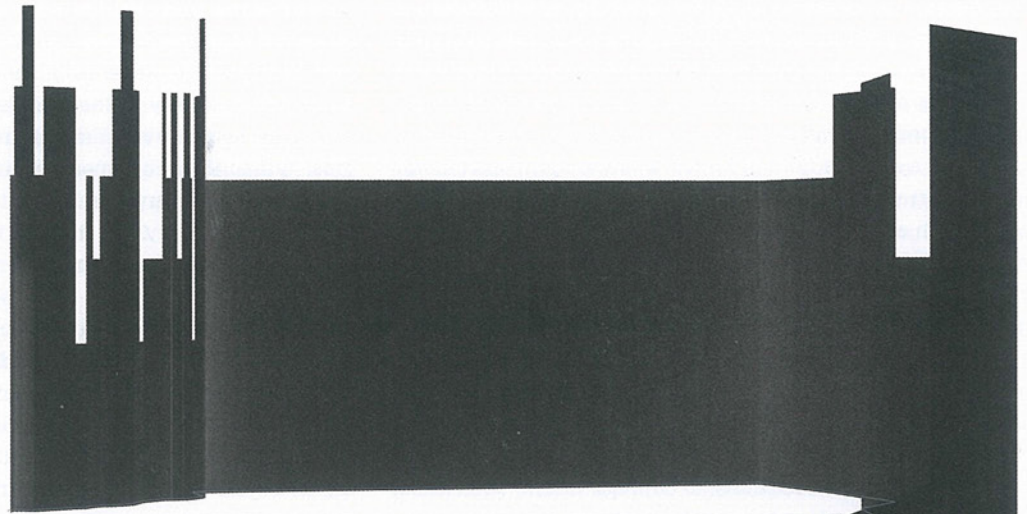


SUBVERTED INTENTIONS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR “FOUND” COLLECTIVITY IN NATALIE BOOKCHIN’S *MASS ORNAMENT*

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*Certain objects which in isolation have no deeper meaning are charged en masse with content; they have this meaning potential that is hidden by individualism, that is inconspicuous in the everyday life of the individual, and which is only rendered visible in the light of the mass.*¹

(Andreas Jürgensen)

In the past decade or so, digital archives have emerged

both as sources from which filmmakers may appropriate documents for their own works and as venues for distributing and sharing these same works. Simultaneously, digital processes have expanded the ways in which documents found in digital archives may be repurposed. As theorist Lev Manovich has noted, digital technologies lend themselves to processes of recombination even at the level of the most basic computer functions.² Indeed, the easy use of the cut-and-paste command encourages users to take fragments from different sources and combine them into new configurations. Manovich has further noted that all digital objects are equivalent in terms of their usability: still images, moving images, and sounds can all be converted into computer code.³ Thus, any kind of digital object that can be accessed by a user can be easily combined with other digital objects and appropriated into a new work.

Indeed, one of the major tendencies that can be said to characterize media production in the digital era is appropriation.⁴ Established artists and amateurs alike are drawn to the endless storehouses of digital documents that can be easily accessed and reused in infinite ways. However, this tendency toward appropriation has taken a particular turn. Indeed, I would suggest the emphasis on understanding the world through archival documents is now largely dominated by a fascination with what I term “intentional disparity” – a play with the gap between what we imagine to be the original intended purpose of a document and its present usage. Various forms of appropriation film – from musical mash-ups and machinima to recut trailers and satirical compilations of recent news footage – abound on the Internet and have become full-fledged art forms. In all of these, the recognition of intentional disparity often generates critical (and sometimes comical) effect.

I would hypothesize that one of the reasons for the current emphasis on intentional disparity in contemporary appropriation films may be the accessibility through the Internet of a seemingly endless supply of documents produced and posted by millions of users, each with their own reasons for making and sharing these videos. Through video-sharing sites like

YouTube where amateur performers of every stripe post their performances (or those of their cats, dogs, and children), we can look into a million little windows and see a fragment of someone’s everyday life – of which performing for YouTube has become a part – inside each one and imagine who they are and why they made and posted each particular clip. And, with digital technologies, we can potentially appropriate these fragments – that carry with them traces of possible previous intentions – and use them in any way we see fit.⁵

Natalie Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* (2009), a single-channel split-screen video running on a seven-minute loop, plays with intentional disparity and offers us one model for navigation through the wealth – or deluge – of accessible and intentionally disparate materials unique to digital archives in a way that produces an emergent kind of specifically digital “sense.” *Mass Ornament* sifts through the brief fragments of lives on YouTube to find both congruities and incongruities in the bedrooms, living rooms, and basements of hundreds of anonymous young people of different genders, ethnicities, and (judging from the spaces in which we see them) social classes, performing for themselves and – via YouTube – for the whole world. These are not celebrities but rather amateurs acting out their imitations and aspirations in front of the camera.

The loop begins with empty rooms and moves on to images of these various performers peering directly into the camera to make sure it is working before each individual begins to dance. Then, as we watch these individual amateurs trying out their moves, with no immediate audience other than the camera, the numbers of screens in the image begin to increase, each showing someone different. As more and more dancers appear, each alone in his or her own little square, Bookchin weaves their movements together so that at times they come into synch, making almost the exact same movements – presumably imitating the dance moves they have seen in music videos and popular culture. In unison, they twirl their bodies, shimmy up and down with their backs against a wall, and perform handstands and backbends. They look, at least for a few seconds at a time, like they are dancing together before they again drift apart into their own, individual performances. Bookchin further unifies these disparate clips by adding, at times, bits of the soundtracks from two 1935 films, Busby Berkeley’s *Gold Diggers* and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*.

The title of Bookchin’s film is clearly a reference to Siegfried Kracauer’s famous essay in which he wrote about the mass choreography of the Tiller Girls, a dance troupe that created geometric forms through the movement of their body parts. Kracauer saw this choreography as a symptom of the capitalist order, arguing that the mass ornament embodied the Taylorist logic of the factory, transforming human beings into a

1 Andreas Jürgensen, “Mass and Meaning”, in: *The Mass Ornament: Mass Phenomenon at the Turn of the Millenium*, ed. Andreas Jürgensen and Karsten Ohrt, Odense, Denmark: Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik, 1998, p. 21.

2 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001, p. xxxi.

3 Ibid., p. 20.

4 For an elaborate discussion of remix culture, see Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License, 2008, pp. 191-222. <http://lab.softwarestudies.com/2008/11/softbook.html>. Accessed 1 November 2011.

5 This reference to intention does not suggest a naïve return to the intentional fallacy, in which a single author (or filmmaker) is positioned “behind” the work and is the arbiter of its meaning, but, rather, points to the fact that when we encounter a media work, we frequently infer or project an intention (however ambiguous) onto that work, which may or may not be in line with that of the actual author.

While each individual dances on his or her own and then posts it on YouTube, Bookchin, through her editing, choreographs the mass dance. Our perception of intentional disparity derives from the fact that Bookchin has clearly taken all of these solo performances and turned them into a collective dance, transforming individual, isolated performers into a dance troupe. When the dancers suddenly come into synch, much of the pleasure of watching the film derives from the fact that this synchronicity could not have been anticipated by these performers, that Bookchin “found” the pieces and brought them together as one.

set of moving parts in the service of a larger pattern – a set of lines – which none of the participating performers could themselves see.⁶ Although Kracauer was writing about performances choreographed down to each identical step, however, the mass ornament in Bookchin’s piece is one which she found, collected, and synchronized. While each individual dances on his or her own and then posts it on YouTube, Bookchin, through her editing, choreographs the mass dance. Our perception of intentional disparity derives from the fact that Bookchin has clearly taken all of these solo performances and turned them into a collective dance, transforming individual, isolated performers into a dance troupe. When the dancers suddenly come into synch, much of the pleasure of watching the film derives from the fact that this synchronicity could not have been anticipated by these performers, that Bookchin “found” the pieces and brought them together as one.

However, the “foundness” of this mass ornament also allows for an excess that was largely eliminated from choreographed performances such as those of the Tiller Girls. Indeed, in *Mass Ornament*, as compelling as the moments of synchronicity are, the differences between the dancers’ bodies, their individual movements, and the background images of the private spaces in which they dance are equally fascinating. While these dancers may not have intended – at least not primarily – to share the intimate spaces in which they live, the camera records the spaces surrounding the performers, in excess of their performative aspirations. We are permitted to look through these little windows to see where other people – whom we will probably never meet and whose names we likely will never know – live everyday: how messy their living rooms are,

what kind of wallpaper they picked out, what odds and ends they keep in their basements. We also witness the exact way each girl tosses her hair and shakes her hips and how each boy cocks his head and spins his body. Thus, another part of the pleasure of the piece lies in the play of differences that derive from the contingent elements of everyday existence that are visible seemingly in excess of the performers’ intentions.

Indeed, *Mass Ornament* invites us to think about the presence of both similarity and difference, individuality and conformity, within archives in general and digital archives in particular. There have always been patterns and deviations to be discovered (and constructed) in material archives. However, the fact that anyone with a camera, a computer, and an Internet connection can post documents online has allowed a staggering number and variety of materials to accrue to a digital archive such as YouTube,⁷ while the accessibility and searchability of such sites offers us new means to trace and discover such patterns and deviations, not just in the official documents of revered institutions but in the brief public moments in otherwise anonymous and disparate private lives. In other words, digital archives expand the territory for tracing such patterns, and the search engines allow us to quickly and easily trace these patterns across this digital territory, which includes not only the missives of the rich and famous but also of the modest and unknown. (It is important to note, however, that the structures of the search engines also limit or at least guide what sort of patterns we may find. Bookchin says that, in order to find these videos, she used search terms such as “me dancing”, “dancing alone”, or “dancing in my room”.⁸ Her film, then, is a result of finding and following certain pathways, guided by the search engines, through the YouTube labyrinth.)

6 Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament”, in: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Levin, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1963], pp. 74–86. Although Kracauer does not mention them specifically in this essay, Berkeley’s musicals and the Nazi pageantry featured in *Triumph*, like the Tiller Girls’ performances, also contain elements of the mass ornament – the synchronization of bodies subsumed within a larger pattern. Thus, Bookchin’s choice of music is also relevant here.

7 There are many who would argue that YouTube is not an archive because no one oversees its contents as a whole. However, I would argue that it is an archive in that it serves as a place where users may find, appropriate and reuse documents stored there.

8 In conversation with the filmmaker, 14 August 2009, Visible Evidence Conference, USC.

Natalie Bookchin: Mass Ornament, 2009



Views: 10,132



This video is no longer available due to a copyright claim by WMG.



Views: 1,638



Views: 56,081



This video has been removed due to terms of use violation.



Views: 44,535



Views: 992

Views: 1,885

Views: 11,724

Views: 1,111

Whether contemporary YouTube dancers are like the Tiller Girls – a disturbing vision of individual bodies violently appropriated in the service of a larger whole they cannot even see, reflecting the negation of the individual will and agency within modernity – remains to be seen. We may read Bookchin’s video as a reflection of a similar negation of individual intentionalities that can be so easily subverted for other purposes, whether those of Bookchin or of consumer society.

In tracing these visual patterns across disparate spaces and bringing isolated individuals into a collective movement, Bookchin’s film points simultaneously to the utopian promise of democracy, connection, and community that emerges in the digital realm and to the dystopian specter of conformity latent in these lonely video posts. In the 1930s, Kracauer was quite pessimistic about the mass ornament, suggesting that the participants themselves were unable to recognize the violent abstraction done to their own bodies.⁹ The mass ornament as it was formulated in the 1930s was not a collectivity of shared goals or intentions but rather of the suppression of individuality in the service of politics and the spectacle of bodies turned into parts. And, like the Tiller Girls, the individual performers in Bookchin’s film will likely never recognize their place in this new mass ornament as similarities are transformed into synchronies and individuality is lost within the ornament.

Moreover, in addition to visual patterns, Bookchin’s film also reveals the social patterns inscribed within each of these individual performances, the fact that each video is not *sui generis* but, rather, emerges from a shared social and ideological system that encourages certain kinds of bodily movements and media practices. The tension between sameness and difference or solitariness and collectivity in Bookchin’s pieces is also that between individuality and conformity. On the one hand, the anonymous people in *Mass Ornament* – some of whom seem to have “talent” and others whom do not – are putatively expressing themselves as individuals. On the other hand, as *Mass Ornament* reveals, they are also simultaneously doing what everyone else seems to be doing – the same dance moves combined with the same impulse to post their videos online. The bodies of these dancers seem to have been colonized by the same hand – even before Bookchin’s hand entered the picture. Indeed, while there is great pleasure in watching these dancers perform “together” in *Mass Ornament*, there is also the

nagging sense that we are also watching them attempt to be something other than themselves – presumably pop stars – expressing goals and intentions not of their own but, rather, of the corporations and interests that dominate mass media. As Bookchin notes in an interview:

In seeming displays of personal expression, the YouTube dancers perform the same movements over and over, as if scripted, revealing the ways that popular culture is embodied and reproduced in and through individual bodies. They often perform utterly conventional gender roles, but the fact that they are performed – repeated, mimicked, and quoted again and again, undermines any pretence of their being real, authentic, and immutable.¹⁰

Thus, *Mass Ornament* begs the question of whether the democratizing force of digital archives, where anyone can post anything, is not also a force for conformity – or at least a reflection of the conformity that mass media attempts to impose on individuals as it transforms them into consumers. Indeed, these performers are distinguished neither by their names nor by the moves they perform – which is the very reason Bookchin can make them dance “together” – but only by the contingent aspects of their own embodied performances and the spaces in which they perform.

And yet, these contingent elements seem to hold value as traces of everyday life, whose colonization is always incomplete. Cultural theorist Ben Highmore notes that “everyday life” is a “vague and problematic phrase” and that the term can be used in multiple ways. On the one hand, he writes:

To invoke everyday life can be to invoke precisely those practices and lives that have been traditionally left out of historical accounts, swept aside by the onslaught of events instigated by elites. It becomes shorthand for voices from

9 Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament”, p. 77.

10 Natalie Bookchin, “Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin”, *Rhizome*, 27 May 2009. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2653>. Accessed 18 August 2009.

“below”: women, children, migrants and so on.¹¹

However, Highmore also notes that, on the other hand, “everyday life” is not necessarily synonymous with resistance to ideology. Indeed, on some level, its relation to ideology is ambiguous:

Perhaps the most central question for the recent history of cultural and social theory...is levelled at the duality resistance and/or power. Does the everyday provide the training ground for conformity, or is it rather a place where conformity is evaded?...Is the everyday a realm of submission to relations of power or the space in which those relations are contested (or at least negotiated in interesting ways)?¹²

I would argue that *Mass Ornament* enacts precisely this ambiguity. These anonymous amateur performers are, in fact, expressing their own “voices” and intentions, not only through their bodies but also through their surroundings, clearly speaking from “below” the frequency of public discourse. At the same time, however, their private spaces do seem to have been already transformed into a “training ground for conformity” as they mirror the bodily motions they have seen the anointed stars of popular culture perform. Their intentions are not, it seems, entirely their own. Moreover, the “resistance” that persists in the contingent elements of their bodies and surroundings may be largely – and ironically – unintended on the part of the performer. Yet, in bringing together these intended performances and seemingly unintended contingencies, *Mass Ornament* attests to the fact that contemporary everyday life simultaneously resists and assimilates the logic of the market.

At the same time, Bookchin’s filmmaking strategies can also be seen as a means of coming to grips with digital archives as sources of knowledge about the social present, generating meaning through particular accumulations, revealing similarities across vastly different spaces and, thereby, also revealing social tendencies – and potentialities. In an era when we are often faced with so much information that it is difficult to cull the important pieces from the noise, finding and gathering film and video fragments that share one particular feature allows us to focus on how they are also different, to notice and appreciate their variations, those traces of everyday life that serve as the contingent context in which the performance takes place. Similarity generates a background against which differences are foregrounded and made “meaningful” in some way. And, although we may read conformity in the similarities between the many appropriated YouTube videos, we may also recognize a horizon of similarity along which resistance to conformity may take shape. By gathering and coordinating all of these disparate intentionalities into a “whole,” Bookchin allows us to envision the possibility of shared aims and emergent coalitions – that do not, however, require complete homogeneity.

Moreover, I would argue that such structures of similarity and difference, foreground and background, are the condition for knowledge – and informed action – in the digital era. We need Ariadne’s string to lead us through the labyrinth of the digital archive in all of its repetition and heterogeneity in order to make sense of the contemporary world and to conceive of a new kind of politics. Indeed, *Mass Ornament* seems to me to be a model for charting – to a degree impossible and unimaginable before the emergence of digital archives – the movements of a particular set of objects or actions in order to reveal all of those contingent elements that adhere to and circulate around that one consistent set. By tracing patterns within digital archives, we may be able to uncover and construct unities that may become the basis for communities that ultimately exceed the logics of imitation and consumption.

Indeed, Bookchin’s film suggests not only that digital media has helped to produce “mass ornaments” that are generally hidden from view, but also that another user – like her – can uncover and (re)assemble them into a synchronous whole. In other words, video-sharing sites have given users the tools to excavate the mass ornaments of the digital era themselves, locating the “inconspicuous in the everyday life of the individual” and rendering it “visible in the light of the mass.”¹³ Whether contemporary YouTube dancers are like the Tiller Girls – a disturbing vision of individual bodies violently appropriated in the service of a larger whole they cannot even see, reflecting the negation of the individual will and agency within modernity – remains to be seen. We may read Bookchin’s video as a reflection of a similar negation of individual intentionalities that can be so easily subverted for other purposes, whether those of Bookchin or of consumer society. However, we can also read it as signal that if these mass ornaments can be “found” rather than produced from above, then the potential for collectivity and collaboration – rather than simply co-optation – lurks within digital archives, awaiting a moment in which users may join together for their own purposes. ■

13 Jürgensen, p. 21.

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11 Ben Highmore, “Questioning Everyday Life”, in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

12 Highmore, p. 5.