

The Ugly Construction of Beauty

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Abstract

In film, a woman's desire for success is often visually presented via an adherence to structured acts of so-called beautification. These performances, or as Judith Butler would have, 'acts of the flesh', often result in frustration, failure and the re-positioning of the female as societally submissive. The gestures which are performed in order to achieve a stereotyped vision of beauty are repetitive, boring and often seemingly painful or destructive to the individual performing them. They may even result in death or in a zombie-like form of living death. In *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), the character of Norma Desmond is trapped between reality and the myth of her own stardom. She seeks freedom through an elaborate set of rituals, designed to regenerate her youth and with it her fame. These acts, however, are revealed to be narcissistic and ultimately fatal. In *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidelman, 1985), scenes of a domestic feminine identity are used to accentuate the difference between the 2 female protagonists, one a street-wise extrovert, the other a demure housewife. This paper will analyse four of my short films (originally made for the solo exhibition *The Women*, Patricia Fleming Projects, U.K., 2013) which manipulate found footage in order to reveal the ugliness at the heart of rituals of beautification, both physically and psychologically. Interrogating Butler's assertion that we are always in drag, my practice operates to place the viewer 'back stage', revealing the self-conscious staging of a feminine identity. Dara Birnbaum's use of repetition as a device to create anxiety is appropriated in the context of my work, to reveal otherwise unnoticed moments of boredom, even death, within the performance of feminine gestures of beauty.

Introduction

I will open this paper with the screening of four films, first shown as part of the solo exhibition *The Women*, 7th March – 20th April 2013, Patricia Fleming Projects, Glasgow. I will then go on to discuss the theoretical genesis of these works, after which I will briefly discuss the exhibition as a whole, and these four films in particular.

My practice focuses on the use of appropriation and manipulation of found footage in order to interrogate feminine gender construction. My interest in appropriation derives from the work of Dara Birnbaum and particularly her seminal work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 1978/79 (Fig. 1). This piece is often used as an exemplar of Birnbaum's canon and to stand for the cultural climate in which it was made. But the work is no relic. The issues that it foregrounds are, I believe, increasingly relevant in the current climate of post-net contemporary art making. It has been said that Dara Birnbaum uses television as a protester uses a brick (Burton, 2009). My research seeks to interrogate this notion while questioning if issues of gender performance continue to be suited to critique via methodologies of appropriation and montage.



Figure 1: Birnbaum, D., 1978-79, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, 5:50 min.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler proposes an exciting question that my practice interrogates: 'If the body is not a "being", but a variable boundary, [...], then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its "interior" signification on its surface?' (Butler, 1990, p189). Appropriation admits to and even revels in unoriginality. As Butler's gender has no original, this methodology may be a language that is perfectly placed to assist critique of gender performance. Gender, for Butler, is a construction that, in its performance, seeks to disguise the fact that it is a fantasy. The

gestures of gendered performance explicitly 'create the idea of gender' (Butler, 1990, p190) as without them there would be no gender. The acts of gendered performance are a culturally agreed structure of poses and acts which reinforce the myth that they are natural (and biologically determined). Gender performance is intrinsically linked to repetition. Acts of gender must be repeated in order that they support their own (false) cultural and biological authenticity. They are both 'a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.' (Butler, 1990, p191). In other words, it is not enough that the acts are performed. To achieve the effect of authenticity they must be repeated, *ad nauseam*, in a myriad of tiny (and almost invisible) daily ways. This creates a direct link between appropriation (with its associated techniques of montage and repetition) and feminine gendered acts, including the application of make-up and housework. This repetition relates, of course, to Birnbaum's methodologies and to my appropriation of same, specifically to the use of repetition to reveal the absurdity, the contrivance, of a feminine identity.

The four films screened were first shown as part of solo exhibition *The Women*, 7th March – 20th April 2013, Patricia Fleming Projects, Glasgow (in a sequence of 8 films, 4 not discussed here). This exhibition was the result of a research project which explored issues of gender and identity. The exhibition referenced costume and gender definition in order to interrogate the power play of relationships. Repetition and mirroring were tactics employed throughout the exhibition to highlight the anxiousness that accompanies looking and being looked at. Interrogating Judith Butler's assertion that we are always in drag, the exhibition as a whole operated to place the viewer 'back stage', both actually and psychologically. The installation revealed the daily self-conscious staging of the public persona. Of particular focus was the complex business of female gender construction via clothing and mannerisms, as dissected in *The Women: 8 Films*.



Figure 2: Topping, J., 2013, Press Image, *The Women*.

In *The Women: 8 Films*, highly specific found footage was manipulated in order to reveal the mundane procedures vital for successful feminine gender construction. Of particular focus were acts of supposed beautification such as the application of make up, pseudo medical procedures and of domestic duty. The four films screened here make use of two films previously discussed by Jackie Stacey (1988) and that are of particular interest to me in the context of feminine gender construction and performance: *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidelman, 1984).

Christian Metz (1975) has noted that, in film, images of women are usually put into the service of something else – such as desire or transformation. The women serve as a gap or as a foil for firmer ground. However, *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Sunset Boulevard* are two films which do the opposite. The performances within these films of transformation and desire *are* the firm ground, the basis upon which the narrative progresses. Hence they are of use as loaded source material with which to dismantle both the collective memory of the films themselves and the fallacy of gender construction.



Figure 3: Topping, J., 2013, Screen Shot, *The Women: 8 Films*, 15:27 min.

With respect to the character of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in *Sunset Boulevard*: 'the contradiction between the reality and the myth pull her apart and finally drive her mad.' (Place, 1980, p43). The reality of the narrative is Norma's entrapment in her large house while the myth is her belief that her stardom can be resurrected. The physical control that she exerts over her body takes the form of 'beautifying' treatments, the performance of which she directly connects to the reviving of her talent and with it her desirability. Norma uses the limited gestural vocabulary of beautification in a failed and ultimately lethal attempt to garner (male) adoration and with it a form culturally acceptable of feminine power. The procedures available to Norma (and which appear to offer her the independence that she seeks) are limited to a societally approved series of repetitive, mundane and ultimately ineffective acts: the use of make up, face masks, medical-like procedures. Not only are the gestures of feminine identity performance useless, the inference is that the woman is flawed (a mere narcissist) in her desire to make use of them. So transfixed is she by her own image and her performance of femininity, that more direct and possibly successful routes towards her aim of becoming a star are neglected or forgotten. In *Sunset Boulevard*, 'the woman gazes at her own reflection in the mirror, ignoring the man she will use to achieve her goals.' (Place, 1980, p47). In this film (Fig. 4) I overlay the performance of beautification with a text relating to the reality of women's domestic duties within the workplace – in this case, an application for an artist's studio space.



Figure 4: Topping, J., 2013, Screen Shot, *The Women: 8 Films*, 15:27 min.

According to Jackie Stacey, *Desperately Seeking Susan* is a film in which 'the fascination of one woman with another, across the gap produced by their differences, structures the narrative development.' (Stacey, 1988, p115). The narrative of the film is propelled by the character Roberta's (Rosanna Arquette) desire to not only to become more like Susan (Madonna) but 'also to know her, and to solve the riddle of her femininity.' (Stacey, 1988, p127). Surface signs, particularly of clothing and of gestures, are offered throughout the film as insight into the inner identity of the protagonists. Though we understand (from Butler, 1990) that these outward signs are merely performative and as such are unable to signify a core identity (which is itself mutable), they are used in *Desperately Seeking Susan* as a code for two distinct

cultural 'types' of feminine identity – the suffocated, trapped housewife and the sexually adventurous free spirit.

One way that the film signifies difference is in the way the two women occupy (public and) private spaces. Stacey notes that: '...Roberta is only capable in her own middle-class privacy. Arriving home after her day of city adventures, she manages to synchronise with a televised cooking show, catching up on its dinner preparations with confident dexterity in her familiar domestic environment.' (Stacey, 1988, p128). However, while Roberta is certainly competent in her actions in this kitchen scene, the appropriation of the performance of domesticity from a television show suggests that she is reliant on mimicking feminine gender performance in order to successfully fulfil her obligations as a housewife. The character's use of the television program reveals the unnatural nature of the feminine domestic performance, something that the very existence of this format of television program seems to support.

My appropriation and manipulation of the domestic scenes from *Desperately Seeking Susan* are developed from this observation and the desire for the work to reveal, not only the performative nature of feminine domestic actions, but also the repetitive mundanity of the acts themselves (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Topping, J., 2013, Screen Shot, *The Women: 8 Films*, 15:27 min.

In one film (Fig. 6), a segment of a dinner party scene is cropped, slowed down and repeated. The extent to which Roberta is trapped in a loop of domestic servitude, offering nibbles from a platter to a never-ending succession of party guests, is now revealed. Her headless body floats in a dreamlike state, unable to be rid of either the platter or the performance. The original audio from the film is also cropped and looped. The abbreviated song *You Belong to Me* (Simon/MacDonald, 1978) accompanies the zombie-like movements of Roberta. The lyrics, now out of their original context, emphasise the need for such performances to occur within a domestic setting, so that the established hierarchies of domesticity are supported; '... do you need to know, Don't you know you'll always be my girl? You don't have to prove to me you're beautiful...' (Simon/MacDonald, 1978). Here the domestic performance is a signifier of the 'beauty' of the performer. A wife that did not perform such feminine gestures runs the risk of becoming not only undesirable, but also obsolete. The women in this sequence of film wear very similar costumes, signifying not only of the social status of the women (middle-class), but also implying that any of these women could be involved in similar mundane, repetitive performances of domestic femininity at another time.



Figure 6: Topping, J., 2013, Screen Shot, *The Women: 8 Films*, 15:27 min.

Conclusion

The four films screened foreground methodologies of appropriation and repetition, used in my practice to reveal that the gestures of beautification available to women are repetitive and often destructive to the individual performing them. These performances, then, can only result in frustration, failure and the re-positioning of the female as societally submissive. They even result in death or in a zombie-like form of living death for the performer herself.

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