

## **Delirium**

Mindy Faber

23 minutes, black and white and color, video, 1993

Women Make Movies

### **Description**

Delirium opens with images of a white-haired woman in a floral robe and sneakers, dancing, in slow motion, on a street, to a bluesy song.

The camera cuts to a photo of a little girl, and the filmmaker and narrator begin the story: she was her mom's third child. The birth order is traced back from the narrator's birth to a brother before her, to two miscarriages beforehand, and to a sister before that. The camera glances over a picture of all the kids in the family and concentrates on an old-fashioned photo of the mother, with a perfect smile and added color, as if to study and understand it. "Two years before she was born," Mindy Faber continues, "her mother had a traumatic mental breakdown." Mindy never knew what exactly happened but it was always there as she was growing up, "like wallpaper showing through peeling layers of paint."

In a striking close-up, looking much older and sadder from that of the first view, Mindy's mother answers the questions she asks from behind the camera. What was she feeling when she had her first nervous breakdown? "My mind was just paralyzed," the mother recalls. She could hardly move and was eclipsed in total fear. She recalls calling the operator, the only number she could remember. She was afraid she was going to hurt herself. I felt like taking my life, she says as she shows how she would stab herself. I felt like taking the knife and just plunging it in. But I knew that if I got the knife, I might hurt the children, so I just stopped. Avoiding the camera with her eyes, she says she was in the hospital for a year. She escaped a few times, she says, sneaking out a door where the nurses came in, and running away in her husband's car. She wipes her eyes as she recalls buying a gun and lying with it all night. Sometime you have the guts, sometimes you don't. She ran away with her gun bought at Sears many times. I knew something was wrong but I didn't know what. Her daughter asks, off camera, if she now knows. The mother answers, "What's wrong with me?"

In a voice-over over her mother's face, Mindy relates her experiences of her mother's mental illness. Her mom's explanations of her constant feelings of depression, anger, suicide, and violence seemed inadequate to her. Her mother saw herself as "an anomaly, an aberration, with no real reason for her hysteria but her nature." So that is how the family treated her. As in all families, Mindy recalls, they learned that her father was the serious one, knowledgeable and of the world, and her mother was the unstable, emotional, and childlike. The camera illustrates the description of the father with a photo of the three of them, he dressed up and proudly looking up. The illustration of the description of the mother is a picture of her dressed up in a Wild West costume, posing for the camera, doll-like and playful. In a voice-over, Mindy continues that the link between her mother's depression and domesticity was "crystal clear to her." It was

most often expressed in her mother's attempts to teach her how to sew, seen as "an act of torture by the girl and illustrated by the camera with images of a little girl so anxious to avoid the sewing lesson that she twists her body as if to physically weasel out. We were all caught up in this game called family, she says. They did not know the rules, but they faked their way through because it was the only game around, we learn through narration.

As a teenager, she says, she put together a book of photographs of her mother and saw it as a pilot for a TV series, *The Life and Times of Mrs. Jones*. Under this title, and accompanied by playful tunes, Mrs. Faber-Jones begins acting out the (farcical) episodes. She prepares for her day by dutifully taking her pills. She watches her garden grow sitting in a chair staring at the garden. She likes to tinker playing with some broken gadgets. She does some shopping posing with a paper bag on her head. She likes to sew building a pyramid out of the thread spools. She enjoys collecting things sitting amid many naked dolls, all identical. She prepares supper lying in bed amid a disarray of groceries. And she waits for her husband to come home with a knife raised to stab him by the front door.

As the camera follows the mother's face in a slow motion dance, and old movie footage is superimposed on it, the narrator says how she always wanted to make her mom stop thinking of what was wrong with her and start thinking of what was wrong with the world, since she was not alone trying to survive in this condition. Her neighbors and friends were in it, too, it was in a movie genre of the '40s, and even in the most popular TV show, *I Love Lucy*, in which the wife tried to break out of the home and achieve a career and a status. It seems to me that when women say or want the things men say or want, women are mad and men are heroes.

The narrator announces that she will now reverse the logic and try to prove who "the real hysterics are." We see a politician's speech, the screen flips and "mom as a politician declares that I am legally and emotionally entitled to what I want to be." That's what I want to be and that's what I am. We see some more old movie footage and "mom as Bogart declares that I love you, but I must kill you." Finally, who is it that gave you life, the narrator asks over scenes from "*Jesus Christ Superstar*." And Mom (as Jesus) recites, "This is my body and it was given for you." But then the camera takes us back to the images of the woman in slow motion, turning her face away from us, and of the old film, in which the woman revolts against being told that she is insane and the man tells her that he is telling her she is insane because he is trying not to tell himself that.

The mother, in a voice-over, explains that some women were oppressed by the image of the perfect housewife, but were not allowed to have careers and were taught that if not for men, they would go hungry. Her lecture is accompanied by the image of a woman taking bread out of the oven, except that in a reference to a famous *I Love Lucy* episode, the bread is endless and keeps coming out until it buries her on the kitchen floor. Mindy is lucky she was not raised by my mom, her mom says. Back in the close-up, asked questions from behind the camera, she says her mom was "volatile, emotional, led only by emotions, not too much by reason or anything-- I didn't understand her really." Could

Mindy's mother be like her own mom? She could be like her if she would let herself. She recalls being left on the back porch in her underwear, so that she would not run away because she always meant to do that, knowing that "there must be a better place over the fence. She recalls being tied to a rope, too, and her mother not thinking that was cruel.

The camera returns to the slow motion image of a dancing nude female body, with the voice-over from the old film, in which the man calls the woman mad and accuses her until she starts crying in pain and horror. Her mother was mad and died in an asylum without anyone, his accusations say. The narrator picks up the voice-over to say that she sees a pattern between her mother, her mother's mother, and so on. It is an entire history of women and madness to which I feel linked. But how do we understand madness? Is hysteria a mental illness or a normal reaction to being born female and powerless? As she asks these questions, subtitles are superimposed over images of a hysterical woman and read that hystera is the Greek for womb and hysteria means affliction of the womb.

As her mother takes over recounting oppressed women's experiences, we continue to see the superimposed subtitles reading how the minds of the times misunderstood and misrepresented women. People used to think that if women used their heads too much, they would not be able to have babies, the mother says. Women who refused to marry were put in asylums. The uterus is the controlling organ in the female body, we hear a doctor say. Freud became famous because he understood that it was not their bodies that were sick but their minds, the mother continues. When women had seizures or loss of speech, which we see in the footage, some "idiot doctors thought their wombs were rising and choking their words in their throats," she says. And we read a statement from 1870 saying that first the uterus was formed and then a woman was built up around it. "Their bodies were speaking what they were feeling inside," mom explains. "And all this nonsense about girls desiring their fathers... even Freud could not see men as the guilty ones." Dressed up in glasses, a tie, and a white doctor's coat, she concludes that in Freud "once again," the daughter speaks but the mother is still silenced.

As we see newsreel footage of a speech in Congress alternate with the family photo, the filmmaker says that Freud did not understand the link between mothers and daughters: Not one of destiny, blood, biology or nature but of control, with these actors keeping women "imprisoned in the enclave of the family." But the family is an inherently unhealthy place for women to be, she states. The day before she had her first breakdown, her mother walked out in a busy street, hoping that someone would run her over, but the cars just stopped. She always said that the thought of her family kept from killing herself. "But it always seemed like it was her family she wanted to kill," the narrator observes as the camera takes us back to the street and the mom dancing frantically amid the traffic noise. The scene ends with her closing her eyes and pulling her short hair back in desperation.

There was another memory, not personal but social, that haunted Mindy Faber, she says as the camera studies old photos of anonymous women and the image of a man. Reading

about the history of women and madness, she found the story of Jean Martin Charcot. He was a theorist of hysteria and diagnosed women as victims of their emotions. Charcot used to attract crowds of spectators by hypnotizing and then unleashing hysterical women. Their performances included physical contortions and full convulsive seizures. His success continued until one of his assistants confessed that the women had been “coached to produce attacks that would please the master.” Words used to describe his work were “imitation” and “fraud.” But his photographs, against the background of which the story is told in voice-over, used to surround the women in his clinic and serve as “labels attached to rebellious women to remind them what they were: hysterical.”

The camera cuts to images of an ugly, nude, cracked and wrinkled female body with messy hair and bloated limbs, like a puppet. As the soundtrack repeats one phrase, “where is my mind,” the hands of the puppeteer move the woman in ungraceful moves and unnatural convulsions. In voice-over, the narrator says that hysteria is “femininity in revolt.” Its spectacle attracted crowds for Charcot, and what they saw was “female bodies in crisis,” but what they refused to see was women bound by constraints, wrapped in veils, carefully kept distant, pushed to the edge of history and change, kept out of the way, at the edge of the stage. My mom is not crazy, but she too performed on the only stage possible. Better to be seen as a hysteric than not to be seen at all.

The camera cuts back to the close-up of the mother. Continuing her interview, she says she was bossed too much and never allowed to make choices of her own. Her marriage was a continuation of that, her husband wanting to run things, perhaps thinking that he knew more than she did. And then the mother announces playfully that she has an idea: now that Mindy is a mother, she should put herself in her TV comedy, “The Life and Times of Mrs. Jones, Part II.”

As mom happily announces the parts of the pastiche, Mindy acts them out. She loves her baby, whom we see covered with lipstick kisses. She tries to see things from her baby’s perspective lying in his crib. She tries to feel his physical needs enjoying a pacifier with him. She recycles dirty diapers into beautiful framed wall decorations. She tries to avoid the Oedipal complex, disguising herself when she breastfeeds. She tries to avoid castration anxiety, throwing out knives and saws. She tries to avoid penis envy, changing her baby’s diapers blindfolded. Finally, she encourages her baby not to keep emotions bottled up inside, screaming and throwing herself on the bed.

The close-up and sober voice of the mother to which the camera cuts are in sharp contrast with the comical style and lighthearted tone of the improvised TV series. The mother admits that she could not make peace with the world, and her daughter asks from behind the camera why she took it out on her. She did not, the mother says. She took it all out on herself, she explains calmly, as if having overcome a difficulty and teaching her child about it, the way only mothers can make difficulties stop being threatening. You are right, Mindy tells her in voice-over, I felt your symptoms but they were never my own. She wishes she could represent her mother’s life as a rebellion, the filmmaker tells her, but the

mother still finds more relief in tranquilizers than in feminist theory. Born in a different era, the daughter can stop fighting her now because she never was the enemy. And the camera cuts to the mother in a long wig making a peace sign: Peace, sister.

Back in the interview close-up, the mother maintains she never took anything out on her daughter. Then she asks for the camera and turns it to the filmmaker: “what do you think I took out on you anyway?” Her daughter starts recounting how she used to tear up her room and throw pots and pans at her head. But the mother does not remember. But it is true, the daughter tells her, and that is why she is making tapes about her. As she hands the camera back, the mother asks, in genuine disbelief, if she really did that.

We leave the interview to see her dancing in slow motion in the street again, to don't leave me, baby repeated over and over again. Then, still in slow motion, she enters her home and, watched by her daughter, fiercely stabs her husband with a banana. A slide show family photos, a picture of the mother, and a last one of her with her teenaged daughter end the film.

The end title signals the daughter's respect to her mother: Dedicated to Patricia Jane Faber.

### **Style/Structure**

Delirium mixes documentary footage of the filmmaker's mother with performance, experimental and archival images and with old family photos. The family photos are used here to reveal them as a counterfeit of the happy reality they pretend to capture. Mindy Faber says that her film was inspired by the “Brady Bunch” sitcom “because it delivered such a false message about families.” The film references a number of popular culture works: the famed feminist essay “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the popular sitcom I Love Lucy, Bogart movies, Jean Martin Charcot's 19<sup>th</sup>-century photographs of female hysterics, the “Jesus Christ Superstar” rock opera. It thus links this woman's illness to the historically embattled and disempowered position women hold in a patriarchal culture and makes an iconoclastic comment on the media's role in perpetuating this position. The film asserts that female mental illness must be seen in the political and social context in which it appears, and that in many instances women's reactions of depression, violence, suicide and anger, which a male-dominated society labels madness, are understandable reactions to oppressive situations. In this, it deals with some of the same concerns as Means of Grace and Dialogues with Madwomen.

Its deeper concern is with the relationship between the mother and daughter, with all its implications for the daughter's future as a mother herself. The mother's illness had imperilled the relationship with the daughter, who had turned to rebellion, art and feminism. She now takes those same tools and turns them on the challenge of repairing her relationship with her mother, in the hopes of evolving an identity of her own that is not crippled by patriarchy. One of the more astonishing features of Delirium is the willing, even eager, participation of the mother. It stands with the heroic participation of

Ngozi Onworuh's mother in *The Body Beautiful* as a testament to the strength of women whose history had been obscured; their daughters' attempts to resurrect it required new acts of courage from them.

The cartoonish comedy series about Mrs. Jones, acted out by both mother and daughter, both mock the banality of mass media and reveal as pathetic the nostrums given to 50s housewives. The "acting out" of both daughter and mother is an intriguing statement about the lack of role models for them both outside the stereotypes and caricatures of good mothers under patriarchy. Both women perform their problem. The technique was a deliberate attempt to challenge documentary form. As Faber told Bill Stamets of the *Chicago-Sun Times* in 1992, "There's this myth that you can just use video to capture whatever unfolds in front of you, and I think you need to be a little more conspiratorial than that."

### **Background on Director/Film**

As an undergraduate at the University of Kentucky, Faber designed her own video major. In 1985, she received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. Faber is an independent video producer and associate director of the Video DataBank, part of the School of the Art Institute and the largest U.S. distributor of videos and video art. Grounded in biting humor and evocative personal narratives, Faber's videos are informed by political and feminist thought. They are concerned with the social construction of female identity and blend personal stories with analyses of social issues. What emerges is the complexity of female psychology, expressed in mother/daughter, family, and interpersonal relationships. About her seven videos Faber said, All my works are pretty much centered on family relationships. All the tapes have sort of a wry sense of humor. It's a really good way to talk about difficult issues. Her films include *Suburban Queen* (1985), a classic feminist tape about the relationship between a mother and a daughter bonded but also puzzled by each other's lives; *Identity Crisis* (1990), in which a seven-year-old girl portrays ten female stereotypes, from a motorcycle-riding tough chick to a sentimental housewife; and *The Man Within Me* (1995), a poetic piece exploring the gray areas of gender identity.

### **Production Context**

This film rests solidly on a generation's worth of feminist activism, which had created a social and intellectual critique of patriarchy. In occupying itself with the power of social expectation on intimate family relationships, the film participates in feminist film and videomaking from the 1970s on, as documented by B. Ruby Rich (1998). But the problem that Faber addresses is a daughter's understanding of and respect for a mother who has been deformed by patriarchy and been unable to provide her with mothering models is a question of identity that emerges in the generation after the one that struggled to resist the models that so damaged her mother.

The experimental art video style, incorporating performance and installation elements, participates in a tradition of video experimentation that dates from the 1960s forward,

as Video DataBank archives attest. Much of that experimentation was self-consciously socially critical, seen by the artists themselves as a reclaiming of a medium that had been structured into American society primarily as commercial television.

### **Reception/Distribution**

The film was seen in film festivals, including New York Film Festival Video Visions; Atlanta Film and Video Festival Best Experimental Video; Delirium was screened as a preliminary to the International Film and Video Festival sponsored by Women in the Director's Chair, and won first prize in the Berlin Film Festival's Videofest. Distributed by Women Make Movies and available through the Video Data Bank.

### **Discussion**

How are the mother's and daughter's problems different? How are they the same? How do the mother's problems affect the daughter? This video uses many different forms of expression. What effect do these different choices have in developing the filmmaker's argument? For instance, why does the filmmaker use exaggeration and burlesque?

### **Further Reading**

Rich, B. R. (1998). *Chick flicks: theories and memories of the feminist film movement*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

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