

Correcting Misrepresentation: On Progressive Representations of Childhood in Female- and Queer-Authored Avant-Garde

Cinema

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As with any visual medium, the dominant (white, male, heterosexual) group within avant-garde film creates and relies upon its own dictates for representing less dominant groups, including people of other races and sexual orientations, women, and children. When one looks specifically at the depiction of children within this area of film, two main canonized images present themselves. The first, borrowed from other artistic canons, is that of the innocent and strictly gendered child. The second, attributable particularly to Stan Brakhage, is that of a filmic object, or a mode of filming an object upon which light falls, as any plant or piece of furniture would be filmed. Because of this phenomenon's pervasiveness, more dimensional and accurate portrayals of youth in avant-garde film are seen as ranging between "alternate" and taboo. It can be argued that nonwhite, nonheterosexual males or female and queer-identified (defined as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, pansexual, asexual, intersex, or gender variant) filmmakers strive to present more accurate images of children than nonfemale or nonqueer filmmakers. Life experience as second class citizens, especially within their artistic medium, paired with differing approaches to authorship, including collaborative conception and production as well as accessible distribution (via Internet, free shows, traveling exhibitions, etc.) of film and

video works, allows for these filmmakers to operate outside typical means of representing youth.

The direct imposition of adult society's rigid gender binary upon child characters—without regard to one's own experience of youth—limits artistic expression rather like viewing a fluid form through a grid. The children in Brakhage's films are primarily presented as canvasses for light and color, but on the occasion that they are permitted some form of identity, the children are often engaged in gender-specific activities involving their mother. Similarly, Alfred Hitchcock's home movies (arguably closer to avant-garde than his features) of his daughter from age two to age four perpetuate these gender roles by routinely depicting her in flouncy, pastel dresses and curled hair, smiling and playing amid flower beds with her nanny. Both of these situations represent classical images of children. These archetypal images of youth are significantly called into question by avant-garde filmmakers who do not fall into the dominative group framework, such as the queer-identified Matthias Müller, Ryan Trecartin, and Barbara Hammer, and the female filmmakers Gunvor Nelson and Peggy Ahwesh.

Social rules that are coded in visual media largely determine how individuals identify in any respect. However, it seems that as not yet full-fledged members of society, children can operate outside of these pressures and identify on their own terms. In *The Queer Child*, Kathryn Bond Stockton discusses society's quickness to deny the existence of children's sexuality, while ironically assuming them to be heterosexual. Consistently in Hollywood releases, and often in art film as well, children's gender flexibility and potential sexuality are ignored in favor of presenting a more widely accepted but confusing and hollowly innocent, heterosexual existence. Stockton explains,

it is...the fine-grained lens, by which to see any and *every* child as queer, even though the troubles of [a] specific child seem to be unique...the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. (Stockton 2, 5)

For its ability to visually manipulate space and time, film has become a medium for exploring and evoking a sense of childlike wonder. Female and queer-identified critics of canonized representation have responded to this dichotomy between borrowing a childlike state of mind and disallowing an empathetic portrayal of child characters. Frustrated with the numerous misrepresentations of their own likeness in cinema, they have sought to accurately depict the varied emotions, personalities, and desires of children on screen. The presentation of the world on screen through an adult, white, male, heterosexual point of view is entirely pervasive, even within the noncommercial arts.

The queer filmmaker Matthias Müller's short film *Alpsee* (1995) is an impressionistic glimpse into the psyche of a grade-school boy using the visual vocabulary of someone that age. Although this film is relatively contemporary, it is important to look at for its reconstruction of a classical 1960s environment in which the visual language of the time period is torn down by shifting the voice to the child's perspective. The iconic image of the nuclear housewife is viewed freshly through the eyes of a young boy who fetishizes and longs to claim that role. Thoughts of sexual frustration and repression of gender expression are relayed through television clips, domestic nightmares, and meandering, contemplative shots of objects from the child's daily life. The complex relationship of a child to his mother is not often addressed in such a way that both identifies the token inclusion of Oedipal threads in many narratives and provides access to the impressionistic lexicon of the child. Filmmaker Barbara Hammer addresses similar

concepts in her memoir, *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*. She describes an early film she made that utilized a lesbian lexicon, and notes that although she “didn’t know it then, [she had created] the first lesbian-lovemaking film to be made by a lesbian” (27). Her reappropriation of the lovemaking act mitigates the negative effects of its previous control by the dominant, heterosexual male point of view, and her reclamation of adult, lesbian identity moreover allowed her to approach her childhood in her film *Dream Age* (1979). This film is “shot from the eye level of a three year old as [she] remembered the cabinets...trying to find the Barbara that had come out of so many squares...making the film integrated my hetero and my homo selves” (103). Through the visual language of a child, she interprets the heterosexual-by-default phenomenon of her youth identity as an adult lesbian in an attempt to reconcile an imprinted identity with the expression of her internally felt identity.

As *Alpsee* changed the voice of child-centered films and as Hammer’s work challenged perceptions of the child as inherently heterosexual, Gunvor Nelson’s *My Name Is Oona* (1969) altered the filmic syntax of youth. Though she worked as a structuralist, Nelson’s films operate through visual meaning and emotional content more than storylines. Within her relatively small body of film work, one piece centers upon a child, her daughter. *My Name Is Oona* offers a poetic and resonant portrait of the titular girl, whose presence is unavoidable and claims the viewer’s attention with her constant movement and direct engagement with the apparatus. She interacts with the camera and its operator/her parent, where in Brakhage’s work the children interact with neither. Rather than being silenced, Oona exhaustively shares her voice, claiming even the title of the film for her own. As one watches the film, it becomes evident that Oona is not being directed or

playing a role as much as she is directing the movement of the camera and challenging it to capture who *she* is. Nelson carefully portrays Oona as one who is thoughtful, chaotic, responsible, involved, and an enactor of ethereal horse riding as well as wrestling. Through superimpositions, repetition, and cross cutting, Nelson expertly blends these images, traits, motions, and emotions with a critical mass of sound to create a loving, knowing portrait of a person, as well as a tangible relationship between the filmmaker and the subject.

After the groundwork had been laid for altering the syntactical structure of a work, Peggy Ahwesh was able to create an entirely different filmic language in *Martina's Playhouse* (1986). The film has received resistance in the art world for its overbearing “feminine-ness” and ability to raise ambiguous questions about gender, identity, and social roles without definitively answering them. There exists an incredible sense of openness in the work that doesn't follow a solid storyline and allows for a very serious and wily six-year-old, Martina, to host the madness. Martina is generally given free rein to direct herself (in a more literal sense than with Oona) in a collage that dissects women's roles and sexuality. In response to Ahwesh's questioning of one of her stuffed animals, Martina states, “I thought he was a boy but she was really a girl,” directly exposing the fluidity of gender in the child's mind. Martina's mother also plays a role in the film, as directed by her daughter. The mom becomes the baby who is scolded and breastfed by Martina, who ultimately becomes distraught by the small size of the diaper she attempts to put on her mother. In an Eisensteinian attempt to pull out the sexuality-based subtexts of Martina's actions, Ahwesh instructs her to read portions of Bataille and Lacan's writings on sexuality. Though she stumbles and essentially rewrites the texts in her readings, the meaning is only enhanced. Her world is also intercut with that of Ahwesh's twenty-

something friend who casually tosses out that “everybody’s angry all the time, especially women,” perhaps suggesting that, as mentioned above, young people are more free from society’s marginalizing pressures. These aspects of role-reversal, queer identity, sexuality, and autonomy are generally ignored or unnoted by heterosexual male filmmakers in the arts. The difference between adult male-to-child detachedness and adult female-to-child assimilation in avant-garde filmmaking may suggest differing approaches to authorship, relationships with children, and filmic intent.

These filmmakers’ efforts towards more accurately presenting childhood over thirty years have made way for contemporary artists to internalize and build upon the tropes of this counter-canon. Queer-identified video artist Ryan Trecartin’s body of work draws from the perfectly aged language set forth by *Martina’s Playhouse* and expands it to depict the intricacies of family dynamics between heterosexual and homosexual members. The result is an increasing fluidity of identity in which strict boundaries among age, sexuality, gender orientation, and social roles are challenged on multiple levels. His characters, often media-oppressed, queer teen to young 20-year-olds, are highly aware of and developed from *real* childhoods rather than from stereotypical or nonexistent ones. For example, in *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2005) the main character, Skippy, clearly exhibits the traumatic effects of being assumed to be heterosexual as a child, when in actuality Skippy did not identify as heterosexual. Expanding upon Hammer’s reformulation of her childhood identity through an adult lesbian lens, Trecartin revisits childhood identity as even more fluid through a variety of gender and sexual identifications, both real and imaginary. Thus, identity is conceived not as a singular entity but as a collection of connected identifications rendered visually through a constantly morphing digital collage.

By freeing the child and the teenager from narrowly defined social and sexual roles, specifically within the family, Trecartin has created opportunities for more open adult identities, as well.

Ultimately, the expansion of the definition of identity calls into question basic ideas about authorship. Female and queer identified people traditionally work in communities in and outside of the arts. In these groups, shared authorship is a more accepted method of production than it is for male filmmakers, with whom the concept of a film is credited to one sole director or auteur, even though the work is almost always produced by a group of people. Whereas the individualistic framework from which heterosexual male directors tend to work emphasizes the filmic subjects' reflection on the filmmaker's identity and sense of authorship, the more communally based works produced by marginalized groups exhibit greater concern for accurately portraying the personal identities of their subjects and construct less rigid impressions of individual identity. This movement in film is particularly important because it creates new opportunities for self-expression that do not rely on cliché and archetypal images of gender and identity by reclaiming an empathetic representation of children as fluid subjects rather than rigidly defined objects.

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