

Ellen O'Donohue Oddy on *Tracks* by Susan Stein
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Released in 1989, Susan Stein's *Tracks* is a multi-media essay film centred around the Women's Liberation Movement in late-twentieth-century Britain. In just half an hour, it shifts in key from a first person account of a school teacher that probes the social conditioning imposed on women from childhood, to a protest on contemporary birth control, abortion rights and the diverted path to equal pay.

It is also a film about memory, and how personal reflections on the political past can shape the present. Opening with the sound of an air raid siren, Stein's narrator asks us early on in the film, "can you remember something you've never known"? When I first watched *Tracks* this question stalked me throughout - not exactly consciously, but instead, as I watched footage of mothers slinging Sainsbury's and Mothercare plastic bags onto the handles of buggies, and listened to Stein's narrator scathingly list daily injustices against the female sex, I couldn't help but reflect on the feminism I subscribe to today.

Feminism has changed a lot since 1989. A year later in 1990, Simone de Beauvoir's letters were published and it turned out that she was a bit of a womaniser herself. It became ideologically sound to purchase luxury beauty products as well as feminist literature. Beyonce sampled Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi to dismantle the fiction of flawless female characters. Jia Tolentino thinks that sometimes, you can criticise a woman's sensitivity because she's actually being too sensitive.

But Stein's point isn't necessarily - don't buy this YSL nail varnish that you see evocatively edited alongside images of guns - but rather, don't forget that when you're a woman, everything is political. *Tracks* shifts from abstract scenes of heels and buggies to historical footage of a young Pankhurst, in order to show that politics takes place in the mundane; in our dull, daily tasks, we are breathing the oxygen of our government's voting record, our media's agenda, and our financial market.

On the subject of contraception, *Tracks* raises the issue of testing the pill on women of colour in the Global South, rightly denouncing the fact that, quote 'we have the pill because our black sisters suffered.' But who exactly is this 'we'? Although the personal-is-political dialogue of *Tracks* does occasionally shore up the power metrics of race, class, health and sexuality within women's liberation, watching today, I also think about the voices and experiences that were still to be fully heard - for instance, black women living in Britain.

Tracks is also operating on binary structures that, if this film were made today, may be broken down, as feminist discourse has grown further ideologically equipped in regards to the experience of the trans community. *Tracks* claims that the path to gender equality is the relinquishment of male privilege - today, we acknowledge it is the relinquishment of all privilege. As so many adverts for banks and phone networks are inauthentically reminding us at the moment, we're all in this together.

It is impossible to hear Stein's carefully crafted lines on gender inequality without thinking of the institutional failures highlighted by our present situation. As Stein's narrator states that 'while

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motherhood is elevated by the powers that be, it's mothers that pay the price for their reality' - her words remind me of the tension between the national celebration of our key workers, and the working (as well as living) conditions that our elected government, and therefore we, have left them in. So while feminism has transformed since *Tracks*, the parallels between our current situation and the film show there will always be continuities in the way that patriarchy manifests in our society.

As her focus shifts from the pressures on teachers to perform to the cultural erasure involved in gentrification, Stein's unflinching essay film serves as an important reminder that these "unprecedented times we live in" - a phrase we've been indulging in for some years now - have been very much preceded by decades of embalming the privileged few so that those at the forefront of the social struggle just happen to be responsible for not only the failings of society - from interest rates to crime rates - but are also the heroes that will selflessly catch us when there's no one left to blame.

As *Tracks* somewhat vividly details the consequences of UK abortion law in the late 80s in reference to the 1967 Abortion Act, it is important to remember that these rights were only achieved for all women in the UK in October last year, when abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland. As the country is yet to have the infrastructure to offer this service, and at present it is near impossible for people to travel to England to receive this procedure on the NHS, the British Pregnancy Advisory Service has launched an Emergency Abortion Pills by Post service for Northern Ireland.

If there is momentum to change the course of the wind, Steins' film roots it firmly in the everyday actions of the population. *Tracks* begins with the personal narrative of a primary school teacher and ends with a sarcastic statement on the equal opportunities procured by night shifts in an unnamed industry. As we turn to teachers, healthcare staff, supermarket staff, delivery drivers, and bus drivers to carry us safely through this nightmare, we should not just acknowledge the individual sacrifices involved in taking up these roles, but also work to dismantle the disproportionate social value system that such roles operate in.

Ellen O'Donohue Oddy is a writer based in London.

www.ellenodonohueoddy.com

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