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2002

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Recommended Citation
Aubry '02, Sarah M., "See Jill Paint: An Experiment in Queer Film" (2002). *Honors Projects.* Paper 7.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/theatre_honproj/7

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Theatre 497

26 April 2002

See Jill Paint : An Experiment in Queer Film

My film, See Jill Paint, is an exploration of the possibilities for non-oppressive, nonviolent objectification. I started with a strong desire to focus a short movie around the application of colorful paint to nipples and the surrounding areas; as I progressed towards that goal, I questioned how the project might correspond or conflict with the radical gender politics that I value. In sexist objectification, people (mostly women) are perceived as being only visual objects at the expense of their subjectivity. I think it is possible to draw attention to bodies as objects and simultaneously affirm the complexity of the embodied subject. The intent of my film project was to explore some possibilities for positive objectification. I achieved this by disrupting the conventions of sexist objectification and replacing them with a playful context.

Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema" describes some problematic and oppressive assumptions about "the male gaze" that dominate hegemonic cinema and promote sexist objectification. Mulvey describes how two "pleasurable structures of looking" from psychoanalysis are at work in the conventions of film. These are scopophilia or a voyeuristic "pleasure in looking" at someone else as an object[1] and the narcissistic identification with an image on the screen corresponding to an infant's first recognition of self as image (16-18). Mulvey elaborates the dominant trend in mainstream narrative film to posit a normative male as the viewer, and to use the mentioned visual pleasures to reinforce the order of patriarchy. For Mulvey it is problematic that films posit the treatment of women as objects and men as

active choosing subjects as normal and acceptable. Before Mulvey analyzes how the scopophilic and narcissistic aspects of pleasurable looking are used to convey the "ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order" (25), she makes an important statement about the lack of meaning inherent to these structures. They "both are formative structures, mechanisms without intrinsic meaning. In themselves they have no signification, unless attached to an idealisation" (18). Because some conventions of cinema relate directly to processes that are important in the formation of identities, film has a unique potential to reach audience members on a personal level.

Mulvey calls for radical cinema to seek "the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire (16)" and to "free the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment (Mulvey, 26)."

Bertolt Brecht also critiques mainstream art for reinforcing stifling ideals under the guise of political neutrality: "for art to be 'unpolitical' means only for it to ally itself with the 'ruling' group" (243). Brecht describes an alienation effect to interrupt audience members' usual passive reception and make them think critically. He explains that "[a] representation which alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time, makes it seem unfamiliar" (240). Brecht's alienation effect interrupts the viewer's suspension of disbelief, frequently by calling attention to how the representation is constructed.

See Jill Paint presents boobs[2] in a recognizable but unfamiliar way, by painting on them. Perhaps the film will defamiliarize objectification by showing it in a way that operates in contrast to the norm. The film has potential for interrupting the deployment of nakedness referred to by gender theorist Riki Anne Wilchins:

> The invention of nakedness (not not wearing clothes but rather the consciousness that one is 'naked')—simply by hiding various body parts from view—creates the mere displaying and viewing of bodies as a medium of intimacy, a focus of desire, a point of arousal. We have developed a highly advanced methodology of concealing, exposing, teasing, and insinuation out of the basics of sight itself, and then deployed it relentlessly. (Wilchins, 169)

Images of the clothed body, the partially clothed body and the naked body are familiar and have a variety of culturally defined meanings. The boobs in See Jill Paint are not naked, are not clothed, and lie outside of the usual continuum of nakedness. Paint conceals and reveals the body in a way that clothes and the absence of clothes do not. This interruption of the deployment of nakedness may allow audience members to see our use of boobs as conveying an atypical meaning. Perhaps they will further recognize and question the customary meanings associated with boobs that are somewhat arbitrary.

The following explanation of my film will help to show how I've interrupted conventions of sexist objectification using a playful context and Brecht's alienation effect. I will also discuss how the process of making the film was shaped to accommodate this central goal.

The original script that I wrote for this project was a simple script about an artist. I was struggling with ideas about the embodied status of the human subject, and thought it would be interesting to consider an artist who objectifies herself in art. To satisfy her subjectivity, the artist would view herself as an object for play. The first scene in See Jill Paint follows the original script closely. The painter is standing frustrated in her studio with her eyes closed. The first shots are focused at a downward angle. There is a close-up on the painter's tense face and she opens her eyes, she is introduced to the audience as someone who sees. Out of her

frustration comes serendipity. The painter throws her paintbrush; there is a double take and then a cascade of falling-paintbrush shots, as the brush loaded with blue paint repeatedly heads towards impact with a black and white photo of boobs that is lying on the floor.[3] The falling repetition is included early in the film to set the playful mood. As the painter turns around to discover the landing site of her paintbrush, the camera follows her, not at a downward angle, but on the same level. The camera peeks over her shoulder as the painter looks at the painted photo, and looks up to her when a light bulb comes on simultaneously with her burst of laughter and new idea. The change to an angle that indicates a powerful character accompanies the character's internal process of finding a means of self-empowerment.

When the painter faces her image in the mirror and paints her chest, the camera catches her arm in the act of painting and her face reflected in the mirror, but her breasts are obscured by a bouquet of paintbrushes. The decision to not include any boobs-in-action in the film, but only finished photographs of painted boobs was complicated. The final deciding factor was not an aesthetic consideration, but a matter of respecting the actors' level of comfort. No single shot was worth compromising the atmosphere of trust that my novice production company depended on and disregarding the sensitivity of the people being objectified in the film would be contrary to my goals. I had some qualms that hiding boobs would lead to a coy or striptease dynamic that could work against my goals. I am quite pleased with the way that excluding moving boobs in this moving picture shaped the emphasis of the scenes. In the shots of the painter and her mirror image, the spectators can only "see" her boobs vicariously by imagining themselves in her position. If the spectator does not go the empathetic route, s/he is left to witness the painter's experience of self-possession and play.

One minor detail in the composition for the painter's self-painting shot indicates a question that fueled a great deal of the work on this project. Between the artist and the mirror a small empty picture frame is balanced on its corner. The process of continual script revision was informed by insights arising from the collaborative interactions of this experimental project. The final product is a result of constantly questioning where the "art" lies in such a multilayered process and how it could be appropriately framed and presented for reception[4]. Since the content of the loosely narrative film revolves around an artist making a change in how her work is framed, I could not ignore the implications of framing choices. Painting directly on bodies leads to a more direct literal interaction between the painter in the film and the people who pose for her. The nature of making a film about photographs of paintings on bodies requires putting more intervention between the perpetrators of the art and the receivers of the art. Instead of ignoring this seeming contradiction, I encouraged the production team to approach each layer of interactions as a frame that would help the audience to playfully contextualize our work. One example of how our idea of framing led to a major script revision has to do with how the art is distributed in the film. In a very early version of the script, shots of a model being painted and photographed are interspersed with a shot of more and more of the final photographs appearing on a traditional gallery wall. The diagetic presentation of the art that I eventually decided on was much sillier and more personal than a gallery setting, with a secret spy distributing the photos in plain string-wrapped packages to unsuspecting recipients.

The decision to include characters other than the painter necessitated more decisions. I made an attempt to establish relationships through dialogue, but I found the verbal element unnecessary. I considered the possibility that leaving out spoken interaction might make an unintentional comment about women not having access to the power of language. Eventually I

realized that if the imagery of the film was very clearly about issues of subjectivity, objectification, and spectatorship that I wanted to confront, that leaving out dialogue could contribute to this clarity. It also seemed like we would make better use of the film form if the relationships could be established visually.

I wrote a photographer into the script to be identified clearly as the chooser of imagery and allow her traits to be contrasted to the "male gaze" assumed by hegemonic film and media. The delightfully exuberant photographer somersaults into the frame and confronts the audience with her camera in a game of peek-a-boo. The photographs that she has displayed in her studio involve cross-dressing, nipple clamps, and transgender pornography. It was important for me to establish the photographer as someone who delights in seeing imagery that challenges the widespread myth of an orderly binary distinction of sex and gender. It was also important for the boob-painting images to be the most intense photographs in the film, so all of the other photos were black and white. In case the colorlessness of these images might inadvertently indicate something un-fun about them, I placed these photos under the nonjudgmental gaze of a toy bunny.

Shooting and editing choices for the scene in the photographer's upstairs room reflect the playful style of children's television. This is the context in which boob painting photos are first shown to the audience. The photographer flips through a small stack of the colorful photos; this shot is edited into a series of still shots. The simple motion of shuffling through pictures is reminiscent of flipbook animation. The still shots indicate motion, but not smoothly flowing motion, and therefore call attention to the constructed nature of the film. Hopefully this moment will be slightly jarring for the audience, and help them to think critically as they view the painted-boob photos.

The pie-cooling scene is included because the imagery is familiar from cartoons and pokes fun at a fascination for a nostalgic ideal. The character titled baker/model in the credits has an interesting journey in the script. She is introduced playing a culturally recognizable stereotypical role, and after receiving a package of painted-boob photos she decides to participate in this more novel ritual.

The model's role in the painting scene is helpful in illuminating how the film's artists depend on the subjectivity of the objects of their work. The painter and photo grrl have visual creative agendas to fulfill, but their art is not possible without interested bodies. The model's enjoyment in this scene is not primarily connected to visual pleasure, because she isn't in a position to see the image being painted on her or the limits of the photographer's frame. The model experiences both sensual and exhibitionist pleasures as she is painted on and photographed. The model is in an interesting position of power. Her aliveness is what makes the painter's choice of painting surface interesting. The model's choice of movement is the variable that makes the photography engaging. Her consensual availability to the art and her movement with the art are its most important interactive elements.

The high value placed on consensual playful interactions among persons involved in this art prevents any individual from being perceived as a mere object, even though the art focuses on some of individuals as objects. The objectification is contextualized in a playfully respectful set of circumstances. The ultimate frame for this project is the limits of the movie screen, so the audience is not given the chance to interact. It may seem contradictory for a project that prioritizes playful interactions to not offer the audience an opportunity to interact. I considered what would happen if this art were performed live. The quality of playfulness could have become variable because the actors would have to prepare to involve people unfamiliar with the

project. The voyeuristic potential of film allows the audience to see without interfering (Mulvey, 17). For this project, I decided that film would offer the actors the most sense of safety and freedom to play.

The last scene in the movie emphasizes the painter and photographer enjoying the final objects or artifacts of their work, the photos. The characters play with, choose from, and are surrounded by the final objects of their work. The shots in this particular scene more than the others were chosen by the director of photography and me because of our enjoyment of the motion of the characters within the frame. We enjoyed the reflexive quality of this part of the editing—choosing our favorite moving pictures of the characters choosing among their favorite still pictures. This is one point at which the editing was dominated by a sense of play; it is difficult to say whether this particular choice reads for an audience.

It is important to call attention to bodies—to objectify, because of what I have referred to as the embodied status of the human subject. After Foucault, I want to avoid saying that humans are simply subjects who have bodies or are bodies who have subjectivity (Foucault, 326-7). People experience each other as bodies. Bodies are objects. The human condition of being an object is less abstract than human subjectivity. The process and product of my film are proof that calling attention to bodies as objects can be done in a context that recognizes human subjectivity.

Notes

[1] Mulvey attributes the concept that to Freud's Three Essays On Sexuality. "At this point (Freud) associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (16)." Freud's use of "object" does not imply the reduction of a person to a thing. For Freud every sexual drive has a desired "aim" and "object", the desired sexual activity is the "aim" of the drive and the desired partner, body part or fetishized thing is the "object" of the drive. Freud's use of "object" allows him to differentiate between people and things as the target for sexual desire without unavoidably reducing one to the other. (Freud, 63-66)

[2] I use "boob" and "boobs" in this paper more frequently than "breasts" or "chest". The Oxford English Dictionary defines **boobs**:

> **4.** *pl.* The breasts. *slang* (orig. U.S.) **1949** H. Miller *Sexus* (1969) xiii. 305, I felt her sloshy boobs joggling me but I was too intent on pursuing the ramifications of Coleridge's amazing mind to let her vegetable appendages disturb me. **1955** T. Williams *Cat on Hot Tin Roof* (1956) I.7 He always drops his eyes down my body when I'm talkin' to him, drops his eyes to my boobs an' licks his old chops! **1968** *Daily Mirror 27* Aug. 7/5 If people insist on talking about her boobs, she would rather they call them boobs, which is a way-out word, ..rather than breasts.

I use "boobs" most often because it was the most frequently used term by models working on the project to describe their own anatomy. Out of respect to their preferred usage, I favor this word.

[3] More than one spectator has asked me if the paintbrush was meant to be phallic. This is a legitimate (if unintentional) interpretation that becomes more interesting when considered in the context of feminist criticisms of art history's description of the relation between artist/subject

and model/object in nineteenth century painting. The brush was sometimes considered to be the phallus of the painter as *he* conquered his models on the canvas (Garb, 228). The paintbrush in my film is not wielded according to the rules of a patriarchy, so maybe it can be viewed as a feminist appropriation of the painterly phallus.

[4] My obsession with the frame and the impact of theory on the frame and therefore the work was fueled by Derrida's The Truth in Painting. None of these ideas are borrowed directly from that text, but its arguments impacted this process immensely.

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