Circulating Useful (Feminist) Media

NGOs and Grassroots Feminist Distribution in the UN Decade for Women (1975–85)

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The First International Feminist Film Conference, organized in Amsterdam in 1981 by the Dutch film collective and distributor Cinemien, had a lasting impact on North American critic Julia Lesage. By meeting with women filmmakers from different parts of the world, she realized that "national boundaries require international perspective, involving more flexible and varied understandings of women's needs for survival, struggle, and the aesthetics of perception."[1] This memory well illustrates the vibrant context of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–85), when the explosion of women's international meetings provided opportunities for the circulation of films in nontheatrical spaces.[2] With Cold War tensions still simmering, these conferences offered forums for activists and policy makers to discuss a global agenda to foster gender equality, and thanks to the growing participation of women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the priorities set by Western feminisms—such as sexual politics and legal equality—shifted toward more holistic attention to issues such as labor and global development.[3] This process coincided with two interconnected tendencies: the prominence of the so-called Women in Development (WID) movement, which advocated for the centrality of women in international development programs, and the concurrent "NGOization" of feminism, a term coined by scholar Sonia E. Alvarez to indicate a move toward the professionalization of activism and the promotion of individual "empowerment" as means to enhance gender equality.[4] In this context, films—especially documentaries—were used as educational and networking tools, which provided firsthand insights into the lives and struggles of women, covering issues like education, contraception, family planning, and participation in the workforce.

While intergovernmental organizations, like the UN and UNESCO, sponsored several media productions and meetings in connection with their media policies on women, NGOs began to support a growing number of film projects from independent women filmmakers and collectives—particularly from Asia, Africa, and Latin America—facilitating their access to the increasingly privatized and scattered funding of development aid.[5] More notably, NGOs contributed to the cross-cultural and cross-border circulation of these films by taking part in an alternative, grassroots infrastructure that complemented and enhanced the work of feminist and nontheatrical film distributors. NGOs redirected institutional funding and other material resources to create opportunities for nontheatrical exhibition, including at workshops and conferences. In doing so, they boosted the visibility of women's films by collecting and disseminating practical information to organize screenings in institutional, activist, and educational spaces, promoting audiovisual resources for their ability to inform about women's lives and prompt action, particularly in the field of development.

This article provides the first historical assessment of the impact of NGOs on the nontheatrical distribution and exhibition of women's films in the UN Decade for Women. To do so, it focuses on the microhistories of two organizations: the first is the Italy-based ISIS International, an NGO named after the ancient Egyptian goddess, which promoted women's alternative media, with a particular focus on North/South collaborations; the second is the Mexican distributor Zafra A.C. which, thanks to the work of members of the women's film collective Cine Mujer, played a key role in distributing Latin American women's films in international activist circuits. As examples of the complementary work of NGOs and film distributors, the histories of ISIS and Zafra illustrate the overlap between women's activist and film infrastructures during the UN Decade for Women, exposing the complexities and contradictions of cross-border collaboration.

Circulation and Collaboration: Researching (Feminist) Useful Media through Infrastructural and Archival Lenses

Most films produced and circulated during the UN Decade were low budget documentaries, shot on 16 mm and later, video, often commissioned, produced, or supported by nonfilm institutions, like the UN, UNESCO, and governmental agencies and NGOs. For this reason, they can be read as examples of "useful cinema" as they showcase "a disposition, an outlook, and an approach toward a medium on the part of institutions and institutional agents," with the expectation that they could "do something" to foster women's activism and gender equality.[6] This "useful" aspect pairs with their prevailingly "nontheatrical" circulation, which relied on existing noncommercial circuits (educational, institutional, festivals) as well as emergent, nonconventional exhibition spaces at international activist meetings, workshops, and training events in which the fruition of alternative media converged with advocacy work in the field of development aid. The notion of "useful cinema" and the focus on the "nontheatrical" provide helpful conceptual tools to assess the scale and impact of the circulation of these films. As such, I will approach the cases of ISIS and Zafra through an "infrastructural disposition," which prioritizes "questions of resources and distribution" over the discussion of women's and feminist filmmaking as a "history of style, genre, or meaning [to] think more elementally about what they are made of and how they arrived."[7] This translates into the study of the "mundane combinations of technological and social factors," including the everyday and ordinary labor of organizing, which in the context of these organizations consisted primarily of non-media-making practices.[8] An infrastructural approach is indeed particularly helpful to analyze the role ISIS and Zafra played in the international circulation of women's films, responding to Marsha Gordon's call to theorize and historicize women's nontheatrical media beyond the recuperation of films and authors.[9] As Cait McKinney points out, activist media infrastructures are mostly built through

information exchange, a nonglamorous practice of *doing feminism* that is often invisible in textual-focused media scholarship.[10] As such, I turned to a variety of archival sources, like brochures, activist journals, reports, and catalogs, which provide a rich documentary evidence of communicative practices linking to wider "feminist material cultures" in which "objects have been making feminist things happen."[11] This translates into a historical narrative in which the contribution of individuals and organizations is framed into the multivocal "cultures of circulation" of the Decade for Women, using Edward Li Puma and Benjamin Lee's definition of circulation as "a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, . . . created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them."[12] The framework of the "cultures of circulation" has two interconnected advantages: first, it sheds light on the importance of collaboration in the context of transnational feminisms; second, it encourages the critical mapping of individuals and organizations who took part in these exchanges and their location. This cartographic work resonates with Jesus Martín-Barbero's notion of "nocturnal map": in his proposition of a media cartography that moves from the so-called peripheries, Martín-Barbero suggests prioritizing the reading of "marginal communicative practices" to move away from hegemonic media systems and decentering the West.[13] This approach is particularly apt to the reconstruction of ISIS and Zafra's grassroots and localized work in the field of film circulation, while it illuminates the complex geographies and power imbalances affecting their cross-border collaborations. Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr argue that the critical analysis of transnational feminist collaborations provides a political and epistemic tool to reassess existing approaches to positionality, subalternity, voice, authorship, and representation, bridging the gaps between praxis and knowledge production.[14]

All these questions are mirrored in the different number, location, and nature of the archival sources available. Most documentation about ISIS and its participation in

international meetings and activities belongs to activists and organizations based in North America, such as those at Harvard's Schlesinger Library or the National Film Board of Canada. As an NGO, the bureaucratic nature of ISIS entailed the recording of its activities in the form of reports and budgets, which, combined with its prolific publishing activities, translates into a detailed reconstruction of its initiatives in the field of media. By contrast, only a handful of resources were consulted at Mexican film institutions (Cinemateca, ENAC), where evidence about Zafra was scattered and consists mostly of promotional materials (catalogs), while access to the personal archives of the members of the company was not possible. These incongruences are neither casual nor surprising: as Kirsten Ghodsee points out, the history of the Decade for Women has been prevailingly written by the "victors" of the Cold War, with most of the documentation reflecting the perspectives of Western European women.[15] At the same time, the scarce documentary evidence about Zafra highlights the complexities of researching the history of private, small film companies, whose informal and nonstructured working protocols are more difficult to retrieve through archival research. As such, I follow Ghodsee's suggestion to use interviews as a corrective to these limitations, while my use of documents and printed sources will account for the impact of archival imbalances in film historiography. Thus, drawing from firsthand testimonies from my ongoing oral history project on the film cultures of the Decade for Women, the article builds a historical narrative in which documentary evidence and personal experience contribute to the resurfacing of both material and intangible aspects of this media infrastructure.

ISIS International, the NGO as Networking Engine

Founded in Rome in 1974, ISIS was based in two small rooms in the headquarters of the International Documentation and Communication Centre (IDOC), which served Dutch

bishops with resources on development and Third World countries. Marilee Karl, the communication expert among the founders of ISIS, collaborated with IDOC and used her contacts with this and other Christian organizations to secure funding for the activities of the NGO. Since its early days, ISIS had an international staff, including women from the Philippines and a group of exiled Chileans, who took charge of its network in Latin America and translated ISIS publications into Spanish. In the early 1980s, the organization opened an office in Geneva and a resource center in Santiago de Chile.[16]

<Figure 1 here> [img01]

ISIS's activities during the UN Decade for Women reflect various aspects of the impact of NGOs on women's films and alternative media more broadly. The NGO defined itself as a "Women's Information and Communication Service," which provided technical assistance and training via conferences and workshops for international network-building.[17] ISIS facilitated the production of bespoke tool kits, videos, and other audiovisual materials, although its main goal was increasing the circulation of existing resources. This objective was informed by the NGO's own understanding of women's alternative media derived from participation at international meetings and the publication of anthologies, essays, and reports. With these activities, ISIS "theorized" media and took part in the ongoing conversations about the movement for the so-called New World International Communication Order (NWICO), whose discussion monopolized the international debate since 1976, in arenas like the United Nations and UNESCO.[18] The NWICO, mainly supported by postcolonial countries and members of the Non-Aligned Movement such as Tunisia, Mexico, and Kenya, argued that global imbalances in the production and circulation of media and communication fostered Western cultural imperialism, increasing the economic dependency of developing countries. In other words, global inequalities in the ownership, production, and circulation of media contributed to broader disparities of power and access to economic resources. In

response to this issue, the proponents of NWICO advocated for the creation of independent, autonomous media and communication infrastructures in developing countries, as tools to counteract Western political and economic influence.

Aware of these debates, ISIS's founder, Marilee Karl, supported the use of audiovisual resources as means to challenge stereotypes and foster the empowerment of women as community leaders.[19] While this view echoes the line adopted in official UN policy documents (like the Plan of Action for the UN Decade for Women), Karl also insisted on the power of alternative media infrastructures to foster gender equality, combining ideas close to those put forward by the proponents of the NWICO with the positions of the Women in Development (WID) movement.[20] In her view, women should build their own alternative media and communication networks as means to counteract their marginalization, particularly in development programs.[21] These alternative infrastructures would create opportunities, especially for Third World women, to "share their experiences and knowledge without the distorting intermediaries of the establishment mass media systems."[22] Although she recognizes that this solution could only affect a small audience, she insists on the potential of alternative media to foster structural change, counteracting male-dominated development and tackling the existing unequal communication system. In this context, an organization like ISIS could make a difference by creating the conditions for women's media to exist and thrive and contributing to their circulation and visibility.

ISIS publications provide good examples of this practice. The 1984 special issue of *ISIS International Women's Journal and Supplement* focused on the topic of *Women and Media*, with a collection of essays on the experiences of advocacy groups in the Pacific region.[23] Among them, a report on the video projects of the NGO Centre for the Development of Instructional Technologies (CENDIT) well illustrates the efforts of ISIS publications in increasing the visibility of local organizations within its global network, while

promoting specific uses of film and media vis-à-vis development policies.[24] This piece summarizes the results of a study on the reception among rural communities in the northern India states of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana of about 100 institutional films made by the government-owned Films Division of India on topics like contraception and population control. Films Division's filmmakers are criticized for their limited knowledge of the habits and needs of rural communities, which translates into films not effective in achieving their goals of informing about crucial issues for development in the region. In contrast, the report opines that CENDIT's projects—spanning from educational films to participatory video-making—went beyond "the conventional sense of one-way communication . . . by breaking barriers between people."[25] In lauding CENDIT's work with the community, the report endorses collective and participatory filmmaking via NGO funding as a more potent and effective form of alternative media for women than state-sponsored initiatives. In this respect, it provides an emblematic example of the process of privatization and fragmentation of development aid during the UN Decade, which consisted in a proliferation of small-scale, project-based initiatives and the concurrent dismissal of large-scale programs.

In sum, ISIS took part in the international debates on media policy and provided a space to women's activists and organizations, especially those in the field of development, to promote their work. With its focus on networking, collaboration, and transnational exchange, ISIS's publications promoted women's media-making practices by making visible the small-scale and project-based advocacy work carried out by local NGOs in the Third World. In this context, filmmaking, especially in its participatory and community-based forms, emerged as a tool with great potential, highlighting the role played by development aid in fostering the cross-contamination between film and NGOs.

Circulating Filmmaking Practices: The ISIS Exchange Program

ISIS's commitment to alternative media-making, particularly among development workers, is best exemplified by the training, workshops, and exchange programs started by its Genevan branch in 1981, with the primary goal of facilitating North–South collaborations. The 1984 iteration of the program centered on the topic of communication and included a practical video-making session led by two UK-based filmmakers, Karen Alexander (a former member of the feminist video collective Pictures of Women), and Sarah Montgomery (a community video maker of the Albany Centre in East London).[26] The workshop produced a short video titled *Connections*, which was discussed in a final, evaluative session of the exchange program. In this occasion, the video was praised for showcasing a collective process of sharing and acquiring technical expertise, which produced a "positive and uplifting image of women."[27] However, some criticized film technology, perceived as too hierarchical and technical for those who had never worked with film before. This critique emerged despite the two facilitators' assessment of the U-Matic equipment as accessible and "equivalent to super 8 in film or to offset litho in printing."[28] These different perceptions illustrate how trained and experienced filmmakers had to adapt their practice to meet the demands of NGO and development professionals without previous knowledge of media production.

The participation of trained filmmakers in this exchange program further reveals the complexities behind the collaborations between NGOs and women's independent media-makers. For instance, the trajectory of workshop attendee Mahbuba Kaneez Hasna of the Women for Women Video Filmmaking Group from Bangladesh exemplifies the transnational flows supporting women's video-making in the context of development aid: Hasna was trained by the NGO Worldview International Foundation, thanks to a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).[29] Another filmmaker who took part in the program was Dora Ramirez, who presented her work with the collective Cine Mujer Colombia, which was becoming increasingly involved with NGOs and other organizations

involved in the WID movement.[30] In her presentation, Ramirez shared her concerns about the limited circulation of Cine Mujer's films, which they tried to increase by distributing their catalog of productions among "women's groups, schools, universities, community centers, labor unions."[31] Conscious of the importance of these nontheatrical venues for their distribution efforts, Ramirez acknowledged the limited scale of their potential audience yet saw in the collaborations with NGOs like ISIS an opportunity to increase the international impact of their films.

The "Women and Audiovisual Project" and the Resource Guide *Powerful Images*

ISIS was aware of the critical importance of distribution for women's alternative media, and the work of the organization in this area is attested by its "Women and Audiovisual Project."[32] This initiative, inaugurated in 1983, was coordinated by María Eugenia Jelincic, a Chilean refugee who moved to Rome in the aftermath of Augusto Pinochet's coup.[33] In Chile, Jelincic was a director and producer for the national public broadcaster on programs such as *Vamos Mujer* [Let's Go Women]. Once in Italy, she worked freelance for the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and for Italian NGOs by producing nonformal educational resources. As Jelincic recalls, it took her time to adjust to the scarce resources available for educational and grassroots audiovisual projects, as she was used to working with a crew and professional equipment in Chile.[34] In Rome, she was involved in the local assemblies of the Chilean political exiles, most of them supporters of the left-wing coalition Unidad Popular (Popular Unity). Here she reconnected with the Chilean women working with ISIS, who, knowing her background in media, asked her to design a tool kit for women's organizations interested in audiovisuals. An abridged version is published in *Powerful Images: A Women's Guide to Audiovisual Resources*, a booklet that represents the culmination of the "Women and Audiovisual Project" and ISIS's supporting role in the

distribution of women's films. The guide was conceived as an "instrument for reflection and action" aimed at women's groups and activists. It consisted of an annotated catalog of films organized by themes, including pacifism, labor, reproductive rights, racism and antiapartheid actions, development, health, and sexual violence. Each entry included the technical specifications (format, duration, language, director/producer, country of production), a synopsis, and the country/area the content was about. More importantly, for each film/slideshow, the guide provided the contacts of distributors and other organizations that may have copies to share, with the objective of facilitating circulation.[35] Interestingly, this information was compiled through crowdsourcing: starting in 1984, ISIS distributed a survey through its journals asking readers to send them details about films and media resources. As Jelincic recalls, questionnaires were also sent to targeted addressees, selected from ISIS's network. In 1985, this consisted of a repository of over 15,000 entries about "all kinds of publications as well as [illustrated] materials and information about audio-visuals, radio programs, and activities of women's groups and networks" from over 150 countries.[36] The repository was built "to make [information] available to women and to create communication channels and help put women directly into contact with each other."[37] To this extent, by the mid-1980s, ISIS pioneered the use of computerized tools to catalog, store, and disseminate its resources, including a version of *Powerful Images* that was made available as a database that could be implemented and updated.[38]

<figure 2 here> [img02]

Given the large number of submissions, the ISIS curators prioritized films and resources made by groups from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, highlighting the NGO's mission to "decenter the West" as well as the understanding of these guides as a tool to prompt cross-border collaborations across women. The description of each entry focuses on the film's topic rather than the author of the film, confirming the "useful" approach of the

guide to film and audiovisuals. The categories adopted by *Powerful Images* challenge established notions of feminist authorship, aesthetic quality, or activism, as films are considered *resources* for education, advocacy, and networking rather than expressions of the filmmaker's creativity. For instance, a film like *Reassemblage* by Trinh T. Minh-ha (1982) is featured in the section "Empowering women for development," grouped with institutional productions like *The Role of Women in Food Security* by FAO.

The practical aim of the guide is further confirmed by the contact list of distributors at the end of the volume, which predominantly include European and North American organizations, with a strong presence of Latin American groups. The organizations listed in the guide spanned from feminist and educational distributors (for example, Women Make Movies, Circles, Third World Newsreels), to film cooperatives and collectives (for example, Yugantar, Cine Mujer Colombia, Grupo Chaski) and intergovernmental (for example, UN, FAO) and government-funded organizations (National Film Board of Canada, Embrafilme—Brazil), as well as NGOs (for example, Oxfam, Martha Stuart Communications, Centro de Servicios para el Desarrollo—Bolivia), and women's centers (for example, Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristan, Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir). While this geographical composition reflects ISIS's network, it also hints at the imbalances, particularly in terms of resources, that affected this precarious infrastructure of distribution in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Nevertheless, the diversity of the organizations listed in the booklet illuminates the scope and composition of an international infrastructure in which cinematic, institutional, and activist circuits overlapped and collaborated with one another.

The Film Forum at Nairobi and the (Unfulfilled) Project of a Global Infrastructure for the Distribution of Women's Films

The release of *Powerful Images* was planned for 1985 at the NGO Forum that ran parallel to the UN Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi (July 15–26, 1985), yet it wasn't completed until 1986, when it was published in English, with a Spanish translation in 1987.[39]As the editing progressed, members of ISIS attended the NGO Forum where they organized three half-day workshops titled "Audiovisuals, Participation and Development."[40] This initiative complemented another series of workshops about media, which were part of the program of the Film Forum, a film exhibition organized at Nairobi by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Most participants and panelists at these workshops were part of organizations listed in *Powerful Images*, confirming the existence of a global network of film organizations and NGOs already collaborating on concrete projects.

<figure 3 here>[img03]

As the thematic sessions of these workshops suggest, distribution and circulation represented critical topics in the project of an independent infrastructure of women's alternative media. For instance, in the panel titled "Developing Networks: National and International Distribution of Women's Film and Video," participants shared concerns about the persistence of regional imbalances, as the content produced by the women from "the North" circulated more easily than that from other regions.[41] To fix this situation, the participants determined that women's networks should concentrate on five tasks: "1) Collection and dissemination of information . . . 2) Production training, use, evaluation, and distribution of audio-visual material; 3) Co-productions between groups; 4) Dissemination of information on training facilities; 5) A regular journal reviewing audio-visuals and their use."[42]

In another session, titled "Expansion of Distribution: Broadcasting, Exhibiting, and Promoting Women's Work," television emerged as the most promising and effective medium for reaching a bigger audience. It was also considered a more welcoming industry to women

professionals.[43] Again regional differences became a central topic of debate, as the economic disparity between North and South affected the opportunities that national broadcasting could offer women. Moreover, although workshop participants agreed that the scarcity of funding affected production, they recognized in distribution the most affected activity by the precarious means available, "as the distributor bears the cost of all prints, promotion, printing, etc."[44]

As these discussions reveal, the priorities and concerns of a global community of film and development professionals, the Film Forum itself—with a program of over 160 screenings—provides further evidence of the precariousness of this infrastructure.[45] It also offers a good assessment of the practical consequences of the imbalances in women's media networks and different understandings, between film organizations, filmmakers and NGOs, about the reasons for women's films to circulate. Despite a relatively high budget, the organizers of the Film Forum relied mostly on low-cost and ingenious do-it-yourself solutions to fulfill the ambitious global scale of the initiative.[46] To deliver the films to Nairobi, they resorted to diplomatic mail, setting up sending and pick-up points at Canadian embassies in Nairobi and in other "strategic cities."[47] Despite this, the staggered and slow process of shipment, combined with the expectation that as "diplomatic materials" the films didn't have to pass the evaluation of the local censorship board, caused delays that heavily affected the schedule, to the point that several films were not screened, with huge disappointment on the part of the filmmakers who attended the event.[48]

Similarly, the work of the international programming committee was often carried out via letters and very sporadic phone calls, with members like Laura Ruiz from the Mexican collective Cine Mujer, asking for funds from her organization or government to fly to Montreal.[49] However, given the short notice, the NFB was willing to pay for the flight and cover other expenses by asking Montreal women to host her in their homes. Elsewhere, Rosa

Marta Fernández, also of Cine Mujer Mexico, attended the workshops in Nairobi thanks to a grant provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), specifically aimed at bringing participants from Third World countries to the meeting.[50] Ruiz's and Fernández's travels illustrate how existing infrastructures in the fields of development aid, feminist solidarity, and filmmaking were used to facilitate the participation of women from Latin America at these international forums, with the specific goal of counteracting the disparity of financial resources available.

The film initiatives organized at Nairobi illustrate the obstacles NGOs and film organizations faced in building an alternative, self-sufficient media infrastructure by relying on precarious means and networks of solidarity. At this stage, most women were aware of the disparities in international mobility and material resources affecting their work yet struggled to find long-term solutions.

Distributing Latin American Women's Cinema: The Work of Cine Mujer at Zafra A.C.

Founded in Mexico City in 1978, Zafra specialized in distributing political, independent, and art cinema from Latin America, and its name is listed in *Powerful Images* as well as among the participants at the Film Forum at Nairobi. The inclusion of this company in these feminist circuits might appear, at first, surprising: defined by one of its members as a "masculine environment," Zafra was not explicitly feminist in orientation, at least in the way that companies like WMM or Circles framed themselves in the United States and the United Kingdom.[51] Instead, it was the behind-the-scenes work of Laura Ruiz and other members of Cine Mujer Mexico that made the presence of Zafra at Nairobi and other international meetings fitting, as they used their role in the company to foster the circulation of women's films. Precisely for this reason, the history of Zafra provides a good example of how women's film infrastructures emerged from the interstices of the cinematic organizations

available locally and imbued them with new meaning. Moreover, this microhistory challenges the impression that the participation of Third World women in the international feminist film networks of the UN Decade was made possible exclusively by grants and invitations coming from the Global North. Instead, most international contacts and networks were established through reciprocity, and while the material aspects of this infrastructure were often provided by individuals and organizations from economically privileged areas, other intangible yet crucial aspects saw a greater contribution from women located in the so-called peripheries, who had already developed their own autonomous networks. This contribution consisted of a double movement: decentering the international feminist film network from the West while depatriarchalizing the local and regional film culture. This dynamic emerges clearly in the evolution of Zafra's own catalog, which included Cine Mujer's films as well as an international selection of women's films that became increasingly diverse throughout the 1980s. In a 1981 catalog, aimed at the Mexican market, the films categorized under the section "Cine por mujeres/Women's Films" included Mexican titles and a handful of US productions, like Victoria Schultz's *Women in Arms* (1981), which focused on the women fighters in the Sandinista army, and Lorraine Gray's *With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade* (1979), which details a series of women-led strikes of the 1930s at a General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan.[52] The topics of these films hint at the internationalism that inspired Zafra's overall approach to political cinema, as well as its contacts with North American filmmakers. Five years later, Zafra catalogs had two sections on women's film: "Cine por mujeres sobre mujeres/Women's films on women" and "Mujer: tu vida, ¿tuya?/Women: your life, yours?" These themes included not only North American and Mexican films but also works by filmmakers and collectives from Latin America, like Venezuela's Grupo Miercoles (*Yo, Tu y Ismaelina*, 1982) and Grupo Chaski from Peru (*Miss Universo en el Peru*, 1982).[53]

<figure 4 here> [img04]

The culmination of Cine Mujer's efforts in circulating Latin American women's films was the festival "Cocina de Imagenes/Cooking Up Images" in Mexico City in 1987. Ángeles Necoechea, the organizer, used Zafra's basic but essential infrastructures (telephone, telex, and office) to assemble the program.[54] She also took advantage of her established contacts with other filmmakers and collectives in the region, which she had previously developed at international conferences such as the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentros.[55] A few months before the festival, Necoechea sent an English-language call for films to be published in the ISIS quarterly journal *Women in Action*. It announced that "during the festival, a series of meetings will also be organized to promote the exchange of ideas and experiences among the participants."[56] This format replicated that of the many other international film meetings that unfolded during the Decade and signals Cine Mujer's work in consolidating international collaborations across the Latin America region.

More than thirty years later, the members of Cine Mujer regrouped for the shooting of the documentary *Rebeladas/Rebelled* (Andrea Gautier, Tabatta Salinas, 2023), which focuses on the history and legacy of the collective. In a key scene of the film, the group is sitting at a dining table looking at old photographs, warmly recalling both the First International Feminist Film Conference in Amsterdam (1981) and Cocina de Imagenes. The discussion of these two events is somewhat emblematic of the affective and historical impact of these meetings in the making of transnational film feminisms, yet no explicit mention to Zafra is made throughout the documentary, confirming the complex relationship between the work of the collective and that of the distributor.

Conclusion: Circulation and Useful Women's Films as Feminist Historiography

The participation of members of both ISIS and Zafra at the Film Forum in Nairobi illustrates the cross-pollination between advocacy and cinematic practices, while it exposes the precarity of the alternative media infrastructure of the UN Decade for Women as well as the political limitations of a project of "global sisterhood" marked by disparities of power and visibility.[57] The multifaceted "uses" of women's films in this context, which included tasks in the fields of education, networking, and advocacy, invite us to reconsider Laura Isabel Serna's observation that "the analytic lens of gender . . . can provide new insight on the ways in which [useful] media advance or complicate feminist projects."[58]

In the case of ISIS, the organization used film and alternative media to promote its vision of "women's empowerment," yet its limited means and the informal and extemporaneous nature of its interventions confirm the circumscribed nature of the work of NGOs, especially in confronting agencies such as the United Nations and UNESCO, which supported the production and circulation of films "to operationalize [their] social visions."[59] This doesn't erase the impact of NGOs—including ISIS—on the work of Third World filmmakers, who obtained support for their projects by linking up with the agenda, networks, and funding of development aid and more specifically the WID movement. This can be seen as an instance in which Western feminisms have operated as a homogenizing force by imposing universalist categories, such as development, over Third World women's filmmaking.[60] However, a closer look at the collaborations between ISIS and film organizations like Zafra suggests a more nuanced relationship in which both the dynamics of power and the category of "women's cinema" are challenged by the reciprocal exchange of information and mutual solidarity. In the case of Zafra, transnational collaborations like those developed at Nairobi and other international meetings enhanced the work of the members of Cine Mujer, who navigated the ambivalent "structures of opportunity" offered by local cinematic cultures dominated by men and the feminist infrastructures of the North.[61]

By the end of the 1980s, the precarity of this transnational media infrastructure and its collaborative networks was further exacerbated by the privatization of development aid, which entailed the closure of vital streams of public funding for women's and film organizations, particularly in Western countries. As a result, the ambition of expanding the existing media infrastructure faded and, like most of the hopes of the women's movement during the UN Decade, still awaits full exploration.[62] In this sense, the story of this (unfulfilled) project of alternative film infrastructure invites further reflections on the opportunities and limitations of cross-border feminist collaboration, and the tensions between local action and structural change.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Debra Zimmermann (Women Make Movies) and María Eugenia Jelincic for sharing their memories and precious archival materials with me.

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[1] Julia Lesage, "Feminist Documentary: Distribution, Exhibition, and Interactive Platforms," in *Contemporary Radical Film Culture: Networks, Organisations and Activists*, ed. Steve Presence, Mike Wayne, and Jack Newsinger (London: Routledge, 2020), 65.

[2] Peggy Antrobus, "A Decade for Women: UN Conferences, 1975–85," in *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues, and Strategies* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 37–66; Martha Alter Chen, "Engendering World Conferences: The International Women's Movement and the United Nations," *Third World Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1995): 477–94.

[3] Third World feminists and activists challenged Western feminists since the first UN World Conference on Women in Mexico City (1975), with most of the clashes taking place in the

parallel NGO Forum. Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[4] For a historical assessment of the WID, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 97–139. For a critical perspective, see Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012). For NGOization: Sonia E. Alvarez, "Beyond NGO-ization? Reflections from Latin America," *Development* 52, no. 2 (2009): 175–84; Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal, *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2014). For "empowerment," as originally formulated in the context of Third World feminisms, see Gita Sen and Caren Grown, *Development Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives* (London: Earthscan, 1988).

[5] Examples are in-house films like *Women in Mass Media* (1980) by Claire Taplin, and commissions like *Souls in the Sun* (1981) by Safi Faye, both produced by the United Nations. UNESCO sponsored the international symposium Women in the Media (Saint Vincent, 1975) and the homonymous publication (1980) with the proceedings of the event.

[6] Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

[7] Lisa Parks, "Stuff You Can Kick: Toward a Theory of Media Infrastructures," in *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 357.

[8] David Hesmondalgh, "The Infrastructural Turn in Media and Internet Research," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2022), 133.

[9] Marsha Gordon, "Nontheatrical Media," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (2018): 128–34.

[10] Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 8.

[11] Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (London: Pelican 2021), 147.

[12] Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, "Cultures of Circulation: The Imaginations of Modernity," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002), 192.

[13] Manisha Desai, "Critical Cartography, Theories, and Praxis of Transnational Feminisms," in *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements,* ed. Rawwida Baksh and Wendy Harcourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Oficio de Cartógrafo: Travesías latinoamericanas de la comunicación en la cultura* (Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002).

[14] Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr, "Introduction: Theorizing Transnational Feminist Praxis," *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

[15] Kirsten Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 11–15.

[16] From 1984, the autonomous branch ISIS-Wicce—Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange. In the early 1990s, with the aim of decentralizing its activities from Europe, ISIS moved its headquarters in Rome to Manila, while the Genevan office transferred to Kempala, Uganda.

[17] Isis International, *Promotional brochure*, 1983, in Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 47, Folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, Harvard University.

[18] Jonash Brendebach, "Towards a New International Communication Order? UNESCO, Development, and 'National Communication Policies' in the 1960s and 1970s," *International Organizations and the Media in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Jonas Brendebach, Martin Herzer, and Heidi J. S. Tworek (London: Routledge), chap. 8.

[19] Marilee Karl, ed., *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision Making* (London: Zed Books, 1995).

[20] The Plan of Action (1975) called for a greater inclusion of women professionals in the industry and assigned to mass media the role of counteracting stereotypes, promoting positive representations, and absolving an educational function. These propositions remained consistent throughout the UN Decade. United Nations, *Report of the World Conference of the Women's Year* (New York: United Nations 1976), 34, 62.

[21] Marilee Karl, *Women and the New World Information and Communication Order: A Feminist Critique*, unpublished document, 1980. Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 47, Folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, Harvard University.

[22] Karl, *Women and the New World Information*, 6.

[23] *Women and Media: Analysis, Alternatives, and Action*, special issue of the *ISIS International Women's Journal and Supplement* (December 1984).

[24] Akhaila Ghosh, "Media and Rural Women," in *Women and Media,* 63.

[25] Ghosh, "Media and Rural Women," 67.

[26] Karen Alexander and Sarah Montgomery, "A Model for a Video Workshop," *Women's World*, no. 4 (December 1984): 56–57.

[27] Various authors, "Evaluation of Video Presentation," *Women's World*, no. 4 (December 1984): 61.

[28] "Evaluation of Video Presentation," 61. The U-Matic was an analogue videocassette format produced by Sony since 1971. It was one of the first video formats to contain the videotape inside the cassette, making the technology portable and more accessible than others of comparable quality, like 16 mm film.

[29] Mahbuba Kaneez Hasna, "Documentary Filmmaking in Bangladesh: A New Venture by the All Women Video and Filmmaking Group in Bangladesh," *Women's World*, no. 4 (December 1984): 13.

[30] Lorena Cervera Ferrer, "Towards a Latin American Feminist Cinema: The Case of Cine Mujer in Colombia," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 20 (2020): 150–65; Juana Suárez, "Gendered Genres: Women Pioneers in Colombian Filmmaking," *Critical Essays on Colombian Cinema and Culture: Cinembargo Colombia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 95–120.

[31] Dora Ramirez, "What Is Cine-Mujer?" *Women's World*, no. 4 (December 1984): 20.

[32] The centrality of distribution is examined across several chapters in Presence, Wayne, and Newsinger, *Contemporary Radical Film Culture.*

[33] ISIS International, promotional brochure, 1983, in Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 47, Folder 4.

[34] María Eugenia Jelincic, personal interview, April 19, 2024.

[35] Foreword in various authors, *Powerful Images: A Women's Guide to Audiovisual Resources* (Rome: ISIS International, 1986), v.

[36] ISIS International, "Information Mobilization—Networking in the Global Women's Movement: The Experience of Isis International, a Women's Information and Communication Service," unpublished report for the Non-Governmental Forum of the United Nations Decade for Women in Nairobi, Kenya, July 10–19, 1985, 3, in Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 47, Folder 4, "ISIS International 1980–1988," Schlesinger Library, Harvard University.

[37] Unpublished report for the Non-Governmental Forum of the United Nations Decade for Women in Nairobi, Kenya, July 10–19 ,1985, 3, in Charlotte Bunch Papers, Box 47, Folder 4, "ISIS International 1980–1988."

[38] ISIS International, "ISIS International Annual Report 1984," Papers of Charlotte Bunch, MC708, Box 47, Folder 5, "Isis International 1980–1998," 11. ISIS was a member of a global network of computerized NGOs active in the field of development, called INTERDOC and founded in 1984. Brian Murphy, "Interdoc: The First International Non–Governmental Computer Network," *First Monday* 10, no. 5 (2005).

[39] ISIS International, *Conquistando las imágenes: Guía de recursos audiovisuales de mujeres* (Santiago: ISIS International, 1987).

[40] ISIS International, "ISIS International Annual Report 1985," Papers of Charlotte Bunch, MC708, Box 47, Folder 5, "Isis International 1998–1998," 30.

[41] Harbourfront, *A Report*, 43.

[42] Isis International, "ISIS International Annual Report 1985," 18, Papers of Charlotte Bunch, MC708, Box 47, Folder 5, "Isis International 1980–1998."

[43] For a first assessment of the convergence among television, feminist filmmaking, and development media during the Decade, see Dalila Missero, "Re-Bordering UK Feminist Video in the 1980s: Cross-Border Exchanges and Reflexivity in a Digital and Archive-Based Project," *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 12, no. 24 (2023): 70–86. https://doi.org/10.18146/view.304.

[44] Harbourfront, *A Report*, 44.

[45] National Film Board of Canada, *Nairobi FilmForum '85*, catalog (Montreal, 1985).

[46] SM, First and only meeting of the Steering Committee of the Women's International Film Forum, Nairobi 1985, in Montreal from March 11 to 13, 1985, Papers of Charlotte Bunch, MC708, Box 43, Folder 2, NGO Forums, Nairobi Film Forum, 1985.

[47] Gerry Rogers, personal interview. March 11, 2024. According to Rogers, this was an idea of Hannah Fisher, the chief programmer of the Film Forum and director of Harbourfront, a prominent film festival in Toronto.

[48] Debra Zimmermann, personal interview, January 18, 2024. The problems encountered with the local censorship board are extensively reported in *Forum 85*, the daily publication of the NGO Forum in Nairobi. Notably, a filmmaker who was particularly vocal about the censoring of her film was Heiny Srour, whose *Leila and the Wolves* was confiscated by the authorities during its first screening.

[49] Gerry Rogers, *Letter to Laura Ruiz*, February 25, 1985. National Film Board Archives, 50–762.

[50] Harbourfront, *A Report on International Women's Film Forum/Nairobi '85*, 18.

[51] Elena Oroz, "Cocina de imágenes: Primera Muestra de Cine y Video Realizado por Mujeres Latinas y Caribeñas (1987): A Pioneer Event for Tasting the Recipes of Latin American Women's Filmmaking during the 1970s and 1980s," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 61 (Fall 2022).

[52] Zafra A. C., *Catalogo 1981* (Mexico City, 1981).

[53] Zafra, *Catalogo 1986* (Mexico City, 1986).

[54] Oroz, "Cocina de imágenes."

[55] Oroz, "Cocina de imágenes."

[56] Angeles Necoechea, "First Latin American and Caribbean Women's Film and Video Festival," *Women in Action*, no. 6 (1987): 44.

[57] Third World Feminists have contested the notion of "global sisterhood" since its initial popularization by Western feminists, such as Robin Morgan, during the Decade for Women. Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30, no. 1 (1988): 61–88.

[58] Laura Isabel Serna, "Editor's Introduction," *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 2 (2015): 2.

[59] Zoë Druick, "Operational Media: Cybernetics, Biopolitics, and Postwar Education," *Foro de Educación* 18, no. 2 (2020): 64–65.

[60] Ella Shohat, "Post-Third-Worldist Culture: Gender, Nation, and the Cinema," in *Feminist Genealogies: Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1995), 183–212.

[61] Kathleen McHugh, "The World and the Soup: Historicizing Media Feminisms in Transnational Contexts," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 3 (72) (December 2009): 111–51.

[62] The "failures" of the Decade, especially in relation to its internationalism and intersectionality, have been analyzed from different angles since its conclusion at the Nairobi conference in 1985. For immediate accounts and reflections, see Avtar Brah, "Journey to Nairobi," in *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, ed. S. Grewal et al. (London: Sheba Feminist Press, 1988); and Nawal El Saadawi, "Women and Development: A Critical View of the Wellesley Conference," in *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, ed. Nawal El Saadawi (London: Zed Books, 1997), 143–53.