

Seeing Red

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Seeing Red : Meaning-Making and Resistance in Menstrual Culture

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Introduction

This project explores how women negotiate information about a taboo subject-menstruation-as presented in the documentary film *Under Wraps*. Using analytical tools from the work of each Raphaëlle Moine (2002), Michel Foucault (1980), Mary Douglas (1966), and Michel de Certeau (1990), I construct a theoretical framework through which to interpret these women's negotiation of the information being presented in the film. I go on to briefly describe the film and research methodology, and then I provide a summary and discussion of the results and their significance for both the social construction of menstruation and media reception studies.

Theoretical Framework : Power(s) and Resistances in Meaning-Making

The documentary film as a genre is embedded with expectations of "truth" in the information it communicates. Using Raphaëlle Moine as a point of departure, we can understand how a film's genre creates certain expectations about the film's communicative and ideological roles :

↳ Le genre organise le cadre de référence dans lequel est vu le film. Le genre constitue un espace d'expériences à partir duquel se déterminent et se construisent [nos] attentes et [notre] lecture du film. Qu'on le considère comme un pacte de communication, une promesse ou un contrat de lecture, le genre organise le cadre de référence dans lequel est vu le film. (Moine, 2002 : 80)

The documentary film as a genre is assumed to produce non-fictitious (read : truthful) representations of some aspect of reality, and audiences thus consume documentary media with this expectation in mind.

However, an aspect of Moine's conception of genre is problematic. She suggests that 'genre'- as an ideological conduit that creates and directs certain expectations about the reception process - in fact anesthetizes the possibility of multiple receptions of a medium's message. This sort of determinism represents audiences as passive absorbers of mediated information, which robs the audience of any agency in the reception process. This paper, on the other hand, will demonstrate that while genre communicates a certain expectation about the nature of a given medium's message (i.e. expecting a documentary film to communicate 'truth'), media reception is ultimately a very complex process that does not take place in isolation.

The "truth"-based discourses inherent in such media are rooted in power. According to Michel

Foucault (1980), power, understood as a productive force rather than simply a repressive one, produces forms of knowledge and discourses of truth. In this way the documentary film, as an expression of such truth discourses, and can be understood as exercising power (however abstractly) over its audience.

Foucault explains how societies develop their respective discourses or régimes of truth and meaning-making :

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth : that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true ; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned ; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth ; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980 : 131)

This suggests that discourses of and about truth (and thus power) can manifest themselves in myriad ways, including through media, science, religion, and laws, among other institutions. It is clear that the documentary film as a media genre produces discourses of truth, and this essay takes the idea further by arguing that socio-cultural norms and taboos constitute another of these different types of truth discourses. In other words, the socio-cultural context of norms and values relating to menstruation exists as another set of perceived "truths," though as a more subtle form of ideologically-naturalized power not necessarily originating with an identifiable individual or institution, but that is nonetheless very real in its consequences (i.e. social sanctions resulting from transgression, intentional or otherwise, of menstrual norms). I shall provide a brief outline of the contemporary normative discourse surrounding menstruation in mainstream Western society.

In her discussion of social norms and taboo, Mary Douglas (1970) discusses the social meanings of different body fluids. She addresses a general human fear of contamination resulting from contact with body fluids, in particular the contamination of men by women's fluids, and suggests that it actually reflects the fundamental hierarchical relationships between the sexes in most societies, wherein men tend to be superior to and more valued than women. Within such patriarchal societies the male body is thus understood as superior to the female body, and so the processes and fluids that do not pertain to male bodies-such as menstruation-hold a special status of "impurity" or "dirtiness" within the context of those societies.

When not portrayed through the sexual male gaze, women's bodies in general are also taboo. Douglas (1970) discusses rituals of and beliefs about purity and cleanliness, as well as their Western contemporary likening with a sort of secular sacredness or holiness, thus aligning conceptions of impurity and dirt with profanity. This discursive moralizing creates certain "truths" about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, attitudes, and states of being. "As we know it," Douglas explains, "dirt is disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt : it exists in the eye of the beholder" (1970 : 2). As a relative social fact,

↳ [d]irt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. [...] In chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. (Douglas, 1970 : 2)

Douglas's conception of cleanliness as the escape not from disease but rather from what I would term "dis-ease" or unease is particularly compelling. She argues that cleaning and producing self-representations of cleanliness (and, thus, purity and morality) are attempts to re-order and make sense of our environment, to restore comfort to our lives and to how we are perceived in the world.

"Our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions. The rules of hygiene change, of course, with changes in our state of knowledge" (Douglas, 1970 : 7). Since social norms are built into this "knowledge", Douglas suggests that social norms regarding taboo produce discourse about what behaviours and attitudes are acceptable and unacceptable in a given society. The emphasis on contagion and purification in contemporary Western society means "the individual is in the grip of iron-hard categories of thought which are heavily safeguarded by rules of avoidance and by punishments" (Douglas, 1970 : 5). These rules and punishments take many forms.

Contemporary normative discourse involves both men and women feeling disgust toward menstruation (Roberts et al., 2002 : 133) as well as the compulsion to shroud it in secrecy : this involves keeping one's menses private and out-of-sight, and it warns against looking at, touching, or otherwise acknowledging its existence except in a cursory and procedural way. By pretending that they do not menstruate, women in fact appear to be more like men (the unstated ideal). Paradoxically, hiding one's menstruation is thus "an ideal of super-femininity" (Roberts et al., 2002 : 133). Because these messages about menstruation as taboo are so deeply embedded in the social world, "the sanitized, deodorized, and idealized images of women's bodies become the only ones we encounter" and so we accept them (Roberts et al., 2002 : 138).

In those instances when women do break these "rules"-when they transgress-they face social sanctions. When the transgression is unintentional, the "appropriate" response is to demonstrate embarrassment and shame, since this reaffirms adherence to norms. Intentional transgressions-including most elements of the film-are particularly interesting because they are the ultimate signifier of "impurity" or "immorality" as the transgressors come to terms with the illogical process of denying one's femininity in order to assert it. Instead of colluding in their own oppression, transgressors take a stance that is often oppositional to the normative discourse. I shall demonstrate, however, that such resistance to the norms takes many less evident forms, and that there is in fact the potential for resistance in all of us.

Foucault (1980 : 142) actually notes that power relations cannot exist without multiple resistances, and that these resistances are formed in the instant that power is exercised. My intent is to represent the film's audience members not as passive consumers of the truth discourses described above, but rather as agents who actively participate in the processes of media reception and norm negotiation. These truth discourses thus provide, together, a context for interpreting an audience's negotiation of competing truths. The possibility of these two sites of power communicating different or even *conflicting* truths necessarily creates processes of negotiation, consciously or otherwise, between the differing sets of information. It is these processes of negotiation, or productive acts of resistance, that I explore herein.

I have established that power is located in multiple places, including the truth discourses of both documentary films and, as I argue, social norms. Michel De Certeau (1990 : *XLVI*), in his discussion of audience reception practices, refers to these legitimized sources of truth/power as "strategies"

because of their authoritative role in defining and determining reality. I have also established that the audience members being studied are herein constructed as agents who actively negotiate the information presented to them by both the media and the dominant culture. According to De Certeau (1990 : XLVI), these negotiating activities constitute "tactics", which are productive practices of appropriation used by individuals at the lower end of the power relationship to create space for themselves in situations defined by strategies. In other words, tactics are meaning-making processes that acknowledge the distortion inherent in any interpretive practice, as well as the knowledge "products" resulting from this process.

In this essay I argue that the audience's reception of documentary media does not occur passively or in isolation, but rather constitutes an active process of negotiation between the film's imposed "truth" and the normative "truths" about menstruation at this specific cultural and historical moment. This project takes into account that negotiations with normative truths constitute a lifelong process of continuously positioning and repositioning oneself with respect to these truths. It is these processes of negotiating between competing truth discourses that constitute what I call "tactics of resistance," since these processes involve a degree of resistance that produces the new spaces within which audience members are continuously (re)positioning themselves.

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About the Film

The film, *Under Wraps* (MacInnes, 1998), is a National Film Board of Canada documentary produced in 1998. A contemporary exploration of how menstruation is portrayed in North American popular culture, the film describes various efforts to break down the taboo surrounding menstruation by bringing it out from "under wraps" and thus demystifying it.

Under Wraps explores several examples of menstruation's representation in popular culture, including Judy Chicago's "Menstruation Bathroom" art installation ; Judy Bloom's young adult novel *Are you there, God ? It's me, Margaret* ; the Museum of Menstruation that has taken over one man's life (and basement) ; a woman's life-threatening experiences with toxic shock syndrome (TSS) ; environmental concerns resulting from the massive quantities of disposable menstrual products ; and concluding with another controversial art installation, this time Wenda Gu's "Enigma of Blood".

Generally speaking, the film has a progressive perspective on menstruation that actively and intentionally transgresses normative discourse.

Methodology

This project explores the intricacies of how women use various tactics of resistance in their negotiations of the information presented by "strategic" powers, namely the documentary film and social norms, by incorporating an analysis of real women's experiences of negotiating information from a documentary film about menstruation, in the context of a society where this topic is

considered taboo.

Using qualitative methodological tools to explore how women negotiate information about menstruation in the documentary film *Under Wraps*, this project takes into account audience reactions and interactions during the film screening, the interactions and conversations among respondents in a post-viewing discussion, and a deeper exploration of respondents' experiences through written personal reflections and individual in-depth interviews.

Feminist research methodology advocates that there is no such thing as real "objectivity" in science, and so highlighting the subjective experiences of respondents and researchers is important in providing context for the results and interpretations of a given study. Historically, women's subjective experiences have been neglected and pushed aside in science, so feminist methodology puts in place a strategy that intentionally focuses upon these experiences. In the present work, a feminist methodology is used in order to understand respondents' negotiation of an instance of mediated information about a taboo subject.

My general research question was : How do audiences negotiate information about a taboo subject presented in media ? More specifically, how do women negotiate information about menstruation as it is presented in a documentary film ?

For the sake of time and the manageability of this project, I have opted to rely on a convenience sample of five Caucasian Canadian-born women who are close to me, each with different degrees of English-French bilingualism, all currently based in either western Quebec or eastern Ontario. The study took place with two groups, which I have labeled A and B in order to distinguish between them in the following analysis. The relationship between the women in Group A is that of two sisters and their mother-which, in itself, accounts for a particular pattern of interaction among the respondents that turned out to be quite interesting !-and of two friends in Group B.

All of the respondents have been assigned fictitious names to make the following analysis flow more smoothly :

↳ Group A :

"Deanna" is a 49-year-old single mother whose children have all left the home for school or to live independently. She is a tax auditor with the provincial government and has worked in the field of finance for nearly 20 years.

"Janice" is 22, has graduated from 2 college programs and is currently working in security, although her fields of study were fashion design and event-planning.

"Britney" is aged 21 and is taking a year-long break between her second and third year of university studies. She had been studying biology in hopes of eventually becoming a veterinarian, but has now changed fields and intends to pursue business administration.

↳ Group B :

"Sonia" is aged 23 and works for an activist research and resource centre. She is also involved in various activist projects, including an anarchist bookstore and resource centre.

"Anna" is aged 24 and is studying psychology in university. She is involved in various activist projects, including a Women's Collective.

The data-collection process took place in four steps : a short, private, semi-structured interview with one respondent from each group to find out more in-depth information about their perceptions of and experiences with their own periods ; a screening of the film with each group, where I took note of the interactions between the audience members and the film, as well as interactions among audience members themselves ; individual, written reflections on the film and each participants' thoughts about it ; and, finally, a semi-structured discussion with each group about the film and some of the themes explored therein. The responses were coded and generally grouped according to discernible patterns in the data.

Findings and Discussion : Tactics of Resistance

Using the analytical tools presented in the theoretical framework outlined at the beginning of this paper, we can begin to interpret these women's negotiations between the information presented in the film and the normative discourse about menstruation. For the purposes of organizing this analysis I have divided the responses into rough overlapping categories-herein referred to as "tactics of resistance"-that begin the project of describing peoples' processes of negotiating new discursive spaces for themselves among and between the many different components of the regimes truth. The different tactic categories include (but are not limited to) : Othering & Normalizing, Self-Contradicting, and Comparing & Legitimizing. I also include a fourth section regarding audience critiques of the film and normative discourse, primarily because I felt these ideas were significant but did not know how else to categorize them.

Before delving into these specific categories of responses, I shall briefly describe some general observations about the two groups of respondents. Group A was primarily made up of people who adhere fairly strongly to socio-cultural norms about menstruation, and this was evident in their negotiations with the film. The respondents in this group tended to position themselves "inside" or "between" the two competing truth discourses, and by this I mean they tended to struggle between them, trying to create or find their own space.

On the other hand, Group B was made up of activist feminists whose attitudes about bodies and menstruation are actively transgressive, so their responses tended to differ significantly from those of Group A. Group B's respondents tended to situate themselves "outside" of the competing discourses, critiquing and evaluating both the film and social norms. Due to my own positioning as being more in line with Group B's reasoning and politics, I had more difficulty "stepping outside" of myself in order to truly understand the patterns in their responses, although I had no problems finding patterns in those of Group A.

Also, because Deanna encompasses the widest range of experience of all the respondents-having been a young menstruator, a mother, and now a nearly menopausal woman-her answers tend to take a prominent position in the following discussion. The amount and depth of her experiences with these various roles or positions means she had much to say about them, and this is reflected below.

Othering & Normalizing

The first two categories of analysis, Normalizing and Othering, are interesting because they overlap

and are mutually-reinforcing. The process of Othering involves pointing out someone's transgression in order to affirm of one's own adherence to a certain norm. It also serves to distract attention from a person's own potentially transgressive behaviour by vilifying someone else's. Britney and Deanna tended to engage in multiple Othering tactics throughout the viewing and discussion sessions.

Accusations such as "That's not art !" were used to devalue a particular art installation portraying various aspects of menstruation by isolating and vilifying it, thus delegitimizing menstruation-themed art as a valid form of artistic expression. Consequently, this portrays menstruation (or, at least, representations thereof) as vulgar and offensive.

Throughout the course of the film and discussion, Deanna and Britney accuse the filmmakers and talking heads of "making a big issue out of nothing" (referring to menstruation, of course). Through this process they are re-asserting their respective normative positions in relation to the taboo subject. Britney calls them a "group of raving feminists" as a prefix to her accusation, a process which assigns a deliberately derogatory label to people who are engaging in a particular kind of activity as a method of delegitimizing the activity. This activity identifies and labels the speaker as being apart from the transgressors and thus "normal" while they are "strange" or "other" or "abnormal".

During the film segment about the Museum of Menstruation-which is located in a man's basement at his home and constitutes a grassroots effort to document the history of feminine hygiene products, social constructions of menstruation, and related phenomena-Britney exclaimed "Creep !" multiple times and had a disgusted expression on her face. When asked later why she made this comment, she responded, "Any guy who is interested in this kind of stuff is creepy," including gynecology in her category of "this kind of stuff." She explained that because men "have no relation to it" and "have no idea what it feels like," they must just "want to look at a whole bunch of naked women," and went on to describe how the museum was pornographic. "The female form is porn, a nude picture is porn, in my opinion, it's all porn." When asked about the diagrams of the human body in doctor's offices, she conceded that these were different because they only showed a person's insides, and that it was skin that constituted pornography.

She suggested that the only way a person (man or woman) should be interested in such a topic would be for a medical or scientific reason. This judging of the characters was her way of defining and normalizing her own distance from the taboo topic, expressing discomfort at the film's message, and reclaiming what menstruation means for her : in this case, it's something scientific or medical and a private personal experience, but by no means social or historical-and certainly not something to be looked at, cherished, or discussed !

Her comments, intended derogatorily, are particularly interesting because they suggest that men should not be interested in women's bodies or biological processes in any way, and the reference to pornography serves to situate menstruation and representations of the human body in a "bad" place with other tabooed social phenomena. The entire dialogue is evidence of an uneasy process of struggling to find meaning between moralizing socio-cultural norms about bodies and the intentional transgression of the film. As can be seen in this and other dialogues throughout the discussions, this process often seems rooted more in the fear of social sanctions than in actual logic.

With all of these, the process of delegitimizing someone or something as a transgressive "other" and, therefore, "wrong" has the double effect of simultaneously making the accuser seem "normal" and

"right." This re-affirmation of adherence to cultural norms is what I call Normalizing, which describes the process of distancing oneself in some way from a taboo subject in order to reaffirm one's own behaviour as "normal" or "correct". This usually happens when the respondent identifies more with the normative discourse than with competing messages, or is too afraid of potential social sanctions to consider transgressing, and she thus feels the need to assert her alignment with the norms by discursively distancing herself from the taboo.

This primarily took place during certain parts of the film and discussions that dealt with especially graphic representations of menstrual blood and women's bodies. In these instances, instead of participating in the discussion Britney would begin talking loudly to the cat across the room, or she would pick up a magazine from the table beside her and begin flipping through it, as though to communicate her disinterest in the topic being presented. She also admitted to being shy about the topic, especially in the context of being tape-recorded. She followed this up with a threat to move far away so that she would never have to participate in this kind of project again. Another similar point was when she noted that in class discussions about the topic she never bothered to pay attention, she simply was not interested (in something so fundamental to her being a woman).

I interpret Britney's active process of distancing herself from the discussion about menstruation as her way of affirming that she was "normal" for not being interested in something as "gross" or "dirty" as menstruation. Her detachment from the film and the situation was her way of rejecting the film's-and our discussion's-transgression, while simultaneously aligning herself with the normative discourse of silence and secrecy around topics like menstruation. In fact, group B's Anna astutely pointed out that it is socially acceptable to be embarrassed about such transgressions, since that embarrassment demonstrates a degree of social awareness of the topic's taboo nature. Conversely, *not* being embarrassed about an unintentional transgression can be interpreted as a transgression in itself.

In this negotiation between competing messages, actively delegitimizing the more transgressive positioning of others often simultaneously serves to align oneself more closely with certain norms. In this way, the processes of Othering and Normalizing are deeply interconnected. To apply Mary Douglas, I could argue that the "dirt" in the film left the respondents feeling unclean, so they tried to "clean up" or re-order their respective environments and positions through these Othering and Normalizing tactics of resistance in order to be at ease. This analysis also applies to other tactics throughout the discussion.

Self-Contradicting

I want to begin the description of this tactic by emphasizing that the point of identifying respondents' self-contradictions is not about accusing them of lying in their responses. Rather, it is to flesh out the processes by which people seek meaning in and among competing messages as they try to determine their own positioning with respect to these messages. This negotiation is a continuous process of always re-figuring, re-determining and re-evaluating our own positioning in light of new information or old memories, and this process is bound to be fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions.

One example of such a contradiction is when Janice began her interview by stating that she is "pretty open to talking about" menstruation, yet she barely contributed to the discussions except to point out

how the rest of Group A was "wrong". Whenever one of the other two women would make a comment she didn't agree with (which was often !), she would directly challenge them, thereby suggesting that she was open to considering the film's perspective. She tended to play the role of the "voice of reason," trying to mediate between the film's message and the reactions of those around her. It was a difficult position to occupy : trying to confirm some aspects of the film's messages while simultaneously facing normative and moralizing feedback from the rest of her group. I can subcategorize this self-contradiction as a constructive use of silence : a process whereby Janice engaged in thoughtful reflection in order to negotiate her positioning. This could be motivated simply by a quiet personality, or more interestingly by an inability to articulate a position, or an unwillingness to vocalize responses that might be perceived as "wrong" and thus either "uptight" on the one hand, or "immoral" on the other.

_Deanna began the discussion with a statement that menstruation is an "amazing, life-affirming process," then later contradicts herself when she talks about her joy about the onset of her own menopause, and throughout the discussion continues to reflect upon her own deep frustrations with menstruation, such as how it always interferes with her beach vacations and how "it's just a crappy thing about life that you have to live with." She described it as inconvenient, messy, and an interference in her sex life. At another point in the discussion she dismissed periods as being an unimportant issue, just something the body does, "like peeing and pooing." These three different perspectives-embracing, condemning, and disregarding menstruation as unimportant-all contradict one another, thus demonstrating a process of negotiation between the film's primarily positive messages, her own negative experiences, and the socio-cultural norms encouraging women to pretend that the menstrual experience doesn't exist, or at least doesn't matter. The complexity of the process of finding meaning amidst all of these contradicting messages reveals itself in these contradictory positions.

The pervasiveness of the norms about menstruation are deeply-rooted. Deanna hypothesized that if she were "stranded on a desert island, if there would be a shortage of pads or something, it would be very inconvenient." This sort of reflection demonstrates the degree to which these norms invade peoples' thoughts and operate at a level that is more rooted in a fear of social sanctions than in logic-that, were she stranded on a deserted island, the lack of hygiene products would be a woman's biggest concern ! This contradicts her repeated statements that menstruation "isn't a big deal," as well as her statement that she's "not embarrassed about people who menstruate." Clearly if the fear and shame are this deeply ingrained into your thought patterns, then the norms have affected you.

Similarly, Deanna also contradicted herself when she justified the historical shift of hygiene products from reusable items to the disposable variety as being solely due to convenience and not to the shame associated with having to carry around the constant reminder of a woman's bleeding. She compared it to the parallel change in baby diaper products as being a result of convenience : having less laundry to wash. Within the same breath, however, she also described how her learning about menstruation was uncomfortable, a message passed down this way unconsciously by her parents : "initially it was hush-hush and we didn't talk about it." She explained she had actively tried to counteract this in the process of bringing up her own daughters to understand menstruation as not being shameful. Again, this contradiction is evidence that while Deanna wanted to believe that the shame did not affect her and that she embraced the movie's positive depictions of menstruation, she simultaneously was trying to understand the role that it did in fact play in her socialization into "womanhood." Wanting at once to be the "progressive" thinker applauded and celebrated by the film,

yet at the same time afraid of the sanctions that come with such independent and transgressive thinking, she found herself in a state of self-contradiction.

Finally, Britney's likening of representations of menstruation to pornography was another contradiction : that images showing actual human skin are pornographic and thus profane while depictions of internal organs are scientific and thus acceptable. Here her logic was rooted most strongly in finding a medium between the illogical normative discourses about menstruation and pornography respectively, which then created internal contradictions in her reasoning.

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Comparing & Legitimizing

Another tactic of resistance that I noted was the respondents' tendency to compare the film's presented information to various other sources of information : personal experience, as well as normatively legitimate and illegitimate sources of information.

During the film's segment on Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS), Deanna said, "I remember this... all those women died..." thus confirming that the film was providing accurate information on something she remembers directly from her own experience. As if to keep the momentum of the film's correctness, she seemed to accept what it said even when it didn't coincide with her own experience : there was a section on the environmental hazards of flushable tampon applicators washing up on the beaches along the US's coasts, and she didn't remember any of this from her own annual trips to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, over the past several years. Instead of critiquing the film, she said, "they must clean it all up before the tourists arrive." This comparison to her own experience to legitimize the film's information, coupled of with a willingness to accept the film's information as truth, again demonstrates the strange contradictory nature of the negotiating process between competing truths.

When something was said or shown in the film with which she disagreed, she would sometimes openly tell the TV that it was wrong, or she would play the "expert" role of comparing it to her own experience of having periods for nearly 40 years, or at times she would play the role of the "mother" (which she was), drawing on the naturalized authority and experiential truth of motherhood, and begin explaining a particular concept to her grown daughters (like the history of pads, the meaning of TSS, her theory about the transition from a patriarchal to a matriarchal society). In this way she was both challenging the authority of the film for daring to tell her how her own body works, as well as she was challenging the information itself by either confirming the messages or shutting them down with stories of her personal experiences.

Other methods of comparing the film's information included comparing it to established legitimate sources of information, such as science. An example of this is Britney's acceptance of the field of medicine as the only legitimate space within which to discuss menstruation. Medical and scientific interests are legitimate (to a degree), but social and activist reasons for interest are not legitimate.

These tactics are particularly interesting due to the degree of irony in the fact that she was, originally, the respondent most excited to see the film when she found out it was going to be related to biology, something she understands and recognizes as legitimate and valuable. She didn't expect that it

would delve into women's bodies on a social level, and reacted negatively because the social realm is outside of her comfort zone. In this way, her resistance was an attempt to keep the meaning and discussion of menstruation at a place where she felt comfortable.

Within the context of menstrual representations as art-a primary focus of Group A-respondents also compared art as a legitimate form of expression with the apparent vulgarity of representing women's bodies and bodily processes. Deanna referred to art as being aesthetically pleasing, but did not believe that anyone wanted to see images of a tampon being pulled out of a vagina, nor that they would consider it art. "Art is supposed to make you feel better," she argued, "artists should use more 'niceness' in their work." This suggested that menstruation and women's bodies were not 'nice' but actually provocative and antagonistic. She compared the artistic representations in the film to the Jerry Springer show, thereby making yet another association between menstruation and a social phenomenon regarded with very little social value.

Another tactic used to situate oneself in relation to the taboo is by comparing menstruation to other bodily processes that involve excretion, including urination, defecation, and ejaculation-processes that are all heavily stigmatized themselves. Such comparisons of menstrual blood to other bodily secretions and conditions, as well as comparison's between pads/tampons, condoms, and diapers for kids and adults perform similar tasks. "People have been peeing since the beginning of time," argues Deanna, "and we don't make documentaries about peeing !" Statements such as this demonstrated her disconnection from feminist thought, which would tend to recognize connections between the silence around women's bodies and gender-based oppression. Instead she immediately made the connection between menstruation and gender-neutral bodily functions, identifying it as "gross" and "messy"-which is in sharp contrast to the film's presentation of menstruation as "empowering" and "life-giving."

Similarly to Group A, Sonia from Group B also made a comparison between menstruation and excretory processes. "It's not only menstruation we don't talk about, but also poop," she explains, noting how we try to pretend such bodily processes don't exist. She mentioned some products that can be put in the toilet which are specifically designed to deodorize the bathroom after passing feces. She also compares this to "freshening cloths" that come with female condoms, noting how social norms vilify female genitalia, while "it's ok for a guy to have a sweaty gross penis." In an equally sarcastic tone, she quips, "Or maybe they're always clean because they're so stable and manly," followed by knowing laughter from both her and Anna.

Miscellaneous Critiques

Most of the respondents had an opinion about normative discourses surrounding menstruation, or about the film's own discourse. While Group A's respondents tended to situate themselves between the film's discourse and the normative discourse, Group B actively discussed the problems with normative discourse, with the film's discourse, and with the film's inability to adequately address normative discourse. Because this section is a little more difficult to organize, I have divided it according to themes from the discussion :

Birth control as menstrual control : Anna was particularly disturbed by the film's and popular discourse's conflation of sexuality with the onset of menstruation. She explains that sexuality is typically portrayed as only starting the moment a woman first menstruates, and describes how this

presents a conflict for young women. "You're a woman now...' As if when you can't reproduce then you don't have a sexuality."

Conflations such as this are facilitated by products such as birth control pills that are marketed as "solving" the problems of menstruation. While Janice praises birth control pills (a "miracle pill") as "fix[ing] everything about being a girl" (such as increasing breast size, "curing" adolescent acne, and reducing or even eliminating a woman's menstrual flow and associated abdominal cramping), Sonia and Anna are deeply disturbed by the effects of "the pill" on menstruation. What was lacking in the film was a critique of this conflation between birth control and menstrual control, as well as a critique of the pill's harmful effects, including reducing a woman's flow, potentially eliminating her period altogether, disrupting hormones, associations with depression, and some women's tendency to purposely alter or disrupt their flow by taking placebos on the wrong days (half of these so-called problems were considered positive attributes of the pill by Janice !).

There was an interesting difference between Janice's and Anna's interviews : while Janice appreciates the pill for its ability to "fix" woman-ness, Anna condemns the pill, expressing her own experience with menstruation as a positive reminder of her femininity and her reproductive capabilities.

"Hygiene products" :

Sonia was particularly disturbed by the film's focus on "sanitary products" and "hygiene products." She was upset that the film didn't critique the lack of fit between the products and their "sanitary" and "hygiene" classifications, and that such a cursory discussion avoids the issue of "what menstruation is and how it affects women and our lives with each other and our sex lives, and those things are easy to not talk about when you're looking at 'Are pads healthy ?' and 'What are the alternatives to pads ?'" Of all the potential topics for discussion about menstruation, she could not understand the film's chosen emphasis on hygiene products. She said that menstruation is more than the products used for "hygiene". The film focused too much on the "clean-up" aspect of menstruation, and she felt that taking this focus was merely a way of talking about women's oppression, but not really touching on it at all. The fixation on sanitation was generally bothersome to her and did not address women's alienation from their own bodies. It also overlooked or avoided dealing with men's misunderstanding of women's bodies and menstrual cycles, just as it avoided discussing the cultural/social norms and pressures on women regarding dialogue around their bodies.

Interestingly, the in-depth interviews with Janice and Anna revealed intimate familiarity with the products they use, with Janice naming-unprompted-the specific product brand, the colour of each level of absorbency of her brand, etc., and Anna providing a nearly scripted description and history of her product of choice, the Diva Cup. This suggests that such "hygiene" products do play an important role in the experience of menstruation, though the film's way of dealing with it was inadequate.

The critique of the film's focus on sanitary products led to a discussion about Diva Cups and how they actually measure a woman's blood in ounces. Anna describes the experience :

↳ A Diva Cup really gets you *connected* with your flow-with tampons and pads you don't even *interact* with your blood ! [...] Tampons are so popular because you don't ever have to look at your own blood. If you change it frequently enough, you can spend an entire cycle without looking at or

touching the blood. With applicators, now, you don't have to even touch your own *vulva*. [...] I enjoy interacting with my period ; look forward to it, I like using the cup and seeing the different colours and combinations... the texture is cool, with different layers of stuff floating on top. [...] It makes you more in touch with your blood.

The behaviours, attitudes, and imagery in this description are incredibly transgressive. Perhaps another sub-categorical tactic of resistance to the film's messages, then, is taking a stance that is in fact "more radical" than that of the film-the transgressive object of discussion-itself. This sort of positioning is significant because it rejects both the film's and the normative discourse's attempts to assert power over their knowledge.

Other critiques :

Because there have been so few films about menstruation, there were some far more important topics that Group A felt ought to have been discussed. These included, among other things, the compulsory secrecy and shame about menstruation.

Sonia recalls her mother forcing her and her sister to hide their pads under the sink in a compartment at the back of the cupboard-they were not allowed to dispose of them in the trash. Believing this was the norm, when visiting friends houses Sonia would tuck used pads into her sleeve in order to transport and dispose of them at a later time. Sonia describes her mother as "trying to be the 'perfect woman'-as in a woman who doesn't menstruate because she's 'clean.'" Experiences such as this are crucial to our understanding of the depth and breadth of women's experiences with menstruation.

Similarly, Sonia argues, there has never been an adequate forum for discussing the feelings of guilt and shame associated with accidentally bleeding on a friend's bed sheets during a sleepover and other such inadvertent transgressions. The film also skimmed over the need for better and more frequent communication between men and women about menstruation, on topics like sex during a woman's period and the enormous set of taboos surrounding that specific issue.

Anna reflects that in spite of the film having been made ten years ago, the issues considered important in 1998 important are still the same today (secrecy, safety of products, denial). While the public discourse about it has somewhat increased, the problems and prevalent messages about it have not changed.

These last few points actually help to articulate more clearly a pattern that has been emerging throughout the course of this analysis : the importance of subjective experience as knowledge or truth. In the process of asserting their own experiences as sources of knowledge about the world and thus their positioning within it, women are actively resisting objectification.

The major themes explored in this project-namely taboo and the social construction of menstruation-are significant because their meanings are deeply embedded in cultures around the world. If the goal of feminist research is to correct for the invisibility and distortion of women's experiences in popular culture, then women's lived experiences of menstruation must necessarily be addressed as part of this process.

Michel Foucault refers to these lived experiences as subjugated knowledges, that is, forms of

knowledge that are considered "illegitimate" (i.e. feminine, subjective) against the tyranny of "objective" knowledge as true knowledge, a regime that values scientific over experiential discourses, thereby negating human experience as a valuable source of knowledge.

Giving validity to these forms of knowledge creates new modes of understanding human experience and the social world. Unfortunately, however, due to the transgressive nature of such activity, there are few forums where the meanings of these experiences can effectively be expressed and explored. In spite of their fairly resistant attitudes toward transgressions, even some of the members of Group A seemed interested and even eager to engage and express their experiences with the group.

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Limitations & Further Questions

This study is limited in many ways-primarily because of its size. There was limited time and even more limited resources for carrying out the project, so some concessions were made regarding the methodology. The respondents were only women, they were all white Quebec or Ontario residents, and they were all people with whom I have a personal acquaintance. As such, the results do not reflect cultural or gender-based variations in responses. I will admit that it is rather hypocritical, though, to use a feminist methodology to account for traditionally marginalized people's experiences, and yet only consider five relatively privileged respondents in the actual study.

One potential slip-up I have been dealing with cautiously is that this paper focuses on only two particular sets of truth discourses within a larger régime of truth. To be clear, I want to emphasize that these represent only two of many possible sites of power that play a role in the process of negotiating meaning, and in no way are they intended to construct a binary or dichotomous division of power's many possible forms. Even throughout the process of focusing on just two, a third-personal experience-demonstrated itself to play an incredibly valuable role in the meaning-making process.

Some questions for further research might ask what this all means in the context of non-documentary media, such as news or fictional genres. Also, it would be worthwhile to further explore the impacts of many diverse positionalities on people's meaning-making processes, including those of men, transgendered, and racialized subjects.

Conclusions

In this essay I argued that the audience's reception of documentary media does not occur passively or in isolation, but rather constitutes an active process of negotiation between the film's imposed "truth" and the normative "truths" about menstruation at this specific cultural and historical moment. This project took into account the fact that negotiations with normative truths constitute a lifelong process of continuously positioning and repositioning oneself with respect to these truths, and that these processes are different for everyone. I demonstrated how these processes of negotiating

between competing truth discourses that constitute what I call "tactics of resistance," since these processes involve a degree of resistance that produces the new spaces within which audience members are continuously (re)positioning themselves, and I outlined a preliminary sketch of what such tactics of resistance might look like.

De Certeau explains that one purpose of the tactic is to deflect the influence of a strategy. Thus the argument I am building throughout this paper becomes evident : that interpretive processes are inherently power struggles between individuals and the power-that-be with the aim of dismantling such power structures. Perhaps this exercise is a microcosm for tactical processes that take place in everyday power struggles, where resistance is not always apparent though it is always present, and that there is in fact the potential for resistance in all of us.

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