

Felicia

By Marsha Gordon and
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“Felicia,” an approximately thirteen-minute documentary marketed as an educational film starting in the mid-1960s, is one of many thousands of nontheatrical films shot and distributed on 16mm during the greater part of the twentieth century for use in classrooms and other community-screening contexts. The short film tells the story of an African American high school student living in the Watts neighborhood of South Los Angeles, California.

Made by three white film students as a non-school-related project while they were attending the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), “Felicia” is an exceptional document of life in Watts prior to the rebellions that took place in the summer of 1965. The film’s timeliness was a key point made in its initial marketing. While the film was not intended to be an exploration of the roots of urban unrest (which it could not, of course, have predicted), in terms of marketing it benefited from increased attention to “Watts” and the escalating crises taking place in cities around the country.

Most educational films about race made in the 1960s and 1970s focus on African American males in an urban environment, so from the outset “Felicia”’s concentration on a female protagonist and point of view sets the film apart. “Felicia” was made in the documentary tradition, largely using nonsynchronous, first-person voice-over accompanied by images that read as “fly on the wall” in terms of their aesthetics but that are enacted or staged for the camera’s benefit. One of the things that differentiates “Felicia,” then, from such contemporary nonfiction films on the subject of race is its personalized and intimate mode, as well as its predominantly realist, observational aesthetic.

The filmmakers—Alan Gorg, Bob Dickson, and Trevor Greenwood—started filming on occasional week-ends in 1963, while all three were students of filmmaking at UCLA. Felicia Bragg remembers that there was a significant period of time during which the filmmakers got to know her and her family before the project officially began. They collected more than



Teenager Felicia Bragg walks from school to her home in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Courtesy A/V Geeks.

an hour of audio recordings of Felicia, the daughter of a Mexican American mother (who appears in the film along with Felicia’s siblings, Peter and Rosie) and an African American father (who does not appear in the film and was no longer living with the family at the time of filming). The filmmakers asked Felicia to speak about her life, her expectations, and her perspective on living in Watts when she was a junior in high school, and the film’s narration consists of this edited voice-over monologue.

The filmmakers subsequently shot scenes in the family home, in her school, and on the street to correspond with her unscripted words. Trevor Greenwood explains that “the comments were crucial in developing the structure for the film. Nothing was scripted. The comments were her own.” The goals of the filmmakers could be viewed as aligned with the goals of educational films of this period and sympathetic to the themes Felicia raises in her narration; they are also methodologically oppositional to Hollywood’s attempts to deal with race in social problem films like “The Defiant Ones” (Stanley Kramer, 1958), and “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” (Stanley Kramer, 1967).

“Felicia” is largely a film about the perception of the subject’s relation to her own environment and areas beyond the borders of her community. The film is framed from the perspective of an outsider on its main subjects—the figure of Felicia and the spaces she does and does not occupy. Felicia discusses her family, schooling, dreams, and impressions of the city, ruminating on the limited opportunities for her de facto segregated community and declaring her commitment to getting an education in order to help

improve Watts. Against her narration, the filmmakers provide visual accompaniment that illustrates the points she makes. The film begins with shots of idyllic spaces in Los Angeles as Felicia provides off-screen narration of her impressions of other (white) neighborhoods in the city against corresponding long shots of a bucolic neighborhood, public swimming pool, park, and school. The camera shoots these locations at a distance, aligning its lens with Felicia's outsider perspective on what she calls "the rest of the city."

The classroom sequence in "Felicia" demonstrates the disparity between her educational environment and that of the imagined educational film audience. The film cuts to shots of the school, crowded hallways, the lunch yard, and students hanging out. Over these shots, Felicia talks about how there have been very few white kids at any school she has attended. The camera cuts to Felicia talking directly to the camera for the first time in the film. Addressing the off-screen interviewer, she then gives her impressions of white students.

Like the opening, the onscreen interview centers on Felicia's impressions of the white world around her. This moment is followed by a significant duration of silence—twenty seconds total—an unusually quiet and sustained segment of the film that allows for a visual transition between Felicia at school and Felicia walking the streets alone on her way home. Allowing spectators the opportunity to think about what she has just said about race, class, educational opportunities, and personal aspirations, the placement of this caesura in the narration alerts us to the film's most obvious focus, carved out by the directors in the editing of the voice-over: the value of, and disparities regarding, education.

A tracking shot of Felicia walking with decaying, graffiti-covered, and flyer-littered fences and walls behind her is accompanied by narration focused, for the first time in the film, on the Watts neighborhood. Felicia points out that the only way to improve Watts is if people stay to "build it up." The film does not suggest that Felicia is a typical young woman in her community but rather that she has managed to flourish and dream in ways that many—perhaps even most—of those around her have been understandably unable to do. She concludes with a prognostication: "Perhaps it's too late for the adults, but it's not too late for the young generation like myself."

These are the final words of the film. Felicia's final verbal sentiment is hopeful, but the wistful music and the image of Felicia getting smaller in a desolate landscape complicate what could otherwise have

been depicted as a more celebratory finale. In some ways, the final image reminds us of Felicia's alienation—another recurrent thematic of the film. "Felicia" is in some ways a study of these varying and opposed subject positions, connecting the story of one teenager to broader contemporary discussions of alienation—both racial and generational.

In the present day, "Felicia" speaks to intersecting areas of study, including nontheatrical film production and the role of educational film in the national discourse on race and poverty. As a classroom film, "Felicia" operated in the same discursive environment as theatrical film, network television coverage of "riots," documentaries about race relations, and governmental assessments of the causes of civil discontent. The quest for documentary authenticity as a powerful tool of political change motivated the makers of "Felicia" (as well as subsequent generations of UCLA students) for similar activist purposes. Encountering such an instructive film amidst the vast universe of forgotten educational films affirms that 16mm nontheatrical film offers a perspective absent from, yet complementary to, the theatrical universe of the time—one that contributes to a richer understanding of film history.

"Felicia" has been preserved by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Archive from the best surviving element, a 16mm print belonging to one of the film's directors, Bob Dickson. Modern VideoFilm scanned the print at 2K resolution, and performed minor digital restoration and color grading. The audio was captured at Endpoint Audio Labs, and audio restoration was performed at Audio Mechanics. The restored picture and audio files were used to make a 2K digital cinema package (DCP) as well as HD files for access purposes.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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