

THE TACTILE UNCONSCIOUS

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Cinephilia is not antithetical to *epistophilia*. The love of documentaries interlaces with the pleasures of knowing more about the real world.

I think I knew all this before I came to the Flaherty seminar. I'd read extensively in documentary studies, particularly the writings of Michael Renov, who attributed the pleasures of fiction to documentary as well. My week at the seminar in 2014, however, provided me with a lucid illustration that documentary grants us an excursion into the unconscious and the irrational and that cinephilia for art documentaries is absolutely alive and kicking.

Of all the work presented, the short films of the American artist Jesse McLean, whom I had never heard of, lingered with me the longest after the seminar was over. They provided a perfect example of how the



Figure 88.1.

Flaherty offered a site to practice collectively, as opposed to individually, the documentary gaze into the unconscious.

McLean creates hypnotic collages from found-footage materials with mysterious thought-provoking texts. Difficult to categorize, her work drifts somewhere between video, documentary film, and conceptual art. On the big screen, it was immediate, sensual, and emotional. McLean's short films, which can be viewed online, dismantle the complex relationship viewers have with mass culture and popular media. McLean explores how television, Hollywood cinema, or music can, on the one hand, unite us all almost mystically, but on the other hand, manipulate, confuse, and contribute to loneliness and alienation.

McLean never drifts easily into a critical position of the blinding power of popular media. Instead, she creates a dynamic tension between a critical standpoint and a special interest in the emotional impact of popular media. In her world, mass culture has a commercial and cynical side yet also fosters a directly affective, difficult-to-evade audience connection. McLean's oeuvre explores how a viewer responds emotionally,

sensuously, cognitively, and actively to cinematic or television material. It questions what establishes an ultimate viewing experience and how individual spectatorship differs from collective viewing.

In *Magic for Beginners* (2010), McLean probes the mythologies of fan culture by interweaving personal stories. A woman tells us about her obsession with the film *Titanic* (1997). A young man speaks of a special experience he had while watching *Tron* (1982). Another describes an emotional and spiritual journey he had while attending a rock concert by Oneida.

Summoning the legacy of experimental cinema, McLean uses found footage material modified via Photoshop to examine the impact of media. I felt a theatrical screening was the only proper way to experience *Magic for Beginners*. McLean draws the viewer in, invites a tactile reaction to the screen, and turns the viewer into a participant.

The central scene summons a trancelike state with flickering images very rapidly playing to the Oneida experimental rock band's monotonous sounds. My watching this experiential homage to the avant-garde's flicker films tradition was an intense experience, both physiologically and psychologically. Collaborative viewing amplified the hypnotic impact.

Some images at the Flaherty were incredibly beautiful, sometimes in quite disturbing ways. I was not aware that Johan Grimonprez's *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* (1997), screened on the first day, was such an important art-documentary classic, first shown at Documenta X.

Grimonprez's film celebrates new possibilities for avant-garde documentary filmmaking in the digital era, obscuring boundaries between thinking and action. It outlines the genealogy of airplane hijacking by building contradictions into its use of archival material. Its strange mix of disco music and images of catastrophe and disaster results in a viewing experience oscillating between fascination and recoil, desire and rejection.

Incredibly jet-lagged after a long flight from Israel, I struggled not to fall asleep watching this enchanting film. After an hour or so, the jet lag hit hard. I dozed off for what seemed a few moments, only to wake up to the end credits, where the gripping disco music of Van McCoy accompanies images of an airplane crash, an unforgettably sublime experience of the tension between beauty and disaster.

The following day, we watched Lois Patiño's *Montaña en sombra* (*Mountain in Shadow*) (2012), a contemplative look at a snowy mountain and the skiers on it—the vastness of space contrasted with the almost invisible small people. This screening too had a dreamlike tactile quality, as the image gradually became flat, pictorial, unreal, hypnotic. Was it a tactile vision? I think so.

The opening titles of Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953) led to enthusiastic applause of a kind I never expected to hear from an audience watching a black-and-white essay film about colonialism and African statues. I overheard participants whispering self-congratulatory remarks to their companions, such as "Hey, this is the Resnais and Marker short, do you know it?"

The film felt remarkably fresh. While Marker's overtly poetic commentary is delivered by a voice not his own, the film's self-reflexivity becomes increasingly layered. The audiovisual montage passionately engages in more-relevant-than-ever anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist thinking. Half a decade after its original screening, *Les statues* requires us to ponder our complicity, not only in the events it alludes to but also in everything that has occurred thereafter.

Loud praise ensued as the opening titles for Jill Godmilow's *What Farocki Taught* (1997) appeared on the screen. A perfect replica in color and in English of Harun Farocki's black-and-white German film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), Godmilow's homage is an agitprop challenge emphasizing immediate and unmediated direct address.

What Farocki Taught starts with black-and-white footage from the original and could easily be mistaken for it. Was the audience applauding Farocki's work, a chilling gesture made only a month before his sudden death in Berlin, or was it showing explicit approval for Godmilow, who sat with us in the theater?

As I had spent time gazing into the historical world rather than into fantasy, my week at the Flaherty fascinated me. Consciously, I devoured the epistemological value of documentary images. Unconsciously, I could never escape their delirious, ecstatic, and tactile properties.