

**Julia Lesage: “I was never anything less than the person I am.”**  
**An Interview with the Author, Editor, and Filmmaker Julia Lesage**  
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### **Introduction**

Long recognized as a pioneer of experimental filmmaking and feminist documentary theory, Julia Lesage is the closest we have to a feminist film scholar-practitioner. Her creative and scholarly work has received widespread recognition and critical acclaim in and beyond the academy. At the same time, she is also a formidable feminist educator. Lesage holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Indiana University and has taught as a visiting professor in departments of English, Women’s Studies, Telecommunications and Film across the United States (the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the University of Rochester, San Francisco State University, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, to name but a few), and as a tenured professor at the University of Oregon. Her publications include several monographs, *Making a Difference: University Students of Color Speak Out*, with Abby Ferber, Deborah Storrs, and Donna Wong, (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. with Linda Kintz (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), as well as countless articles that have appeared in *Jump Cut*, *Camera Obscura*, *Film Reader*, *Wide Angle*, and *Women and Film*, as well as in numerous edited volumes. Her award-winning video productions include *In Plain English* (Columbus International Film Festival, North Carolina International Film and Video Festival) for which she has received production grants from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Center for New Television, Chicago, *Making a Difference*, *El Crucero*, *Troubadours*, and *Las Nicas*. Her videos are available from Facets Multimedia, Chicago. Julia Lesage is also co-founder and co-editor of *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (<http://www.ejumpcut.org/>).

*This interview was conducted in Eugene, Oregon on January 16, 2020.*

**Sonja Boos:** Your career was punctuated by several departures and arrivals, and animated by multiple and different roles—film scholar, journal editor, teacher, and political filmmaker. How did you balance your academic and creative work in these distinct but related fields and what particular challenges did you face during the process?

**Julia Lesage:** When I started at Indiana University, Bloomington, we formed a little group, the Bloomington Feminist Filmmaking Collective. We taught each other 8mm film-making, and we made a short film about the makeup and cosmetic industry's being bad for people. Interestingly, there were some of today's media scholars in that group, Karen Becker and Jane Feuer.

At one point, I bought a second-hand 16mm camera. The technology was too expensive to get seriously involved in, but the experience definitely planted a seed of interest in the back of my mind.

My scholarly career started when I became Assistant Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago, in 1973. That was just after Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess, and I formed the editorial group for *Jump Cut*, which has long occupied much of my time. Still, my reference group in Chicago were mainly women. I was part of a woman studies group that organized first a course and then a program at the university. And another group formed to organize one of the first international women's film festivals in the United States, Films by Women—Chicago '74. A few years later, I lost three jobs in four years for being a Marxist, and then was blacklisted from getting a tenured academic post. During that time, I began to retool myself to improve my odds of getting a permanent academic media position.

I learned how to make video. One of the key challenges at the time, especially for a lot of community production groups, was the prohibitive cost (at \$35 per hour) of video editing. So, when VHS came, I was an eager and early adopter of the new

medium. I got a Canon camera and deck as soon as they became available. And I used that when I went to Nicaragua and shot video there. My work in grassroots media with women in South America was intellectually extremely compatible with my interest in small gauge format film.

Finally, my pursuit of video editing was enhanced when I got the job at the University of Oregon. I was hired to teach media theory and criticism, screenwriting, and video production. However, the department had the most antiquated equipment you could imagine. When I accepted the job offer, I said to the dean that I would give up my moving expenses to the university if they would invest in a VHS editing suite, which they did. So that then initiated a whole era of analog video production at the university.

**S.B.:** Can you speak a bit more to the experience of teaching film theory and video production at the time?

**J.L.:** Teaching was crazy when I first came here. The UO's Media Center's video players did not have the technology to pause and do a freeze-frame. Because my portable Canon video deck that I used for my own production had that capacity I got the Media Center to install an extra jack into the video deck in each classroom where I taught. That way I could plug in my own player and use its freeze frame capacity. I bought a suitcase at Goodwill, put it on a little luggage cart that I had, and my GTF would have to wheel my deck to the classroom and plug it in so that I could play sections from videos in class.

Then we got laserdiscs, although the Media Center at first put in laserdisc players in classrooms that did not have freeze frame capacity. When we were first teaching film criticism, we only had VHS tapes. My colleague, Ellen Seiter, who taught film history, would go to all the video rental stores in town and rent five or six copies of the same film; that was so she could have each tape cued up to a different scene

to illustrate her lecture. Thus, the teaching of media has long been a tricky thing. It has gotten a lot easier.

I always asked myself: What do the students look for in your classes? Who are these students who would come to that kind of class? How to best teach all kinds of students from all walks of life? I usually tried to teach more about race than a lot of teachers did. As a result, I would have international students or students of color who would be enthusiastic about my classes. Perhaps that was also because in the classroom, I was never anything less than the person I am.

**S.B.:** You have written about the importance of feminist filmmakers generating new political subjectivities through which we can glimpse marginalized realities. But you have also argued that in order to effect change with their films, filmmakers must engage in a critical process that questions and reinvents the conventional forms of realism inherited from Direct Cinema. Can you speak to the role of collectives in forging a sense of a collective identity that could galvanize women to act?

**J.L.:** There was a very important feminist film conference in the 70s in Amsterdam run by Cinemien that invited people from all over the world, paying our way and finding places to house us. It was fascinating from early on. When the women first got together in a plenary, we just went around the room. Everybody explained what film was like in their country and we soon realized that the film situation was different from one country to another. In other words, some countries had a national film school. So, the struggle was to get women into the film school. For those who had attended a national film school, the struggle was getting to produce a woman-friendly or feminist thesis film or at least to keep the guys from featuring their same old stuff. And in some places, women learned filmmaking from development agencies that ran a little media program. Every country had a different structure in which people were struggling to get entry. My understanding of women in film changed after that conference because I realized that access to media training was very different from one country to another.

Intellectually I and those around me were very close to Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983), Lucy R. Lippard's *The Pink Glass Swan* (1995), and Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*; these authors were writing about vernaculars and cultural products developed from grassroots communities. Further important impulses came from Chuck Kleinhans and JoAnn Elam's "The Small Gauge Manifesto" (1980) and Patricia R. Zimmermann's work on home movies. All of those inexpensive, vernacular formats were extraordinarily interesting to us, socially and politically.

At the same time, the idea of a collective intellectual and creative enterprise was very important in the context of *Jump Cut*. We thought we would try some things like having criticism and self-criticism inside of our editorial meetings. Well, I can guarantee you that if you were the object of (self-)criticism, you just left the group. So very quickly I learned that "self-criticism" (which often resulted in blame) just meant winnowing out members. At its best, working collectively meant that you learned what you could expect of people, what their preferences were; you asked them to work with you, and what they were comfortable with. For years, *Jump Cut* had Saturday meetings where people would come and read manuscripts and write comments on them and sometimes write letters to authors. People could pick which articles they wanted to read. So maybe somebody would sit there for a couple of hours and read two or three manuscripts and write some comments. When an issue was just published, sometimes we would be organizing all of the *Jump Cuts* to be sent in a bulk mailing and everything would be laid out on the living and dining room floor according to the postal codes all over the world. That was fun. And then a meeting would always conclude with a dinner and maybe on the West Coast in Berkeley also going to a hot tub together. (I have to laugh.) It was, as you know, the time of the hippie cultural revolution and earlier stages of trying out collectivity. And this was not just true for *Jump Cut*. The collectives that I knew, film-making collectives and intellectual collectives—some all lived in a house together, shared income; some all slept together, usually serially. Collective scriptwriting was a common practice at the time, but when it came to video editing,

I made a personal decision to the contrary. I knew of too many collective filmmaking efforts that disintegrated when it came to collective editing. I decided I was going to be the only one in the editing room, and I would show the piece after I completed it. People could still ask me to eliminate parts that they did not want to be seen publicly. But ultimately, editing and also layout is the work of only one person.

**S.B.:** In your recent editorial, *The Future of Jump Cut*, you convey the significance, but also highlight the practical challenges, of starting and maintaining a truly independent academic journal. Your work with Kleinhans and Hess was radical in the context of its own era, both in its choice of subject matter and methodologies (Marxism, feminism) and in its interdisciplinary, international scope. How would you characterize the impact of *Jump Cut* on the emerging field of film studies and the development of film theory in the academy in the 80s and 90s? And what role has the journal played in promoting the work of experimental and independent filmmakers?

**J.L.:** John, Chuck, and I all met as comparative literature graduate students at Indiana University and, in a sense, we were intellectual snobs who looked down on people who were not versed in foreign languages and the cultures of past centuries. Our expertise in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism was certainly intimidating to some of our colleagues. Given our background in literary studies we were able to bring a variety of theoretical, methodological, and aesthetic perspectives to bear on all aspects of film form and culture in general. We analyzed the intricate relations between a film's sound and image tracks, its narrative construction, and its metaphorical language. The 1979 Alternative Cinema Conference at Bard College, which brought together all the U.S. radical filmmaking groups, sparked our interest in leftist documentary and political film. But it was hard to find people to write essays on these films, even if we would make those films available to them. It was only with the development of the Visible Evidence conferences that came much later that scholars began to pay more attention to documentary film. I would

say we were open to writing about original, experimental work, but we found more authors engaged with fictional films and doing ideological analysis than actually writing about radical cinema. And those who wrote about politics often developed an over-simplified version of media's influence, leaving out the perspectives of those who are on the bottom or the fringes and who are ignored by the mainstream, which were extremely interesting for me.

We have long had a strong pro-gay perspective in *Jump Cut*. I began to understand lesbian culture through the women's movement and through some of the *Jump Cut* staff who were lesbians. Currently, it is inspiring to see the growth in the last five to ten years of the transgender movement because in second-wave feminism, we thought gender was a social construct, but most of us were living out older patterns. However, I see many people now really *enacting* gender as a social construct, a variable social construct. And that is the goal we had but we were not living, so it is stimulating to see an older goal becoming a social reality.

**S.B.:** Throughout the 1970s, and 1980s, feminist film theory developed and flourished within the institutional context of the university, especially in the United States, where newly founded journals such as *Jump Cut*, *Women and Film*, and *Camera Obscura* provided both new frameworks and renewed legitimacy for studying film. German film studies were influenced by the psychoanalytic and Marxism-inflected approaches to film criticism coming from the United States, as well as gender and queer studies, and postcolonial theory. The journal *Frauen und Film* is bound up with these new methodologies, which helped solidify the status of feminist film criticism in Germany. Have you ever collaborated with any German filmmakers or film critics and have you had any exchange with the editors of *Frauen und Film*?

**J.L.:** My first foreign language, aside from Latin, was German and my first travels were in Germany. And one of the first articles I wrote, "Feminist Film Criticism: Theory and Practice," was translated into German and reprinted in one of the first

issues of *Frauen and Film*. We also had a *Jump Cut* series of articles on the first wave of German filmmakers, like Monica Treut, Jutta Brückner, and Helke Sander. In her work for the German women's movement, Sander was critical of the sexist nature of German gender inflections. I am very interested in that because I think that the current use of the word *they* owes a lot to that struggle, but I do not think it is well-publicized. In other words, we should recognize our foremothers. Somebody should write about that.

**S.B.:** You have long been invested in the question of how to make the practice of filmmaking viable outside of commercial circuits. In the same spirit, you have highlighted the notion of "thrifty artistic media," insisting that the artist should control their own production process so as to be able to work independently. How has the practice of independent filmmaking changed with digital media?

**J.L.:** In my generation, DIY was a major goal, and I am not sure it could still be a goal. I always wanted to be able to do sound, and I wanted to be able to do editing, and I wanted to be able to do production. Filmmaking used to work like a funnel, you would quickly reach a place where you could not afford to get to the next stage. It was costly to get an editing suite or hire an editor, let alone get something bumped up to a higher gauge or get prints made so that you could submit your work to festivals and, of course, pay for the festival fees . . . And even if you enter a film into a festival, it is hard to get noticed. You can have a window, you can win a lot of prizes and still not get seen. You always hoped that maybe public television would pick up your work, but if it was not high-enough gauged, that would not happen.

Another aspect of my intellectual snobbery is that for many years I believed that the people who make media know what is happening in it much more than people do who do not create media. But that has shifted because media studies are so much more sophisticated now. In current media studies departments students come in who want to be video makers. However, they have already worked with

their cell phones and do pretty good at holding the camera still while composing the image. Of course, they shoot way too much footage to be of interest to a viewer. But the money that is spent now is often spent in competing in what we would call the attention economy. In other words, you have to be able to get noticed. Less money is spent on the original production because that can be a pretty artisan. You can do it on your computer, but you have to submit to lots of festivals. You do not even have to make prints for unique festivals. You just need a Vimeo account with a password.

**S.B.:** It seems that much of the cost of filmmaking has shifted from the actual production to the aspect of marketing. Do you have advice for people starting out on a career of independent filmmaking?

**J.L.:** Yes, there is one clear thing. You have to focus on two major markets, the educational film market and streaming television. To get noticed, you have to get written about. You have to cultivate the attention of somebody who is going to write about your work. Many academics I have interviewed said that they write about films that they do not want to get lost. They write about a film knowing that this is what is going to keep it alive. At the same time, teachers often do not teach a film unless there is an essay they can teach along with the film. So, the filmmaker, in some way or another, has to engage somebody to write about their media in a way that it can be picked up by a teacher and be used in a class. One of the most exciting and brilliant media makers that I know in this regard is Sue Friedrich, who has on her website all the essays that have been written about her films. This makes her an ideal artist to teach. And she is a really great filmmaker. She did the work of making it possible for teachers to get hold of essays written about her by having that information readily available on her own website. Of course, I do not think Sue Friedrich recruited those articles. I think she was making films about being lesbian at a time when there were not a lot of great films about that subject, films with that quality.

**S.B.:** You embody the connection between film production and academic writing and thinking about film. I find that interesting. I like the idea of finding a relationship between creative output and academics. As scholars and teachers, we need filmmakers whom we can write about, and the filmmakers in turn need us to become better known. It is a great symbiosis.

**J.L.:** For the last issue of *Jump Cut*, we had a series of articles about a fantastic experimental filmmaker who dissects the sexist construction of media images within her experimental film-making. Her name is Jennifer Proctor. And so, I am happy that we have these articles about Proctor's work, not only because it is both funny and teachable but also because it is precisely the kind of meta-cinema that somebody teaching women and film courses would like to use.

**S.B.:** What future projects do you have planned?

**J.L.:** In the next issue of *Jump Cut*, I have asked a number of writers to contribute to a section called Time, Media, and Politics. In this period of history, with the pandemic, renewed activism, and arch-conservative governance throughout the world, the media has taken on new roles which may reshape media institutions and use into the future. I have asked authors to theorize this in terms of media activism, teaching, interpersonal communication, politics, educational institutions, work, parenting and family life, and social class. We are living in a time of drastic change. I am glad to see it coming. Perhaps we need to learn that, indeed, we can adapt to big change if we are to take the steps to save life upon the earth.

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