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“How Could She?”: The “Inappropriate” Woman in Contemporary Appropriation Films

By Jaimie Baron

Since the 1960s, independent women filmmakers like Chick Strand, Peggy Ahwesh, Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, and Leslie Thornton have been appropriating film footage, sometimes using appropriation to critique dominant representations of women. Leslie Thornton’s *Adynata*, for instance, appropriates as well as reenacts instances of the subjugation of women and their bodies by men, and her later film *Another Worldy* similarly uses found footage to reveal the ways in which women’s bodies are placed under the control of the male gaze in a range of historical and cultural contexts. Since these influential critiques, however, a new generation of critical appropriation filmmakers has emerged in order to challenge the persistent tropes of femininity.

In January 2009, I founded the Festival of (In)appropriation, which is an experimental found footage festival that will be held annually from now on. The only parameters in the call for entries were that works submitted had to have been made in the past four years, to be twenty minutes or less, and to include at least some appropriated material. The festival received 120 entries, many of which, my co-curator Andrew Hall and I found, touched on issues of gender and the body – particularly the female body. This recognition led to a screening held at UCLA in December 2009 entitled “Intermittent Delight: Gender and the Body in Contemporary Found Footage Film.” In this paper, by looking at few of the films shown at this screening, I will explore some of the ways in which appropriation continues to be used to challenge dominant representations of gendered bodies. I suggest that in the digital era, I will outline two

strategies that contemporary independent filmmakers are using to put certain kinds of representations of gendered bodies into question.

In a society that likes to think of itself as egalitarian and post-feminist even as sexist and misogynist images saturate Hollywood movie screens, subversive media pirates are fighting back against such complacency. Indeed, if one figure may emerge from these films it is that of the “proper” woman whose body is, through appropriation, made “inappropriate” – at least to the dominant media. The notion of “inappropriation,” then, becomes a productive term for the act of wresting a woman’s body out of its “proper” context and reasserting its irreducibility to the limited roles women are permitted to play on the big screen. And, indeed, to reveal the “inappropriate” is always also to reveal the “appropriate,” which is precisely hegemonic ideology

The notion of the “inappropriate” is always based on context. What is “appropriate” in one context may be deemed utterly “inappropriate” in another context, and I would suggest that these different contexts may be either temporal or spatial or both. Indeed, one strategy of inappropriation involves taking images from a previous era and juxtaposing these images with images of similar objects from the present – in other words, to juxtapose images from disparate temporal contexts – in order to make visible the ideological gaps between “then” and “now,” whether to critique the present or the past. A related strategy involves taking images from one geographical or cultural context and placing them in a different geographical or cultural context to make visible the ideological gaps between “here” and “there” in order to critique either one.

Both of these kinds of inappropriation are present in Akosua Adoma Owusu’s *Intermittent Delight* (2006), in which the filmmaker combines contemporary images of

African women in Ghana weaving and sewing patterned cloth with images appropriated from a 1960s American Westinghouse commercial showing white women how to decorate their refrigerators with pre-made patterns. What links these two sets of images together and make the film cohere are the visual matches between the patterns of the African cloth and the refrigerator decorations and the visible presence of women's labor, however different these labors may be. In the context of Owusu's film, the refrigerator decorating commercial reveals its own absurdity, partly because the trend never caught on and partly because, from a distance, it is clear that refrigerator decorations and matching outfits are unlikely to make anyone so very happy. Across the temporal difference between the 1960s and the present, the dancing bodies of the women in the commercials are rendered "inappropriate" and – at least potentially – hilarious. At the same time, however, the film also comments on race and racialized bodies, gesturing toward the fact that the Westinghouse commercial renders black women and their labor invisible since it only shows and is clearly aimed at white American women only. Thus, the dancing bodies of the white women who have decorated their refrigerators are further rendered "inappropriate" in contrast to the contemporary images of the women in Ghana, which generate a sense of documentary authenticity and the sense that their labor produces something that has more than purely exchange value – unlike outfits for your refrigerator. Yet the film produces more than a laugh at the expense of the women dancing next to their refrigerators by suggesting that what has often obscured by the dominant media, then and now, here and there, is the labor of women, both white and black.

Another strategy of inappropriation that has emerged is that of the collection and accretion of images and sounds that are in some way the same but that are also slightly different, accumulating similarities and differences in order to reveal something about the original sources of these materials. In Julie Perini's *They have a name for girls like me*. (2009), for instance, Perini edits several films in which a character named Julie appears and cuts out all but the spoken (or sung) repetition of the name "Julie". The result is a litany of "Julie"s spoken in different tones in different contexts that we glimpse briefly as the film moves from one "Julie" to the next. In a manner similar to that of photographer Cindy Sherman and her movie still series, Perini's film reveals the different kinds of roles women are given to play, which is surprisingly obvious even in the brief snippets that we get to see. What may seem "appropriate" within the context of a given film – a character addressing another character by name – becomes "inappropriate" through its removal from that context and its repetition. In the process, what seems realistic and transparent in the original context is revealed as ideological and constructed in the appropriation film. Listening to and seeing a character being literally interpellated over and over again by name defamiliarizes the very experience of being named and addressed.

Another film that works according to the strategy of collection and accretion of particular images is Marnie Parrell's *About Town* (2006). For this film, Parrell took a number of porn films that she realized were all shot in the same Los Angeles mansion. Taking clips from each of these porno films, she constructed a real estate advertisement in which the voiceover describes the house in hyperbolic detail while ignoring the people performing sexual acts with one another in each shot. Of course, pornography is an established genre with its own conventions and intended purposes. Within a porn film,

people having sex in almost any way is considered “appropriate.” However, when Parrell recontextualizes these sexual images within the genre of the real estate advertisement, these acts become utterly “inappropriate.” Moreover, the fact that the voiceover entirely neglects the people having sex onscreen in favor of the windows and patios visible in the backgrounds of the images directs our attention to precisely what is not important to most people watching a porn film. Parrell’s film situates us either as spectators watching a real estate advertisement full of people performing inappropriate acts or as spectators of pornography whose attention is suddenly – and “inappropriately” from the vantage point of the porn viewer – forced to notice the surroundings in which the film is taking place. By intentionally confusing and obfuscating the genre in which these images operate, Parrell’s film also reveals the way in which both advertisements and pornography operate according to an erotics of the image that plays on both our physical and material desires.

While Perini and Parrell’s films are hilarious in their inappropriate editing and narration, Kate Raney’s *I love (hate) you: Gloria* (2007) works in a similar manner without offering us a laugh. In a fashion similar to Perini and Parrell, Raney gathers images of the Classical Hollywood actress Gloria Grahame from many different films in which Grahame starred. In bringing these clips together against a background of hazy green and blue clouds, Raney reveals a consistent pattern of violence against Grahame by the male characters that surround her. In his article entitled, “The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films,” film theorist William Wees has argued that “To ‘undo’ an image means to loosen its connections to the cultural and ideological assumptions that lie behind its production and intended reception, so that is

becomes available for [a] kind of re-production and alternative reception.”¹ Raney’s title attests to the “ambiguous aura” of Gloria Grahame. Wees writes that there is a “dialectic of fascination and deconstruction that seems inevitably to result when avant-garde filmmakers confront the erotic energy and nostalgic appeal of images of Hollywood stars,”² and I would suggest that in Raney’s film, Grahame retains that erotic energy and nostalgic appeal even as the consistent violence toward her and her body is revealed, most strikingly in an image from *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953) in which half of her face is scarred after a gangster throws a pot of boiling coffee at her. This form of inappropriation is disturbing rather than funny because what is revealed is not the absurdity of Grahame’s roles but, rather, the consistent, accumulated violence to which her characters and their bodies are subjected.

In each of these cases, by collecting one element of a group of films – the name “Julie,” the house in the porn films, or Gloria Grahame – and eliminating almost everything else, these films render these elements “inappropriate” to their new cinematic context and, thereby, reveal the ideological basis underpinning the ways in which the bodies onscreen are displayed.

To be “inappropriate” is always to question norms. If the ways in which people, their gendered bodies, and their gendered identities are constructed in cinema become obscured through repetition as they inevitably do, the strategies of temporal and spatial juxtaposition as well as of collection and accretion – in other words, strategies of inappropriation – offer us a means for constantly and vigilantly questioning these norms.

¹ William C. Wees, “The Ambiguous Aura of the Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found-Footage Films,” *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2002), 3.

² Wees, 6.