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THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO CINEMA AND GENDER

*Edited by Kristin Lené Hole, Dijana Jelača,
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pp. 263–93. (This article explores the explosion of animal imagery on the internet by analyzing 26 examples.)

Halberstam, Judith (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (Halberstam argues that animated works such as *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* and the *Wallace and Gromit* series provide rich possibilities for rethinking collectivities, animality, and posthumanity.)

Haraway, Donna (1989) *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. New York: Routledge. (Haraway's groundbreaking work analyzes the construction of nature in late-twentieth-century culture by focusing on the history of primatology.)

Haraway, Donna (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge. (This book contains Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," a seminal feminist theory essay and foundational text of posthumanism, which argues for the importance of the cyborg as a utopian figure that transcends traditional categories of embodiment such as biology and gender.)

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CLASS/ORNAMENT

Cinema, new media, labor-power, and performativity

Erica Levin

The study of social class as it intersects with gender in film studies has tended to focus either on issues of representation or reception. In the first case, scholars have analyzed how the depiction of class and gender in specific genres, contexts, or periods operates as ideology. Scholars such as Biskind and Ehrenreich (1987) and Nystrom (2009) argue that shifts in the gendered representation of one class point to social and political uncertainties faced by another; arguing for example, that the depiction of working class masculinity in the 1970s indexes the anxieties of a shrinking middle class. Other scholars have drawn attention to the way shifting gender norms are inflected by class concerns. For example, Tasker (2002) analyzes how depictions of working women in New Hollywood cinema reflect shifts in the industry while betraying ambivalence about the broad cultural impact of feminist discourse. Focus on representational codes of class and gender in film studies is not without its critics. Concerns about the tendency to presume a neutral viewer whose own class perspective is either entirely determined by the text or otherwise deemed irrelevant have driven increased scholarly attention to the conditions of classed and gendered reception in specific viewing contexts. Often drawing upon ethnographic and archival sources, a reception approach takes up the question of how gender and class inflect new modes of mass spectatorship. The work of Hansen (1994) is exemplary in this regard. Her groundbreaking study, *Babel and Babylon*, looks at the film industry's promotion of a modern culture of mass consumption through appeals to viewers characterized by social and sexual difference, which in turn conditioned, she argues, the emergence of new contexts for intersubjective experience otherwise absent from the bourgeois public sphere.

This essay proposes an alternate model of analysis based on the allegorical strategies of reading that inform David James' revisionary survey of American avant-garde cinema (James 1989, 2005). It draws on insights generated by feminist film scholars' analyses of ideological codes of class and gender while keeping in view questions raised by film historians of mass spectacle and spectatorship. As a model focused on how films tell the story of their own production, James's allegorical mode of reading proves especially useful in the close analysis of experimental practices of appropriation, sampling, and montage that cite classical Hollywood cinema. The following essay models this mode of analysis by looking closely at *Mass Ornament*, a video installation by Natalie Bookchin made with found

footage culled from YouTube that probes the conditions of performativity that shape the appearance of class and gender online today.

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Webcam footage of an empty bedroom appears at the center of a dark screen. Unseen fingers tap at a keyboard, punctuating the ambient buzz of this otherwise mundane domestic atmosphere. Other casually empty interiors begin to appear and disappear alongside it on screen. Together they form a shifting, but always incomplete row of similar shots. The chatter of flickering televisions in these spaces contributes to a swell of white noise. A tinny recording of "Lullaby of Broadway" breaks through the din. The words "Mass Ornament" flash on screen. This sequence introduces a short video installation produced by the artist Natalie Bookchin in 2009. Bookchin is known for work that engages a wide range of new media formats. The *Databank of the Everyday* (1996), for example, uses a database to catalog digital photographs of banal gestures. In this and later work that involves interactive installation formats and video game platforms, she interrogates the biopolitical dimensions of information and surveillance culture. *Mass Ornament* calls attention to new cultural forms that have been fostered by the internet. The work pairs footage posted to YouTube of people dancing alone in their rooms with a soundtrack borrowed in part from the finale of *Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935), the first feature film directed entirely by the famed Hollywood choreographer, Busby Berkeley. Staged as a performance at the climax of Berkeley's depression era backstage drama, "Lullaby of Broadway" has been described by James as "one of the great film poems in the American cinema and one of its most succinct indictments of gender and class exploitation" (James 2005: 83). To begin then, this essay asks how gender, class, and the logic of exploitation appear in Bookchin's work, mediated through this reference to one of Berkeley's most noteworthy musical numbers.

Bookchin borrows the title *Mass Ornament* from Siegfried Kracauer, whose essay of the same name was first published in 1927. Kracauer takes as his titular subject the Tiller Girls, a troupe of dancers whose coordinated tap and kick routines prefigured the cinematic spectacles produced by Berkeley for the camera. Through the precise orchestration of highly abstracted and synchronized movement, dancers are transformed into what he calls, "indissoluble girl clusters" (Kracauer 1995: 76). No longer performing as self-possessed individuals; their limbs become abstract elements in elaborate visual designs and military-like formations. Kracauer reads the unfolding visual patterns made up of their fragmented movements as purely ornamental; "the star formations have no meaning beyond themselves" (ibid. 77). Though they serve no other purpose than the production of visual pleasure, Kracauer argues that they make manifest the "rational principles which the Taylor system merely pushes to their ultimate conclusion" (ibid. 78). He observes, "The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girl" (ibid. 79). The mass ornament is thus "the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (ibid. 79). But, he asserts, this rationality is ultimately false:

The Ratio of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself but a murky reason. . . . It does not encompass man. The operation of the production process is not regulated according to man's needs, and man does not serve as the foundation for the structure of the socioeconomic organization.

(ibid. 81)

Though Kracauer is more concerned with the manifestation of the mass as an ornamental figure than with the social divisions its abstract configurations disavow, his account of the phenomenon suggests how capitalist ratio decouples precision choreography from the classed experience of factory labor it draws upon.

Taylorism—the theory of "scientific management" devised by the mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor—sought to increase the efficiency of capitalist production through the application of extensive time-and-motion-studies. Taylor's approach, outlined in his 1911 book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, begins with the division of the design and management of production processes from their execution. "The most important object of both the workmen and the management," he writes, "should be the training and development of each individual in the establishment, so that he can do (at his fastest pace and with the maximum of efficiency) the highest class of work for which his natural abilities fit him" (Taylor 1911: 12). In practice, "scientific management" stripped knowledge and autonomy from workers and transferred increased control to their supervisors and managers. Under this system, time restraints and exacting guidelines for movement were set for specific tasks based on the rational principles of measurement and the study of energy expenditure. Taylor's scientific approach to the human body reduced it to a mechanistic device defined by its capacity for motor-like repetition, measured in increments of productive output. The segmentation of industrial production processes required by Taylor's methods yielded a new generalized conception of unskilled labor. The proletariat can be defined as the class with nothing to sell but its ability to work, what Karl Marx identifies as its "labor-power." Capitalism, Marx theorizes, exploits the difference between the cost of reproducing labor-power (through rest and nourishment) and the value of what that labor-power produces (goods manufactured, for example). Taylorization gave rise to an impossible fantasy of a non-fatigable worker engaged in the endless performance of simple, repeatable gestures, fueled by what Kracauer recognized as capitalism's "murky reason," reason that, in his view, failed to fully encompass human need.

The regimented training of the performative body under Taylorization corresponds to the emergence of the precision style dance popularized by the Tiller Girls. John Tiller, a bankrupt textile tycoon from Manchester, England, founded the dance company specializing in chorus line choreography in the early 1890s. The troupe offered young working class women a better-paid alternative to factory or mill work. Rehearsals were originally held in Tiller's defunct cotton processing plant, where he translated his experience with manufacturing into methods for training dancers to kick on cue. At auditions for the troupe, no one was asked to dance. Tiller took for granted that any woman in good health with the right measurements could be trained in his method, in effect treating dance as a form of unskilled labor. "The girls were 'Tiller-ized'" Kara Reilly observes, "in the same way Frederick Winslow Taylor's Scientific Management streamlined factory work through efficiency engineering" (Reilly 2013: 120).

In *Mass Ornament*, Bookchin also employs segmentation and abstraction to dissect movement into discrete units. She manufactures synchronization (or something approximating it) through deft editing. Her visual analysis of found YouTube footage recalls the methods of camera based motion-study that grew out of Taylor's theories, particularly through the work, who analyzed recorded movement to determine the most efficient or ergonomic way to complete a task. Bookchin, however, dissects movement that is purely ornamental, dancing which serves no purpose beyond the pleasure it generates. Her efforts highlight moments of visual correspondence between moves performed by distinct figures each isolated in their own video frame. If the choreography of

Tiller and Berkeley is synonymous with spectacular formations made up of many bodies moving in unison, then Bookchin's editing emphasizes the distance that separates individuals who nonetheless move in strikingly similar ways (Figure 41.1). Her work asks how the mass endures as a descriptive category in the age of pervasive computing and online social networks, and what new principles of production (and exploitation) might inhere in the ornamental forms to which these principles give rise.

Berkeley's "Lullaby of Broadway" opens on the small ghostly face of Wini Shaw surrounded by depthless black, a non-space, not unlike the blankness that frames the appropriated clips that appear and disappear throughout Bookchin's video. Shaw's face grows steadily larger as she sings the opening chorus of a song describing the nocturnal lives of "Broadway Babies"—"the daffodils who entertain" at downtown clubs and "don't sleep tight until the dawn," girls to whom "a daddy" says, "I'll buy you this and that." After the final lines of the lullaby intoning, "sleep tight baby," Shaw puffs on a cigarette while her upturned visage becomes a cutout in the darkness, a keyhole framing an aerial view of Broadway lined with lights. From there the film shifts into a dream-like reverie that takes the form of a city-symphony style montage. Much like Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), it depicts the collective rhythms of the work-a-day world.

The camera fixes on the gestures of young women in their bedrooms waking up and getting ready for work: an arm sweeps an alarm clock into a drawer, legs swing out of bed, a pair of feet glide into feather adorned satin slippers (Figure 41.2). These actions, depicted through a series of close-ups, offer glimpses of movement that evoke a collective body. Gestures refer to the social, which is to say, classed experience of participating in a world oriented around labor. These brief scenes highlight the means by which labor-power is restored through sleep and other forms of daily sustenance. The absolute, abstract non-space that opens the musical number throws into relief the appearance of gesture coded as social in and through this montage. As the sequence continues, people crowd the sidewalk and head *en masse* to the subway, where one by one they pass through a turnstile (for more on the urban dissolve sequencing in classic Hollywood cinema, see Pravadelli's essay in this volume).

Bookchin's pairing of appropriated YouTube videos with the strains of "Lullaby of Broadway" in *Mass Ornament* calls attention to the role that domestic space plays in Berkeley's musical number. But it also departs dramatically from its referent—in her work individuals never exit their private spaces to come together as a group. The video focuses on the non-narrative play between visual isolation and mimetic movement, while Berkeley's sequence, by contrast, shifts in register from city symphony to what David James describes as its "noir countermovement" facilitated by the introduction of a simple narrative structure.



Figure 41.1 Natalie Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* (2009).

Source: *Mass Ornament*, Natalie Bookchin, 2009.



Figure 41.2 Glimpses of movement that evoke a collective body in *Gold Diggers of 1935*.

Source: *Gold Diggers of 1935*, Busby Berkeley, 1935.

The gender and class exploitation he highlights come to the fore with the appearance of a "Broadway Baby" who personifies the lyrics of the song.

As she steps out of a cab accompanied by a "daddy" in top hat and tails, her matronly neighbor airs some linens out the window above. When Baby bids farewell to her date and enters her apartment building, she is greeted familiarly by neighbors and the milkman on his rounds. Warily ascending the stairs, she returns home to bed as everyone else moves in the opposite direction. Alone in her room, the camera fixes on her gestures in close-up. She gets undressed and swings her feet into bed, repeating in reverse the movements of the collective social body pictured earlier. James observes, this "montage of syntactically equivalent shots ... underscores its thematic contrasts between dusk and dawn and between the bed-times and working conditions of the different girls," and for that matter, the other older women and men she meets in passing (2005: 82).

The noirish turn that the sequence takes from this point forward pivots on Baby's threateningly liberated sexuality, much like the classic noir figure of the femme fatale theorized extensively by feminist film scholars (Kaplan 1978; for more on the femme fatale, see Grossman in this volume). At issue as well, I want to suggest, is the way her sexuality facilitates her capacity to apparently slip between classed identities. After morning fades to night, she wakes up and prepares to go out again. A shot of her sliding on a pair of elegant bedroom slippers calls back again to the earlier montage of women waking up collectively. A quick match cut of her feet in dancing shoes speeds the action along to a nightclub. There a dance performance takes place on a stage, *mise-en-abyme* within the larger musical performance. Baby and her male companion sit on a high platform by the edge of the stage, the only visible members of the audience. The emphasis on socially embedded gesture earlier in the sequence gives way here to formal abstraction in synchronized dance, leaving behind any trace of classed signification. Repetition generates ornamental uniformity rather than variegated social collectivity. Once the number begins, narrative momentum is suspended in favor of spectacular pleasure. Berkeley's choreography abstracts and monumentalizes the gestural movement that the camera earlier located in the work-a-day world.

The number begins with a couple dressed in white dramatically descending the stairs under a spotlight. Bookchin includes a brief clip of this scene in her video—also appropriated from YouTube—just after the title *Mass Ornament* flashes on screen. In the clip, we glimpse the first dancing figures to appear on screen, though only indirectly by way of their silhouettes. In Berkeley's musical number, the dramatic appearance of this dancing couple mirrors the visual isolation of Baby and her partner. Soon they are joined on stage by an army of figures wearing identical costumes in black, marching fascistically in lockstep. The women, encased in shiny black midriff-baring tops, appear as fetishistic totems of high Hollywood style (Figure 41.3).

Berkeley's mobilization of visual replication and the inversion of light for dark shift the image from the domain of shadows to that of ornament. The dancers twirl their partners and pound the stage with thunderous synchronized tap steps. At one point the camera hovers over a row of human torsos transformed through sequential movement into a series of machine-like gears turning automatically. Singing in unison, the dancers beckon Baby to join them on stage and she counters, "Why don't you come and get me?" Narrative momentum takes hold again as the mass ornament breaks down. Baby is drawn onto the stage and passed from one dancing partner to the next. The orderly mass disintegrates into an unruly crowd. Here the sequence lurches toward its dark climax. Baby flees the crowd, which now includes her male companion. They pursue her to a balcony where she seeks cover behind a pair of French doors. As she leans in to playfully kiss her lover through the glass, he flings the doors open with the full force of the crowd behind him, forcing Baby back and over the edge of the railing.

In the moment of her death, Baby's isolation from the mass takes a decidedly punishing turn. Her relationship to the dancers on stage remains ambiguously charged. Her movements mirror theirs, just as her evenings follow the daily rhythms of the working class women she lives among. Through her sexual association with a man of a different class however, she appears out of phase with these other figures. She slides into and out of her role as this man's "baby" as easily as she does a pair of satin bedroom slippers. Through her implied exchange of affection for such commodities, the film compares her to other working



Figure 41.3 "Lullaby of Broadway"—dancers in black.

Source: *Gold Diggers of 1935*, Busby Berkeley, 1935.

women who have nothing to sell but their own labor-power. She moves freely between their world and the world of her wealthy, bourgeois suitor. In the end, Baby is violently undone by her failure to assimilate perfectly to either domain. This failure precipitates the transformation of the orderly mass into the crowd. This crowd appears as the inverse image of the mass ornament, a fantasy formation of affectively charged, mimetic bodies reduced to an indissoluble cluster, no longer a dream image of rationality, but now its nightmarish opposite. The unity of the mass and its dark shadow, the crowd, figure a rationalist order that obscures the division between the working classes and their capitalist bosses.

James points out that Baby's brief, tragic story "inverts the saccharine resolution of the film's main plot" which involves a wealthy heiress and young hotel employee. It dramatizes what he calls "a social contradiction" in the form of "a surrealist nightmare of class consciousness," reflecting the "social realities" of the period, including the disproportionate exploitation experienced by working class women (James 2005: 83). It also suggests, I would add, how working women in this moment might come to find themselves out of synch with the gendered roles to which they would have been relegated in the past. The women who performed as the "Tiller Girls" were paid twice as much as their factory employed counterparts. They had the opportunity to travel extensively, though their experiences were often circumscribed by professional restrictions. Members of the troupe had to agree not to date while on tour and to give up their dancing careers once they were married. Doremy Vernon, a former Tiller Girl herself, draws upon interviews with other dancers in her historical study, *Tiller's Girls* to detail what it was like to transition back to working class surroundings after entering the public sphere as a performer on tour, often to exotic locations. Vernon highlights the difficulty of re-assimilation faced by women who were forced into early retirement without much in the way of financial reserves. Finding their old living conditions shabby or dull after a brush with glamour, many described feeling lost or out of place. Family and friends would remind them how "they had stepped out of their class," implying they might have been better off had they never left (Vernon 1988).

"Lullaby of Broadway" is a reverie that unfolds along what Maya Deren describes as film's vertical axis, the domain of poetry which she contrasts to the horizontal axis of narrative (Deren 1970). James argues that Berkeley's film-poem anticipates the fascination in postwar avant-garde film with this poetic form, characteristic especially of Deren's "suicidal trance film," *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) (James 2005). He charts the development of a mode of filmmaking influenced by Deren, in which conflicts rooted in classed experience are decoupled from those bound up with gender and sexuality. Deren and many of her well-known queer acolytes, including Kenneth Anger and Curtis Harrington, focus on psychosexual conflicts staged in dream-like settings that seem cut off from the rest of the social world. Through the historical excavation of amateur and working class cinema, James calls attention to largely forgotten film histories that cut against this tendency. Elsewhere he discusses the evacuation of class from the study of film more broadly (James 1996). His revisionary survey of postwar filmmaking counters this tendency by focusing on the way films call attention to, or in his terms, "allegorize" the mode of their production (James 1989). Ranging across a wide span of filmmaking modes, including avant-garde, underground, independent, and experimental, he considers cinema's indeterminate and shifting imbrication in its political, cultural, and economic contexts. Following his lead, Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* calls to be read as a work that points to the process of its own production as it explores the contemporary conditions of mass spectacle.

Bookchin's cut-and-paste (or better, clip-and-repost) aesthetics are drawn directly from the digital online archives where she sources her material. She sidesteps narrative altogether

in favor of audio layering and the simultaneous visual coordination of movement across discrete shots. Images of social collectivity in "Lullaby of Broadway" are generated through montage; working women wake up in their bedrooms and start the day. Scenes of synchronized choreography abstract gesture from this social context. The appearance of the mass (and the crowd as its dark shadow) screens out these lived experiences of working class life. Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* presents a negative image of these conditions of mass spectacle. The figures that pop up in separate frames in her video constitute neither a mass nor a crowd. The gestures they perform in their rooms are already mediated through mass spectacle; they do not add up to the kind of collective working class experience captured by Berkeley's Vertovian montage. As a result, signs of class in Bookchin's work are difficult to pin down. The accidental details of the interiors captured on screen may suggest traces of social meaning, but ultimately they resist signification. Does this particular bed-spread or flickering television read as working class? Who can say for sure? What matters is that these banal spaces are private while at the same time imbricated in the emergence of a new kind of networked public sphere online, sustained by the proliferation of new media. Bookchin's work pictures the involution of the mass ornament in the age of YouTube. It asks how social bodies are mediated through online platforms. Classical cinema's embrace of the mass ornament set the stage for dramas in which social contradictions played out across bodies marked by class and gender difference. In "Lullaby of Broadway" the codes of class are conflated with gender in the figures of Baby and her bourgeois "Daddy." Scenes of working class life in Berkeley's film are largely represented through signifiers that are also gendered female and vice-versa. By contrast, most of the people that appear in Bookchin's video are female, but the inclusion of a few male figures engaged in similar dance moves suggests that gender does not function the same way in the work. The differences that structured the micro-drama of Baby's story in "Lullaby of Broadway" are no longer operative in Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*. Identity appears less fixed, more performative. Shifting registers from one mode of gendered or classed gesture to another is no longer threatening, if anything, performativity constitutes the normative condition of participation in this online public sphere.

The crowd in Berkeley's film betrays anxiety about the rise of mimetic politics—anxiety that erupts through the violence that underpins the sequence's fascist aesthetics. In Bookchin's work, we encounter the mediation of mimetic impulses through unseen networks of exchange. Bookchin describes her work as "trying to orchestrate a variety of quests to define and describe the self as a part of (and agent in) a larger social body" (Bookchin and Stimson 2011). Her work acknowledges that the risks of alienation and exploitation in undertaking this enterprise remain high. Throughout *Mass Ornament* view counts appear tagged to each appropriated video file. This subtle device points to new forms of abstraction and value extraction that have emerged with the rise of online media. At the same time, the work does much to call attention to the way the bodies on screen push against the constraints of isolation, conformity, and seamless digital exchange. Bookchin layers the soundtrack with noises produced by bodies bumping up against the surfaces of the spaces they occupy. Thus, feet dragging, hands sliding down walls: these sounds bleed from one site to another, just as early in the work, the past bleeds into the present. Underscoring the connected distance between the bodies on screen, she asks what links the moment of the mass ornament's apogee in Berkeley's choreography to present conditions of sociability online. Looking at the way the work allegorizes the means of its own production through borrowed sound and strategies of montage brings this relationship into greater focus. Ultimately Bookchin's work is oriented toward the question of what might yet be possible,

rather than what has already been. It visualizes a performative public sphere where mimetic desire does not signal the obliteration of class or gender difference so much as the powerful urge to make these differences matter in new ways.

Related topics

Maureen Turim, "Experimental women filmmakers"
Veronica Pravadelli, "Classical Hollywood and modernity: gender, style, aesthetics"

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