INAPPROPRIATE BODIES

BY JAIMIE BARON

Contemporary Filmmakers Challenging Gender Constructions through Appropriation

FOUND FOOTAGE filmmaking has long been a method that filmmakers have used to critique media images or to pay homage to them–or sometimes both simultaneously. Well-known filmmakers like Abigail Child, Su Friedrich, William E. Jones, Chick Strand, and Leslie Thornton, among others, have appropriated images in the service, at least in part, of challenging the audience to rethink the gender constructions posited by the mainstream media. While the use of found footage goes back almost to the beginning of film history, there is now a rising generation of filmmakers using appropriated images to further deconstruct and reconstruct the gender roles established by Classical Hollywood films, television commercials, medical textbooks, pornography, and other institutions of power.

In January 2009, I founded the Festival of (In)appropriation, which is an experimental found footage festival that will likely be held annually from now on, due to the wealth of materials sent in response to the call and to the strong audience turnout for the first event, which was held in June 2009. The only parameters in the call for entries were that works submitted had to have been made in the past four years, be twenty minutes or less, and include at least some appropriated material. My fellow curator Andrew Hall and I received over 120 entries from all over the world. While Andrew and I chose a group of about 25 films that we thought were particularly "good" or "original" based on our subjective sense of aesthetic judgment for the Festival of (In)appropriation, it occurred to me that it would be interesting to examine a different cross section of the films based on

a different set of parameters. As we watched these 120 films, we noticed that many of them raised questions about or adjacent to issues of gender and the body. In collaboration with the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and the program in Cinema and Media Studies in the UCLA Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media, I decided to create an entirely different program of films from the same entries, the screening of which will be held on December 7, 2009.

One theme that emerged from this new cross section of films is an ambivalent fascination with female stars of an earlier cinematic era. In Kate Raney's *I Love (Hate) You Gloria* (2007), brief black-and-white clips from the famous films of Classical Hollywood actress Gloria Grahame are cut out and pasted over a swirling, ethereal background of green and blue. Sometimes Grahame appears alone, beautiful but isolated against the background while at other times she appears with various male co-stars, including Humphrey Bogart in *In a Lonely Place* (Nicolas Ray, 1950), who alternates between caressing and attacking her. Kristy Norindr's *Nana Reedit* (2008) similarly exhibits a fascination with Anna

Scott Stark, *Speechless*, 2008

Karina, who seems to be dancing with joy in Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) but whose appearance of happiness is undercut by Norindr, who constantly interrupts her dance. Anthony Hays' *Anything for My Gal* (2008) produces an even more disturbing effect when he re-edits footage of Marilyn Monroe in *Bus Stop* (Joshua Logan, 1956), creating a field in which Monroe's body is violently stretched and distorted.

Another set of films productively "misuse" images of naked bodies–primarily female–derived from pornography and from medical sources. In Marnie Parrell's *About Town* (2007), Dinorah de Jesus Rodriguez's *XXX* (2007), and Scott Stark's *Speechless* (2008), such images are taken out of their accepted context so that they become

strange, shocking, and sometimes funny. In *About Town*, Parrell appropriates images from many different heterosexual pornographic films all shot in the same Los Angeles house and transforms it through voiceover into a fake real estate advertisement. Hilariously, the narration completely ignores the sexual acts being performed onscreen. Rodriguez's *XXX* takes pornographic footage and manipulates it through hand-processing, painting over the footage, and creating a three-screen triptych of porn in which the images suddenly take on an artisanal quality that undermines their function as purely utilitarian sexual stimulants. And Stark's *Speechless* appropriates close-up stereoscopic Viewmaster images of female genitalia from a 1976 medical textbook called *The Clitoris*, "animating" the vulvae

by switching back and forth between the two stereoscopic images, and combining these images with patterns found in nature. Interestingly, none of these films engage in an overt critique of their original sources, but, rather, they all exhibit a desire to hyperbolize such images so that they transgress the "rules" of how images of nude bodies and genitals are "supposed" to be consumed.

Two other films focus a critical eye on heterosexual masculinity. Ann Steuernagel's *Pledge* (2006) combines footage of young boys, smiling shyly or playing together, with footage of men doing "manly" things–for instance, building a house, marching in military formation, or shooting a missile– suggesting that a particular set of actions has already been prescribed for these boys. Stuernagel's use of reverse motion, however, also suggests that this process of masculine indoctrination has the potential to be undone. In a similar vein, Elisa Kreisinger's *I Am Man* (2008) uses footage from a Burger King commercial in which men sing a song about eating like men which means eating meat and not "chick food." Kreisinger uses some of the original footage from the commercial

Ann Steuernagel, *Pledge*, 2006

but adds militaristic and phallic imagery that defamiliarizes the commercial so that it becomes an advertisement for violence rather than food. Rodriguez's *Is It True Blondes Have More Fun?* (2006) similarly interrogates the way in which commercials address women, who apparently care less about eating meat and more about having beautiful hair.

Along with Parrell's *About Town* (2006), Brandon Downing's *The Ship* (2009) and Julie Perini's *They have a name for girls like me* (2009) both exhibit a humorous approach toward language in relation to gendered images. In *The Ship*, Downing takes a song from a Bollywood film and lays it over images of a scuba diver, adding his own subtitles that sound like the Hindi words being

Elisa Kreisinger, *I Am Man*, 2008

Nada Gordon, *The Garden of Life*, 2009

sung, "interpreting" them to make them, and thereby the images that accompany them, seem pornographic. In order to construct her film, Perini appropriates materials from films in which a character named "Julie" appears, preserving only the clips in which someone
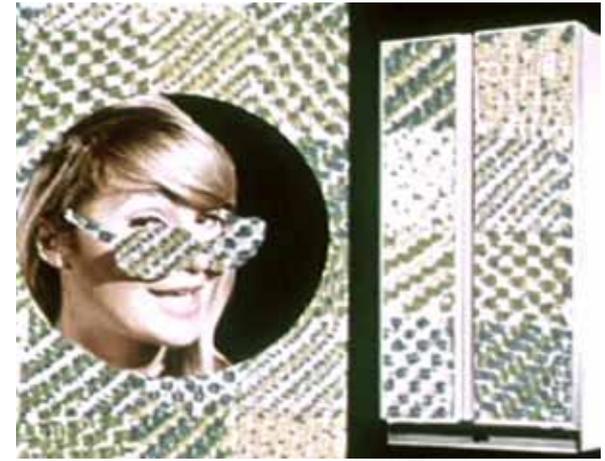
Agnes Moon, *Dream of Me,* **2007**

Sasha Waters Freyer, *Her Heart is Washed in Water and Then Weighed,* **2006**

Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Intermittent Delight*, **2006**

says the word "Julie." In each of these two films, the filmmaker "misinterprets" language in order to poke fun at the original sources, Perini's in order to trace the life of a name and Downing's in order to show how seemingly nonsexual sounds and images can be transformed by the written word. Nada Gordon's *The Garden of Life* (2009) also uses subtitles (she and Downing are both part of the Flarf Collective) but focuses primarily on images of women from across the world dancing for the camera. She and Perini both make appropriation films through the method of "collecting" certain kinds of footage in order to reveal particular (gendered) tendencies.

Agnes Moon's *Dream of Me* (2007) and Sasha Waters Freyer's *Her Heart is Washed in Water and Then Weighed* (2006) meditate on what it means to be a mother, a wife, or a sister. In Moon's film, images of newspapers scanning by on microfilm and footage of a girl ice skating are overlaid with voiceovers of different women talking about the film subject identified as "you" who was adopted. In this case, the bodies of "you" (who may or may not be the filmmaker) and her (lost) biological sister are absent from the film despite being its central subject. In Freyer's film, a story about her mother's lack of fulfillment as a housewife is intercut with images of an

autopsy, indirectly linking her mother's feeling that her labors were taken for granted to the medical objectification and depersonalization of a dead body. Both films are grounded in the desire of others to know a woman, but, in each, a gap is opened between a female subject's identity and the material manifestation of that identity,the body–suggesting that she is ultimately unknowable.

Like Freyer's film, Akosua Adoma Owusu's *Intermittent Delight* (2006) reflects on women's labor, combining footage of African women weaving textiles with footage from 1950s American advertisements for printed patterns for decorating your refrigerator, aimed at (white)

housewives. Owusu's film traces the similarities and differences between patterned objects as they are made and used across space and time.

While these films constitute only a small sample of the approaches to gender and the body that are being employed by contemporary found footage filmmakers, they nevertheless reveal a certain set of concerns surrounding the gendered body. I suggest that the key trope is, in fact, ambivalence: toward the female stars of Classical Hollywood, toward pornographic and medical images of the body, toward militaristic and carnivorous constructions of masculinity, and so on. To appropriate is often to critique but, as is the case in many forms of ironic and parodic play, such appropriations also repeat and thereby risk reinforcing aspects of the dominant paradigm. Nevertheless, appropriation always has the potential to destabilize meaning itself and, at least in the case of the films discussed above, to encourage us to misread the gender cues that constantly tell us what it means to be a man or a woman.

INTERMITTENT DELIGHT

GENDER AND THE BODY IN CONTEMPORARY FOUND FOOTAGE FILMMAKING

Curated by Jaimie Baron and Andrew Hall

MONDAY
DECEMBER 7

5 TO 8 PM
DESIGN ROOM THEATER,
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