

THE DOCUMENTARY CONSCIENCE A Casebook in Film Making  
By Alan Rosenthal  
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Chapter 26: IT HAPPENS TO US and NANA, MOM AND ME Amalie Rothschild

Amalie Rothschild's name crops up almost inevitably in any discussion of filmmakers who are exploring ideas and issues relating to women in the seventies. An extremely intense woman, she is concerned not just with film making but is also very involved in improving the lot of the independent film maker.

After graduating from NYU, Rothschild worked for three years doing special effects cinematography for the Joshua Light Show at the Fillmore East theater. During the same period she worked very widely as a freelance photographer publishing everywhere from Time-Life books and Newsweek to Rolling Stone and The Village Voice.

In 1971, while still working for the Light Show she began production on *It Happens to Us*, raising \$21,000 of production money from five different foundations. *It Happens to Us* is a plea for legalized abortion. Unlike many "educational" documentaries which swamp one with statistics and facts, the film is content to let twelve women speak candidly and simply about their own experiences. The stories reveal the problems of illegal versus legal medically safe abortions and illustrate the quandaries of the personal situations underlying this emotion-packed issue.

In the same year Rothschild helped organize and found a distribution company, New Day Films, together with Julia Reichert, James Klein and Liane Brandon. The move was both an attempt to stop the rip-off of independent film makers by distributors, and a move to open up the market and audiences to a slightly different type of film.

*Nana, Mom and Me* (1974) brings together two key themes of Rothschild- women and independence, and the nature of the family. The film began almost as a home movie about Rothschild's grandmother. Gradually, and partly because of the reluctance of "Nana" to be filmed, the film shifts focus to involve Amalie herself and to explore the relationships between Amalie, her mother, and her grandmother. The film is very sensitively done and one comes away wondering not just about Rothschild's family but also about all one's own relationships. Other important films of Rothschild's are *The Center* (1970) which was produced for the defense fund of a Black Panther, Robert Collier, tried and acquitted in New York in 1971, and *It's All Right To Be Woman* (1972). On *It's All Right*, which was made for Channel 13's show "The Fifty-first State" Rothschild got credits for photography and editing. At present she teaches narrative film at NYU and is currently shooting a film on Willard Van Dyke, the celebrated film pioneer.

Q. Prior to going to film school what did you see yourself doing in film?

A. My background was in graphic design and still photography and I saw myself getting involved in film work by using those skills. My hero was Saul Bass who did all kinds of fancy graphics and animated title sequences and that's how I saw myself. My idea of the ideal job at that time would have been to do animation and cinemagraphics for a commercial firm. However, after my first year in film school many things in my personal life began to coalesce and take shape to the point where I began to realize that I had ideas of my own that I wanted to express in film.

Q. I would like to go more into this because the body of your film work deals very much with women, their lives, their problems. So how, in fact, did everything come together?

A. It has a lot to do with a very disturbing event in my personal life that catalyzed a lot of internal changes that allowed me to make the "leap in consciousness," and I use that phrase with quotes around it, to connect with ideas that I had of my own to express in film. I had been engaged to a Rumanian film maker, my first real love, who died, and that experience knocked me way down. It was overcoming it that really got me in touch with my own needs and drives for the first time. Suddenly I began to see myself as a separate person and not as someone whose identity was tied to working with someone else. It was that experience, once I survived it and overcame it, which set me up on my feet independently and separately as a complete person.

Q. Your first film, *Woo Who? May Wilson*, was shot at film school. Was that film related to this searching you were going through at the time?

A. Very much. I had gotten to know May when I was in high school because she was an artist colleague of my mother's and they had exhibited together. I would see her at gallery openings and I became fascinated by her. When I began film school in New York I looked her up, and we became very close.

As you also know, the film really focuses on her overcoming a period of acute emotional crisis in her life and discovering her own independence for the first time. She had been a suburban housewife in Maryland. At sixty, her 40-year marriage breaks up, and she's forced to find a new life of her own. That whole experience of hers connected very closely with what I had just gone through and that's why I felt comfortable and close to her and really identified tremendously. I knew that what she had gone through was an important experience. It was a story that needed to be told and I connected with it because of my own personal involvement with those same issues. Of course, what turned out later on was that the film struck a responsive and important chord in many women.

Q. Can we take that further-how women responded to it in the late sixties?

A. Well, by the time the film was finished the women's movement was being publicly recognized at last, and these things were finally beginning to come out into the open and be acknowledged as valid areas of concern. So the film was really born of its time and it was the women's movement that enabled it to find an audience and a life of its own.

Q. I remember you doing various short films after that and then coming out with *It Happens to Us*, about abortion. Were you thinking about the subject a long time?

A. Well, yes. I understood the implications of the subject through my own experience of having an abortion and came to see that that was the next area that was burning me up to make a film about. It was made over a very long period of time. It was a stop-and-start production as I kept running out of money.

Q. Where were you going for money?

A. Well, I basically raised the money through five different foundations. I had three

matching grants for \$5,000 each and two matching grants for \$3,000, a total of \$21,000 in all. The actual production budget of the film was around \$18,000 and I used the additional \$3,000 to launch the distribution.

I started the film by putting in about \$1,000 to begin shooting and I lucked onto the discovery that you have a much better chance of raising money for a film if you've already gone out on a limb with a project and begun to shoot. People then begin to look at the material. They know that you're committed to the project and are not going to back out.

Q. When did you really commit yourself to the film?

A. There was a big demonstration for legalized abortion in Albany in March 1971 and I put together a crew at the last minute. I wavered and vacillated back and forth whether I should go to Albany and film or not and would it really make a difference. Then, two days before the rally, I decided that if I was going to do this thing I'd better put my ideas where my mouth was, so I went.

And then I seriously began looking for the means to finance the film. I made a lot of initial phone calls and one call led to another as people gave me different leads. I also recognized that I had to have an arrangement with a nonprofit tax-exempt organization that would sponsor the film and be the conduit for raising funds. So I started looking for someone who was connected with a group that would be interested in the subject.

Eventually, through the phone network, I heard of a woman doctor, Felicia Hance, who was then vice-president of the National Committee for Human Rights. The head of the organization was Dr. Quentin Young, who is a rather well-known and very outspoken physician and important supporter of radical changes in the American health care delivery system. We met, and they both agreed to get involved with the project and help me with the fund raising. We made contacts and wrote proposals for about four months and then one week in July I suddenly found myself with \$10,000. The proposal had gotten through two places each of which said, "Well, if the other one puts up some money, we'll put up some money." So they both agreed and were willing, and we had a solid shooting amount.

Q. What did you want this film to do? What kind of audience were you aiming at?

A. I was aiming at a middle-class audience who probably had not had any personal experience with abortion in their lives. I felt, if they understood emotionally what was involved and the life circumstances of the women who find that abortion is the only solution to their unwanted pregnancies, they might view the whole situation more sympathetically. I wanted them to understand that women must have the choice to decide for themselves how they're going to deal with the circumstances. And I knew what this audience was probably thinking because of my own unrealized biases and prejudices. Until it happened to me I basically thought that any woman who found herself with an unwanted pregnancy was somehow personally responsible. I thought that she was either careless, or stupid, or secretly wanted to be pregnant and that in any event, it was her problem and her fault. When I became pregnant myself I realized through my own circumstances that that certainly was not the case, and I had to confront my old unsuspected attitudes. And then it was a real blow to discover my own prejudices against other women.

Now, I considered myself pretty open-minded and unprejudiced and it finally sunk in that if I had felt that way without knowing it, God knows how many other people did as well, and maybe the best thing I could do would be to make a film that would lay out the arguments and information on the subject. I wanted to show the emotional and personal levels of the situation. I wanted to tell the stories of women who had been through this experience and share those stories and those things with other people in a very open and honest way so that perhaps they would come around to the same way of thinking and understanding.

Q. Were you working with an all-female crew?

A. Yes, and for a number of reasons, first of all because I knew many women who were working in film who were competent technicians and who clearly needed work. But the other reason, which was really the more important one, was that it was clear to me that there would be a much greater atmosphere of trust among the women I was interviewing about their abortion experiences if there were only women present. I thought a rapport and a feeling of sisterhood was absolutely necessary so that the women I was interviewing would feel free enough to share their very personal and very intense and in some cases painful abortion experiences with us in front of the camera.

Q. You must have had to make very difficult human judgments within the film. Were there any scenes which you shot, which in the end you thought were just too sensitive or too painful to put in the final film?

A. Well, that worked in a slightly different way. The interviews I eliminated were cut mostly because of aesthetic decisions about the way in which some of the women came across. Also in some cases there was repetition or one person told a similar story better than another.

I did preliminary interviews with between thirty-five and forty women from all walks of life. Black women, white women, poor, rich, old, young, and so on and so forth—seeking a real cross-section of what I discovered were the basic kinds of circumstances that people's abortion stories fell into. I then selected twelve women who I actually filmed interviews with, and portions from ten of them appear in the film.

Q. You said you wanted to make a film for a fairly wide general audience. How did you go about selling it? What were the responses of the distribution companies you went to with a film that handled such a controversial issue as abortion?

A. I never went to any distributors with it. I wouldn't have given it to anybody else for anything in the world. I wanted to distribute it myself because I felt I knew best for whom it was made.

When I say that I knew best, it's not to say that I knew very much about distribution in general but that I was committed to the subject from start to finish and that included getting it out to people. Anyway, while we were working on the film my sound woman kept telling me about some friends of hers she had gone to college with who were making a women's film called *Growing Up Female*. They were in Ohio and I really should see it and so on. She told me a fair amount about the people who made it, Julia Reichert and Jim Klein, and I ended up meeting them at the 1971 Flaherty Film Seminar.

At that point I had already been having some serious discussions with several other women who were interested in setting up their own distribution and we had gone fairly far in making a decision to do something. In the end it didn't work out but then I

met Julia and Jim and they had already begun this process themselves with *Growing Up Female*. We hit it off right away and they said they were interested in joining up with someone else as well. As it happened I was still in the middle of production of *It Happens to Us*. I showed them what I'd cut so far and they got very excited. They were just moving to New York and came to stay with me for three months. They saw a lot of the rushes, and got very involved with the film. In fact, as a result of all that Julia opened up about her own abortion experience and I filmed an interview with her that became one of the more powerful stories. She is the woman who had the very devastating encounter with her father who blamed her for getting pregnant, and had a very awful, illegal abortion experience. So New Day, our distribution cooperative, was born out of all that.

Later that Fall, Julia and I were both on the screening committee for the First International Festival of Women's Films (the screenings were held in my loft twice a week) and during one of those screenings we saw a film, *Anything You Want to Be*, by Liane Brandon. We liked her film very much and on the basis of that Julia went up to Boston to meet Liane, to talk to her, and to find out what she was doing, how her film was being distributed, and if she was perhaps interested in distributing it herself and getting involved. Essentially that's how we first got together with the three original New Day films, *Growing Female*, *Anything You Want to Be*, and *It Happens to Us*.

Q. How did you organize the distribution?

A. The backbone for distribution is mass mailings of catalogues and information about the films to people, mostly in education, who are likely to use them. We did a 10,000-piece mailing and it went, for example, to the head of the department of sociology and the head of the department of psychology, in every university and college in the entire United States. We sent the brochures to schools, libraries, universities, junior colleges, technical schools, vocational schools, and community groups and organizations. We sent the brochures to anyone we thought could use the films as tools for discussion and for the raising of the important issues that we felt people would want to know about. In fact the underlying concept of New Day is based on the idea that films are tools for social change and that one's concern as a social and political film maker is to start educating the public on a wider scale to the issues that one's films are designed to raise.

The perennial problem for all film makers is, once the film is made, what good does it do if people don't see it? How do I get people to see my film? We faced that problem directly because at the time none of the existing commercial educational film distributors were interested in films about women. It was a new area that was not yet proven financially viable. You have to understand that commercial distributors are not there to take risks on the creation of new audiences. They are there to make money from what they've already learned will work. However, our work with New Day proved that there was, in fact, this huge audience out there interested in the subject of women.

Of course, once it became clear that "women's films" were saleable, the commercial distributors suddenly wanted to handle some and everybody suddenly had to have women's films-or at least a token women's film.

Q. When you go through a commercial distributor in the States what percentage of the profit do they keep and what do they pass on?

A. That's the bleak side of the picture. Film makers don't generally make a living from

their films and that's because the distributors take anywhere from 75 percent to 80 percent of the profit. Today, in 1977, you know you've got a good deal if you can manage to get 25 percent. It used to be that 25 percent to 35 percent of the royalty would go to the film maker. Now 15 percent and 20 percent is what they generally offer and if you have a film they really want and if you're a hard negotiator or whatever, then you get 25 percent and that's not a whole lot. Of course, after having become a distributor myself, I also understand what costs and expenses are, but with the present system the idea of distributing the film oneself has become important for many film makers.

Q. In *May Wilson* and in the abortion film you were working with subjects which related to your life sometimes centrally, sometimes more peripherally. In *Nana, Mom and Me* you deal with your grandmother, mother and yourself. How did that film begin?

A. It began very simply as a film about my grandmother, and I didn't think it would be for any audience other than my family. Nana had had a very serious operation when she was 84, from which she had not expected to recover. In fact it took her a full year afterwards to accept the fact that she was still alive. She aged incredibly during that year and it was very shocking and alarming and disturbing to me to finally see my grandmother as an old woman and realize that she was mortal and that she simply wouldn't be in my life forever. I wanted to keep her alive and have a record and to catch her for my children when and if I had them, so that they could know who this woman was who had been so important to me and the family. And that's really how it started.

I just began by filming some family stories of one thing and another. Unfortunately Nana was not cooperative. She wasn't very enthusiastic about the project and the idea. It took me six months to get to film her for the first time. I would make plans to go down to Baltimore with the equipment and then at the very last minute I'd get this panic phone call, "Nana doesn't feel well, don't come." At a certain point I caught on and just went down there with a Nagra and recorded her voice, some family stories, and people talking to her. And she seemed to go along with that.

And then, in October of 1972, my mother decided to take her on a trip to Virginia and invited me and my sister to come as well. I asked my mother about bringing the camera and she finally said, "Well, it's up to you, but if you do bring it, don't expect to be able to use it. If you want to have it there just in case, that's your business, but you don't know how she's going to react to it, so we won't tell her." So I didn't tell her. I just went and showed up with all the gear. I had to do the shooting because I couldn't bring anyone else and I taught my sister to take sound.

Q. Could you tell me more about your mother's attitude?

A. She was very cooperative, but at that stage wasn't part of the film herself. She recognized that if Nana had known in advance she probably would have gotten sick and not gone. Once, of course, I was there I just used my chances and shot about 2,000 feet over the span of an entire week. It wasn't a lot, but it was a beginning. And then I went and put the material on a shelf because I didn't have any more money to sink into it and I was moving on to other projects.

Some months later I got a \$10,000 film maker's grant from the American Film Institute for a project about women and mental health. It had a much larger budget, close to \$50,000. To cut the story short, I couldn't raise the extra \$40,000 for the mental health

film but after some correspondence with AFI they agreed to let me put their money towards a film about my family. However, even at that time it was still a film about my grandmother.

Finally I had the funds to go ahead seriously with the project. In August of 1973 I went down to Maryland for four days and the first day we had a family crab feast, which is a real Maryland tradition. Nana was all excited because she'd invited a lot of members of the family and she was making her famous crab soup and these were all things that I wanted to film because this feast was a real central event in our family life. But it was a very exhausting day for her. She was 86. She'd started at 6 A.M. working in the hot kitchen and continued right through the day preparing for a dinner that didn't end until nine o'clock at night. Of course she was exhausted, but she attributed her exhaustion to the fact that I had been making a film at the same time. Thereupon she decided that she would no longer have anything to do with my crazy film project because it had wiped her out.

So it was then I began turning to my mother, initially for information about Nana that I was no longer able to get from Nana herself. And it was only then that I began to discover my mother as a daughter for the first time- which was a revelation to me. I also began to understand that the film I had all along really wanted to make was more about my mother, who has been the pivotal influence in my life. For years I hadn't really known how to get close to her and how to approach her. Now something was happening, and the film really began to grow and take off at that point. It suddenly became clear to me what I was really after. And the way the film is assembled is very much a reflection of the sequence of events that happened over the film making process a sequence that I wanted to preserve as part of the odyssey of discovery.

Q. Was your mother totally open and totally cooperative with you? Was she keen on the project?

A. No, she wasn't. She was very ambivalent and I think that uncertainty is in many ways evident in the film. I felt that uncertainty while I was making the film but it was not entirely clear to me where it was coming from. I was upset by the fact my mother wouldn't trust me and was wary. Later I saw that it came out of her concern that she would not be presented in the film as an artist and as a professional person. She was afraid that all I was going to do was show her as Nana's daughter and my mother, and not as the separate professional person that she was.

Now that was an astounding revelation for me. I hadn't realized that she was worried that I wouldn't show her as a professional because it was as a professional that she had been such an important force in my life. That was the real person that she had always been to me and that was the most crucial thing for me to deal with because it was what I admired most about her. Once she understood that, she began to loosen up. There was another dynamic that was operating also because of the fact that I was filming her and using my professional and creative tools to reveal her.

This was part of the subtext and undercurrent of the rivalry that in fact has long existed between us and which I attempt, as openly as I can under the circumstances, to deal with directly in the film. I also think it's probably one of the most important, crucial and controversial areas in the film; that whole discussion towards the end of the mother-daughter rivalry which comes about as a result of our names being the same. When we started discussing the fact that we had the same name that brought it all to the surface and made it possible to see the emotional terrain more directly.

Q. You've become known as one of the more prominent American film makers dealing with women's issues. Is this a mantle you gladly accept or is it something you want to throw off? Would you say that the whole subject of women has still not been treated well on film?

A. Of course it hasn't been explored adequately. The surface is just beginning to be scratched a little bit, and as you're probably well aware, the commercial cinema is light years behind. There have been very few commercial films that have dealt successfully and positively in any way with women as equal and full members of the human race. But the whole thing of "women's film" is a term that really needs to be defined. It's very vague. It has meant many different things at many different periods. In the thirties and forties, women's films were soap operas, tear jerkers, designed for what was at the time, derogatorily, seen as a women's market, you know, housewives who needed romantic fantasies. Women's films today, of course, mean something different, but while lip service has been paid to equality, I don't think things have changed as much as we've all been led to believe and would like to believe. There still is a negative connotation in the mass public's mind to women's films, and they see them as militant, radical, badly made, strange documentary things that nobody understands, coming out of some radical fringe.

Q. Where would you like to see yourself going? Or what would you like to see yourself doing in the next few years?

A. I've recently been moving into and around fiction film making for a variety of reasons. One is directly connected to the experiences I had making *Nana, Mom and Me*, which is that I felt I had really pushed back barriers as far as I could in terms of delving into intensely personal and private matters in real people's lives. I think that documentary film makers have a very profound responsibility to the privacy and dignity of the individuals whom they're making films about and that there are limitations as to how far you can go without crossing that thin line beyond which you're exploiting someone else for your own art. For myself, I have certain personal ground rules that I won't break.

While making *Nana, Mom and Me* I found that there were certain thematic areas I was interested in exploring further, particularly mother-daughter relationships for example, that I couldn't possibly do in a documentary film with real people. And therefore it is a logical extension to turn to the freedom of fiction film making where you can express those ideas very directly. So I do see myself as eventually going on to feature film making, but I'm not in a hurry. I want to get there in steps. And I never intend to stop making documentaries.