



**THE FAILURE TO ASSIMILATE: The Video Works of Cecilia Dougherty**

Thread Waxing Space, New York

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The effort to consider the works of Cecilia Dougherty creates a linguistic and semiotic conundrum. There is an exacting language for the dominant and minor codes of film, video, and television production. Yet 25 years into the discourse, experimental video art tends to remain only loosely signified. How can we catalog the complex language of video-graphic signs that operate outside of mainstream media? How can we codify an aesthetic that deliberately resists formal assimilation and defies facile interpretation?

Near the conclusion of Cecilia Dougherty's video *My Failure to Assimilate* (1995), we see a series of shaky, hand-held, telephoto shots. Taken from a rooftop, Dougherty's camera points down towards a nondescript street. Initially, the image reads as casual, mundane. However, as the shot develops in time, a subtle friction emerges between its different representational modes. What begins as everyday voyeurism develops into the precarious instability of the stolen, lonely view. In their unique and often misread form, Cecilia Dougherty's videos signify a visual/aural Other. Her rigorous and highly evolved discourse operates across multiple axes of identification: addressing viewers as both marginalized and central, collective and complicated.

Geographer Yi Fu Tuan describes experience as a "cover-all," the one term that colors the "various modes through which a person knows and constructs reality." ¶ In the body of work before us, the radical infusion of video's formal properties with lesbian content becomes the architecture of a fantastic, experiential narrative space.

One of the most striking experiences of watching this work is the juxtaposition between personal and public space. *Claudia* (1987) introduces this tension between psychic space and geographic place as it intercuts between two distinct environments. A lone plane travels through the sky, cars creep slowly across a freeway in traffic. Like a lyrical establishing shot, these muted post-industrial landscapes create an emotional tone and sociopolitical context for the intimacy and vulnerability of the lesbian domestic interior. Although we never see the outside world represented in *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* (1991), we feel its presence and witness its dramatic impact. The interiors are claustrophobic, dysfunctional, but always familiar. In *My Failure to Assimilate*, conversation, experience and descriptive memory are collaged together to create a range of intimate, disjunctive portraits. These subjective states are contrasted with a contemplative voyeurism. In this context, simple street scenes and exteriors take on mythic proportions.

The formal elements of this experience are resolutely video-graphic. In the true spirit of early feminist video art, the material of life itself is foregrounded. Framing, bodies and the time and space of everyday life are essential, featured. Electronic processing creates metaphors for emotional states. The flowers in *My Failure* are lush, saturated and strobed so that camera movements leave a lasting memory. As two girlfriends discuss the complexities of a visible lesbian identity, their image is parceled and stacked in neat horizontal pieces. This painterly use of color and tex-

ture is a recurring element. In *Joe-Joe*, geometric transitions and psychedelic wipe effects punctuate the one exterior scene. Here, in a love note to the hot and color-saturated video signal, the activity of color rivals the activity of people. Image processing also becomes a device with which to suggest duration and create situation. Shot entirely through the purview of a pixel vision camera, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* speaks with texture, contrast and light. Its videography signifies both a surreal, imagined landscape and the stripped-down truth-look of cinema vérité.

Throughout these works Dougherty eschews the disembodied voice-over as establishing shot. Instead she creates experience through the camera's aural and physical presence. This is a mournful and celebratory soundscape. In *Claudia*, the sportscaster's play by play provides an ironic aural juxtaposition to the sex that is happening on the bed. His voice serves them, their image overpowers him and he is successfully appropriated. In *The dream and the waking* (1997), the outside world is harder to deny. The inescapable drone of the radio and the noisy commodified landscape are strident reminders of invisibility and absence within larger cultural discourses.

These exterior and interior spaces are in constant dialogue with a larger historical discourse. Dougherty's videos shift queer representation from air-brushed, mainstreamed love stories to challenging explorations of identity, language and passion. Dougherty's acting and directing strategies are relentless – deadpan, pastiche and drained of affect. This is performance as material, post-Warholian but seeped in vulnerability and emotion. With minimalist mise-en-scene and cinematography, Dougherty and her collaborators transport us: to London in the 60s, to Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the early 80s, to the Mission as literary hot bed. As an experimental artist Dougherty shapes context and builds experience without the hand-me-downs of narrative film language. She processes popular culture and domestic experience through a rich realm of reality-infused fantasy that is the outsider's prerogative.

Through these diverse strategies, a trajectory of experimental, fractured narratives revises cultural history from a distinctly feminist, lesbian and anti-assimilationist position. Popular culture is imagined like a two-way mirror in which multiple subjectivities reflect, survey, and recreate contemporary history. The effects of this mirroring shift throughout Dougherty's 25 videos. At its most fantastic, this device literally makes doubles. In *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, the actors virtually embody Dougherty's own life story. In *Joe-Joe*, the doubling effect works to centralize and celebrate marginalized experience. As Judith Halberstam writes, "Joe and Joe are doubled in order to strengthen the power of the lesbian image...in a method of radical repetition that undermines the primacy of heterosexual or masculinist culture and imposes a new layer upon the surfaces of conventional history and representation."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to historical critique, these tapes seek to privilege intimate relationships within representations of daily life. Yet in more recent works, the psychic impact of the replication effect – so often an analogy for lesbian relationships – suggests another kind of blurring, with its own problems. In particular, the failure of language to truly bridge subjectivities and the inherent contradictions of co-existence. Whereas *Joe-Joe* envisions utopian spaces, *My Failure to Assimilate* and *The dream and the*

*waking* allude to the pitfalls and complexities of doubling. Similarly, these works evoke the enormous risk of dissimulation and the broad, troubling consequences of working outside dominant cultures, discourses and practices.

#### Footnotes

1 Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977: 8.

2 Judith Halberstam, *Gay Lesbian Quarterly*, Vol. 1: 362.

#### LABORATORY

"I'm feeling that I'm something that I never really knew that I was," Cecilia says drowsily, as if drugged, wisps of smoke or cloud drifting across her face. She's on the bed, under interrogation and flattened, pinned to the sheets, tightly framed by the lens above her. An invisible questioner conducts the examination. A detective, therapist, us, Cecilia herself? Drained of blood and color in a black and white clinical nightmare, specimen under investigation, guilty. Immobilized for surgery, body anaesthetized with chemical transfusions of commands, common sense, prepped for incisions, amputations of desire, transplants, cosmetic surgery designed to bring her body into alignment with mandatory categories of identity. Ontological certainty: It's the law.

This scene occurs in *My Failure to Assimilate*, an exploration of love and loss and how one constructs an identity in the face of absence, an absence of the gaze you were depending on to rescue you from erasure. Perhaps Cher said it best, when she remarked to Jacques Lacan: "We can only know ourselves through the Other's gaze." A central concern of Cecilia's videos: What is seeing? What is being seen? Who made me? Do you like my shirt?

#### LOVE AND SURVEILLANCE

The interrogation continues. "I really believe in the physical world...and I guess I could blame it on that," Cecilia answers. Her eyes shut and she turns her head, exhausted, resisting interpretation. "Blame it all on the physical world," she says again, groggy, as her image falls apart.

Suddenly contaminated, she discovers herself a foreign substance rejected by the lover's body. Intolerable suffering precipitates a desire for flight, escape from the boundaries of flesh.

"Do you believe in other worlds," she trails off, dematerializing as she invokes materiality, dissolving into light and motion, flower petals, particles set to music, dreamy, a dream sequence, perhaps the nervous system offering a gift of opiating data. Aural, visual pleasure.

But there's no redemptive narrative to make things okay, no transcendence. An insistence in all Cecilia's work: There are only bodies and their effects; desire, loss, and, in this instance, the persistence of pain. She escapes the interrogation, only to reappear in an isolation chamber. The lost lover surfaces, gazing directly at us, eyes enormous, impassive. And here is Cecilia, an exhibit behind glass. Blank walls, a cell or institutional space cold in alien light, Cecilia, monitored as though on a security guard's screen. We are claustrophobic.

A disembodied voice. "Does it annoy you when I'm quiet?" suggesting the desperate need to be seen conflicting with the desire to withdraw, the anxiety of misinterpretation, fucking up, transgressing rules known only to the enforcer.

## MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER

"Being visible exposes me to attack; it's a basic biological risk," Cecilia says at the beginning of *My Failure*. "Being invisible makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to see that I'm different from anyone else."

Girl, lesbian: one is either targeted for extermination, or buried alive beneath a mudslide of definition that collapses all difference, ambiguity, into the same static image. "Oh, lesbian? Your films go over here." What would happen if Cecilia's work came in a boxed set titled, *The Lost Works of Jean Luc Godard*?

How to create from within the exiled body? If representational codes in the service of authoritarian discourse uncouple perception from the body, how to dismantle conventions that operate as perceptual strait-jackets? To open a space for banished perceptions, to re-agitate the senses such that current is restored to the deadened nerves of anesthetized bodies?

In Cecilia's videos we are swimming. Not in the depths of signification, but an immersion in surface. "The whole point of the story is that there is no point," Cecilia says. There is only investigation, a gathering of evidence, recreation of scenes; the exhibits unstable, deceptive, subject to transformation. A mesmeric and mobile accumulation of images, transparencies that channel us not beyond themselves to explanatory narrative, but only to more images. In this economy of repetition, replication, and reversals, Cecilia constructs Deleuze and Guattari's "assemblages", sculptural desire machines. Surfaces, objects, flesh are deployed to engage the viewer's nervous system in a circuit of affective states that rupture the silencing or gag effect of cultural scripts. "Of sense there remains only enough to direct the lines of escape." ¶

In *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, Cecilia restages autobiographical elements. Memory, fantasy, the movies, TV, contaminate one another to highlight the impossibility of unsplicing, separating out, influences in the neurons that make me; the futility of recovering origin. Media is biology, but, Please, God, not destiny. Delicious, horrible "acting" exposes the inauthenticity of realism as conduit to truth. Everyday life is performance, my punitive Super-ego a committee of corporate execs, Hollywood moguls, dictating dialogue, plot-lines. But in *Granddaughter* events are arranged; disarranged – we're unstuck in the space-time continuum. Disorientation precludes reabsorption into moralizing.

"Renee, eat your food." In this zone of temporal upheaval, the family dinner table is both hilarious and chillingly coercive, as one ad-libbed cliché after another flies from the characters' mouths. The past is reconstructed as play to grapple with its effects in the present, the disfiguring physical trace.

Pop culture debris drifts through the videos, recontextualized, detached from its normative logic to circulate randomly as agent of both humor and terror. *Grapefruit* restages with lesbian "actresses" archetypal Beatles videos inscribed via broadcast into the flesh of millions. *Joe-Joe* presents love-scene montages familiar from countless melodramas. But, as with *My Failure's* incorporation of psychedelic kaleidoscope effects from the 60s, appropriation of clichés isn't a device of easy irony. Yeah, it's funny, but the clichés also contribute a sense of longing, an ache, not nostalgia but the sadness of desire inflicted and suffered for something

that never was. The camera peels from its subjects' bodies a second skin, an immobilizing body cast or acetate overlay of sitcom ideologies; and genetically re-engineers them into haunting textures, gorgeous compositions inviting the viewer's sensual participation. "I am not a ghost." As Steven Shaviro says, "The repetition of stereotypes may be a way of unleashing singularity, even as the blankness and willed dumbness of quotation at a distance may be a means for inciting and magnifying passion. Simulacral artifice and inauthenticity become ways of affirming the life of the body." ■

And what of girls, lesbians, the ultimate stereotypes? *Cecilia* opens with a distant bay, oil derricks in a chemical haze, landscape littered with industrial debris. An "establishing shot", establishing nothing but itself: A hallucinatory, science-fiction beauty in which to indulge. Car in the driveway, mundane but for the sublime glide along its metal. Woman's body on a bed. Indecipherable murmurings, some sex. What connects these images? we're conditioned to ask. As if it's forbidden, impossible, to see unless the object's been run through an interpretive filter. Same with your own body, "Girl," searching the mirror for something you call your "self".

Cecilia's camera, schizophrenic device, moves restlessly, fluidly, and in this medium we encounter girls. Girl bodies, girl skin, girls wearing shoes. Girl sex in slow motion, beneath filters, s/m, straight. Fragmentary girls merge, fly apart. Permeable skin, identities migrating, exchanged. It's fun. Boys playing girls, girls playing boys. English, Spanish. We are Linda Blair, possessed by dybbuks, movie stars, government functionaries, homunculi, vampires, Oprah; but also by each other, radiant, complicated in stuttering brilliance, excellent hairstyles. Cecilia, each of us: irreducible. Singular bodies inhabited by multitudes, polylingual.

#### HOMELESSNESS/NOMAD

A section in *My Failure* entitled "True self." Two girls articulate notions of identity. It's hard to explain, when language hates you. Conversation fades, superseded by song. "The body tells a story without any words," sings a girl, as the camera sweeps over Tammy Rae and Lala, lovely in their sheer presence, multiplicity of angles. Repeatedly the camera asserts, as in *Joe-Joe* and *Grapefruit*, the eroticism, playfulness, and primacy of uncertain, transformative bodies over paralytic fictions of a continuous "true self."

"My greatest fear in life is losing my tongue," the song continues. In *The dream and the waking*, tongue, speech, have disappeared almost entirely. Instead, language scrolls across the screen as we travel by bus through a grim and crumbling cityscape. Language reveals itself as material, image. The film takes place from behind the eyes of the filmmaker, enduring a weekly round-trip from New York to her job in Boston, an exhausting and demoralizing routine. Gradually the story's explication shifts; words of anxiety and threat slide by like transmissions from the station's bathroom tiles, the passing structures. Fragmentary resolutions to "set goals," "call my mother." "A knife-wielding neighbor."

Positioned as we are "inside" her body, we too suffer the inscription of commands, fear, in our flesh, as though telepathically generated by the unlocatable, omniscient voice of authority in Godard's *Alphaville*. The

border between inside and outside dissolves. Impenetrable, institutional buildings, economic traps and lack of opportunity – prisons, Ministries of Truth insinuating themselves into your very flesh. “It’s all my fault.”

But editing opens a line of escape, induces proprioceptive states that counter the landscape’s narcoleptic effect. Filters and stop-motion, layering, sweep us away. The freeway, conveyor belt – hell, populated by zombies, “mortified schizos, good for work, brought back to reason,”<sup>1</sup> as Deleuze and Guattari say, metamorphoses into a lush poetics of shifting geometries. The landscape tilts, skids away in slow-motion, the unbalanced sensation of the tilt-a-whirl underwater, a carnival ride where the distancing of interpretive thought is subsumed in a molasses careen of sensation, floating image – cars adrift, gleaming; rain-drenched curves of the roadbed; the sulphurous glamor of hazy streetlamps; our own bodies out of control...a strange suturing occurs between mind and body, viewer and viewed, such that for a moment, unfamiliarly, consciousness *is* the body, and vice versa. The video ends, the pleasurable estrangement lingers. As Baudrillard said, “Beauty is always strange.”

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West; Boston: The MIT Press, 1990: 64.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 236.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Dedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983: 335.