial beginnings with discussions of films that feature critiques of patriarchy.

The digital platform offers a resolution to the tension of New Day's collection, and it also suggests that the logic of the collection can help progressive media achieve its ends. This is particularly evident in *Granito*, which both performs and unravels the processes of history. Coproduced by New Day Digital leader de Onís, Pamela Yates, and Peter Kinoy, *Granito* recuts footage from an earlier documentary that Yates and Kinoy worked on, *When the Mountains Tremble* (dir. Newton Thomas Sigel and Pamela Yates, US, 1983). The original film was notable for covering the Guatemalan genocide by interviewing corrupt government officials as well as indigenous rebel armies. Traveling with the leftist guerillas, a young Yates profiled Inés—whose name was actually María Magdalena Hernández—a Mayan guerrilla fighting for fair wages, property rights, and the recognition of her people. *Granito*'s title is taken from Hernández's own fateful words in *When the Mountains Tremble*: "We are making a big effort, each contributing our tiny grain of sand, our *granito*, so that our country can be free," words and images that *Granito* returns to repeatedly.

Granito suggests the ways in which a collection can be compatible with the aims of the collective, just as *When the Mountains Tremble*'s collecting and recording of the conflict was itself a politi-

cal act: the preservation of the events depicted in the film contradicts the regime's official narrative of its actions and locates the actions of the rebel armies in a wider context. The film was used as a politically mimetic object within and outside of Guatemala, most notably in the case of Yates's 1983 interviews with former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt. Yates recorded Ríos Montt bragging about his responsibilities: "I control the army," a statement that was used as forensic evidence at his trial for genocide in May 2012. In its turn, *Granito* reopens the history of this period in Guatemala in its engagement with *When the Mountains Tremble*, turning the form of the collection against its expected uses. Distributed digitally by New Day and contextualized within a complex social media environment predicated on presence, *Granito* is characterized by the digital prostheses that so often accompany the contemporary film collection, as well as by shared aesthetic decision-making practices.

On New Day's website, Yates describes how the "collective concept" behind the coproduction, direction, and editing of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Granito* allowed her, de Onís, and Kinoy to develop "our approach to political documentary storytelling."[14] This "collective concept" continues with the social media updates to the memorial website that accompanies *Granito*, "Every Memory Matters" (a multimedia project developed at the Bay Area Video Coalition Producers Institute).[15] The memorial website includes Yates's description of Hernández in 1980, months before her death. One evening, during a 2012 screening of *Granito* in Guatemala, Hernández's brother, Valeriano, was in the audience. A week later, he located Yates on Facebook and informed her that he had not seen footage of his sister in thirty years. After the Facebook contact, Yates dug through her collection and located a letter detailing Hernández's life and experiences leading up to her guerrilla activities, which she had sent Yates shortly before she was killed. Yates and de Onís posted this letter, as well as many other emotional memorial documents and photos, on "Every Memory Matters." With the ongoing, interactive story development of *Granito*, and the support of New Day Films, Yates, Kinoy, and de Onís provide compelling examples of how women's storytelling history may achieve social justice through the aesthetic and institutional strengths of both the collective and the collection.

Notes

1. Liane Brandon, e-mail message to Elizabeth Coffman, 3 August 2012. Brandon is an award-winning filmmaker and cofounder of New Day Films. See "Liane Brandon," New Day Films, www.newday.com/filmmaker/42 (accessed 9 October 2015).

2. Beverly Seckinger, e-mail message to authors, 8 September 2014. Seckinger is a filmmaker and producer affiliated with New Day Films. See "Beverly Seckinger," New Day Films, www.newday.com/filmmaker/132 (accessed 9 October 2015).

3. For information on the share ladder, application processes, and distribution practices, see New Day Films' website, www.newday.com/content/apply-join-us (accessed 17 August 2015).

4. While New Day is notable simply for its decades-long operation, the collective is perhaps even more remarkable for its continued adherence to its original economic model and mission, especially when compared to WMM. Like New Day, WMM recently celebrated its forty-year anniversary as a women's film collective. The biggest difference between the two distributors today is that New Day has continued to operate successfully using collective and sustainable decision-making models, while WMM's comeback is more the product of a single individual's (Debra Zimmerman) efforts to develop it into an organization that is more focused on independent film distribution. See Debra Zimmerman and Patricia White, "Looking Back and Forward: A Conversation about Women Make Movies," *Camera Obscura*, no. 82 (2013): 147–55; B. Ruby Rich, "The Confidence Game," *Camera Obscura*, no. 82 (2013): 157–65.

5. Chuck Kleinhans, "*Chris and Bernie*: The Virtues of Modesty," *Jump Cut*, no. 8 (1975): 6.

6. Quoted in Julia Lesage, Barbara Halpern Martineau, and Chuck Kleinhans, "Interview with Julia Reichert and Jim Klein: New Day's Way," *Jump Cut*, no. 9 (1975): 21–22.

7. Brandon, e-mail message to Coffman.

8. Kleinhans, "*Chris and Bernie*," 6.

9. Jane Gaines, "Radical Attractions: The Uprising of '34," *Wide Angle* 21, no. 2 (1999): 103.

10. Kleinhans, "*Chris and Bernie*," 6.

11. Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 17–30.
12. See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984), 151–53.
13. Beverly Seckinger, e-mail message to authors, 17 February 2013.
14. Pamela Yates, quoted in "*Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*," New Day Films, www.newday.com/film/granito (accessed 17 August 2015).
15. "About the Project," *Granito: Every Memory Matters*, www.granitomem.com/acerca-del-proyecto/ (accessed 20 November 2015).

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