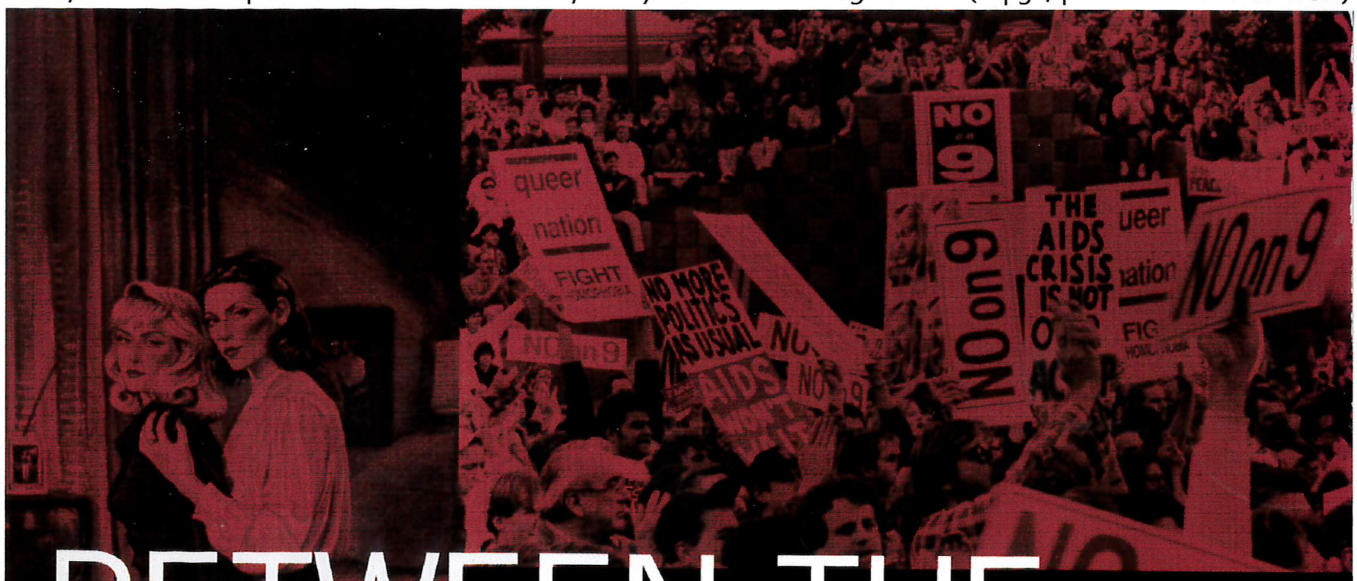
Analysis of videotape *Brains on Toast* in essay *Irony and Dissembling* - 1997 (6 pgs, please remove to view)



BETWEEN THE SHEETS, IN THE STREETS

QUEER, LESBIAN, GAY DOCUMENTARY

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editors

Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Series design by Will H. Powers
Typeset in Sabon and Memphis by Stanton Publication Services, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Between the sheets, in the streets : queer, lesbian, gay documentary / Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs, editors.
p. cm.—(Visible evidence ; v. 1)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Filmography: p.
ISBN 0-8166-2774-6 (hardcover : alk. paper).—ISBN 0-8166-2775-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Documentary mass media—United States. 2. Gays in popular culture—United States. I. Holmlund, Chris. II. Fuchs, Cynthia. III. Series.
P96.D622U63 1997
306.76'6—dc21 96-47751

In the sequence that follows, a group of women, including Saunders, sit around a picnic table and try to make sense of the incident. How does the bird know the difference between men and women? How did it acquire a bias against women? The sequence cleverly exploits the enigma of the bird's behavior to rehearse all the explanations we use to try to decipher sexual difference. What are the signs? What is their source (cultural, biological)? How do we (mis)interpret them? Saunders builds *Here in the Southwest* around gender enigmas demonstrated by lizards, someone's cat, and various birds and around the discourses her characters use to make sense of these enigmas. The video underscores our culture's relentless reliance on science to explicate and normalize sexuality; the lesbian feminists' seeking a precedence for their sexuality in the authority of lizards wittily recalls the "birds and the bees" euphemism for sexual knowledge. At the same time that Saunders pokes fun at such facile recourse to animal behavior, she also indicates, by the examples she chooses, the arbitrary and exclusionary character of most scientific interpretation. Saunders insistently links the critique of biological determinism to the conventions of both science documentaries and those of autobiography by refusing to use voice-over, talking-head interviews, the recording of personal life, or the representational conventions of supporting statistics and documentation in ways that are generically appropriate.

In her later work *Brains on Toast: The Inexact Science of Gender* Saunders, together with collaborator Liss Platt, continues to investigate the documentation of gender and sexuality, focusing much more specifically on the formal, representational conventions of "friendly" television science documentaries. Incorporating interviews with people on the street, expert testimony, lab footage delimiting the results of pertinent experiments, and an organization that neatly encapsulates and explicates its subject, *Brains on Toast* hilariously demolishes the myth of scientific objectivity and visual documentation, simply by assuming the various tropes of its televisual, documentary rhetoric in the interests of many usually repressed subjects.

Saunders begins this work with a convention adopted from nature documentaries. This genre uses expository voice-over and the trope of personification to relate to the audience the emotions of the mother and father lion as they nurture their young, hunt for food, fight other lions, and so on. The popularity of these nature programs lies in their ability to solicit audience identification with the lions (zebras, giraffes, hyenas, cougars, bears, seals) and their travails by having the empathetic voice-over speak the animal's experience in the framework of Ozzie and Harriet. Thus, the video begins in the San Diego Zoo, the camera watching a baboon climb down a rope and a monkey swing from tree to tree to a raucous rendition of the

song "I Enjoy Being a Girl." Having enacted the personification fallacy, Saunders follows it with a series of impromptu interviews of male passersby in front of the cage. Platt and Saunders construct a witty visual irony or conceit here, using the animal cage as backdrop for the men's responses to the question "Would you get pregnant if you could?" The interviewees, framed so the audience can see the caged baboons behind them, assert in various responses "Don't mess with nature—that's my motto." Along with the obvious indictment of our contradictory relations with "nature," the sequence also demonstrates that the most spontaneous interview is always already "staged," locations often having as much to say as any "man on the street."

An early sequence set in a classroom lays out the didactic agenda of the piece. The professor, attired in a red dress, comes in and announces to her class that they will be studying science's role in gender construction. An intertitle that reads "Subject: Science and Gender; Are there significant differences between the genders?" comes on the screen. A second follows with "Where to look: A) Brains B) Hormones C) Reproduction D) Private parts." The "Brains" section begins in a mock laboratory where the professor and her assistant, garbed in white coats, are weighing brains. The professor explains to her assistant that in the 1850s, craniologists decided that men were smarter than women because their brains were bigger. "Bigger was better even then," she observes wryly. The assistant protests that that kind of reasoning would mean that elephants were smarter than men. "Yes, that was known as the elephant problem," the professor remarks. She continues, "They then came up with a formula that looked at brain size in proportion to body weight. It was discovered that men were indeed smarter than elephants, but this formula had to be jettisoned when they found that, according to it, women were smarter than elephants and men." She sticks a sign reading "male" in the heavier mass on the scale, one reading "female" on the lighter one. Because of the preceding sequence and its information (is it "true?" parody? what does brain size mean, proportional or not, anyway?), this data or measurement is unreadable, indecipherable. The sequence indicates humorously yet emphatically the importance of context and interpretative bias in comprehending scientific facts.

In the next several sequences, different theories about brains and gender are aired in an array of settings: women at a dinner (where "brains" are cooked and served) discuss gender and brain lateralization; in another lab setting a woman explains, as an egg boils over a Bunsen burner, the Victorian theory that women's reproductive functions depleted their capacity to think, and vice versa; while a graphic crawl recounts men's decreasing fertility over the past several decades, a woman discounts the Victorian

ism—as she also questions the limited perspectives of both experience and science in telling the truth of sexual difference.

Of the three artists I discuss here, Bill Jones addresses the question of queer identity most directly and least ironically. In ways very different from Saunders's, he takes on and depersonalizes the genre of autobiography in his film *Massillon* (1991). Jones wants to reframe the inception of a queer identity; to do so, he divides his film into three sections, each of which addresses different aspects of that identity formation. The first section, titled "Ohio," recounts the narrator's personal experiences and dawning awareness of his sexuality as a child and adolescent. The second, entitled "The Law," neatly encapsulates the first, by recounting the history, evolution, and current status of sodomy laws in the United States. The third, "California," uses images of planned communities to explore issues pertaining to heritage, tradition, history, memory, and, finally, justice and the limitations of the social contract. *Massillon* begins at the level of the personal, but the film's perspective telescopes out, placing its personal narrative in legal, religious, and historical contexts that illustrate their adverse effects of these on individual subjects.

Jones has said that his primary interest as an artist and filmmaker is in ideas, and the paradox of his work is that he works in a medium ill suited for conceptual expression. He wants to visually represent what cannot be depicted or shown. *Massillon*, an essay in images, approaches the paradox that motivates it in several ways. Jones emphasizes the semantic importance of the sound track, inverting the traditional hierarchy of image over sound in film. There are no people depicted in *Massillon*, save for a few isolated figures in long shot, captured in the home movies that the narrator/Jones watched as a child and that he uses here to commence and end his film. This tactic effectively generalizes the import of specific images, as Saunders's very different strategies do, but Jones is less interested in undercutting or deconstructing the voice of his film than he is in working with conceptual generalities about queer identity and the forces involved in its construction and containment. Finally, the documentation that Jones performs eschews the veracity of images altogether. He tells us what the images do not or cannot show. The words are the thing.

Massillon begins with a black screen and Jones's voice telling us about his early memories of family vacations. His father took home movies of the places they traveled—Washington, D.C., and Niagara Falls—and Jones reflects that his memories of these places are memories of home movies. The sound track falls silent as the home movies play on the screen: images of Niagara Falls and then shots from an array of historic locations in D.C. The significations attached to Niagara Falls—honeymoons, romance, sexu-

theory of atrophied eggs and asks, "What's wrong with this picture?" The coda to this section consists of a child's ditty about three fishes accompanying footage of sperm surrounding and penetrating an ovum, and then of a zygote dividing after fertilization. The irreconcilable incongruity of scientific discourses that open and close this section—anatomical versus cellular biology—underscores the gross and shifting physical logics that have organized scientific theorizing about gender: for brains, "bigger is better"; for Victorian women, the "up" or "down" options—the female brain is only nurtured at the expense of reproductive organs; for fertility, "atrophied" eggs (quality) or sperm counts (quantity). The final shots (of ovum and sperm) testify to the highly variable information that scientific data can give us, relative to their context (the sperm wriggle to the beat of the music), while also indicating the limits of scientific explanation. Visually and conceptually, the cellular drama of fertilization bears no evident relationship to the size and gender of brains. This sequence performs the lack of any relationship simply by accepting and trying to represent science's assumption of such a relation.

Saunders and Platt continue in this vein throughout their program. In the section about hormones, scientific research that denies links between aggression and testosterone is relayed over shots of a bullfight. The reproduction section concludes, from information derived from the zoo interviews, with an assertive question: "Pregnancy is women's work?" Finally, in the private parts section—subtitled "Seeing Is Believing"—commentators recount instances of hermaphroditism and the heinous surgical practices used to "correct" these abnormalities while engaging in sexual foreplay or while reading scientific manuals in their bedrooms. As it concludes, *Brains on Toast* appears to be a clever parody of the misguided conventions and foibles of sex education documentaries, laced with stunning visual ironies and very "creative" research protocols throughout. Yet in the credit sequence, Platt and Saunders deliver their final, scintillating twist, an irony that encompasses the entire video. Inverting the very structure of parody on itself, they reveal that all the research findings and studies cited were derived from "legitimate" scientific sources. Calling the very concept of legitimacy into question, this revelation nevertheless puts a different spin on all the information that has preceded it. As in Saunders's earlier work, obscure, repressed, marginal knowledge is put forth in texts that rigorously refuse any serious or univocal authority. Throughout, the rhetorical fallacies addressed in the text always involve the representational fallacies that present that text to an audience. Saunders consistently critiques the identificatory and objective structures of visual documentary—visual determin-