esse arts + opinions

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Numéro 96, printemps 2019

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/90923ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Les éditions esse

ISSN

0831-859X (imprimé)
1929-3577 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Chan, Z. (2019). “What’s in the frame and what’s out”: Storytelling, Representation, and Black Quiet in Aleesa Cohene’s I Don’t Get It. *esse arts + opinions*, (96), 80–83.

“What’s in the frame and what’s out”: Storytelling, Representation, and Black Quiet in Aleesa Cohene’s *I Don’t Get It*

Zoë Chan

Critique can sometimes remain frustratingly in the realm of the negative, framing and reflecting hegemonic ideology rather than overturning it, highlighting problematic issues rather than proposing alternatives. Take, for instance, the prestige TV series *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–ongoing). Accruing accolades as a clear-eyed critique of patriarchy, misogyny, and fascism, it has been celebrated as a cogent allegory for the political present in the United States under Trump. But beyond its slick production values, striking costume design, and excellent cast, *The Handmaid’s Tale* could almost be read as an aestheticized how-to guide for state-sanctioned violence against women—reiterating the control and denigration of its female subjects in gruelling scene after gruelling scene.

In her video project *I Don’t Get It* (2017),[1] Aleesa Cohene adeptly transcends such limited uses of critique. In previous works, she rejected the tropes of heteronormative storytelling by remixing them as queer narratives; here, she turns her gaze to the pervasive racism undergirding Hollywood cinema. Throughout her practice, Cohene has consistently employed a rigorous methodology, involving the intense study and categorization of many hours of footage, to create her composite characters. She selects video clips of an actor featured alone in a shot; from these she finds small recurring actions that she organizes into categories and then edits together: a character who hesitates by a door, enters a room, and so on. For *I Don’t Get It,* Cohene stages two composite characters in dialogue with each other presented on two separate screens. In the first video, she has gleaned dozens of clips of black actresses from American films made in the 2000s, and in the second, has done the same with footage of white actresses. Through this literal black-and-white

Aleesa Cohene
Whoa (1 and 2), 2017, installation views, *I Don't Get It*, Gallery 44, Toronto, 2017.
Photos : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of the artist

juxtaposition, Cohene underscores the hegemonic normalcy of white faces that represent not only twenty-first century white aesthetics and body norms but also a default baseline for "universal humanity."

Using her ongoing approach of editing together new narratives from a dizzying myriad of film clips, Cohene engages with the very structure of cinema, famously defined by director Martin Scorsese in uncompromisingly categorical terms: "Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out." Through choices in casting, filming, and editing, directors literally decide who will be framed and how. As viewers, we must ask ourselves, who are we consistently asked to focus on? Who are the characters that demand our attention and affection, compassion, or concern? Often, the answer is simple: white people.

In his study of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's writings on 'faciality,' author Richard Rushton identifies the face as "a reduction of the infinite to the finite—it is the channel that both connects the infinite with the finite and separates the infinite from the finite; it reduces infinite possibility to finite possibility, but in doing so, it unleashes potential."[2] In Hollywood films, the powerful potential of the face has been accorded primarily to white actors—whose faces in themselves are typically considered a cause for celebration. In numerous critically acclaimed films, cameras follow white actors, who are sometimes asked to do little more than "be themselves" moving through the world. Singular and sometimes silent, their portrayals are typically read through the well-known European auteur and American indie cinema tropes of existentialism: ennui, loneliness, melancholy. A recent example is Olivier Assayas' *Personal Shopper* (2016), in which the fetishizing gaze of the camera rests on Kristen Stewart's blank face as she goes through the motions of her job in the aftermath of her sibling's death. It is much harder to name a film featuring a black protagonist who is the face with which viewers are asked to identify, or who is asked to project the emotional range of complex inner worlds. Rather, black actors are often hired to perform stock supporting roles like the warm-hearted, wise "Mammy" or the sassy sidekick.

Certainly, Hollywood cinema, rife with stereotypical, one-note depictions of people of colour, is an easy target. However, Cohene does not simply offer a critique of the mainstream film industry's track record in casting and types of representation. More ambitiously, she proposes another mode of creation and aesthetic content. For this very reason, Cohene's video of black faces edited together is particularly striking. It shouldn't be so, but it is rare and therefore poignant to see black women on screen in moments of reflection; not acting out, just *being*. This is heightened by the artist's careful, sensitive editing of these brief clips; she skilfully creates the impression that the camera is actually lingering on their faces, allowing viewers to take pleasure in her subjects' unique yet interconnected presences. Perhaps inevitably, Cohene's video of white faces, in contrast, has less visual and emotional impact simply because we are already accustomed to the spectacle of subtly emotive white characters on screen. White actors, after all, are already cast more often and in a wider variety of roles, thus having the opportunity to show more range.

Scholar Kevin Everod Quashie argues that in order to counter an ongoing history of suppression, violence, and racism, African American communities have prioritized a public, political expressivity. Without criticizing the necessity for this outward-facing strategy, Quashie calls for the cultivation of expressions of interiority—or 'black quiet,' as he conceives it—to "support representations of blackness that are irreverent, messy, complicated—representations that have greater human texture and specificity than the broad caption of resistance can offer."[3] Going beyond "the 'hip personality' exposed to and performed for the world,"[4] black quiet, according to Quashie, can equally "affect social and political meaning, and challenge or counter social discourse, though none of this is its aim or essence." Cohene's video of black actresses calls to mind Quashie's call for the recognition of quiet, not only the #kickass, #blackmagic image predominantly promoted in pop culture. Watching *I Don't Get It*, we want more: more time with these faces, more time to know them better, more of their stories.

Shirley Bruno
Tezen, video stills, 2016.
Photos : courtesy of the artist & Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains, Tourcoing, France

Journalist Candice Frederick argues that Michelle Obama's memoir is powerful for its revealing of her fears, vulnerabilities, and imperfections. Frederick writes, "Simply identifying a feeling that is outside the overwhelming image of vitality aloud is an act of defiance in its own way, a rebellion against the confines of womanhood in which we've been placed."[5] This statement reveals a longing—and need—for more nuanced and varied representations of humanity expressed and embodied by people of colour. In *I Don't Get It*, Cohene reminds us of this simple desire. But more than that, she offers a glimpse of what a new type of narrative could look like and how compelling it could be.

The irony is that Cohene has managed to wrangle this work from the already "tainted" visual culture of mainstream cinema. It is exciting to witness a new generation of filmmakers fully engaged in creating new modes of narrativity and visual aesthetics that reject Hollywood's discriminatory norms and stale stylistic standards; rather, these artists simply prefer to create work outside of its paradigm. Shirley Bruno's short film *Tezen* (2016) is one such evocative example. Centring on a real-life family in rural Haiti, it is a tender retelling of a popular Haitian folktale, embodying a storytelling sensibility that is poetic, textured, and visually lush. Whereas Cohene has worked hard to tease out moments in the vein of black quiet through her editing process in order to transcend her source material, Bruno's subjects subtly embody this quiet from start to finish. ●

1 — The exhibition Aleesa Cohene, *I Don't Get It*, was presented at Western Front in Vancouver, May 25–July 27, 2018.

2 — Richard Rushton, "What Can a Face Do? On Deleuze and Faces," *Cultural Critique* 51 (Spring 2002), 228.

3 — Kevin Everod Quashie, "The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet," *African American Review* 43, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2009), 337.

4 — Ibid., 339.

5 — Candice Frederick, "Michelle Obama took off the mask the public gave her. We can do the same." *The Guardian* (November 18, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/18/michelle-obama-took-off-the-mask-the-public-gave-her-we-can-do-the-same.