

Her dark materials: conjuring the feminine imaginary in practice
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Dialogues at the Interlude: Between Body, Artifact and Discourse

Transtechology Research conference, Plymouth University, UK
Friday 12 to Sunday 14 July 2013

Panel:

Imaginary materialities: hypnosis as a medium for artistic and creative practice

Saturday 13 July 2013, 9.00am to 10.15am
Plymouth Arts Centre, Plymouth, UK

Paper: Kayla Parker, Plymouth University

kayla.parker@plymouth.ac.uk

Title: Her dark materials: conjuring the feminine imaginary in practice

Abstract:

My paper explores film-making 'as (a) woman', an audiovisual form of *écriture féminine*, a term used by Hélène Cixous and others to denote 'feminine writing', the transformative practices that come through the body, with reference to Maya Deren's theorisation of cinema and her ethnographic study of Haitian voodoo belief systems.

In creative practice, I take the feminine position through an embodied layering of consciousness, entering a trance or dream state, which for Freud was, "the threshold between life and death ... a space of uncertainty in which boundaries blur between rational and the supernatural, the animate and the inanimate" (Mulvey, 2006).

Deren (1960) has written of the 'invisible underlayer of an implicit double exposure' that is unrolled beneath the stream of moving images when we watch a film. We construct meaning from the memories and dreams evoked, from the film itself and the space in which the experience takes place. Although Deren refers to the visual realm, reflecting the cultural primacy of the sense of sight, the sonic environment of the film also affects our understanding. The double exposure to which she refers is the unconscious interweaving of imaginary materials – our own subjectivity and the fictive reality we perceive.

As a maker, in giving agency to multiple strata of the self, I conjure the material specificities and repetitive rhythms of light and shadow that form the illusion of moving image. Life and representation entwine to the rapturous beat of animate and inanimate states of being, in the flux of the present moment, within which - to borrow Deren's words – life and death become one and the same. Each material loop of space-time, telling and knowing, woven through its link to a maternal other, continually in process, making and unmaking.

Keywords: artists' moving image, cinema, Maya Deren, space-time, trance

Duration: 20 minutes

Paper

SLIDE 01 title Her dark materials: conjuring the feminine imaginary in practice

Introduction

Firstly, I want to thank Hannah Drayson and Transtechnology Research for giving me the opportunity to present my paper here today, and thanks also to Plymouth Arts Centre for hosting this event.

My talk is based around a reflexive commentary on *These Restless Hands*, an animated film I made last year, a piece made for presentation to audiences as an looped gallery installation. I am speaking here from a position of practice, from the inside looking out, but also - through reflection – from a perspective beyond the immersive sphere within which the practice operates.

The title of my paper 'her dark materials' alludes to Luce Irigaray's metaphoric evocation of feminine sexuality as an unfathomable "dark continent of dreams and fantasies" (Irigaray, 1974/1985: 141) within the dominant paradigm of patriarchy, which assigns to 'woman' the materiality of dark, unthinking and irrational matter. It refers also to John Milton's reference in his poem, *Paradise Lost*, to the omnipotent 'Almighty Maker's dark materials' - the four elements of heat, cold, moist, and dry, which are in endless battle with the realm of chaos and darkness.

In this presentation I focus on the visual realm, the borderspace¹ between being awake and unconsciousness, and the representation in a moving image artwork of a fictive reality that derives from the maternal, which is continually in process and being made anew.

And, to start – some personal archaeology and the beginnings of a creative practice. In early childhood I became aware that I was able to think in different ways. Being sent to bed in the early evening during the summer when it was still bright sun outside, I would lie in bed, slightly bored, alone, with nothing to do, waiting to fall sleep. In the quiet and subdued light I discovered that I could 'make patterns move' by staring at curtains, bedspread, wallpaper; fixing my gaze at a focal plane, and through a process of 'defocusing' bring another image layer of a different type into being.

There was a recognition, an understanding, that some objects were still – such as the wardrobe and the chair – and other objects were moving slightly – such as the curtains in a light breeze, or the gentle rise and fall of my bedspread as a result of my breathing. There was also an awareness of my mind operating at different levels simultaneously: I could allow the scene in front of me, or the form of elements within it, to become dynamic, animated, whilst knowing that it was all happening in

¹ Whilst I don't refer explicitly to Bracha Ettinger's matrixial borderspace, her theorization of shared affect at the intersection of consciousness and unconsciousness does inform my thinking in this talk (Ettinger, 2006).

my mind and within my body.

SLIDE 02 text extract Martin Orne quote

The optical performance that I practised as a young child is an improvised choreography of the 'mindbody', a process of temporary hypnosis that fulfils the conditions identified by the psychiatrist Martin Orne in his classic paper on hypnosis as optimum 'situations of trance induction':

1. desirability of entering trance
 2. expectation that trance can be achieved
 3. respect and trust for the operator
 4. restriction of external stimuli
 5. focusing of attention
- (Orne, 1959: 278).

As a young child, there was no outward expression or record of my earliest self-hypnotic adventures; the activity, the practice was not shared – it was solitary, private, and completely internal, without a materialised presence at this time.

With repetition, it became easier to slip into this mode. As I became more adept at trancing, I began to partially-sense the hint of a visual screen a few inches in front of my eyes, upon which I could half-see traces of other images. These wisps of pictures seemed related to the visual illusion I had generated from the surfaces of my bedroom, but had metamorphosed to suggest other forms, conjured from darkness...

SLIDE 03 These Restless Hands – Kayla Parker

VIDEO 1min (silent)

My mother's hands twist this way and that in her lap, looping the fluffy yarn around her crochet hook to create stitch after stitch after stitch. She is making a woollen scarf, for no one in particular. When she is finished, she will unravel all her stitches, and start again.

PLAY FILM

She sits in her living room beneath a lamp in a shower of light, the clicking dance of her crochet needle diving and hooking the yarn as her hands turn in and out. My mother's hands have been busy stitching since she was a young girl.

The film is constructed from a series of frames, extracted from a short piece of filming shot as QuickTime video on a stills camera. My filming frames my mother's hands in her lap, as she was crocheting a woollen scarf early one evening, shortly after moving home in autumn 2007. When she had finished making, my mother pulled out her stitches and unravelled the scarf, reconstituting the yarn into a ball of

wool once more.

To create the film, I printed out the video frames onto sheets of white A4 paper, in landscape format, using a laser printer with its toner cartridge of black running out. I then re-photographed each still image, converting the jpgs into a QuickTime timeline to 'stitch together' a moving image stream. This sequence is looped, repeating endlessly, and shows my mother's hands making and unmaking, again and again. And, as Martin Orne reminds us,² "The absence of expression of a need for logical consistency seems ... to be one of the major characteristics of hypnosis" (Orne, 1959: 296).

SLIDE 04 text extract Maya Deren quote

The film-maker Maya Deren has said that,

As we watch a film, the continuous act of recognition in which we are involved is like a strip of memory unrolling beneath the images of the film itself, to form an invisible underlayer of an implicit double exposure
Maya Deren, 1960: 154–155.

What she means by this statement is that each of us constructs a meaning from the memories that are evoked each time we watch a film, from the moving images themselves and the space in which the experience takes place. Although Deren here refers to the visual element of film, reflecting the cultural primacy of the sense of sight, the sonic environment of the film also affects our understanding.

The double exposure to which she refers is the unconscious interweaving of our own embodied subjectivity with the dis-embodied depicted reality we see in the frames of film; and, I suggest, an encounter with the other. Recently, Jenny Chamarette has described the in-betweenness of cinematic subjectivity - a slippery subjectivity which is plural, emerging from the gaps in language (what is absent, not said) – as a "chiasmic in-betweenness" (Chamarette, 2012: 3).

SLIDE 05 Meshes of the Afternoon – Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid

VIDEO 31sec loop of eye sequence

(sound: hiss and crackle of optical sound track)

The film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) is a collaboration between Maya Deren and her then husband Alexander Hammid. A psychodrama, also referred to as a 'trancefilm', "modeled on dream, lyric and ... dance" (Rees, 1999/2011: 58). Deren appears as the woman, Hammid as the man, in a poetic exploration of the threshold between life and death in a setting of suspense and alienation.³

² Orne's paper presented his findings based on three experiments that investigated the hypnotic state, including hypnotic phenomena.

³ Set in and around their home in the white heat of the hills close to Los Angeles, where they were living at that time, the film reflects the climate of

Marina Warner describes Deren's films as having a “profound affinity between the material properties of film and inner states of mind” (Warner, 2007). Life and representation are entwined in the rapturous beat of animate and inanimate states of being, within which – to borrow Deren’s words – life and death become one and the same.

At the end of her ethnographic study of Haitian voodoo belief systems, conducted between 1947 and 1952, Deren writes of her own experience as a *voudouisant*, of possession by a Haitian *loa*, the spirit-god Erzulie:

The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once. That is all
(Deren, 1953: 260).

For Sigmund Freud, the subconscious, or dream state, was “the threshold between life and death ... a space of uncertainty in which boundaries blur between rational and the supernatural, the animate and the inanimate” (Mulvey, 2006: 38).

The following video clip is an 8 second section of *Meshes*, appearing at nearly three minutes into the film, which I have looped (repeated) several times for this presentation. The screen is filled by the left eye of the woman (performed by Deren), who is lying down. The extreme close-up brings me into the position of a lover, hovering quietly over her. The film seems to pause here. As I look down on her face, the film-maker catches my eye through part-closed lashes.

PLAY FILM

She registers a fluttering view of the world I cannot see behind my left shoulder; sees through me, her eye a dark pool shaded by soft fringed lips. As her eyelid lowers, I can feel her thoughts moving across my face and I am within what she dreams beneath the lowered swell of her *palpebra*, the Latin word for the fold of skin covering the eye that derives from the verb *palpo*, to caress.

This small moment lasts the time it takes to inhale, to draw air into the lungs, and then exhale. As a child, I watched my mother sleeping, counting each breath. My body feeling the soft rise and fall of her body, I knew in intimate detail each feature of her face. Our lives are made in these small sections of time, of enfolded subjectivities, repeated endlessly.

There is a layering of interiority, the woman’s and mine, connected by the skin of the film, a resonance of remembered meanings, moments between sleeping and waking,

suspicion and anxiety generated by their identities as European émigrés living in the United States during the Second World War.

in the shimmering light and dark of the stop-start frames and woven fields.

“Caught in Deren’s ‘mesh’,” writes Catherine Fowler, “time is frozen, replayed, remembered, reordered and foreshadowed” (Fowler, 2004: 343).

In the Nineteenth Century, photography conferred immortality through its capture and the apparent fixing of the likeness of the sitter. Cinema further augmented this immortality through the medium's ability to conjure and replay seemingly living moments over and over again, countering what Laura Mulvey has described as, “the intractable nature of time itself”. She continues:

For human and all organic life, time marks the movement along a path to death, that is, to the stillness that represents the transformation of the animate into the inanimate
(Mulvey, 2006: 31).

The performers appear never to age, remaining as the day their images were recorded onto film, projected life-size, as a miniature, or larger than life, on the screen... living and re-living forever.

SLIDE 06 *écriture féminine* – methodology

In making work as an artist, I adopt a methodology of *écriture féminine*, a term used by Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and others, to denote ‘feminine writing’, the transformative practices that come through the body; an operational mode and a language of the body that enunciates the feminine position. As Annette Kuhn explains, the feminine subject position is not reliant on one's biological identity, but is established through a relationship to language that is “characterised by process and heterogeneity” (Kuhn, 1982/1994: 11). Therefore, subjectivity is set in motion, in process, through the feminine text, “making the moment of reading one in which meanings are set in play rather than consolidated or fixed” (Kuhn, 1982/1994: 12).

SLIDE 07 These Restless Hands – installation view

Land/Water and the Visual Arts exhibition, Scott Building, Spring 2013

Alison Stone points out that maternal subjectivity is an intensive version of feminine subjectivity⁴ within the dominant paradigm of subjectivity which is structured around separation from the mother:

The (Western) self is understood in opposition to the maternal body (or, to be a subject is to separate from the maternal body)

4 “Girls must in some sense also remain identified with their mothers and the maternal body to assume a female identity” (Stone, 2012:10).

(Stone, 2012: 1).

When I confront this work as a spectator, I am immediately aware of the gap that exists between my body standing here, right now, and the images moving on the screen on the wall there, a few feet away, replaying something that occurred in the past. Other points of comparison emerge, my three-dimensional presence, alive and tasting the air in full colour, yet stilled and quieted in contemplation of a flat rectangle that holds a pair of shadowy hands.

I am drawn to this place across space and time, captured by these hands that move ceaselessly and silently, close enough to touch, yet beyond reach. Hands that appear larger than life-size. This work is silent, the maternal voice is aurally absent. It is not heard, she has no voice. The diegetic soundtrack that accompanied the video pictures at the time of recording has been excised. And yet she calls to us, we hear our mother's voice across the expanding void of space-time – how do we respond?

SLIDE 08 These Restless Hands – Kayla Parker

VIDEO 1min (silent)

Mary Ann Doane has described the maternal voice as a 'sonorous envelope', a place of safety which "surrounds, sustains, and cherishes the child (Doane, 1980: 33-50).⁵ This immersive metaphor recalls the *chora* of Julia Kristeva's mother-child dyad, the infant captivated in utter bliss within the pre-linguistic milky warmth of the maternal sphere.

In utero, my mother surrounds me: she is, in psychologist Didier Anzieu's words, my 'first skin'.⁶ Then, after birth the full force of her voice is accompanied by her active touch, the sight, the smell and the taste of her. My experience of the outside world is, in infancy, mediated largely through the multi-sensory zone of the maternal.

I feel the vibrations of her bodily sounds as they transfer through her skin to mine, my mother's voice undulates against my skin, I am aware at a level below

5 Doane (1980) draws the term 'sonorous envelope' for the maternal voice from the writings of Didier Anzieu (1976) and the psychoanalyst Guy Rosolato (1974, 33). For Rosolato, the infant's earliest experience of being enveloped in its mother's voice, experiencing 'cosmic music' within "the sonorous womb, a murmuring house - or music of the spheres" could form the first prototype for auditory pleasure (Rosolato, 1974: 81; 1988: 84-85).

6 Anzieu was critical of the language-centred paradigms of Lacan, and developed his own theories based on skin and touch, and his concepts of the 'psychic envelope' and 'skin-ego' ('moi-peau'), publishing his first article on the skin ego in 1974 (Anzieu and Tarrab, 1990). Anzieu proposed that the sensations 'felt' by the physical skin create the basis from which the psychic apparatus of bodily ego and sense of self are formed: "In the same way that the skin supports the skeletal and muscular systems, the skin ego supports the psychic systems" (Lafrance, 2013: 16-44).

consciousness of the sounds produced by my own body, and the range of physical effects that are generated, and I can open my mouth.

As Brandon LaBelle points out, silence itself can be a form of communication, foregrounding the decision not to speak. Silence, then, “operates as a vehicle for modulating, contouring, and performing communicative gestures” (LaBelle, 2010: 73). Salomé Voegelin refers to “the absence of sound as the beginning of listening as communication” (Voegelin, 2010: xv).

So, there is a space of promise within the absence of sound, in silence there is the anticipation of it being filled. John Cage’s

what we re-quire _ is / silence ; ... it is like an _ empty glass / into which _ at any / moment _ anything _ may be poured /
(Cage, 1961: 109-110).

Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of the world of significance proposes only an elastic and dynamic, ‘rhizomatic’ spatial field, that functions through interconnections with other interconnections, as simultaneous flows, ‘becomings’ or ‘assemblages’. Their model allows for supple expansion between thoughts, for connections to be made, and associations to flow... following Deren’s own theorisation of the horizontal and vertical axes operating within film, and the interconnectedness of the anagram form of poetic cinema.

PLAY FILM

Perhaps, then, my film *These Restless Hands*, is metonymic⁷ of film-making/making-film-meaning process itself? As Chamarette has observed,

Film, photography and installation art all share aspects of the temporal and the figural (those aspects related to form and representation). They are doubled arts in that sense, requiring a temporality of creation and a temporality of viewing which do not participate in the same framework.
(Chamarette, 2012: 5)

These Restless Hands brings my mother back to me... and yet, she is immaterial, there is nothing there... she is de-materialised. A silent image that holds its own space, bounded by her hands' activity, the weave of the crochet needle, and the growing/shrinking woollen garment. Beyond the hands, there lies a volume of air contained in her lap, where she held me. Once, I was small enough to fit here.

⁷ Metonymy is based in contiguity – association. A metonym is a figure of speech in which a thing or a concept is substituted by another thing or concept with which it is understood to be associated. In metaphor, the substitution is based on a specific similarity between that which is substituted and its replacement in speech.

What remains? Every frame counts, every scrap of memory I hold, each stitch, every frame, the single moments that make seconds, minutes, the flow of which moving image time is constituted. All in motion, making and unmaking, like these restless hands, moved by the breath of animation that makes us alive. Each material loop of space-time, telling and knowing, woven through its link to a maternal other, a hypnotic simultaneity of stitching and unraveling, continually in process, making and unmaking.

ENDS 20 minutes

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Filmography

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943) directed by Maya Deren, with Alexander Hammid [film]. 14 minutes.

These Restless Hands (2012) directed by Kayla Parker [film loop, silent]. Plymouth: Sundog Media. Available: <https://vimeo.com/58640466>