

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter

Deborah Hoffman

44 minutes, black and white and color, video, 1994

Women Make Movies

Description

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter follows the struggles of filmmaker Deborah Hoffmann as she comes to terms with her aging mother's descent into the depths of Alzheimer's disease.

The film begins with an interview by Deborah Hoffmann with her octogenarian mother, Mrs. Doris Hoffmann. Her mother appears in a close-up, describing her relationship with her own parents, a non-communicative father whom she never really knew, and a talkative mother to whom she felt closer. An old black-and-white photo of Mrs. Hoffmann as a young child posing with her parents dissolves to a current picture of her with Deborah as she conversationally asks the unseen interviewer, "Were you close to your parents?" "I was closer to my mother," replies Deborah; "then, you know who my mother was?" "You!" Mrs. Hoffmann sits back in disbelief. I was your mother? she asks incredulously. "How can I really be your mother?" She laughs, "Something went wrong!" The image fades to black, and against the 1920's-style background lilt of an old upright piano, the title page, "*Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*" dissolves up and then out. In what appears to be her home office, filmmaker Deborah Hoffmann addresses the camera, recounting the milestones which marked her mother's increasing forgetfulness; milestones which came in the form of her mother's querying, "How exactly are we related?" Does Deborah have any siblings? Has she ever met Deborah's father? Against b-roll of Deborah in the bedroom gently brushing her mother's hair, Deborah's voice-over continues, "When my mother was about 70," she began to have Problems with her memory, but it was the type of thing a lot of people have. She got kind of repetitive. A black-and-white photo of her mother's visage jumps to a close up of the woman's searching eyes as Deborah explains, then she got more repetitive. Against photos and the obituary about Banesh Hoffmann's death, Deborah describes her father's passing as the first indication that this was, for her mother, maybe more than getting a little forgetful. Though her mother was able to call her with the news, she was unable to tell her the whereabouts of the body once Deborah arrived in New York from California. Within days, her mother had no idea that her father had passed away. Somber strings with piano music fades up with the next sequence in which Deborah and her mother have a chat in the living room. Her mother grapples with her wording in an attempt to describe her husband's passing five years earlier: it was in a muddle stage, she says to Deborah, "we each had a relationship with Banesh, and then he was gone, and he was a different person. It wasn't easy, and you don't just change people, they're gone." As her mother applies makeup in preparation for leaving the house, Deborah's voice-over explains that, despite moments of profound confusion, her mother could function amazingly well. Her mother's desire to move back to California, where she grew up and where Deborah was living, initiated Deborah's role as the overseer of her life. As though posing for a photograph, the two women stand before the camera as Mrs. Hoffmann instructs, look at Frances, the segment's videographer. "Okay, I got it!" the unseen Frances exclaims next, Mrs.

Hoffmann is observed looking through her purse for her keys. "Everything is missing," she says in frustration.

Addressing the camera again, Deborah introduces the next sequence by relating that once her mother noticed she had a problem with her memory, she would compensate by writing down notes to remind herself of things. Staccato violin music ticks off extreme close-ups of various calendar messages in her mother's handwriting. Deborah then pronounces the incident in which she realized that the notes were becoming a problem as "The Dentist Period." The intertitle "The Dentist Period" fades up and then out to the humorous piercing whirr of a drill. Having trouble with a tooth, her mother began to write countless messages to herself because she was afraid she was going to miss the dentist appointment. Over extreme close-ups of note after note after note -- some written in pencil, some in pen, some on colored post-its, some on white notepaper -- Deborah relates that the notes piled up and became a complete and utter obsession, and that the tooth was the only thing that was talked about for weeks on end! Even after the appointment was kept, everything escalated, and her mother began going to the dentist, for no reason whatsoever, every day! Deborah then describes how she would call her mother every morning to explain, you don't have to go to the dentist. Though her mother would seem to understand, a half hour later Deborah would get a call from the dentist office saying that her mother was there.

And then her hearing aid broke.

"The Hearing Aid Period" intertitle dissolves up onto the screen. From her home office Deborah explains that, even during this time, she hadn't understood yet that notes were the enemy -- so she began leaving them as reminders to her mother that the hearing aid was being repaired. Her mother latched on to this idea, and soon began copying down Deborah's notes for herself. Another amusing montage of her mother's various notes, all reading "Hearing Aid Being Repaired," accompanies Deborah's voice-over as she continues with the vignette, explaining that, along with these hearing aid notes, somehow, my phone number started to appear. As the camera slowly dollies toward a dimly lit answering machine sitting on a hall table, a phone rings, and the machine picks up a series of five incoming messages from her mother -- all placed within an hour -- inquiring about the hearing aid. A final close-up of an old-fashioned clock ticks off the seconds.

Against the quickening tempo of a Keystone Cops -styled piano ditty, Deborah next equates her mother's obsessions in "The Dentist Period" and "The Hearing Aid Period" with other phases in Mrs. Hoffmann's life. While whimsical intertitles with old-fashioned graphics dissolve up and off the screen, Deborah describes: "The Lorna Doone Period," during which her mother hid boxes of cookies throughout her apartment; "The Podiatrist Period," similar to "The Dentist Period;" "The Ticket Period," in which her mother would try to use the same ticket stub to see a show over and over; "The Social Security Period," in which her mother was convinced she hadn't received her monthly check; and "The Banana Period," during which her mother would eat dozens and dozens of bananas. Her life was out of control my life was out of control! Finally, Deborah realizes that the notes are to blame for her mother's obsessions. Over extreme close-up footage of liquid paper being brushed over her mother's handwriting, Deborah describes arming herself

with a bottle of whiteout, going over to her mother's house, and covering up all the notes she can find! Deborah finally admits to having been so busy with the minutiae of these obsessions, that she was unable to clearly see the big picture of what was truly wrong with her mother: "I began to wonder who's crazy," Deborah exclaims in exasperation, "her or me?!" On camera, Deborah discusses taking her mother to have a medical evaluation, at which point she is informed that her mother has Alzheimer's. An atonal piano riff and slow motion footage of her mother wandering over to look out a bedroom window preface Deborah's voice-over: Getting the diagnosis was an incredible blow. Deborah describes her impressions at that moment of the helpless Alzheimer's victim, and adds that her mother was nothing like that, but I guess that's where we're headed.

The soundtrack from a telephone conversation between Deborah and her mother accompanies the next sequence of footage. The two women are seen walking and laughing together outside as Mrs. Hoffmann frets over the phone that they don't get together more often. Well, we got together last night, Deborah corrects her mother. The conversation then turns to college grades, as Deborah tries to reassure her mother that the two are no longer in college, so they no longer need to worry about their grades. Against old photos of Mrs. Hoffman during her college years at the University of California and graduate school years at Columbia School of Social Work, Deborah describes her mother as an intellectual snob who was above reading the newspaper. et, arriving at her mother's home one afternoon, she was surprised to see her mother delighting in the television show, Star Search. "This is not my mother," Deborah recalls thinking, "This is beneath her!" The sequence ends with footage of Mrs. Hoffmann dancing to a honky-tonk piano tune.

How old were we when we got into medium-sized age? Mrs. Hoffman asks Deborah in the next outdoor sequence. Deborah explains that she is 45 years old, and asks her mother, you know how old you are? 84! I'm 84? the woman replies, I never thought of that, Debbie! A photo of Deborah's mother at her own recent birthday party begins the following montage of photos depicting a progressively younger Mrs. Hoffman as Deborah's voiceover describes the deterioration of her mother's recall, from the initial loss of her short term memory to the point where the only events she could recollect were those which occurred further and further and further back in her lifetime. Old home movies of Deborah and her brother frolicking with her mother underscore Deborah's distress that her mother's memory no longer included her. Deborah is next seen attempting to explain to her mother that she is, in fact, her daughter.

The frustration that Mrs. Hoffmann is beginning to feel becomes apparent in the next sequence. In her voiceover taken from a telephone conversation, she laments, I can't remember from one minute to the next what I do and don't do. Against a somber air for strings, more photos and slow motion footage of Deborah and her mother provide the visual imagery for Deborah's next voiceover: I really loved my mother when I was growing up; I felt very, very loved by her. yet, with her mother's advancing Alzheimer's, Deborah had to endure the increasing pain of being the object of her mother's hostility brought on by obvious frustration. Finally, Deborah came to recognize that the constant reminders, and the corrections she had been imposing on her mother (her insistence on

truth, reality, as she puts it) were just not important. What does it matter that she thinks we went to U.C. together? she realizes. It was a liberating moment for her to realize that their relationship could merely transform into that of just two old friends trying to reminisce. No longer was it the content of their discussion that mattered, but the feeling. The next scene occurs at a restaurant, where Mrs. Hoffman takes control of the camera and films a pose of Deborah with her now-seen life partner (and the film's videographer), Frances Reid. From her office, Deborah describes her mother's pre-Alzheimer's attitude of discomfort toward Deborah's lesbianism. Yet, once the disease began to influence Mrs. Hoffman's mental capacities, her biases dissolved away to reveal the basics : to Mrs. Hoffmann, Frances' role became purely that of a friend who made both Deborah and her mother happy. That was a good thing. It was very simple, Deborah says candidly. In a happy moment, Mrs. Hoffmann remarks to the camera, Frances is here we all love her dearly!

Deborah's concern for her mother's safety occupies the following sequence. Over footage of darkened, ominous city streets pierced by traffic noise and sirens, Deborah explains that her own concern for maintaining her mother's independence had taken priority over her protection of her. However, more and more things that could lead to catastrophe were happening. The voice-over of a telephone conversation reveals that Mrs. Hoffmann is unaware she had been locked out of her apartment earlier in the day. Deborah explains that she had received a call saying that her mother had been unable to get back into the apartment, but the woman insists she had been at home the entire time. All is well, Mrs. Hoffman says reassuringly, before Deborah confides to the viewer her difficulty in connecting with her mother.

If ever there was a period that seemed to be saying something to me, it was 'The Suitcase Period.' Another whimsical intertitle reading The Suitcase Period introduces a familiar-themed sequence. Against close-up footage of various-styled suitcases, Deborah explains that her mother had begun an obsession with packing -- packing anything and everything! Deborah surmises that her mother is now indicating that she wants to go somewhere, she wants to move. Truly, Deborah believes, this is a period with a special significance. The lilt of the guitar-accompanied vocal, Bye, Bye, Blackbird, with its opening lyrics Pack up all my cares and woes., provides the background for this humorous segment in which a stationary suitcase is repeatedly open and closed to reveal the diversity of Mrs. Hoffman's shifting obsessions: a couple of boxes of Lorna Doones and an array of coat hangers; a telephone, boot and teacup; a teacup, flower and banana; bunches of bananas and a book; seven boxes of Lorna Doones; and, finally, a plate, blouse and clock, the latter of which is zoomed in on by the camera.

The film then shifts to a managed care facility where well-groomed elderly residents are seen receiving personalized attention from caregivers, conversing with one another and swaying to the in-house melody of In the Good Old Summertime. With this sequence, Deborah describes her decision to look for a facility in which she can place her mother. After visiting 30 such locations, she finally stumbles into one that caters exclusively to Alzheimer's patients by allowing people to have their dementia, however they were going to have it. Recognizing that this was the right place for her mother, Deborah then

discusses her apprehension of telling her mother about the impending move. Tell her nothing, a horrified Deborah recalls the facility director instructing her, Trust me, do not try to explain this to her. You will just agitate the two of you

On the eve of the move, while the two women were walking home from a dinner out, Deborah recalls her mother spontaneously pointing up to her apartment and saying, You know, I used live in that apartment. But I don't think I'll sleep there after tonight. Against an expressive piano with strings accompaniment, the camera effects a slow motion pan of Mrs. Hoffmann's apartment dining room and kitchen. To Deborah, her mother's words signified the woman's approval of the move.

The next sequence shows Deborah and her mother being introduced around the managed care facility. Leaving her mother there, Deborah admits to the camera, was, I guess, the hardest thing I'd ever done ... I just felt horrible. A slow motion snapshot of Deborah with her mother, the same one seen in the first minutes of the film, lingers poignantly before fading to black.

In describing her first visit back to see her mother after having dropped her off two days earlier, Deborah's mood, and that of the film, has brightened. Cheerfully, Deborah illustrates their conversation, in which her mother would periodically throw her arms out and say, 'Oh, the joy of me!' Scenes of her mother's new surroundings -- an exercise class, a bingo game -- accompany Deborah's voice-over in which she explains that adjusting to her mother's new life took longer for her than it did for her mother. Though Deborah had brought important memorabilia from her mother's apartment that she felt would ease the woman's transition to her new home, Deborah admits that they were, for her mother, a source of anxiety: they represented parts of Mrs. Hoffman's previous life which she knew were familiar, but that she just couldn't remember. Now, there is not (a) thing of thing of her past that she has.

During an affectionate moment, Deborah and her mother sit watching another patient frolicking unselfconsciously around a large rec room to the tune of Let Me Call you Sweetheart. As the camera pans across other patients seemingly enjoying the performance, Deborah contemplates her mother's future in her new home. Everybody who's there is going to get worse, everybody's essentially going to die from what they have there, she admits; but then, commenting on her mother's condition, she adds optimistically, But, if you can accept that, it can still be a very joyful life.

As the two women are seen strolling outside, away from the camera, Deborah recognizes that it is now simply the unconditional love her mother receives from both her family and the caregivers at the managed care facility that make her mother happy. Returning to her onscreen presence, Deborah reveals to the camera that her mother is now the ultimate of living in the moment! Though she confides that her own memories are important in that they tell me who I am, her experience with her mother has made her realize that one can still possess an identity without the characteristic of memory. She concludes, you can still have definition without a past.

The final, poignant segment is one simple long take of Mrs. Hoffmann speaking to the camera in her living room, with Deborah and Frances present but off screen. Though her

phrases are slightly muddled, the emotion she attempts to communicate is clear. I did have a warm feeling just now I began to think we were all parties together. I'm happy it's here. There's something close that's still with me, and I'm grateful for it. She smiles.

Style/Structure

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter juxtaposes high-resolution videotape with home movie-quality footage to reinforce its bi-level theme of memory. Scenes in which Deborah narrates to the camera from her home office appear to be shot on a stationary Betacam, while footage of her mother and the events that support Deborah's recollections are generally recorded on handheld camcorder stock. Particularly for this story, it is a suitable marriage of filmic styles in which sequences illustrating Deborah's narrative clarity in orally remembering specific incidents contrast with those referencing the unevenness of her mother's own deteriorating memory.

By employing the device of recollection to tell her story, Deborah is able to frame the film's vignettes, which allows her a more objective, hindsight view of her relationship with her mother. Thus, she is able to recognize her changing role from daughter to caregiver to chum. The restructuring of their parent-child dynamic does not occur without resistance, but its positive outcome provides an important subtext to the documentary's optimistic message. In particular, the repudiation with which Mrs. Hoffmann had previously viewed her daughter's lesbianism dissolves with the disease and is supplanted by unqualified affection toward Deborah, who, in her mother's eyes, has simply become an individual from whom she receives much joy.

The deterioration of Doris Hoffmann's memory transforms her understanding of who she is, and in this respect the film addresses the quintessential nature of one's individuality. This theme is most succinctly evident in the answering machine sequence of The Hearing Aid Period where Doris's repeated phone greetings to her daughter degenerate from Debbie, this is your mother to I'm Doris Hoffman to I'm Debbie, your daughter. Throughout, however, Doris Hoffmann struggles to retain and regain control. At the end of the film, Doris is stripped not only of her memory, but of practically all of her personal possessions. Is she, therefore, no longer Doris Hoffmann?, the film begs. Deborah explains that while her mother is the ultimate of living in the moment, she still has a self that Deborah connects with. Says Deborah, you can still be somebody with [a past].

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter ably presents the distressing effects of Alzheimer's disease on its victims and their families, yet Deborah Hoffmann tells the story of how she rose to the challenge of caring for her mother and establishing a different relationship with her with wry humor. The whimsical intertitles dispersed throughout the documentary, the old-fashioned, animated musical interludes representing Doris's coherent past, and the amusing editing techniques such as those employed in The Suitcase Period underscore the filmmaker's opinion that the life of an Alzheimer's patient, and the lives of those who care for her, can still be a very joyful. The tone throughout is struck by the position that the filmmaker/narrator takes at her desk. She confides her experience as if to a casual friend, making the viewer complicit in the stories. She recounts the process of coming to terms and coping with her mother's disease by turning it into a comic narrative, with herself as the slow learner. As the hapless daughter, always a little behind

the curve, she turns herself into the lead character; the narrative of the film is then how she will emerge as a dutiful, if complaining, daughter. Her mother's resourcefulness in this story becomes part of the problem, as it first hides the problem and then compounds it.

Background on Director/Film

Deborah Hoffmann is an award-winning video editor whose credits include *Ethnic Notions* (1986), *Common Threads: Stories from the (AIDS) Quilt* (1989) and *Color Adjustments* (1991). She met her life partner, Frances Reid (cinematographer of *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*) while both were working on the 1984 Oscar-winning documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*. In 1999, Hoffmann and Reid co-directed the documentary, *Long Night's Journey Into Day*, about post-apartheid South Africa.

Deborah Hoffmann did not conceive the idea of her documentary until after she realized that the confusing and sometimes bemusing phone conversations she had taped and the video she had shot of her mother had begun to form a complex narrative of a woman slowly succumbing to the effects Alzheimer's disease. "I'd looked at a lot of depressing films on the subject (of Alzheimer's), and they were all morbidly depressing" she told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Whether or not they were good or bad films, it was enough to make you want to kill yourself. I wanted to counteract (those films) ... (and) show that this wasn't always the most hopeless, wretched situation."

The daughter of Doris (the film's subject) and Banesh Hoffmann, a noted physicist and colleague of Albert Einstein (Banesh died in 1986), Deborah Hoffmann believes that the initial stages of her mother's dementia probably began in the late 1970's. Doris's memory lapses became more apparent in the early 1980's, and she eventually received her medical diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease in 1991. The following year, Deborah moved her mother into a managed care facility. With *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, her directorial debut, Deborah wanted to create an encouraging film that would give the families of Alzheimer's victims the ability to cope with the devastation that the disease imparts on all parties involved. She chose the technique of associating objects (cookies, notes) with the stages of her mother's illness in part because she had no video material from that period, she told Pat Aufderheide. She tried many approaches to the narration, and adopted many personas for the film, before settling upon the casual conversation from the desk, a decision encouraged and supported by her editor. (An editor herself, she had eventually found that she needed another editor to assemble the film.)

Funding for *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* was provided, in part, by the Fleishhacker Foundation (an organization dedicated to assisting San Francisco-area artists), the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund (CA), the Pioneer Fund, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Production Context

The film was warmly received as a personal therapeutic narrative, a story about coping that broke the silence around the disease and its frustrations for the caregiver. The reception indirectly testifies to a trend in caregiving. Caregivers had been increasingly

isolated over the past decades as traditional ad-hoc family and neighborhood networks dissolved. They began to use new technologies to connect to each other, to learn more about their individual challenges, and to see their situation as caregivers as a new social category or virtual community--one that required the apparatuses by then available to professional and other voluntary associations. Thus, the film both filled a need and was able to use virtual networks to alert potential viewers and customers.

Deborah reflects on the moment Doris Hoffmann was formally diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in her film, addressing the camera with the comment, "By this time, Alzheimer's was a sort of popular disease. I had heard a lot about it "Indeed, issues surrounding Alzheimer's -- a degenerative brain disease in which brain cells are irreplaceably destroyed thus affecting a person's memory -- had been making headlines for 15 years by the time *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* premiered in 1994. Through the year-long efforts of individuals coping with Alzheimer's-stricken family members, The Alzheimer's Association was incorporated in 1980 and had established 20 local chapters by the end of the year. The late-1982, government-sanctioned "National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Week" evolved into "National Alzheimer's Disease Month" the following November, and was supported by the Congressional allocation of \$22 million for research. Funds were doubled in 1984, and the remainder of the decade witnessed a host of conferences, public policy forums and books on the topic. In 1989, Congress allocated \$129 million for medical research; by then, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that almost 4 million people were affected by the disease.

In 1993, researchers identified a gene thought to be linked to the risk of Alzheimer's, and during the same year the FDA approved the first drug for the treatment of the disease. Coincidentally, in November, 1994, less than six months after *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* premiered, Ronald Reagan issued an open letter to the public announcing that he had been diagnosed with the early stages of Alzheimer's, single handedly elevating the public's awareness of the disease and its effects on the families of its victims. you can expect to see a lot more about Alzheimer's disease," wrote Liz Taylor in *The Seattle Times* in 1995, "Research confirms that 10 percent of all who reach age 65 get Alzheimer's and the percentage increases with age." Since the fastest--growing segment of the population is people 80 and older, this is chilling news.

Public acceptance of gay and lesbian identity was so well-established by the time of this film (although homophobia continued to be virulent) that the filmmaker's lesbian relationship could be an open feature of the story without overwhelming the story of the daughter's crafting of a new relationship with her mother.

Reception/Distribution

Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter premiered at the 18th annual San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in June, 1994, where it won the Audience Award for Best Documentary. Within a year, it had been shown at the Sundance Film Festival, had won both the esteemed Caligari Award (in the category of New Cinema) and Teddy Award (for gay and/or lesbian contextual achievement) at the Berlin International

Film Festival, and had been nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary. On June 6, 1995, the film opened the PBS summer series, P.O.V. (“Point Of View”), and the critical acclaim which announced its national premiere was unanimous in its praise. “Admittedly, (a documentary about Alzheimer’s disease) sounds pretty grim, wrote Ginny Holbert in the Chicago Sun-Times, but *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* is “witty, inspirational ... (and) offers comfort and even practical ideas for people who are close to Alzheimer’s sufferers.” Echoed Matt Roush in USA Today: “This ...documentary is merely one of the most disarming and unaffected films you’re likely to encounter on a subject generally considered depressing: the effect of Alzheimer’s on a parent-child relationship.”

Even the public felt compelled to offer the filmmaker their personal appreciation. “I’ve gotten a stack of unbelievably heartfelt letters from total strangers who have an aging parent or a parent with Alzheimer’s,” Hoffmann told the San Francisco Chronicle, “They say, ‘I hadn’t been able to visit my mother or my father in the (nursing) home for six months because it’s too depressing. But after seeing your film I have a whole new attitude and it’s actually been a lot of fun.’”

Prior to its television premiere on P.O.V., PBS launched a “High Impact Television Campaign” to promote the film’s broadcast to both media outlets and organizations involved in Alzheimer’s education. An article in the National Council on Ageing’s *Ageing Today* generated much interest in the broadcast, and the pre-publicity also attracted the attention of NBC Dateline, which included several minutes of the documentary. The National Endowment for the Arts also subsidized a mailing to caregiver, medical and social service agencies. The result was a deluge of calls to the distributor, and the first wave of sales for the video. Eventually, *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* became financially successful, in part because of eager adoption by many caregiver and nursing organizations. Hoffmann credited its success to the consideration of the baby boom generation for their elderly parents.

Beyond its P.O.V. television debut, *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* continued to garner awards and critical recognition. In addition to a nomination by the Directors Guild of America, in 1996 the documentary was bestowed a DuPont Broadcasting Award, a George Foster Peabody Award, and an Emmy Award for individual achievement in documentary production. In the process, Hoffmann ultimately became seen as a medical expert, she told Aufderheide, accepting invitations to speak at various conferences for physicians, caregivers and social workers. She also found that the conversational technique she used in the film - not contradicting her mother, even when she made no sense - became medical advice, with doctors often referring patients to the documentary. Screenings of *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* and media mentions of her film were used to raise both awareness of Alzheimer’s and funding for research for the disease.

Discussion Points

How does Deborah come to accept the redefinition of her relationship with her mother? How important is the capacity to remember events and people in one’s life in defining selfhood? Is *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* a film about Alzheimer’s disease, or a film about relationships? Who is the central character of *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*?

How important is it to the film that she is a lesbian?

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