

## 'Martina's Playhouse' and the Queer Space of Girlhood

The only thing stranger than a nude on the moon might be a girl in a room. Or so it seems in *Martina's Playhouse* (1989), Peggy Ahwesh's ludic exploration of the queer space of girlhood. The film, which stars a sprite named Martina – daughter of Scottish-born performance artist and drag king Diane Torr – careens from a madcap home movie to a poetic essay on desire, sexual difference, and what Michel Foucault described as the 'implantation of perversions'. In this case, the perversion that is being implanted – and gleefully resisted – is gender normativity.

Caught in the uncanny space between childhood impersonation and performing for the camera, Martina delights in role-playing, boundary transgression, and other forms of juvenile drag. Over the course of the film, Martina munches a sandwich, repeatedly undresses for the camera, performs babyhood, and pretends to breastfeed her own mother. In the midst of these antics, she muses unselfconsciously on the fluidity of identity – something we adults have had to relearn from feminist and queer theory. When questioned about one of her stuffed animals, she replies: 'Froggy? He was a girl. I thought he was a boy, but he was a girl.' Decades before the rest of us became enmeshed in acrimonious debates over bathrooms and pronouns, Martina topples the binary oppositions that have already been imposed between male and female, mother and child, human and animal, real and imaginary, and – perhaps most importantly – undies and nappies.

Yet before you mistake Ahwesh's film for nothing more than a celebration of childhood nescience, think again. Whereas legendary experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage devoted his art to the impossible reclamation of the 'untutored vision' of infancy, Ahwesh's film explores the ways in which the social construction of gender warps any ideal of childhood innocence. In this way, Ahwesh implicitly rewrites Brakhage's famous question, 'How many colours are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of "Green"?' to something closer to, 'How many forms of embodied experience are there in a house of play to the girl unaware of the "Phallus"?' Through her imitation of maternal rituals, it becomes clear that Martina's vision has already been pulsed through the mould of femininity. Yet even after offering both nipples to her colicky progenitor, Martina discovers that her wailing ward remains disgruntled. If the nature of desire is that it remains perennially unsatisfied for all, then Martina's learned nurturing underscores the ways in which sexual difference is expected to mediate this supposedly universal truth: girls learn early that their prescribed role is to compensate for the other's lack. It's no wonder that, in spite of her precocity, Martina decides to regress to the polymorphous perversity of infancy.

Thanks to Ahwesh's comic manipulations of the scene, this precocity rears its head in startling ways. Like Lucy from *Peanuts*, Martina is ever-ready to dispense crystals of wisdom. In this case, Ahwesh – who remains invisible throughout the film in spite of her verbal give-and-take with its subjects – guides the little girl through some choice passages of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The fact that Martina is able to read the chosen text with only slightly more difficulty than the rest of us turns out to be less astonishing than how her play both affirms and deconstructs psychoanalytic concepts. Jacques Lacan famously theorised that lack structures our development, from the initial separation from the mother at birth to the alienated recognition of one's own mirror image, and

onward through a series of other, equally constitutive and devastating losses. Surrounded by a fortress of toys, Martina discovers serendipity in place of absence: instead of 'the point of lack' – the phrase she is instructed to read – she improvises 'the part of luck' before being corrected by her invisible instructor. Of course, neither Freud nor Lacan took 'luck' (or what we might alternately call 'white male privilege') into account, in spite of the fact that gender, class, race and national identity shape our identities as much as the tragicomedy of the family romance. In Freud's infamous account of gender, anatomy was destiny. In *Martina's Playhouse*, anatomy is a drag.

Yet in spite of Martina's fierce independence, it is clear that she has already intuitively grasped how the 'achievement' of each developmental milestone entails some kind of loss of intimacy. Ditching her underwear for a diaper, Martina not only attempts to recover the corporeal attention of her mother, but re-animates the fetishistic object of infancy, with all of its bewitching adhesive strips. Of course, the diaper – like the cinematic image – is just another substitute for that which can never be recovered. Like the rest of us, Martina wants to have it all: the subjection of her (m)other to her every whim *and* her own autonomy. That Martina chooses to mediate this crisis of subjectivity through playacting serves as a reminder that before we learned that gender was a performance, we found solace in play. Learning to enact the rituals of interdependence is how we learn how to be.

Throughout all of these episodes, the tactility of Ahwesh's approach mimics the child's play she records on the 'amateur' gauge of 8mm film. By incorporating collaged images, hand-written titles, scratches, flares and other shimmering flashes of colour, Ahwesh's camera reminds us of the wonders of perception that are, as Brakhage bemoaned, systematically sacrificed in the process of acculturation. That this process is far from gender neutral is underscored by the filmmaker's more critical interventions. By interjecting footage of flowers overlaid with a voiceover describing the botany of desire, as well as her own interactions with friend and fellow filmmaker Jennifer Montgomery, Ahwesh situates the chaos of growing up on a continuum with other struggles for recognition and reciprocity. Notably absent from these human and plant queendoms are men. For other than the male voice who pontificates on the relation between the plant's 'useful' organs and its blooming corolla, no boys are allowed in Peggy's playhouse. Letting them in would not only threaten the solidarity that links the film's subjects and its author, but might hasten Martina's own transformation into an object of desire. As Martina herself yells into the camera on another occasion, 'I'm not ready! I'm not ready!' Why should we ever be?

Ahwesh's camera extends the role of Lacan's mirror, through which the child comes to both recognise and be alienated from her 'natural' self – whatever that self might be. Although Lacan located the mirror stage between six and eighteen months, the effects of reflective apparatuses linger, transforming life into a movie that we simultaneously live and watch in a state of bewildered curiosity. Alternately flirting with and resisting the film's unseen director, Montgomery muses, 'Everything is already relegated to nostalgia the moment it happens' – including, I suppose, the pleasures of soiling one's own diaper, and the joys of watching this film.

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