

FALL ARTS PREVIEW

8 Feminist Documentaries You Should See This Fall

September 14, 2017

By [Erin Trahan](#) 



Stills from "Chavela," "A Fine Line," "Motherland" and "Letters from Baghdad." (Courtesy Music Box Films, Obscured Pictures, American Documentary, Inc. and MFA, Boston)

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The typical narrative about women and film is one of scarcity. Too few women directors, a dearth of strong female leads and no women over 40. Not so for documentaries screening in New England this fall, where there's an

abundance of women in principal crew roles and films that tackle issues disproportionately affecting women and girls.

Could change be in the air? Camden International Film Festival programmer Samara Grace Chadwick thinks so. In fact, she and other area programmers offered up long rosters of non-fiction films they consider feminist — far more titles than could be featured in this piece.

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Anna Feder, programmer for Emerson College’s Bright Lights Film Series, agrees. At least half of the titles she’ll screen during the academic year are directed by women. She labels those films with a “W” and also started giving films an “F” rating for feminist (after the Bath Film Festival launched the idea in 2016) — a process that influences her selections. (IMDb subsequently adopted F and Triple F ratings.)

While women typically fare better both on and off camera in documentaries than in narratives, Chadwick says that finding films by women about strong women was especially “easy” this season. Here's a look at what's coming up:

["Breathing Through Cinema — The Films of Chantal Akerman" | Through Oct. 22 | Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge](#)

Chantal Akerman is one of the rare filmmakers who deftly traverses forms, from fiction to first-person non-fiction, sometimes within the same film. Feminists have long embraced her despite, or perhaps because, her comfort roaming between film theory and practice has allowed her to remain slightly aloof to labels. Her approach leans heavily on observation over dramatization, what theorists call “minimalist.” This style is more common in her Belgian homeland and France. If she has a doppelgänger, she’s yet to

be found in the United States. That could be why you may opt for her visions of 1970s New York in the documentaries “News From Home” (Sept. 15) or “Hotel Monterey” (Oct. 22), screening as part of the Harvard Film Archive series. Both are “substantial experiments in duration,” to borrow a phrase from the HFA description, and establish her as an avant-garde artist who exalts the mundane. If you want to lose yourself in story and character, look elsewhere.

Hotel Monterey



“[In the Waves](#)” | Sept. 15 | Camden International Film Festival, Maine

One reason to choose documentary is to see what is almost entirely absent from fiction. In the case of “In the Waves,” it’s an octogenarian going about her daily life in a coastal town of Nova Scotia. We see her face unadorned, her aged hands and legs. (Framed with a respect that passes [Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s test for ageism](#).) Her home is cluttered with small possessions collected over a lifetime and her husband is a supporting

character. She bones and guts the fish she eats for dinner and vacuums in her underwear. The film prioritizes intimate and artful imagery over dialogue and is shot almost completely in her point of view; too bad it departs at all. The unexpected juxtaposition of visions of herself as still young (one reasons later that it's probably her granddaughter, also the filmmaker), offers a ruminative commentary on family legacy and the passing of time. (*The director will be present at the Camden International Film Festival screening.*)

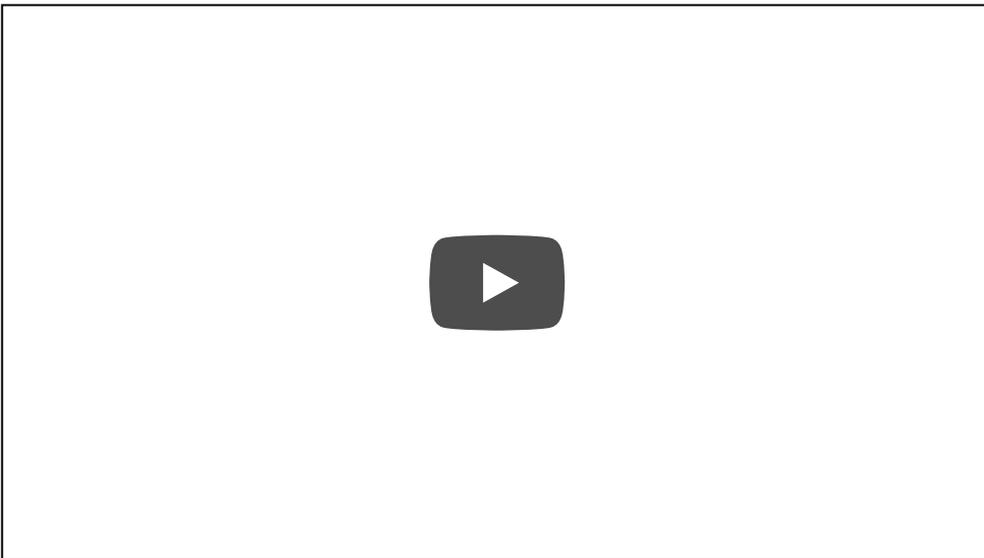
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[“Letters From Baghdad”](#) | Sept. 21 - Sept. 29 | Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The traditionally constructed (and titled) “Letters From Baghdad” does exactly what one can expect of a documentary. In chronological, biographical format it tells the story of the “born too gifted, perhaps” Gertrude Bell. Bell was a self-made explorer of the Middle East whose knowledge of Mesopotamian tribal history and relationships impelled her British

homeland (and the region's colonizing body at the time) to hire her as an intelligence officer. She served as ambassador and spy and helped draw an Iraqi border just after World War I. The film draws from her countless letters home and other documents to populate historical characters with their own words. The tactic works. The actors' subtle interpretations pepper what could be bland. For instance, when Sgt. Frank Stafford expresses his disdain for Bell ("She was abrupt and intolerant. Snooty, perhaps.") he also conveys reluctant respect. While her cohort-in-"diplomacy" Winston Churchill and T.E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") are well-known men of history, Bell has lingered, perhaps in their shadow. "Letters From Baghdad" is one step toward solidifying her remarkable role in the complicated nation-making about which Bell presciently observed, "Oil is the trouble of course. Detestable stuff."



["Chavela"](#) | Sept. 28 and 30 | Boston Latino International Film Festival

Whether or not you know Chavela Vargas and her uncannily empathic vocal style, this modest film about her roller coaster life as a ranchera singer will charm and probably wow. The film's backbone is a roughly shot video interview with Chavela in 1991, decades after her exile from the Mexican stage and decades before her death. In it she says, "Ask me anything," adding, "I send all my love and respect to the women of the world." As a performer who eschewed feminine primping and garb for a poncho and bottle of tequila, it turns out she's as complex a cultural icon as Marlene Dietrich or Prince. A friend says, "Everyone knew she slept with all of Mexico" (by that she meant with women), but Vargas didn't speak publicly about her homosexuality until much later in life.

The film is a collection of vignettes that chart her rise to popularity in 1950s Mexico and the downturn that came with her dependence on alcohol. Pedro Almodóvar sought out Chavela for many of his film's soundtracks and he championed her second career in Spain. "She absolved you of your sins. Then she encouraged you to commit them again," he says. As this film shows so well, that message is one anyone can appreciate. (*"Chavela" is the opening night film for the Boston Latino International Film Festival, screened in partnership with the Bright Lights Film Series. The film opens theatrically in Boston later this fall.*)

CHAVELA - Official Trailer





“[Motherland](#)” | Oct. 2 at The DocYard, Cambridge | Nov. 28 at Bright Lights Film Series, Boston

Women living above the global poverty line won’t be able to fathom the warehouse-like conditions in which poor Filipino women give birth in “Motherland.” Yet even if they must share a single hospital bed immediately after delivery, these mothers, as they are insistently called by staff instead of by name, find camaraderie and humor in their shared experience. Shot [verite style](#) and directed by Emerson alum Ramona Díaz, “Motherland” lays bare the thicket of choices these women do and don’t have when it comes to reproduction and sexual freedom. As one teen refuses birth control, citing her mother’s disapproval, the counselor retorts, “If you listen to your mommy you’ll have 10 kids. Let me ask you, when you sleep with your boyfriend, do you ask your mother?” One husband pleads with his wife not to leave with their premature baby against medical advice; but she has to, she has six other children.

“Motherland” is a stark reminder of how baffling it can be to make decisions when every option feels fraught. It’s also a formidable contribution to feminist documentary cinema and one of the strongest films of the season. *(The director will appear via Skype for the Oct. 2 DocYard screening and in person for the Nov. 28 Bright Lights screening. The film also screens on PBS’ POV series starting Oct. 16.)*

Motherland - Official trailer



[“A Fine Line”](#) | Oct. 15 | **GlobeDocs Film Festival, Greater Boston**

The scarcity issue that plagues women in film, and dozens of other fields, is all-too-common among women chefs and restaurateurs. “A Fine Line” sets the scene with some eye-opening stats: Over half the grads of culinary programs are women yet less than 7 percent are head chefs or own restaurant businesses in the United States. On the macro level, “A Fine Line” asks some of the world’s most influential female chefs, including Boston’s [Barbara Lynch](#), to weigh in on the male-dominated field that is as much a lifestyle as a career. For the micro view it homes in on one entrepreneur who, against mighty odds, has made a name for herself with Val’s Restaurant in Holden, Massachusetts. That Val is also director Joanna James’ mom isn’t obvious until a third of the way in. “I wouldn’t want to see you go through what I went through,” Val tells Joanna when talking about their careers. James, a first-time director and journalist, keeps her distance and the film could’ve benefited from a more dramatic plunge into the mother-daughter relationship. But Val — and the many scenes of her doing three things at once on an active kitchen line — serves as an allegory for those uphill stats. The odds look almost insurmountable but seeing someone pull it off is

priceless. (*The film closes the GlobeDocs Film Festival at the Coolidge Corner Theatre and the director and subjects will be present.*)

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[“Rasheed”](#) | Oct. 24 | Boston Palestine Film Festival

Journalist and “Rasheed” director Samia Badih is determined to understand her family’s lasting grief for her uncle, Rasheed Broum, who died in an Israeli airstrike on Lebanon in 1982. Her mother’s silence on Rasheed has shrouded his activist life, and death, in mystery. So the director explores her family’s political legacy (her grandfather fled Palestine for Lebanon in 1948) and she explores what happens within a family when grief multiplies (her mother and uncle lost their father at a very young age). Badih tracks down American professors and her uncle’s old family friends. When she takes a camera back to her mother and uncle’s childhood home, where, remarkably, residents still remember the family name, she cannot enter. By wisely including her own reactions, the filmmaking process reveals the director’s

own need to grasp the often senseless yet highly personal, lifelong loss that comes with political violence. (*Screening is in partnership with Bright Lights Film Series. The director will appear via Skype.*)



Rasheed - Official Film Trailer
Rasheed - A film by Samia Badih • [Follow](#)

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[“Acts and Intermissions: Emma Goldman in America”](#) | Nov. 20 | **The DocYard, Cambridge**

The highly quotable anarchist Emma Goldman takes a kind of stage in Abigail Child’s latest, “Acts and Intermissions: Emma Goldman in America.” It’s the second film in a trilogy about women and ideology. The young woman who “plays” Goldman is dressed in turn of the century clothing, hair pinned up, eyes behind pince-nez glasses, but her lace-up boots also zip. She’s meant to span the eras. Experimental filmmaker Abigail Child, former faculty at Tufts and the SMFA, often takes on all aspects of her films from

directing to shooting and editing. That's the case here in a film that pieces together ideas about Goldman using her own words (“Love is a play. With short acts and long intermissions.”), reenactments and a sporadic recap of the era. The take-home is more kaleidoscopic, with an eye on now, than straightforward history lesson. But like Gertrude Bell in “Letters From Baghdad,” Goldman’s eloquent observations and commitment to her cause flies in the face of expectations for women then and yes, even today. (*The director will be present at the DocYard screening.*)

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Erin Trahan  Film Writer

Erin Trahan writes about film for The ARTery.

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