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Rachel Garfield

Between Truth and Fiction, The Films of Vivienne Dick, 'A Particular Incoherence: Some works of Vivienne Dick', (ed Treasa O'Brian), Crawford Art Centre/Lux publication, 2009 ISBN 0-9548569-8-8

A Particular Incoherence: Some works of Vivienne Dick

Notably, the early work of Vivienne Dick is prescient in its visualization of the tropes and processes of globalization and in the use of the fragment to offer an experiential rendering of life. Most of the existing writing firmly situates her work within the 'No Wave' filmmakers of New York in the early 1980s or within the framework of an emergent Irish film avant-garde. I will be building on those writings that situate the films although I am not concerned with precedents or definition particularly¹. The aim here is to write about the way Dick exposes the politics of the formation of subjectivity through the figure of the outsider: as social, economic and geographic².

Overall the subject conjured in the films is one formed through incoherence atomized through constant interruption. The subject here has no stable core: fragmentation is the condition of its emergence in a way that makes these films quintessentially contemporary. Stuart Hall in his text 'Who Needs Identity' states that 'identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being'³. Themes and characters emerge and re-emerge in each film edited into different configurations positing a subject in flux: the denouement builds through this process. These are Foucauldian subjects, finding their own locus of power. If the figure of the outsider is key in Dicks work then it is the outsider constructed and regulated through power and power relations. However, the dynamic that drives the films I am talking about here, namely *Liberty's Booty*, *Images Ireland*, *Visibility Moderate*, *London Suite*, *Like Dawn Till Dusk*, is one of paradox, as within this incoherent fragmentation is that of the Subject rooted within a milieu. The milieu I am referring to is characterized by a youth culture of casual labour, casual housing, retro chic, music and a grunge aesthetic formed through its time and place of a prototype of what Saskia Sassen would call the global city⁴.

The global city, as Sassen would posit, is a place of simultaneity, that is, a recognition of the politics that is mobilized through a transnational awareness: what is happening here, is happening there but in a

¹ See J Hoberman *October 20, Spring 1982, pp102-106*; Maeve Connolly [http://luxonline.org.uk/artists/vivienne_dick/essay\(1\).html](http://luxonline.org.uk/artists/vivienne_dick/essay(1).html) or

[http://luxonline.org.uk/articles/from_no_wave_to_national_cinema\(1\).html](http://luxonline.org.uk/articles/from_no_wave_to_national_cinema(1).html) accessed 7/7/09

² I would argue that the figure of the outsider is a discursive formation: its meaning depends on the subject position which is unstable and in flux. One can also be an outsider and insider in the same instance, as I explain later in the text.

³ Hall Stuart, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?', Stuart Hall, & Paul du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage Publishing, 1996, pp. 1-17

⁴ Sassen, Saskia, *A Sociology of Globalization*, Columbia University Press, 2007

way that 'partially by-passes nation states'⁵. This is constituted through the aggregation of formerly subaltern voices. These voices come together in newly configured social formations that cross, not just geographical boundaries but also the domestic space with the work place, the street with the home and so forth. This can be seen in many of Dick's films where there is a collapsing of space through direct and repeated juxtaposition. Sometimes this is the urban and the rural and sometimes it is different geographical locations such as the UK/US. Time also is reconfigured away from a linear reading as the films shift from the contemporary to the past. Often the contemporary has a 'retro' look that is situated in a particular 'scene' of the late 1970s and 1980s, the beginnings of making of the modern into irony that is now commonplace⁶. The collision of space and time is also constituted through the merging of the domestic sphere as a site of labour as in *Liberty's Booty*. A famous example is the shift from those who were prostitutes in the film⁷ sitting in a New York McDonalds to an Irish male voice describing the McDonalds strike in Ireland. This sequence makes the link between the timelessness of casual labour (because prostitution has been part of every known society through time) and the pivotal moment of the expansion of McDonalds brand and its cost on workers rights⁸. *Liberty's Booty* speaks of the processes that bind these different instances together, exemplified by the 'prostitutes' from the brothel, 'everyone thinks its extremely easy but its not, its difficult, there's more physical wear and tear on your body than any other job in the world' or 'I'm going to raise my prices when I renovate my bedroom, 'cos things are just getting so expensive': the macro and the micro are intimately connected.⁹

A more gentle juxtaposition that offers a further reading on the global city is in *London Suite: Getting Sucked In* where a temporary council officer with an Irish accent, checks up on the inhabitant of a property in London. The camera shoots him yawning repeatedly in boredom as the woman talks endlessly about her housing situation, her visits to the Job Club, and how you need a PhD for a job cleaning toilets¹⁰. This scene comes directly after an expert tells us how 50% of people in London are not from London, but get sucked into London life. Here we see the layering of motifs that explore labour conditions through a merging of the work and the private sphere of the home, which is subject to the same processes of exploitation. It is a bizarre moment of an unlikely meeting for the exchange of information, between an ineffectual, temporary Council worker, and a women dressed as an eccentric (thus 'outsiders' both), heightened to stillness by the camerawork scrutinizing the pictures on the wall, as if bored by the narrative or maybe just wanting to throw into relief the desire for a decent life.

⁵ *ibid.* 191

⁶ Thanks to V Dick for helping me with this insight.

⁷ The women in the film were portrayed as prostitutes, some were acting and others were prostitutes by profession. (Dick, 3 July 09)The film maker refused to identify who were or were not prostitutes. The point, according to Dick was that arguably everyone is a prostitute to global Capitalism. I would add that the opposite also stands: we are all people, whatever our profession.

⁸ This moment of McDonalds expansion into Europe is also the pivotal moment of Prime Minister Thatcher (UK) and the first President Bush (US), which signified a significant shift to the 'right' in politics in their respective countries, marking and end to a certain kind of post war optimism and the politics that that period had upheld.

⁹ The significance of the strike in Ireland being brought to a close by 'heavies' sent from the US further adds to the globalizing motif.

¹⁰ This was played by an actor who according to V Dick had actually had this job and did actually in fact visit this woman while working there. The woman was Lorraine Sartorio, a friend of the film makers.

This kind of exchange, in what Sassen has called an analytic borderland is precisely the complex zone of silence where “two systems of representation intersect”¹¹ but which is not a borderline but a space that gives life to new subjectivities through a production of discontinuity. She argues that discontinuity itself is an ‘integral part of the economic system’¹² What is at stake here is the positing of a contemporary political subject through a transnational and multi localized identification of labour consciousness where the key players are women and immigrants in an ‘informalised’ setting of work.¹³

However, the analytic borderland as described by Sassen is merely one interpretive possibility to the devices that exemplify Vivienne Dick’s films.

Kobena Mercer, drawing from Ralph Ellison has used the notion of the ‘cut’ in collage to identify a diasporic concern with ‘sharp breaks, leaps in consciousness, distortions, paradoxes, reversals, telescoping of time, and surreal blending of styles, values, hopes and dreams’¹⁴ He identifies the multiple viewpoints as a way of registering the inequality of the hyphenated identity in the US. Ralph Ellison was referring here to Black and White; equally it could read through the Irish Diaspora: the Irish, of course, are also subject to racism and inequality. Yet another critique that is claimed through collage is a disruption of the indexical where meanings are created through what Rosalind Krauss calls the language effect, that allows one to ‘infiltrate reality with interpretations’¹⁵ Krauss citing Walter Benjamin, states that photomontage ‘expresses not simply the fact which it shows, but also the social tendency expressed by the fact’¹⁶. The sustained use of jump cuts alongside the dramatic shifts of location, tempo and imagery in Dick’s work builds a literal disruption of seamlessness that is everywhere apparent, echoed by the use of sound suddenly starting or stopping with each cut¹⁷. Not only the early ‘No Wave’ work but also the more recent lyrical work, materializing through particular rural settings, such as *Excluded By the Nature of Things* or *A Skinny Little Man Attacked Daddy*, contain nonetheless, a more gentle disturbance. However it is more complex than that: Krauss expands that the cellular, contained structure that montage uses functions like syntax, or ‘the formal condition of signs’. The montage in the films create a density through this self contained, cellular structure that I would call collage.¹⁸ It is thus through the form as much as the content that new subjectivities are constituted.

¹¹ Sassen, *ibid* 110. There is not the space in this essay but it would be interesting to consider this in relation to Ireland, a place where borders have been so important.

¹² *Ibid* 111

¹³ Sassen describes this moment of globalization through transnational exchange, as one that has been constituted through the invention and proliferation of the internet, however many of the films in discussion were made before internet.

¹⁴ Kobena Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, talking about the work of Romare Bearden, Iniva/MIT Press, 2005, p125

¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss, Dawn Ades, Jane Livingstone, *Lamour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, Abbeville Press, 1985, p124.

¹⁶ Benjamin, Walter ‘A Short History of Photography’ states of John Heartfield, Krauss, *ibid* p. 123

¹⁷ This is markedly different from, say, the condition of montage that Stephen Heath identifies through Eisenstein for example.

¹⁸ Garfield, [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/keith_piper/essay\(3\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/keith_piper/essay(3).html) accessed 7/7/09

Dick has an eye for the tawdry: her New York is one of thrift shops, graffiti, broken paving stones and littered streets and her London is one of squats, scrubland and rooftops. The 'street' nature of her work is reminiscent, possibly of Shirley Clarke although unlike Clarke she is embedded in the world she depicts. Whereas Shirley Clarke would have seen the street and black culture as 'authentic' other to bourgeois constraints in line with the paradigm of the time¹⁹. Dick positions herself as one of the 'floating people'.²⁰ In *London Suite* she is living in one of the apartments, she films herself with her son. In *Visibility Moderate*, actors 'play' her return²¹. Unlike Clarke, the black subject in *London Suite*, is not the subject of the Othering gaze.²² In this film the black subject is the expert telling the viewer what to think of London's population, or in another case, a female flat mate, one of the gang²³. The direct address is used in several films and forms part of a range of self-reflexive devices that force an active viewing. Another example is of the artist, Greer Langton, demonstrating and talking about one of her fabricated dolls as a preface to *Liberty's Booty*²⁴.

Liberty's Booty opens with a an abject cloth 'doll', stuffed with fabricated fetuses that are prized out of its womb by the hand of the woman holding it, while she describes the process of extricating the fetuses and then proceeds to hug the figure. A Surreal preface to what is essentially an avant garde documentary. The tempo shifts to a biker through the streets of New York and biker music. In the first scene after the credits the camera focuses on a woman's crossed legs, in pink leggings, sat on a red sofa, the edge of the frame is at the neck. A voice is talking (possibly the woman sitting) about the choices of becoming a prostitute 'most people, if it comes to not having any money and having money or having very limited amount will choose doing sth they never thought they'd do'. The look of the camera is hovering around her disembodied voice, slowly roving around the room, focusing on a retro, kitch lampshade, 1960s glasses, pictures: every object is particular. Studying the environment of the woman talking - the colours are bold and the materials glossy, there is an intimacy to the close-up and a texture to the image. The next scene appears as suddenly. Shot in black and white, introduced through a New York apartment window of a woman in an unfurnished room, describing how she'd furnish it, to a group of women in front of her. Like ironic lessons in womanhood, she shows her sculpture, an oversized eyelash curler to the women in the room (some, the 'prostitutes' from the previous scene)²⁵.

¹⁹ Gavin Butt, 'Stop that acting!: Performance and Authenticity in Shirley Clarke's Portrait of Jason', *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*, Iniva/MIT Press (2007). P.37 .

²⁰ In *London Suite*, a character describes much of the population of London as 'floating people' people who got 'sucked into' London.

²¹ In many of the film there is play, between actors and 'real' characters that subverts the documentary form and indexicality. Often it is not clear who is an actor and who is not. It also represents another form of collapse that restrictions of space prohibit me from exploring adequately here.

²² In Butt, Gavin, op cit, and in Garfield, Rachel, 'Undoing The Subject' (unpublished paper presented at the 'Documentary Now' Conference Birkbeck, University of London, 10/11 Oct '08), the spectacle of the 'other' and the problematics of the direct address are discussed in relation to Shirley Clarke's film 'Portrait of Jason'

²³ There are two black 'actors' in *London Suite*.

²⁴ From the conversation with V Dick, 2 July 2009

²⁵ V Dick 2 July 2009

The camera returns to a bedroom and music, and colour, back to the roving scrutinizing of interior space, 'retro' objects on a dressing table, a record player and an unmade futon. Three songs play, again all retro Motown, in their interrupted succession and then a cut to a woman speaking to a client on the phone introducing the girls and their prices. And on it goes. The fragment thus operates not just to activate the viewer but also to create meaning in the work through the tensions of a narrative regained through self-contained pieces: the cellular structure of Rosalind Krauss. That is, of a life reflected through other lives.

The subject, while central to the understanding of the films is de-centred through filming techniques. The essayistic construction of narrative in the work delivers a rich subject constructed through the incoherent multiple lenses of the collection of props, pop music, performances of actors, friends and 'insider' commentators. The camera is sometimes slightly awry, off centre, hand held, following people, often looking at the floor, the objects, the landscape – constituting the subject through the context. It is also through the slightly awkward camera that the viewer becomes aware of the process of looking.

The context is often figured in works from that period, through well known cultural outsiders from the 1980s such as Lydia Lunch, Pat Place or Nan Goldin (outsiders to the mainstream, work-a-day life but insiders to the sub group). However, a figuring of 'Americana' can represent 'the outsider' (to the hegemon): the subject is formed through this hegemonic norm of the American; subjected to it and alienated by it, because a European would see themselves mediated through a familiar elsewhere²⁶. The misrepresentation thus holds the subject in thrall in an endless reverberation of subjection and defiance. This can be seen for example in *Visibility Moderate* where the sense of self is reflected not just through the literal journey from New York to Ireland but through a series of mediating devices of tourism; advert and mythological narratives in the opening few minutes of the film. From the World Trade Centre, a powerful symbol of hegemonic power and modernity where a woman struts around in a sophisticated office outfit to a woman in similar wear strutting towards a suburban, Irish semi detached home symbolizing the return to the place of origin. This cannot just mark the literal return of the film maker, but through the repetition and juxtaposition of imagery it reverberates through the symbolic return of the Irish-American, who is more authentically inhabiting both nationalities than either of their unhyphenated compatriots. Ireland is posited, in the first instance as a tribal, partisan, and somehow more natural 'Other' to the sophisticated modernity and progress of the Manhattan skyline. Ireland is a place of local sports, the Blarney Stone, Catholicism and American tourists. And yet the smoke and mirrors of the subject constituted through a series of distancing mechanisms leads back to the politics of the moment: the Troubles, presented through richly juxtaposed imagery that relates it to workers rights, religion and the global economy that leads back to the US and the moment in *McDonalds in Libertys Booty*.

²⁶ Another example here of the multivalence and instability of the term 'outsider' as the hegemonic, to say, post-colonial studies would be Europe as well as the US.

These are the themes of Vivienne Dicks works of the 1980s yet this text would not be doing justice to the work if it didn't mention the rich texture and deep humanity to her work that is ultimately life enhancing. As the personal leads to the political, so the political leads to the personal in an ongoing dialectic. Through the attention to detail of many, and the refusal to focus on the singular subject, the work of Vivienne Dick widens the net in a multivalent empathetic gesture that reveals her overarching love of people, hence the redemptive quality of her work.

Rachel Garfield

7 July 2009