Abigail Child: We Cannot Control the Pacing of this Movie

Gracia Ramirez

Watching an Abigail Child film for the first time feels like being bombed, tricked and tickled all at once. She interweaves seemingly unending arrays of stimuli drawn from the bottomless pile of culture, all sources levelled up. She arranges them in sequences, submit them to layering, constant interruptions and repetitions, like a deejay mixing tracks, or someone tuning the radio, or hopping back and forth between TV channels. Sometimes there is synchrony between sound and image, or some continuity in the ordering of space and time - conventional cinematic cues that prompt the mind to search for meaning, recognise patterns and anticipate effects. But before we get too comfortable and savvy, Child thwarts those expectations and forces us to think again. Her work starts to break new ground in the 1980s, engaging with the cultural voracity of the all-consuming eyes and ears of the multichannel TV generation, and with the DIY attitude and wholesale rejections of punk. Over the last forty years, she has used her multiple creative practices to explore meaning and culture in both serious and playful ways. In this essay I pay attention to a selection of her films, while also bringing on board her poems and theoretical writings for how these provide wider contexts and resonances to her concerns on received cultural forms and conventions. I draw Child's connections with a variety of past and present art movements and traditions, showing her simultaneous refusal and engagement with them and from which the possibilities of revisionism and re-envisioning emerge. I argue that for decades she has been reinvigorating cinema's passion for movement and anticipating key positions within contemporary digital practices. Through Child's work we can see ways in which ideas, texts and audiovisual images are adopted, adapted and shared in popular culture, from which results a sustained argument of how culture is an unfinished product of a never ending process of circulation and connection.

Child and Tradition

In her own writings, Child (2002) has set herself up against the mythopoietic tradition in American avant-garde art represented by the figures of Jackson Pollock and Brakhage and critiqued the idea of the masterwork which has dominated much of our received narratives of modernism. William Wees (2005) has given further implications to these statements by situating Child's work within a fundamental paradigm shift in North American avant-garde/experimental cinema happening in the 1980s. Wees's analysis notes how she set out to unwrite the canon based on the Romantic, Emersonian tradition of American avant-garde male filmmakers by engaging with such tradition in a subversive way. Wees considers Child alongside two other American female filmmakers, Sue Friedrich and Leslie Thornton, for how the three of them, saving their differences, (1) address questions relating to patriarchy, sexuality and gender roles, (2) engage in complex relationships with the media and popular culture, reflecting postmodernist dissolutions of the traditional boundaries between high art and popular culture, and (3) work in series, as in the case of Child, not necessarily chronologically but reflecting a creative cohesion emerging from the overall arrangement of their work.

Child has observed that her inspiration for engaging in an alternative way with history has been driven by "reflecting issues of gender, race, and the influences of jazz, narrativity, language, and structural relations of image and sound. Central to this work is my use of language and narration" (Child, 2002: 182). Indeed, received systems of language or conventional signification and the multiple connections that can be made through ordering and composition are pivotal points of her work. Child departs from a wide understanding of working with found footage. First, it can be "found" in the strictest sense, as in being authored by someone else and belonging to different genres and modes of production such as industrial, educational, pornographic films and home movies, which are then repurposed within the ethos and discourses of film as an art form. Second, her found footage can also be authored by herself but made for different purposes than the film they eventually find themselves in. Third, in other occasions she shoots footage that recreates or re-enacts conventions, narrative tropes and motifs of existing film genres. These materials are "found" in the sense that their conventions pre-exist and are passed on culturally, carrying with them complex perceptual, emotional and ideological relationships. From this standpoint, Child uses montage to dissect and overthrow the seamless appearances of popular media culture and thus expose underlying processes of reading images and processing sounds. If the synchronicity of sound and image is meant to be the basis of realism in sound cinema, she deliberately mismatches, exaggerates or distorts it, which can have simultaneously humorous and jarring effects. If we have learned to read narrative space and time through continuity editing, she alters order, splits the image and reverses space or amplifies how the tempo of images seeks to provoke certain effects. The result is a frenetic yet analytical dance of flashing images, which points to the materiality of meaning and received grammars.

Her method of working and thinking about sound and images, often playful and even violent, is indebted to thinking about freeing form in the way that poetry and music concrète have attempted before. Child, who also writes poetry, takes these influences to reinvigorate the tradition of film poetry as Tom Gunning (2005) has duly noted. In particular, Gunning traces Child's direct engagement with Maya Deren's approach to poetic film structure through horizontal and vertical montage, the first predominant in narrative film, which puts temporal continuity at service of dramatic storytelling and the second, more proper of film poetry, which abounds in interruptions, repetitions and circularity in a way that subverts narrative continuity and allows for concentrating on images and sounds themselves, their energy and configuration. It is through vertical montage, moment by moment juxtapositions, uneven impulses and urges, that thematic connections between the similar and the diverse emerge. In this way Child engages closely with images while positioning them at a distance that allows for questioning their functionality, their received meanings.

Gunning continues explaining that her reactivation of the tradition of film poetry passes the legacies of countercultural and guerrilla filmmaking of the 1960s through the critical reassessment of feminism and structuralism of the 1970s, resulting in what he calls "neoconstructivism." Child's rigorous approach to montage allows for interrogating filmmaking itself from a perspective concerned with the attractions and aversions of cinematic images, updating some of the formalist concerns of the 1920s through the political reclamations and intellectual approaches of the 1970s. It is during this time that Child finishes her studies in History and Literature at Yale and starts making ethnographic documentaries while also getting acquainted with a variety of political and avant-garde filmmakers by attending to the University Film Study Center, Film Forum and the Flaherty

seminar in the East Coast (MacDonald, 2005). She moves to San Francisco in 1976 where she encounters a supportive community of filmmakers and artists and finds inspiration in experimental music and poetry. There she becomes closely involved with alternative cinema culture through her association with Canyon Cinema and her editing of Canyon Cinemanews along with Henry Hills in the later part of the decade. As MacDonald (2008) argues in his history of Canyon Cinema, Child's time as editor of the distributors' newsletter is a turning point in intellectualisation, a moment of inviting reflective polemics and openness to theorisation, which also entails a revision of the North American canon reflected in the debate about the personal versus the structural tradition in avant-garde film. Child's subsequent work will indeed take stoke from the study of the meticulous approach of structural filmmakers like Peter Kubelka and Hollis Frampton, and also from the theorisations of British structural/material filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice, who was then spending time in the US. While these antecedents will inform her approach to visual montage, no one had explored sound the way she wanted to. Furthermore, even if Child engages with the tradition of American found footage filmmakers such as Bruce Conner and Joseph Cornell, her approach to narrative structure and the meaning of images is notably different. I will discuss Cornell further down below, but is also relevant to make some notes on Conner here too. Conner's putting together disparate things, as in the thrilling montage of chases, runs and races of *A Movie* (1958), performs a levelling of relevance that reminds us of how early newsreels compilations were described by radio broadcaster Oscar Levant as "a series of catastrophes followed by a fashion show" (Fielding, 1978: 6). But more distinctively, Conner generally respects climactic structure to create an overarching order of signification as in *A Movie*'s implied understanding of bellicosity as animated by sexual urges. For Child, who belongs to a generation more germane to TV channel hopping, levelling of content is also prominent, but she is more interested in shattering narrative causality and staying away from unequivocal readings. In her films, the step by step demonstrations of scientific and industrial films and their conclusive results, the climaxes of porn, the built-up tension of thrillers and film noir, loose their presupposed essence and purpose. As effect is separated from cause, they become trivial and senseless. Child's focus will be on "messing up" with the continuous world of cause and effect and burst the seemingly seamless.

Series

The pictures aren't linear, and   look at
that   the man
spotlight   this
I love   plates
high, beyond   all day.

(Child, 2005: 201)

Serialisation is a common artistic process and a preferred tool of mass media production. Serial narratives appear in TV programmes, where ongoing storylines, recurrent characters and delayed narrative closure keep audiences attentive over long periods of time. Principles

of serialisation also underpin the ordering of different songs in a music album, where a more abstract conceptualisation organises the diversity of materials and themes included. Certainly, Child's use of series responds more to an interest in the latter than in the former. Her arrangement of individual films into series does not respond to the chronological order of the making or to the temporal development of the action in a story, but an order that offers a conceptual way into the similarities and differences within the treatment of certain motifs and concerns. Notwithstanding, as Maureen Turim (2007) has observed, the small likelihood of seeing a complete series of Child's films, such as *Is This What You Were Born For?* in their intended order makes appreciating the emerging nuances a rather "conceptual project." Even if that is the case, understanding how the process of serialisation underlies this series will bring light to her approach to tradition and the themes of gender and sexuality that emerge in in this series. *Is This What You Were Born For?* compiles seven films made between 1981 and 1989. The series is named after Goya's etching *Was It For This That You Were Born For* (*Para Eso Habéis Nacido*) one of the truly harrowing images that compound *Disasters of the War* (1810-1814), a series of etchings that Goya made in the aftermath of the Peninsular Wars. While *Disasters* was a title not given by Goya but by the Real Academia of San Fernando to the first edition of the series, the artist took pains in ordering the different images that constitute the series and giving a title to each of them (Lafuente Ferrari, 1963). The final arrangement does not respond to the chronological making of the plates nor to a linear narrative about the Wars. The disposition of images reveals thematically connected groups of images depicting similar war-related incidents which were reported by the press at that time: executions, torture, rape, hangings, mass burials, hunger, etc. Similar but varied expressions of horror, cruelty and desolation appear again and again against the backdrop of bleak landscapes and ruined buildings. The settings are only insinuated and in losing their temporal and spatial specificity, they become almost abstract. Goya's *Disasters* are impressionistic fragments of universal reach, a forceful argument on the lack of victors in any war. What is more important in order to understand Child's work relationship with them is that the thematic groupings are irregular: a group of several images belonging to one thematic group have interspersed one or two images from another grouping, breaking the thematic similarity and constantly reminding viewers of the other "disasters". Also importantly, each image is titled by a short and terse sentence which, even if sometimes obliquely, points to the excess of the scenes, and the insufficient reach of language and intellect in the face of such brutalities. The visual cadence of the images is thus punctuated by these few words, inflected by questioning, lamenting, condemnation and wishing tones. The etching from which Child borrows the title for her series presents a man retching over a mass of bodies left in the field after a guerrilla skirmish. Goya finished the vomit coming out of the man's mouth with dry point in order to make deeper incisions so the retching appears more strenuous. The resulting image expresses with liveliness the repulsion that spreads through this man's body in the sight of death. Goya's *Was It For This That You Were Born For* underscores the unchangeable fate of all life and denounces the horror of a life seeing death ensuing from human confrontation. While the original Spanish title can be taken as a laconic statement, Child adds a question mark when borrowing it for her series. *Is This What You Were Born For?* intellectually foregrounds her study of tradition, while questioning Goya's Romantic, tragic view of life with typical postmodern playfulness.

Child could not have missed noticing the disposition of Goya's *Was it For This That You Were Born For* within the *Disasters series.* The image appears among a sequence of plates that portray Spanish women physically resisting the assaults and harassment of French soldiers (*They Do Not Want To*, *Nor They*, *Nor Do These*, *Bitter Presence*). Some plates later

there appear several images that thematically relate to *Was it*, with mounds of mutilated bodies and mass graves signifying the endless dialectic of mutual reprisals between warring factions (*Bury Them And Be Silent*, *Look After Them and Then To Others*, *It Will Be The Same*, *So Much And Even More*, *The Same Elsewhere*), with one striking image of soldiers abusing women among them (*There Is No More Time*). In this light, Child's appropriation of Goya's laconic statement connects her with the painter's strategies of episodic fragmentation, recurrence of visual motifs, fragmentary writing and sound inflections, but Child uses these to question conventions and concepts much more than universalising them. Effectively, Child brings to the fore concerns about gender and sexuality that even if appearing in Goya's work, are often sidelined and essentialised in traditional narratives. Her interest in gender representation is apparent in *Mutiny* (1983), which is placed as part 3 in the *Born For?* series. For *Mutiny,* Child re-edited footage from documentary films she had produced some years ago such as *Game* (1972), *Savage Streets* (1974), and *Between Times* (1976). The final film also included footage of female artists dancing, singing and playing the violin. From the varied source materials, Child selected all sorts of gestures and physical movements and edited them to a collection of disparate sounds such as rings, pings, splashes, scratches, slashes, snippets of conversations and singing intonations. The result is a kaleidoscopic panorama of multifaceted women, a riotous celebration of their energy and unruly diversity. The performative qualities of these women come to the fore, they move mechanically and unpredictably, they are relentless but also contemplative, they have humour and seriousness, they gesture in exaggerated and inscrutable ways, they are evasive and direct, spontaneous and calculated. They appear elastic and rigid, reversible and ecstatic, as if living in a cartoon-like universe governed by different physical laws. Their movements and skits and the accompanying often mismatched sounds are repeated, interrupted and frozen and then reversed and again repeated in loops. The forward directionality of movement is subverted and their purpose sabotaged by looping. A dialogue snippet comments "it doesn't go linearly" and the movement starts again. While it is obvious that images of women in movement predominate this film, images of men, in particular one moving in histrionic way, appear at some points, in the same way that in Goya's *Disasters* a thematically discordant image appears within a sequence of thematically related images. This introduction breaks the self-similarity of the images of women and subverts a too linear reading of femininity that the film could insinuate.

Loops, Glitches and the Power of the Digital

Child's recourse to audiovisual loops instils a tireless energy to her mash-up of images and sound. They also become more relevant as they enact a fascination with cinematic movement which has also been recovered by digital media forms. Lev Manovich's (2001) pioneering study of digital media argues that in its materiality and logical organisation, as well as its cultural forms, digital media takes much of the early cinematic and avant-garde film strategies. Manovich notes the looped character of many protocinematic devices but sees that these were soon relegated to "the low-art realms of the instructional film, pornographic peep-show and animated cartoon" (2001: 315) as narrative cinema's linearity and progressive ordering towards resolution became the dominant form. Manovich then observes that looping is an operation at the basis of key programming instructions such as if/then and repeat/while. In this light, we can see that Child's longstanding marvel and investigation of movement and looping was enthused when realising the potential of digital technology to engage with the loop. She anticipated how this would become part of its vernacular language at user level in

some of the thoughts and reflections recorded in 2000 and included in ‘Handcrank That Globalism: A Digi-Dialogue’ (2007). In this writing, Child ponders on digital imaging, editing, archiving and dissemination. When comparing analogue to digital editing, Child sees that the latter is cheaper and faster as the same software acts as printer and composer and so the opportunities for copying and doubling become endless. At this point she makes a strong connection with the idea and purposes of looping. She notes that in digital editing “repetition becomes a governing principle (...) If you choose an ‘in’ and ‘out’ point to make a loop, you can play it immediately. This laser-like slip to the beginning - the cyclical repetition - satisfies some primeval loop-need in all us” (2007: 113). Such statement reveals Child’s deep involvement with the pleasures of repetition, which she follows by an acknowledgement of loop’s potential for critical analysis, mentioning what Dara Birnbaum did in *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978/1979), where the architect-turned artist used analogue looping to investigate gender stereotypes in the TV show.

Following from the reflections on the looping affordances of digital compositing and printing, Child elaborates on the multiplicity of copies and versions that can emerge through the possibility of immediate feedback on image creation, and the potential for inserting titles and text at the very time of ideation. This potential is now realised in memes and macros, digital forms that have become extremely popular from the 2000 to the present. Memes and macros are examples of repetition and text modification which abandon the idea of fidelity, fecundity and fertility of Richard Dawkins’ original notion of the meme and instead thrive on alteration (Lankshear and Knobel, 2019). They offer opportunities for users to become creative producers and debunk ideas of originality and authorship in endlessly proliferating images. Significantly too, today’s popularity of animated gifs, which stand for graphic interchange form, speaks of the pleasures of repetition identified by Child. Gifs concentrate attention in a potentially endless repetition of the same movement or gesture. Looping again renders of no consequence causality or forward direction beyond the looped movement. But the pleasure of gifs is not the appearance of movement only. Gifs work as emotional communication. They are used to comment and express reactions, they are part of the everyday literacy of online communications, especially in the quick emotional temporalities of instant messaging. Often times, the ways that gifs communicate emotionally are intertextual, invoking a wide range of cultural trends and texts drawn from popular movies and TV programmes. But the pleasure of gifs’ loops resides in concentrating on gesture and movement more than recognising the cultural references, as you do not need to know their origin to use them, and the way they are used can also be random and subvert emotional purpose. They can be trivial, frivolous or just silly. They are easily embedded and shared, and with gif generators, easy to make and alter by oneself, just as Child predicted in her text.

Child’s thoughts on image compositing lead her to consider the changes in her time at the editing bench, how a new set of body movements and performative habits have emerged and take place through digital interfaces. These new habits seem to drift away from the materiality and contacts of the real body. Child thus questions “how to negotiate the fear of the human body disappearing into the Net? We have incorporated -taken into the body, into our day - the ephemeral, distance, pause button and absence. We use it to ‘get closer’” (2007: 121). These insights on an outdated body and our desire to communicate and connect within digital environments have been fully developed by the generation of digital natives for whom it is second nature to pause with a light tap, select by click and drag, zoom in and out with a pinch, swipe right to move on, or continue scrolling down until the image has disappeared

from the visible surface of the screen, a surface which has a bewildering multiplicity never thought of before. Legacy Russell's manifesto *Glitch Feminism* (2020) is such an example, as Russell reflects on having grown aware of the difference between visible identities outside the net space and the fluid and gender-defying "corpo-realities" of chatrooms and virtual environments. As Russell talks about the visibility and invisibility of bodies in digital spaces, she proposes taking advantage of the glitches in the system to experiment with noncisgender heteronormativity, something that, she states, has been fundamental for a generation of non-white, female identifying, queer people, growing up online: "Within glitch feminism, glitch is celebrated as vehicle of refusal, a strategy of non-performance. This glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body" (Russell, 2020: 19). But this is not a complete refusal of the physical space but a proposition to embark onto practices and negotiate identities harnessing the power emerging from online spaces. As Child (2012: 52) has acknowledged elsewhere, the contemporary aesthetic "incorporates discrepancy, error, and a vortex or physicality of difference and dislocation." Such are the strategies and positions exploited by the artists identified by Russell in her recent manifesto.

The dematerialisation of the body is for Child (2007: 111) concomitant with that of the digital image. She states

> the materiality of the image means very little on digital. You are viewing a recomposed material. You are working against density. Content becomes king, externalized, broad lines of action – that's all you can see. Different areas of interest come into play – including accessibility, large swaths of data, an array of possible structures, repetition and reproduction.

Since we are viewing recomposed material, how data is accessed is the determining aspect. This insight is also gathered by Manovich who speaks of the database as a cultural form with infinite possibilities for retrieval but relying on our capacity to access and sort through records. This capacity to have many different entries and vantage positions results in the proliferation of experiences and meanings, something which for long has been a driving force within Child's exploration of the power of certain repertoire of images to seduce, upset and provoke.

The Pulsating Image

> "We cannot move. We cannot control the pacing or mind of this movie. The lost echo attached to the image intensifies the tension is an erotic heartbeat. Give it to me. The cons for that are very strong. I mean chance has nothing to do with it."
>
> (Child, 1989)

As much as Child is interested in motion, she brings her attention to emotion. In particular, the emotion conveyed through cinematic images. This appears clearly in *Perils* (1986), part 4 of Born For?, which is made with footage shot by Child following the tropes of silent thriller and gangsters movies, even using the lot in Rivington Street where D. W. Griffith shot *Musketeers of the Pig Alley* (1913) in New York (MacDonald, 2005). The actors in Child's movie perform keyed up genre conventions to communicate suspicion, distrust,

uncontrollable desire and moments of explosive violence. Jerky, accelerated movements redolent of silent era films are created through undercracking (Wees, 2005). The narrative is marked by intertitles and cliffhangers, another nod to the popular silent serial *The Perils of Pauline* (1914). But even if the presence of intertitling devices invokes some order and sense of progression, images do not deliver from them so they only frustrate comprehension, which reminisces of the non sequiturs of the surrealist classic *An Andalusian Dog* (Luís Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929). *Perils* footage was originally shot as part of *Mayhem* (1987), which will appear as part 6 of *Born For?* but the footage made it into a different film due to the differing quality of the film stock in which the images of *Perils* had been shot (MacDonald, 2005). However, in its finished form *Perils* has a distinctive identity, becoming a homage to the pulsating violence of silent thrillers, while *Mayhem* goes deeper into exploring the visual codes and soundscapes of film noir.

For *Mayhem* Child focused on the universe of repressed sexuality of film noir. Working both with found footage and staged scenes with actors, film noir style is strongly marked by black and white photography, shadows cast over settings and characters, and coded poses like a women spreading her legs as a sign of danger. An combination of typically "noir" sounds (Butler, 2002) also features prominently in the soundtrack: footsteps on the floor, creaky doors, recurrent jazz phrases and orchestral arrangements which evoke the ominous and frenzied sonic universe we associate with film noir. For the first part, Child concentrates on the magnetism and power embodied by the femme fatale, the microgestures that stand for invitation to desire or forbid access to the object. This attention to sexualised body language makes explicit the dynamic of sexual tension and consummation that animates film noir narratives. Luhr (2012) has noted that the most paradigmatic film noir narratives are marked by a sense of doom and anticipation of tragic resolution, something that diminishes audiences' interest in the outcome but positions them as voyeurs of gender power games between the weak man and the femme fatale. As a result, Luhr argues that the appeal of noir is based "on masochistic erotics of doom, its ability to draw audiences into nightmare like, paranoid narratives of degeneration and failure" (Luhr, 2012: 6). Significantly, Child foregrounds the masochistic aspects of noir and subverts its typical heteronormativity by constructing a narrative that starts from stressing conventional gender coding, followed by sex scenes where men and women engage in a variety of polyvalent sex play including mild forms of S&M. The film finishes with more explicit porn footage where "the man peeking at the women having sex gestures at the audience in collaboration" (Child, in MacDonald, 2005: 217). This nod at audience complicity found in the original porn footage fascinated Child, who saw this element of reflexivity of the porn movie, its underscoring of spectators' voyeuristic position, as a suitable ending to her implosion of film noir's undercurrents of repressed sexuality. *Mayhem* is certainly not an easy and straightforward film, as evidenced by its rejection by feminists in screenings and conferences and censorship by PBS in the 1980s (MacDonald, 2005). Tom Gunning (2005: xvii) has remarked the "dirty" character of *Mayhem,* as "the excess energies given off by Hollywood (and other international cinemas) in genres of gender conflict (the melodrama, the thriller, the film noir), seem distilled here, yielding a final grimy residue, rather than being wiped away by a narrative resolution." It is important to note that it does not seem to be Child's aim to generalise about masochism being the general principle behind film noir nor to moralise about it. In her text 'Melodrama and Montage' Child states her drive "to collect, destroy, and reconstruct the vocabulary of the body" (2005: 21-22) but she does not aim to do so in a search for purity and transcendence, as the modernist paradigm would dictate, or to simply anatomise the surface workings of style. Her intent is to address the repressed position of women and reposition them, hence

taking a political stance that emerges from the interaction between stability and transgression in her approach to existing images.

Melodrama's Convictions

> "An occurrence that is an *accident* versus a *deluge*. To substitute one thing for another. To intoxicate and suggest - the essential method of the fiction film approximates it to a religious influence, and makes it possible after a certain time to keep a man in a permanent state of over-excited unconsciousness. *Full of beauty and convincing realism*." (Child. 2005: 31)

To and No Fro (2005), made in collaboration with Mónica de la Torre, reworks *A Woman Without Love* (1952), one of the movies Luís Buñuel made in Mexico and that he characterised as "quite simply, the worst movie I ever made" (Buñuel, 2002: 202). *A Woman Without Love* was meant to be a frame by frame remake of *Pierre and Jean* (Andre Cayatte, 1943) a successful movie based on a Guy de Maupassant story which concentrated on the drama of a woman trapped on an unhappy marriage, but Buñuel managed to take it and run with it somewhere he was not even too sure of. Child's take on the remake is an exercise on the plasticity of the original images, soundtrack and montage so to expose its surreal melodramatic excess. The film starts with soaring theatrical music over the title, announcing rising emotionality already threatening to burst open what has been contained under the surface of reality. For this film, Child mostly respects the original soundtrack's synchronisation to the image, so when she spins around and the loops sound, as it will appear in numerous occasions, the image does the same, or vice versa. As the music turns from suspenseful to sentimental, different shots of a couple moving right to left appear twice. This discontinuous sequence disrupts the illusion of continuity of space but establishes the couple, in a more abstract sense, as the driving force behind the film. The following sequences abound in sensational sentences ("I think you don't love me as I thought","I talk to you as if to myself"), punctuated by gestures of yearning, getting close and withdrawing. Looping this snippets of the dialogue, Child brings up the excess in Buñuel's melodramatic approach and exhausts it by making it circle around itself. This overturns the promised revelation and emotional release of the melodramatic universe. Melodrama is "a hot aesthetic, antidotal to the cool posture of Western neutrality (objectivity)" Child states (2005: 23). The looping exaggerates melodrama's heat at the same time that it cools it down. An intertitle brings the action "thirty years later" as if delivering from the seeds planted in the opening part, but the narrative does not really connect. The sequence focuses on confrontation and entanglement due to jealousy between two women of different professional status. Here Child splits the screen to concentrate on one side of the image and mirrors it with its reversal, creating some sort of symmetry. She then introduces a later image on the other side of the screen, thus subverting the common use of split screens to convey simultaneity. Next, Child loops images where there are quick changes in the direction of movements within the screen, noting the hurried emotional tempo of rising passions and resistance. This speeding up anticipates the following dance sequence among duly expectant respectable dinner guests. This is set in a ball room where they are ordered "to enjoy and relish." The couple loop-dances to Richard Strauss' *The Blue Danube,* each consecutive loop reversed, inverted and zoomed in. The

rhythm of this sequence is underscored by Child with parts of a text in Spanish flashing on the screen at intervals, as if not wanting to reveal it all at once, and creating anticipation at the same time that keeping a beat, a sort of announcement made with fanfare. Finally, the text is fully revealed and repeated "queremos pastel" ("we want cake"), what could be taken as a reversal of the famous dictum "Let them eat cake", wrongly attributed to Marie Antoinette to characterise the monarch as an insensitive selfish in the face of the hungry French. Here again the montage of images feels as if speeding up to match the tempo of the music. The whirlwind of images of this sequence creates a dizzying sensation which puts into relief the intoxicating quality of waltz and its use in this melodrama. While dancing partners are kept at an arm's distance in order to maintain balance, the moving sensation of the couple spinning at unison peaks up in synchrony with the rushing final passage of the waltz, and the partners finish with a flushed lateral embrace to the ecstatic applause of the public. Child (2005: 1) presents this film as one where "the text speaks, the scene looks". In this light, we can see that the text "we want cake" ventriloquises the underlying drama of the collectivity, whose wish to eat is fulfilled in the following sequence of images of food being served in a softly choreographed movement that displays bountiful trays of food before the controlling eye of the camera on the way to the table. As Norbert Elias (1982) demonstrated, the intently display of affluence, bodily propriety and social desirability that takes centre stage in the modern ritual of dining is a reflection of the progressive civilisation of emotions in Western societies. We can appreciate how Child magnifies the way in which Buñuel cast his surreal eye on the sublimations of middle class dining, something that he would later refine in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). Child's critique of conformism and inaction ensues as the text reads "hunger and loneliness are the best remedies against rebels." Alluding to precarity and alienation as disempowering conditions, this part connects the film with Child's ongoing concerns with how popular media forms reproduce conforming behaviours and normalise emotions, thus shaping our consciousness. In the final segment,"That Fall", we see images of the desolated woman who has lost appetite due to unhappiness, her worries and loneliness looped. The ending, resonating with sombre musical tones, implies she is not completely alone but being looked after another woman, the maid, thus bringing to attention ethics of care and sisterhood across classes. This ending is seemingly anticlimactic but it could also stand as a statement on Child's revisionism of Buñuel. Child splits the image of the maid's figure stoking the fire on one side and walking out of the room through a corridor positioned centrally within the frame. She confronts one half of the image with its reversal to create a mirroring effect which behaves very much like a kaleidoscope due to the very movement of the maid across the space. The image thus appears elasticated, as if stretching from the sides and pulled into the centre to end up going back to an original non duplicitous one where there is only one maid leaving through the back end of the room. This makes the mirrored image and the original virtually meet in the end, making Buñuel's and Child's visions converge. *To and No Fro* is a film that pushes further in a more iconoclastic way Buñuel's take on middle class conventions and female loneliness. Due to the prominence of selected dialogue snippets and the musical soundtrack, it is the text that "speaks." Giving minute attention to elements of mise-en-scene, it is the scene that "looks" in a detached way and plays upon itself in an exalted awareness of its own staging and malleability.

For Child, melodrama as well as other media forms are a fundamental part of the consciousness industries, the term coined by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in 1974, synthetising some of the earlier ideas on mass media and capitalism of the Frankfurt School. In 'Melodrama and Montage' Child follows some of these insights, stating that "media have

become the frame of life (one hears the ‘frame of reference’ – the sign *is* the life), governing the activities that live outside the frame. The ‘managed’ war(s), our spectatorship, our relation to ‘entertainment’ – soaps, sports, film and attendant empathies distributed throughout the Star System as ´News’ – attest to the psychic/perceptual regime under which we Citizens exist” (2005: 19). Shifting the roles of these media forms and their intended effects is her tactic for enabling other meanings and forms of consciousness to emerge, something that in more recent years has taken aim at received narratives of the past.

Shattering Lineal History

> “On the walls of buildings were proclamations: ‘What does the red star signify?’ Because he can spin a yarn with such suspense, such innuendos. And then there opened up before me the gates of a universe which I scarcely dare dream about. Oh, come on. The weather is good to stand in line. If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past when even in brief flashes people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win.” (Child, 1996: 29)

The Future is Behind You (2005) is part of The Suburban Trilogy, which deals with the vectors of history and power propelling the stories of girls growing up into specific gender roles. Like *Covert Action* (1984) before, *The Future is Behind You* makes use of the intimate format of the home movie. But if *Covert Action* was was an exploration of difference through the interactions between two couples’ gendered bodies, as pointed out by Gunning (2006), the montage of images and texts of *The Future is Behind You* foregrounds a subjectivist perspective on family bonds and history that make it appear more like a traditional film essay, a genre which according to Timothy Corrigan (2007: 13) “describes the many layered activities of the personal point of view as a personal experience.” In order to realise this, Child reworks footage of a Bavarian family from the interwar period onwards. The family events portrayed by the camera are interwoven with a linear historical chronology of the dates that marked the fate of European Jewish during the period. The thread bringing the private and the public together and the imprint of perspective in time is a text that appears like the memories of a woman, punctuating the images and engaging sometimes obliquely with the historical landmarks. The subjectivist text recounts her coming of age and relationship to her sister, underlining their rites of passage and other special occasions marked by the expectations around gender. We see images of two girls playing fancy dress games and performing for the camera, underscored by a text making observations such as “I was seven, Ellie was ten.” Frequents kisses and physical proximity with family and friends are stressed by “I learned to kiss girls”. The personal chronology is also intertwinned with the progressive stigmatisation of Jewish people and with the family life’s entanglement with pervasive Nazi ideology, like the mother’s cross country walking (the widespread “wandervogel” movement), the rising antisemitism that progressively threatens the family: “Ellie refused to salute”, “my family remains silent about why Grandmama Rosa took her own life” and militarisation: “I recall little other than marches, parades and processions”, thus evoking the sudden changes but also slow erosions that prepared the ground for the Holocaust through fear, acquiescence and silence. After the Nazi’s establishment of identity

cards, the text reads "one doesn't understand oneself" pointing indirectly to the difficulty in accepting the categories under which others place oneself, a feeling further reiterated with more emotion in "I am ashamed that I do not belong" which also echoes a repressed queer sexuality.

The text uses passages by Victor Klemperer, W.G. Sebald, Walter Abish, the US Patriot Act and Child's own writings. The amalgamate of voices and styles makes the voice of the fictitious woman's memoirs dilute into other voices, finding origin and resonance in other people and different times, becoming anachronistic and allowing for reversing the meaning of the title to "The Past is Ahead of You." This reversal appears poignantly when texts flash on the screen with fragments of the US Patriot Act of 2001. The texts refer to detentions and deportations, levies on assets, etc, that can be applied to those "guilty by association." These quotations trace a parallelism between the restrictions on property, wealth and movement of the Nazi Racial Laws and George W. Bush's response to the 9/11 attacks which led to racial profiling and skirted constitutional guarantees in the name of protecting civil society. Needless to say, the excesses of the Act came hand in hand with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq which have only brought more death and instability to the areas as we can still witness in 2021. Furthermore, the effective consequences of the Act's "relaxation" of the US constitution have been revealed in the indefinite detentions without trial and tortures happening in Guantánamo Prison around the time of Child's making of this film.

In *The Future is Behind You* text and soundtrack speak for stories not fully voiced or explored, raising the volume of a historically silenced queer sensibility, seeing the political past pregnant with the present and vice versa. Nevertheless, these stories are not overdetermined, as the disjunctions in the film's text allow for contradictions to coexist, and we can imagine elements of resistance and complicity within the family, and non-monolithic narratives come to the fore, as in the final comments on the occupation of Palestine: "I cannot help but sympathise with the Arabs whose land is being 'bought'." The film simultaneously uses the forms of history, its chronologies and watershed moments, and the forms of memory, its tentativeness and shifting positions between the personal and the collective lived experience where the public and the private intersect. From these non-linear workings between the seen and the not-seen, between present and past, a different relationship with time emerges.

Re-enactment as Activation

In the last decade Child has been part of a collective project aimed at the recovery of the almost forgotten life and art of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. *The Filmballad of Mamadada* (2013) is a collective film made by more than fifty filmmakers to re-envision the personality and artistic legacy of Baroness Elsa. Elsa was a Dadaist of the New York circle whose figure, Amelia Jones (2004: 9) notes, is "a sign of the ruptures on the social and gender fabric during this highly charged period." Jones goes on to argue that Elsa must be considered a major exponent of "Irrational Modernism" a counterpoint to the masculine rational sublimations that Modernist aesthetics and historical accounts are more frequently associated with. In its own making, *The Filmballad* project recovers historical Elsa as well as

the dada/surrealist strategy of assembling the different film segments by the various authors in an "exquisite corpse" manner. Moreover, its finishing, marketing and distribution followed a crowdfunding campaign that reflects contemporary approaches to involving audiences in the production and dissemination of the film. Henry Jenkins (2006) has called these processes forms of participatory culture which proliferate in the networked environments of digital media and are enabled by the easy to use technologies of web 2.0. These processes are potentially more democratic in the way that they can involve audiences not merely as passive consumers. *The Filmballad* project also thrives on the encyclopaedic possibilities of internet and its possibility to hold a space for historical figures representing less well-known trajectories of art and feminism. In particular, Child's contribution aligns her own work to this lineage of irrational modernism for her questioning of gender binaries without providing easy answers.

Child's segment, *elsa MERDELAMERMERDELAMER* (2013), departs from the re-enactment of a performance where Elsa shaved her pubic hair for a film shot by Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp (Gammell, 2002). Unfortunately, the film negative of this performance did not make it beyond the rubbish can where it was put to develop. The film had been winded onto a disc hammered with nails in radiating circles by Duchamp but once inside the liquid the reel stuck together and was lost. Nevertheless, some of Elsa's poses survive in a photograph that Man Ray included in a letter sent to Tristan Tzara around June 1921 where the former announced the end of New York Dada. The letter is headlined by the writing "MERDELAMERMERDELAMER de l'a merique", itself a pun on sea (mer), shit (merde) and America. Interestingly, the headlining pun incorporates the Man Ray image where Elsa's flaunts her body emphasising the triangular shapes of her pubis and arms, shapes that double for America's capital A. In the letter, Man Ray asserts that the city of New York is intrinsically Dada for its restless, uncontainable energy, represented in the missive by the hyperkinetic, machine-like articulation of the Baroness' body, her multiple and explicit sexuality. Despite its undoubtedly original character, New York Dada had failed to sell to collectors, Man Ray further declares. It had to henceforth remain secret and unruly, he sentenced by the end, implying paradoxically, that due to its commercial failure New York Dada would remain truly Dada. Gammel's reading of Elsa's surviving pose in the photo presents her figure against the history of the representation of female bodies in Western art, where the female nude often appears demure and sealed, with signs of liminality between exterior and interior eroded. In this light, Elsa's activation of her "muse" body, her public shaving of her pubic hair, her showing of the artifice behind conventional nude representations appears too pornographic and radical. Elsa described the performance as "--aggressive-- virile extraordinary—ante-stereotyped" (Gammel, 2002 :292). It could be considered a subversive feminist performance, as it defies easy categorisation and might not go down well in the eyes of feminists fixated on restricted notions of the male gaze. Elsa's figure thus stands as a contradiction and the perfect illustration of the impossible cultural and institutional viability of the most irrational aspects of Dada.

Child's recovery of this episode in the history of Dada forces us to readdress the history of Modernism, in particular in the U.S. Child's segment exemplifies many of the methods and running concerns of her previous work. It is an appropriation and reactivation of existing materials which subvert gendered and normative perceptions of female bodies. The re-enactment of Elsa's script in Child's film re-envisions the procedures and intentionality of Elsa's original performance, engaging and challenging audiences to ascertain its meaning.

The film opens with a negative black and white shot of a mechanical device, maybe a part of a harvesting vehicle. The device repetitively moves, referencing the perfectly functioning machines of industrial capitalism. But we hear the droning sound of an engine alongside the creaking sound of a hinge which betrays a dysfunctional mechanism, a threat to order and purpose. This introduces an element of irrationality that Jones (2004) sees symptomatic of the desublimating nature of Elsa's approach. The subtle grisailles of the machine's negative shot softly melt with an out of focus image which then sharpens to reveal a close up of a male pubis with a flaccid penis, a shot where black and white values are also reversed. The camera reframes slightly into the area of the pubic hair and very subtly the shot fades out behind the superimposed image of a female pubis. The commonalities between the female and the male pubis are here reinforced by the reversed black and white photography, which reduces chromatic values to tones, while the subtle merging together of the two shots makes sexual difference fluid. After the image stabilizes into the female pubis, superimposed images of a silent movie appear. A hyperkinetic Gloria Swanson performs as comic damsel in distress. She is lying on bed dressed in a night gown and tries to fight off a mosquito but finds herself trapped by the mosquito net and only clumsily she is able to release herself. Next, the shot of the pubis becomes more visible again, this time with a pair of scissors clipping the hair to the animated rhythm of a jazz score, while the sound of fingers snapping keep to the beat of the cutting scissors. Superimposed, we see intermittent shots of Gloria listening to a gramophone, lighting up a cigarette, looking sideways, and rolling her eyes dramatically. These gestures are interspersed with shots of gentlemen hands and feet tapping, edited to make feel that they are increasingly impatient while sometimes their fingers seem to be touching the female pubis. The music turns suspenseful and we see exteriors shots of rain falling over a rooftop and overflowing a water pipe. A quick montage of images ensues, with Gloria being forcefully taken and gagged. The energy of the images increase with shots of rainwater, falling furiously and creating pools. This old and rough footage starts to deteriorate and melt, while the pubis reappears lathered in shaving foam. The succeeding images go back to the exterior shots of the heavy rainfall and some interiors where apprehensive Gloria looks through the window, and a rapid sequence of superimposed images of an increasingly distressed Gloria throwing her arms up and down and desperately supplicating. At this point, the music changes to a more upbeat tango which again reminds of *An Andalusian Dog* with a negative image of Gloria's close up superimposed. Her face is framed by soft wavy hair, eyes, nose and mouth appear as graphic slits into a mask as if coldly looking at the turbulent sequence of images of the damsel in distress in front of her. Meantime, the shaving session finishes and the shots of the out of focus penis appear again. The close-up of Gloria then dominates, looking like a feline resting after a hunt. Shots of falling water ensue and the sound of the hinge announces an abrupt end.

When watching a digital copy of *elsa* from the comfort of one's own device, we have the capacity to pause and rewind to appreciate the laborious montage sound and images that compose its meagre 4 minutes. Throughout the film meaning condensates through superimposed images of different or similar visual densities, dialectics, metaphorical allusions and intertextuality. From the latter, I would like to draw some observations. The moment when the footage seems to deteriorate reminds of the aesthetics of Bill Morrison's celebrated *Decasia* (2002), a reminder of the fragility of film materials from the silent film era to which Gloria Swanson and Elsa belonged, and in particular to the fate of the Man Ray/Duchamp film with Elsa's original performance. Additionally, the decaying footage makes shapes looks like spheres, very much like the sun that eventually falls into a pool after the eclipse in Joseph Cornell's film *Rose Hobart* (1936), the sun that in a surreal magic act,

bounces back to its original position. But this is not the only comparison that can be made between Cornell's canonical found footage film and Child's *elsa*. The selection of gestures and expressions of Gloria Swanson inevitably reminds of Cornell's attention to Rose Hobart's performance in *East of Borneo* (1931). It is worth looking at these coincidences and departures so to bring into relief Child's own take on the found object and canonical avant-garde male figures such as Cornell and less canonical female ones such as Elsa. Cornell's selections from the original film abandoned all interest in storyline, just selecting passages where Hobart appeared. He slowed down the running of the footage to silent speed, thus allowing spectators to concentrate on how Hobart's gestures and presence exuded sexual tension at the same time that he created an eerie effect. Inter-edited with shots of a documentary of an eclipse and projected through a blue glass, these further added to the spooky atmosphere with nocturnal tones. Cornell played the film to a Brazilian music record, which gave it a greater aura of kitsch exoticism and capriciousness. This is apparent from the start where the visual atmosphere of threat and mystery is counterpointed by the sweet flute and light drums of the music while a singer imitates the song of a parrot. The lightness and playfulness of the "Papagayo" song contrasts with the eeriness of the slowed camera movement approaching sleeping Hobart, tossing in bed while the watchful camera floats over her.

Both films retain continuity in some passages, as in *elsa*'s shot in front of and behind the window where Gloria looks at the rain following the exterior shots of pouring water on the rooftop. Nevertheless, these grammars are shattered in most parts of the film for different purposes. P. Adams Sitney (1996: 74) notes that Cornell takes the ideal "beauty of a brave and boyish" performance of Rose Hobart and slows it down so to see grace in her protracted motion. This stands against the accelerated and awkward feminine Gloria, who falls prey to her chasers and appears gagged and tied. These repetitions condense her figure as the damsel in distress, an stereotype of Hollywood movies often criticised by feminists for its passivity, which is mocked through exaggeration here. While distressed Gloria is accelerated in her positive version, it comes to a point after much adversity where her negative image appears restful and observant, standing at a distance from the captive self. This opposite attitude plays against the sometimes foreground, sometimes background of the interchangeable male and female pubis and the process of shaving the pubic hair.

Sitney also argues about the significance of the eclipse in Cornell's movie, the final montage where the sun falls into a pool. For him, this moment invokes a powerful thought and thrill into our imagination "the dreadful consequences of a world which has lost its sun" (1996: 76). In *elsa*, the natural event is the deluge, which happens half-way through. Even if there is a rousing moment where the superficial roughness of the film seems to melt and the images dissolve, this is not a grand finale followed by a restoration of order by the magic act of the sun bouncing back as it does in *Rose Hobart*. In *elsa* the water keeps falling, overflowing and the image of Gloria is reversed to an observant one. Life carries on as a cataclysm, and while dysfunctionality and irrationality are ongoing, distressed Gloria is counterbalanced by her opposite. The sound of a hinge closes down the film, framing it as if we had peeked inside an old box filled with remnants of toys and random stuff, just like the boxes Cornell wonderfully assembled like controlled fantasies and guarded against forgetting and further decay. The ghosts of Baroness Elsa and Gloria Swanson are made present through the reanimating magic of the moving image and re-enactment, re-envisioned under different lights, activated for

their endless energy and unexplainable irrationality. They are redeemed from unequivocal readings of their identity and femininity and kept in a box closed until we press start again.

To conclude, the work of Abigail Child offers a prismatic view and different access points into issues and attitudes as relevant now as they were forty years ago. From struggles for defining gender and against rationalising sexuality, to questioning social conventions and received narratives of the past. Whether through writing poetry, making her films, or writing about culture in general, Child is an artist trying "to turn her reader or viewer away from his or her complacent surroundings with everything she does" (Jones, 2008: 85). Her take on the contemporary is revisionist, reinscribing irrationality into modernism, as well as forward looking, as she has been long practising with her films and addressing with her writings and poetry the importance of keep on moving and staying multiple.

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A Woman Without Love (Luís Buñuel, 1952)

The Exterminating Angel (Luís Buñuel,1962)

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Game (Abigail Child, 1972)

Savage Streets (Abigail Child, 1974)

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Perils (Abigail Child, 1986)

Mayhem (Abigail Child,1987)

The Future Is Behind You (Abigail Child, 2004)

To and No Fro (Abigail Child, 2005)

elsaMERDELAMERDELAMER (Abigail Child, 2013)

Rose Hobart (Joseph Cornell, 1931)

Musketeers of the Pig Alley (D. W. Griffith, 1913)