

Lip and *Love*: subversive repetition in the pastiche films of Tracey Moffatt

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Moving image art since the 1990s has often expressed a fascination with classical Hollywood cinema, employing strategies that range from allusion to direct quotation in its attempts to revise Hollywood imagery, forms and conventions, and the values that these enshrine.¹ Such promiscuous practices of regurgitation are often characterized as parasitical and purely derivative, expressive of a late capitalist cynicism that permeates every aspect of culture; a characterization, in fact, largely attributable to the influential theories of Fredric Jameson.² This diagnosis of appropriation practices in contemporary culture as relatively impotent and indicating the impossibility of innovation has proved hugely influential, overshadowing discussions of their capacity to critique the forms and images they invoke.

The cinematic text is resituated in a variety of ways in contemporary art, but rather than viewing this as a simple gesture of imitation for its own sake or for nostalgic purposes, I shall suggest that cinema is hereby subjected to what theorist Linda Hutcheon terms a 'complicitous critique'.³ For, while parodic reframings do carry with them many of the conventions and values of the original text, they do so only as a prerequisite for critique.

I shall explore this claim by focusing on two short films by the Australian artist Tracey Moffatt – *Lip* (1999, 11 mins) and *Love* (2003, 21 mins) – and propose that they demonstrate a productive intersection between parodic repetition, described by Judith Butler as a key strategy for queering (disrupting) normative categories of identity, and composite pastiche which, contrary to its many theorizations, is particularly well placed to produce a critical transformation of the texts it cites.

1 Contemporary art's fetishization of Hollywood cinema has been highlighted by a number of influential exhibitions in recent years: *Scream and Scream Again: Film in Art* at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1996; *Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film Since 1945* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1996; *Spellbound: Art and Film* at the Hayward Gallery in 1996; *Notorious* at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1999; *Cinéma Cinéma: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience* at the Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, in 1999; *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Art* at the Milwaukee Art Museum in 2004.

2 Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and consumer society', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 7.

3 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 106, 151.

- 4 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 5 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 94–5.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 188.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 186–7.
- 9 Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 10 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Dan Harries, *Film Parody* (London: British Film Institute, 2000); Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film and* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

Combining these strategies, Moffatt's films construct their critiques from the very material they appraise.

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler argues that certain statements are repetitively enunciated in representation, and in our everyday social interactions and rituals (which constitute a type of representation), which has the propagandistic effect of making them invisible or of making them seem like indisputable matters of fact.⁴ Similarly, in *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha describes the stereotype as a 'major discursive strategy' that must be 'anxiously repeated'⁵ in order to present marks of gender and/or racial difference as indicative of essential inferiority and to combat the paradoxical failure of discourse to *prove* precisely that. The effect of the stereotype is to produce a kind of probable truth or predictability, which for Bhabha is always 'in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed'.⁶ There is, in other words, something that necessarily evades the stereotype, a mismatch between logic and culturally insisted-upon 'truths', and that schism is the driver for its constant iteration. However, Butler suggests that these practices of repetition that permeate and shape culture and dictate social norms, can be turned back on themselves, can offer opportunities for subversive repetition that contest the very 'truths' or 'natural facts' such practices establish.⁷ The two familiar cinematic stereotypes that Moffatt's films contest are that 'black women are subservient to white women' and that 'heterosexual romantic love necessitates violence towards women'. Moffatt's films use repetition to reframe, and in the process to denaturalize and repoliticize, a host of images that inscribe these very stereotypes.

Butler's description of 'the subversive laughter' of the 'pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, and the authentic, the real are themselves constituted as effects'⁸ explicitly challenges Jameson's dismissal of pastiche as the humourless imitation of an original that, by simply mimicking it, relinquishes the distance necessary for transformation, which is a key aspect of its superior relative, parody. However, Butler sees the pastiche's declaration that both original and copy are indistinguishable as a cause for celebration. Numerous other theorists have persuasively challenged the ascendancy of Jamesonian renditions of pastiche – a notable recent example is provided by Richard Dyer's *Pastiche*.⁹ In this book, Dyer joins other scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, Margaret A. Rose, Dan Harries and Ingeborg Hoesterey in offering a broader interpretation of pastiche and arguing for its critical potential in certain forms.¹⁰ In other words, these writers assert that while there may be greater distance between the parody and its target text than there is between the pastiche and the text it imitates, a prescribed degree of distance is not a prerequisite for critical engagement with the ur-text. The only certain difference between parody and pastiche, it seems, is formal, and this formal difference is not commensurate with a difference in their capacity for critique.

11 Dyer, *Pastiche*, p. 9.

12 William C. Wees, *Recycled Cinema* (New York, NY: Anthology Film Archives, 1993), pp. 53–4.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Both Butler and Dyer concentrate on pastiche as imitation, such as in the case of drag, but Dyer also outlines the other key type of pastiche, ‘pastiche as combination’,¹¹ which involves the compilation of fragments of preexisting texts, and this is the type of pastiche predominantly employed by Moffatt in her found-footage films. Compilation films take fragments of preexisting film, rip them from their context and reposition them in new compositions that interrogate those fragments and their origins in a variety of ways. In *Recycled Images*, William C. Wees describes the effect of this tearing gesture as *interrupted context*, which relates both to the textual strategy of removing fragments from their original context and juxtaposing them in a new text, and the actual resituation of the cinematic text into the gallery space.¹² Such interruption, for Wees, puts ‘conceptual quotation marks around material and encourages the viewer to see it differently and think about it more critically – which is to say, more politically’.¹³ Found-footage film installed in the gallery is, therefore, a kind of critical rewriting of dominant cinema by contemporary art practice. Both *Lip* and *Love* comprise a recombination of clips directly sampled from Hollywood cinema, a common tendency in artists’ films today. Significantly, Dyer asserts that these recombined texts are careful to maintain the identity of each fragment, emphasizing the act of tearing from one source and pasting into another that is the principal method of pastiche. In other words, for Dyer, the memory of the original source from which each element has been culled remains accessible to the reader, which is essential for the pastiche to produce an effective critique of the texts it combines. Traces of origins act as a guarantee of the critique of those origins and provide an opportunity for the filmmaker to position herself in relation to them.

In keeping with Dyer’s definition of pastiche, each clip incorporated by *Lip* and *Love* clearly stands apart from every other. In addition to the discernible cut that joins them, one simple distinction between clips is that some are in colour while others are in black and white, but there are many other obvious formal indicators of difference (in terms of film stock, age of film, cinematography, directorial style, and so on). Another conspicuous mark of the shift from one clip to another is that the characters are different in each of the films, though some actors appear in more than one of the films quoted. For instance, in *Lip* Hattie McDaniel, the actress who spent her career typecast by Hollywood in the ‘mammy’ role, appears in at least five of the films quoted, most famously *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), where she plays a character actually called ‘Mammy’. While this typecasting does create some confusion for the spectator in differentiating between the various films cited, that confusion serves a useful purpose here, emphasizing the repetition of the mammy role and its limitations, in terms of it being both the only option for many black actresses in Hollywood and the advocated appearance of the black maid (McDaniel’s corpulent frame clearly fulfilled a key criterion).

- 14 Slavoj Žižek, 'Back to the suture', in *The Fright of Real Tears* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), p. 33.

The obvious separateness of each sampled clip also serves the purpose of suppressing many of the essential formal operations of cinema, thereby avoiding the spectator's immersion in the film narrative. In a point that recalls Wees's comments on interrupted context, Slavoj Žižek states that a disruption of the 'appearance of seamless continuity', by interrupting the usual process of cinematic suture, is characteristic of various avant-garde film practices that aim to defamiliarize cinematic conventions.¹⁴ While the discrete shot/reverse-shot sequences draw us in, jumping between shots and sequences from different films is disorienting, as the spectator becomes invested in one scene and one set of characters only to be torn away and catapulted into the next, similar but distinct, scene or shot.

It is vital to Moffatt's critique of the enduring reductive stereotyping of Hollywood that her films demonstrate the frequent appearance of particular character types and narrative patterns across a number of texts over a significant period of time. It is essential, therefore, that the spectator can discern both the number of different film texts quoted from and the duration of the historical period represented. For instance, *Lip* comprises fifty-six film clips, though a few films are quoted from more than once, and spans a period of between forty to fifty years, including films such as *China Seas* (Tay Garnett, 1935) and *For Pete's Sake* (Peter Yates, 1974). *Love* comprises over two hundred clips and spans roughly fifty years, including clips from *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939) and *Picture Perfect* (Glenn Gordon Caron, 1997). Each clip in these pastiche films is distinct, its beginning and end eminently evident and its source discernible; in contrast, it is the *similarity* of the narrative content of the clips that is accentuated. Each clip is distinct, but en masse their affiliation in terms of subject matter is conspicuous. Contesting Jamesonian conceptions of the conditions necessary for parodic transformation of a text, the direct regurgitation of preexisting images and the *repetition of sameness* are key to Moffatt's subversion of representational norms. In her case, revelation takes the form of outing Hollywood as indisputably and ludicrously racist and sexist (and she makes this point emphatically, which is in part a source of the comedy).

As well as employing the device of pastiche as combination, Moffatt also uses pastiche as imitation in her condensed and exaggerated mimicry of the narrative structure of classical Hollywood cinema. *Lip* moves back and forth between sequences that splice together representative clips of the bossy black maid, some of which are overlaid with segments of Aretha Franklin's hit songs 'Chain of Fools' (1967) and 'Think' (1968) in place of the original dialogue. Although the structure of this earlier pastiche film is rather monotonous and lacks the dramatic curve of the classical Hollywood narrative, Moffatt does appoint it with a structure and a trajectory as well as a certain circularity. The film opens with the depiction of a particularly acerbic maid in *For Pete's Sake*, whose dialogue is inflected with an awareness of the civil rights movement that had revolutionized race relations in the USA from the late

1960s, and it ends with a short sequence of clips from films of the same era. These closing clips show young black women dancing in colourful clothing (in place of the maid's uniform that dominated previous segments), while Franklin repeatedly sings 'freedom' on the soundtrack; a musical counterpoint for these images of the liberated black woman.

Although in *Love* the soundtrack functions in a similar way to that in *Lip*, aiding the structuring of the film into cohesive segments, the film's mimicry of the Hollywood narrative structure is more developed than in the earlier film. Like *Lip*, *Love* opens with a series of clips that introduce and exemplify the focus of the film – the amorous embrace – and uses the original soundtrack of each clip. The saccharine dialogue amuses us, and is rendered even more comic by clumping together so many examples of the passionate clinch. In both films, both types of regurgitation – the repetition of stereotypes of womanhood and the imitation of the narrative structure of the classical Hollywood film – are repeated incessantly through the now conventional video installation device of the loop.

Lip comprises images of various cinematic stereotypes of black womanhood, such as the tragic mulatto and the soul diva, but mostly the domestic servant (sometimes slave), epitomized by the lippy mammy character. The mammy is a familiar figure of the white imagination: a figure of Otherness that elevates the white woman's social standing. The black woman who enters the white home is thus fixed as a figure of clownish exoticism, thereby dissipating the threat she poses by working in such intimate proximity to the white family. This 'devoted to white folks' headrag-wearing, shuffling, obese archetype is stripped of sex appeal and, at times, intelligence, which for film critic bell hooks denotes 'complete submission to the will of whites'.¹⁵ Through processes of stereotyping, such as those augmented by Hollywood, the Negro is thus 'made palatable', in the words of Frantz Fanon.¹⁶

The scenes in *Lip* stage a battle of wills between the black maid and her white mistress, in which it is generally the black woman who gets the last word. The last word may be her only source of power, a mechanism for expressing anger or dissatisfaction with her lot. Yet, the last word is a limited sort of victory while the black woman remains tethered to her position of subservience. In fact, this 'lippiness' is part of a characterization of the black woman as resentful of her superior white mistress, serving to disconnect the two women further. In an essay on the mammy, E. Patrick Johnson describes the vacillating masks of deference and tempered hostility worn by the domestic servant in this complex relationship as constituting a kind of tactical performance, a role-playing that colludes with white privilege in its reproduction of racial stereotypes.¹⁷ Extending Butler's thesis on the performativity of gendered identity to raced identity, Johnson identifies and endorses subversive appropriations of the stereotype.

hooks observes the historical exclusion of black women from representation and cinema's 'violent erasure of black womanhood',¹⁸ stating that their only acceptable presence was as servants of whiteness,

15 bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1981), p. 84.

16 Frantz Fanon, 'The negro and psychopathology', in *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 176.

17 E. Patrick Johnson, 'Nevah had uh cross word', in *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 105–10.

18 bell hooks, 'The oppositional gaze: black female spectators', in *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 201.

- 19 Patricia Mellencamp, 'A fine romance, with no kisses: discourse, not intercourse', in *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Feminism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 16.
- 20 bell hooks, 'Good girls look the other way', in *Reel to Reel*, p. 14.
- 21 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge MA: South End Press, 1984), p. 124.

- 22 Judith Butler, 'Gender is burning: questions of appropriation and subversion', in Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: a Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 337.

and of white womanhood in particular. The subjugation of the black woman *serves* to elevate the white woman to the status of object of the male gaze; a dubious honour indeed, as keenly observed in Moffatt's other film *Love*. The US film scholar Patricia Mellencamp describes the generally subservient role played by women in Hollywood in her summary of the claim made emphatically by 1970s film feminists: 'Whether white and present or black and absent, women were there to serve'.¹⁹ By repeating the love scene, *Love* maps the cinematic history of the white woman who has been standardized as the supreme object of desire. In all but two of the clips included, the 'desired' women are white and in the exceptions where she is black she is 'appropriately' paired with a black man. Like all exceptions, these ones prove the rule. For hooks, in cinema, 'glamour, beauty, sensuality and sexuality, desirability are all coded as white'.²⁰

The other significant (and related) point compounded by the repeated imagery in *Love* is the connection between love and violence in popular narratives. To quote hooks again, cinema has repeatedly asked women 'to accept the idea that violence intensifies sexual pleasure'.²¹ There is an escalation of violence in *Love* that portrays the so-called love bond between a man and a woman as a power struggle, a battle, with the conflict initiated by the man and ended when the woman finally reaches for a gun, metaphorically taking the phallus and thereby becoming the loathsome 'castrating bitch' that these Oedipal narratives construct her as. The brutality begins as verbal debasement and rejection. For instance, in one rather dismissive and callous attack that directly conflates sex and violence, the female character tells her male lover 'You're so cruel', to which he responds 'Cruel? I haven't touched you yet.' In another odious piece of dialogue a male character tells his cowering lover: 'That's right. Be afraid of me, a little afraid at least. A woman's no good to a man unless she's a little afraid of him.'

While Moffatt mockingly imitates the contrived conclusions of dominant cinema, none of her work proposes an alternative vision of race relations outside of binary oppositions, and her own transformation of these through a combination of replication and deviation. She may allude to the possibility of an alternative but refuses to make that manifest, preferring instead what Butler describes as:

the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it.²²

Race signifies in particular ways, and while Moffatt's work draws on stereotypes, it exaggerates and reframes them through a process of parodic repetition, contending that effective critique necessitates working with and through popular cultural artefacts, not disregarding them in favour of utopian alternative visions. Butler insists that we must work with preexisting discursive practices, and therefore 'The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat', in order to produce what she calls a

23 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 189.

24 Homi Bhabha, 'Postmodernism/postcolonialism', in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds), *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 450.

'radical proliferation' of the stereotype, which has the effect of displacing it, of making manifest the schism between the stereotype and the logic it purports to represent.²³ Moffatt's films insist on the historical contingency of the 'naturalized' images they reframe. In his essay 'Postmodernism/postcolonialism' Bhabha poses the question: 'How do we use the rules and ruses of historical contingency and cultural indeterminacy to transform the inequitable and injurious *necessities* of history?'²⁴ I hope that I have demonstrated that Moffatt's particular combination of subversive repetition and composite pastiche provides one credible response to this question.