Super 8 Chic

The Collision of Small Gauge Film, Visual Ethnography and Filmic Portraiture in Peggy Ahwesh's *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1983)

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A Cinematic Backdrop for the Nation's Industrial Fatigue: The Rise of Super 8mm Filmmaking in 1980s Pittsburgh

Fig 1 Claudelle "Clyde" Bazemore, stands before the Phipps Botanical Conservatory, in Peggy Ahwesh's *Nostalgia for Paradise*, Part III of *The Pittsburgh Trilogy*, 1983.

The economic crisis occurring in the Rust Belt city of Pittsburgh in the 1980s, with plant closures and massive layoffs affecting the working-class population, crystallized in a short-lived trend of films known as "Super 8 Chic" or "New Depressionism." Linked with Pop Art and the "instant art" subgenre thereof – mail art, color Xeroxes, and Polaroid photos – these films were defined principally by the use of the Super 8mm camera. The camera was seen as more versatile and less costly than 16mm film. The limitations of the format – "nervous projection," "gritty sound" (Davidson 1982, D4-D5) - once seen as hopeless flaws, were revalued as unique features of an emerging moving-image form (Schuler 1980). Be-

cause Super 8mm cartridges only accommodated several minutes of footage, many films wound up being short works and were frequently excerpted. They were shown incomplete and sometimes criticized as such, only giving a glimpse of a larger whole.

The growing movement of Super 8mm filmmakers were young artists, fresh out of college or film school, working exclusively on each other's films, and trading roles of director/performer on a single production, which suggested a fluid, nonhierarchical structure of collaboration. They demonstrated an anti-institutional ethos, resisting the influence of their elders. The Pittsburgh Filmmakers media arts center, once a hub of Structural and poetic film styles in the 1970s, morphed into a bastion of punk music and transgressive counterculture.[1]

Indeed, the growing influence of the punk scene on Pittsburgh Filmmakers, the locus of the city's filmmaking activity, was apparent in various aspects. The physical space of the facility in its second location, on 205 Oakland Avenue, evinced a punk makeover. In its moody atmospheric interior, a portrait of Maya Deren in the lobby announced allegiance to scrappy experimental film. Meanwhile, the punks working at the equipment office frequently discussed underground filmmakers Mike and George Kuchar or Jack Smith, exemplars of the guerrilla filmmaking spirit and the attitude of high/low art promiscuity that was typical of the time.[2]

Fig 2. Jean-Luc Godard, standing outside the entrance of Pittsburgh Filmmakers at 205 Oakland Avenue. Ads for punk bands enframe Godard and Pittsburgh Filmmakers, revealing the lively interpenetration of punk music and countercinema in the 1980s. Photograph by Wes Morar, 1980.

Amid this heady cultural ferment, the most successful of the local Super 8mm filmmakers was Margaret "Peggy" Ahwesh, a recent Film Production graduate from Antioch College who returned in 1978 to Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, in her words "a sad, industrial town" (Rhodes 2014, 494). She found creative mentors in Antioch instructors Tony Conrad and Crystal Janis Lipzin, stalwarts of experimental art. She programmed the film exhibitions at Pittsburgh Filmmakers and the Mattress Factory Museum. At the same time, Ahwesh began to concentrate her film productions by working with two other prominent female artists in Pittsburgh, Margie Strosser, also a filmmaker, and Natalka Voslakov, a filmmaker and photogenic actor with a penchant for drama. They all met working as crewmembers on George A. Romero's 1982 horror film, *Creepshow.* After this initial meeting, the women involved in Ahwesh's circle reported being unemployed, drifting from job to job; they turned their cameras inward to make films about their world

(Strosser 1983, 1).

Ahwesh describes the resulting films as portraits and "small town ethnographies" (qtd. in Reinke 2007). In visual terms, the work found stylistic inspiration in past experimental traditions (Andy Warhol's profilmic improvisations). More deeply, the films demonstrated affinities with new developments in adjacent, non-art disciplines (postmodern ethnography and visual anthropology). Operating as a visual ethnographer, Ahwesh favored documenting the simple, everyday goings-on in the immediate environment, and spent considerable time thinking about and generating profilmic activity in front of her camera. In all, Ahwesh demonstrated an analytic fascination with the diverse people and places of the city she called home.

In this article, I look to Ahwesh's most significant – yet underdiscussed – series of works made in the city, *The Pittsburgh Trilogy* (*Verité Opera*; *Para-Normal Intelligence*; *Nostalgia for Paradise*; 1983, Super 8mm synch sound film, 50 minutes). The *Trilogy* is a triptych portrait of her friends and collaborators, Claudelle Bazemore, Margie Strosser, and Roger Schwab, shot during the years 1981-1982 and completed in 1983. I argue that Ahwesh's Super 8mm films perform an ethnographic study of the postindustrial spaces and the working-class inhabitants of Pittsburgh. Moreover, I contend that Ahwesh should be interpreted as an "experimental ethnographer," borrowing the terminology of Catherine Russell.

Ahwesh was fascinated with the work of visual ethnographers, and cites the work of Ray Birdwhistell as a particularly formative influence on her filmmaking. She recalls that she watched Birdwhistell's *Microcultural Incidents at Ten Zoos* (1969, 16mm film, 34 minutes) at the University of Pittsburgh.[3] In the film, Birdwhistell broke with scientific norms by presenting footage of families at zoos within a poetic formal structure, providing repetitious but beautiful images of parents and children behaving in the company of animals.[4] Ahwesh was attracted to the repetitious chunks of human behavior that comprised Birdwhistell's film. She also found herself drawn to the era's leading sociologist, Erving Goffman. Goffman (1959) coined the influential idea of "the presentation of self," and argued that identity is not natural but a scripted set of taught behaviors, much like a theatre actor putting on roles for an audience.[5]

As a young, punk-ethnographic filmmaker, Ahwesh created problematic, open-ended documentaries. They are problematic as documentary records, in that they purposely misdirect the viewer's "epistephilic" desire for satisfying illusions of plenitude and stable meaning. Instead, her Super 8mm films elude these outcomes by centering on performances and theatrical personae that are in a constant state of transformation. Sensitive to the aesthetic and thematic content shaping her filmmaking, this article recovers Ahwesh's early interest in language and gender performativity, as well as her filmic techniques of paratactical editing, repetition, parody, and collage. These techniques, I argue below, aim to redefine the ethical dimensions of visual ethnography toward being more empathic, more open to forms of Otherness, and nonhierarchical.

Against Epistephilia: Situating Ahwesh's Filmic Explorations of the City

Documentary and ethnographic filmmaking are historically linked with the norms of truth-telling, objectivity, and knowledge production that define nonvisual "discourses of sobriety," such as sociology, forensics, and law (Nichols 1991, 39). In response, a diverse group of scholars such as Leo Bersani, Douglas Crimp, Catherine Russell, Hal Foster, TJ Demos, Hito Steyerl, Okwui Enwezor, and Edouard Glissant have revealed that the seemingly objective, neutral character of these fields disguises a range of power inequalities.[6] In particular, they interrogate the social function of documentary-inclined artworks that re-present cultural Others, raising a set of issues which can be grouped under the framework of epistephilia.

Bill Nichols (1991) defines "epistephilia" as the pleasurable pursuit of knowledge established by the rhetorical and visual attributes of a documentary text, rooted in realism and objectivity. He outlines the problems and ethical ramifications inherent in mainstream documentary's "will to knowledge." As Nichols writes,

> Documentary convention spawns an epistephilia. It posits an organizing agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it. He-who-knows (the agency is usually masculine) will share that knowledge with those-who-wish-to-know; they, too, can take the place of the subject-who-knows. Knowledge, as much or more than the imaginary identification between viewer and fic-

tional character, promises the viewer a sense of plenitude or self-sufficiency. Knowledge, like the ideal-ego figures or objects of desire suggested by the characters of narrative fiction, becomes a source of pleasure that is far from innocent. Who are we that we may know something? Of what does that knowledge consist? What we know and how we use the knowledge that we have are a matter of social and ideological significance (1991, 31).

Under the epistephilic paradigm, the pursuit of knowledge establishes a power imbalance involving several parties. The documented subject becomes the object of knowledge, something to be exchanged between the knowing artist and the unknowing audience. A conventional documentary is considered successful (and pleasurable) when, by the end, the audience passes from a state of "those-who-wish-to-know" to "the-subject-who-knows."

The epistephilic documentary presents itself neutrally. This neutrality, cloaked in techniques of visual realism, expedites the smooth transmission of information, and realizes the promise of "plenitude" and rational "self-sufficiency" toward satisfying and educating the spectator. In turn, the aesthetic and technical design of documentary films often fail to question or investigate the representational nature of film as a technology or medium (let alone film's entanglements with scientific, colonial and economic forces).

The problem with much filmmaking, photography, and visual art when artists attempt to provide "realistic" depictions of marginal groups, is the repeated (if unwitting) desire to render them as objects for the audience's knowledge-seeking, voyeuristic gaze. Filmmaker, ethnographer, and critic Trinh T. Minh-ha criticizes the mainstream documentary and visual anthropological film for not problematizing "reified" Western conceptions of truth that manifest in oft-repeated conventions and techniques (1990). She points to the convention of the tracking shot, in which the camera smoothly follows and records its subject, while masking the filmmaker behind the scenes. The nonreflexive tracking shot is a relation that aggrandizes and conceals the identity of both viewer/filmmaker, by substituting an illusion of presence, as if one were really there. Trinh further notes that mainstream documentary theory has produced a number of problematic binary oppositions. All kinds of techniques viewed as "true" are valorized (long takes, synchronous sound, etc.); meanwhile, the techniques that appear to be non-neutral, self-referential, or artificial are devalued as "false" (montage, editing, any overt visual stylizations).[7] Trinh, and other ethnographers following her critique in the 1980s and 1990s, purposely turned to very techniques that were once deemed "artificial" and devalued. They found it important to challenge the stable positions of self/other when filming cultures by making films that foregrounded the problems of representation.

These debates have led to the creation of new categories of analysis and praxis, such as "experimental ethnography." Coined by Catherine Russell in 1999, this term refers to artworks that, on one hand, focus on depictions of Otherness; but which, on the other, disrupt the ethical presuppositions that underlie visual conventions of realism and scientific observation (Russell 1999, xii-xiii). This lively realm of cultural production encompasses artists who mobilize tools of visual science and realism for experimental ends (Chantal Akerman, Andy Warhol, David Rimmer, Joyce Wieland, James Benning, and Bill Viola), and scientists whose seemingly straightforward observational films exhibit self-critical reflexive devices associated with modernist and postmodernist poetics (Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Jean Rouch, and Ray Birdwhistell). In the world of experimental filmmaking, Russell cites the tendency toward filmic techniques of discontinuity or extended duration, as in the early films of Andy Warhol in which "nothing happens." In *Blow Job*, 1964, Warhol's landmark proto-Structural film, the purposely restrained filmic framing and the extended duration evince an ethnographic impulse. As Douglas Crimp argues, it spotlights a marginal subject without, crucially, offering him to a possessive, acquisitive gaze that would extract some stable knowledge about him, a social group or its marginality (2012, 7).[8]

Scholarly interest in retracing such historical parallels and cross-pollination between experimental and anthropological film only continues to gain traction.[9] Contributing to this growing discourse, I point out the ways in which Ahwesh draws on the body of ethnographic film, its tools and assumptions, and its tradition of documenting cultural Otherness, as a means to portray Pittsburgh in a time of decay and transformation. This "ethnographic impulse" is seen in the *Pittsburgh Trilogy*'s repetitious editing patterns; the attention to role-playing, language, identity-as-performance; and the anthropological images of marginalized people liv-

ing and interacting in their working class environment. My thematic focus on the interrelationship of visual science and experimental film, positing Ahwesh as an "experimental ethnographer," builds upon more recent, 2000s-era scholarship that has tried to clarify some of Ahwesh's more opaque filmic techniques and critical interventions from a variety of methodological perspectives, including feminist film theory, avant-garde film formalism, postmodernist theory, theories of performance and theatre, and ruin studies.[10]

    I argue that experimental ethnography is the dominant aesthetic-epistemological category guiding and shaping the Super 8mm films, as demonstrated at the level of content and form. Ahwesh displays an attention to the temporal rhythms of daily living, obsessively recording the chores, the minor interactions, the jokes and comments of her characters with an almost encyclopedic level of detail. There is an extraordinary fidelity to space, as evinced by her site-specific title *Pittsburgh Trilogy*.[11] The domestic and rundown urban spaces of Pittsburgh (normally overlooked or sensationalized in mainstream media) receive extended treatment. All her films focus on particular social archetypes in her immediate milieu of the 1980s Pittsburgh arts scene. She concentrates on images of black queer individuals, masculine women, feminist filmmaker punks, and socially awkward male bachelors living on and off the streets, creating a kind of Birdwhistellian human zoo.

    While I lean heavily on Russell's work, I also depart from her in significant ways. In her 1999 book, Russell largely focuses on canonical, art-world figures from the 1960s and 1970s operating in the art-world capitals. By contrast, I turn my attention to an overlooked regional context and a noncanonical artist community that was responding to local situations of global deindustrialization through time-based media. As a further distinction, Russell criticizes Birdwhistell for his zoological gaze, which for her freezes human subjects and fixes them according to his kinesthetic categories (1999, 135-40). In my reading, I argue that artists like Ahwesh were able to "salvage" key elements of Birdwhistell's zoological gaze and the techniques of other visual ethnographers without perpetuating their epistemological biases. Ahwesh herself has repeatedly affirmed the importance of Birdwhistell as a maker of images, even if she distances herself from his analytic categories. Her conflicted identification with Birdwhistell reveals a nuanced ability on the part of regional artists to work as savvy bricoleurs, mining the normally rarefied anthropological discipline as a repertory of possible methods and procedures, taking pieces that work and abandoning pieces that do not. The structural binary of artist and ethnographer therefore may not be as rigid as Russell assumes.

    Her films, in a sense, operate as visual "thick-descriptions," in Clifford Geertz's famous formulation (1973). They allow the audience to observe individuals and activities defined in a particular space over a long period of time. Through this extended duration within a culturally specific setting, we are exposed to and have repeated contact with diverse subjects--or "social actors," in anthropological terms.[12] The audience comes to learn and may even adopt, as a participant-observer, the ways of life and habits of the subject on social and psychological levels. Ahwesh thus qualifies as an ethnographic urban explorer of life in Pittsburgh, investigating a variety of sub-cultural settings.

Gender Expression Molded, Plied like Super 8mm Film: *Verité Opera*

    As Ahwesh explains in her interview with Scott MacDonald, the *Pittsburgh Trilogy* was conceived not as a diary film or a documentary film, but something existing in between: a portrait film. Ahwesh states,

> The films—what are they *about*? I don't know—they're not diary films, and they're not documentaries, and they're not narratives. 'Portraits' seems inadequate, actually, though that's the word I usually use.
> It's more like me doing conceptual exercises so that I can figure out what kind of relationship I have with the person, and what kind of relationship the camera has with the person, and how do you shoot positive and negative space and what *is* it about people that makes them interesting?
> To me these three people were amazing examples of humanity, and I really liked them all. (MacDonald 2003).

In Pittsburgh, many artists turned to filmic portraiture as their preferred mode. These films were short; they depicted situations, rather than narratives; and many contained a lively mix of scripted and verité footage. This tendency toward portraiture was echoed in similar "Rust Belt" contexts, like the New York downtown scene in the 1970s and 1980s, with its edgy portraits of punk musicians, unemployed artists and urban activ-

ists. Locally, some of the most notable exemplars of the form included: the hand-processed personal films of Roger Jacoby; the ex-steelworker video portraits of Steffi Domike; and the home-movies about Italian American street hustlers of Tony Buba.[13] Ahwesh followed this trend, and yet also stood outside it, through her Super 8 Chic documentation on the city's diverse women-centric, queer, and PoC communities.

To make the *Pittsburgh Trilogy*, Ahwesh used two Canon S8 sound cameras that she bought from a TV cameraman who had used them on assignment in Poland and then had no further use for them.[14] Unlike the poetic evocation of space that characterized many other Super 8 open-form diary films, where light and objecthood are granted a mysterious dazzling agency, there is a degraded and worn-out feeling of domestic space that comes through the grainy Super 8mm lens. A shallow depth of field flattens one's sense of the surroundings. The "low-end anti-industrial qualities of the home movie" here emphasize the precarious class standing of these characters (Russell 1998, 366).

Each portrait has startlingly direct and mundane content, focused on the day-to-day lives of her friends. Speaking to the weird atemporality of the present tense in Ahwesh's films, Ivone Margulies writes,

> Mostly shot in super-8, the films seize an obvious priority for the profilmic, creating an abruptly-edited texture with long chunks on this or that 'person' or situation. The sense of immediacy and spontaneity in her work is, however, deceptive, with her raw footage held on the backburner sometimes for a year before editing (1989-90, 31).

The priority for the profilmic, the stark presentation of space, and the sustained present-tense of the films, imbue them with an anthropological inscription of the Real, forming the first and most immediate linkage with that discursive field.

Figg. 3 and 4 Claudelle Bazemore attracts the camera's gratifying gaze. As a drag queen, she pastiches with her own gender performance, dressing up and trying out different women's garments. The motif of drag – focalized in the figure of Claudelle – extends metaphorically to how the film itself cuts up and pieces together tropes from ethnographic film and experimental diaristic film traditions into something new. From *Verité Opera*, Peggy Ahwesh.

The first film, ironically titled *Verité Opera*, is set in a Hill District apartment, and opens on mundane interactions between Claudelle Bazemore and Roger Schwab. As soon as Claudelle notices the camera fixed on her, she transforms out of her workmanlike demeanor. She blossoms like a flower: she sets everything aside, begins smiling, plays with her hair and does a few glamour poses. The camera tracks her closely, giving a compressed and tight shot of her activity. While it may seem obvious to some from the start that Claudelle is homosexual and a drag queen, it is nonetheless surprising when the camera tilts down showing us the fluffy, feminine slippers on her feet, which clashes with her masculine, blue-collar attire (jeans and sleeveless black shirt).

As Roger puts on a Rolling Stones record, Claudelle prepares the chess table for a match. The two begin playing a game. Roger then looks at a stack of records. A jump-cut takes us forward in time much later in the day. We see Claudelle dressed in a flamboyant baby blue outfit, ready for a night out. Looking in a mirror, she applies lipstick. The chess match never resolves in a winner, and the film ends.

The film structure follows anthropologist John Marshall's idea of the "sequence film."[15] Such films portray, in chronological and observational ways, the key elements of social activity belonging to a foreign culture, typically oriented around ritualistic, religious, or reproductive behaviors. Viewer and filmmaker remain in one place and time, watching patterns of life progress from one stage to the next. In this piece, Ahwesh applies Marshall's notion of the sequence film not to a foreign culture, but to the gay subculture that occupied her attention in the early 1980s.

However, the normally straightforward treatment of ethnographic subjects in the sequence film is here disrupted by jump-cuts, which break up the action of characters. Events are shown out of chronological order, taking us backward and forward temporally. The most startling jump-cut occurs when Claudelle is cleaning. This action is interrupted by a strange insert of an empty couch, followed by a wide shot in which Claudelle wears different clothing – a fanciful, blue jumpsuit. We are thus jolted forward in time. The jump-cut shows a significant transformation in Claudelle's self-presentation, but without a sequential building up of details or didactic framing that would try to make sense of her shift in identity.

When she looks back at us and does glamour poses, Claudelle engages the camera in a seduction. This echoes the blatantly voyeuristic film portraits of Mario Montez, a drag queen superstar from Warhol's Silver Factory. In *Mario Banana #1*, 1964, we see Montez framed in tight, static close-up. He suggestively snacks on a banana, unpeeling it slowly and delighting in the frank sensuality of the phallic object. Equal parts camp and seduction, Montez's camera mugging inevitably reappears wherever we see Claudelle. The focus on Claudelle doing everyday chores and banal tasks, coupled with her returned gaze, reveals a similar yearning for stardom and recognition by the viewer. She becomes what Ahwesh called "a living artwork" (1998, 80).

The fragmentary editing, moreover, reveals Claudelle as an author of her own hybrid identity. As Russell argues, Ahwesh's disjunct editing draws attention to her actors' performance. It does not break apart our attention, but rather focuses and heightens it, and our confusion gradually becomes a form of analysis. We begin to see patterns, see shades of personality, and character agency, revealed through the use of repetition, the sudden interruptions in action, or abrupt shifts in time/space. As Russell writes,

> The jump-cut [in Ahwesh] is the modus operandi […] it functions as much more than a reflexive device. In filming people it becomes a means of analyzing behavior. Cutting on gestures, breaking up movements and dissecting bodies […] is a key means by which people (actors and nonactors) become objects of study. Each performance is made into a text this way. (1998, 372).

Though the film's "abruptly-edited texture," Claudelle's self-performance indeed is "made into a text." Imagery of Claudelle in her room, and of her social attire, reveals that she is consciously constructing herself. Her apartment room (ramshackle though it may be) is littered with rich signifiers of self-creation. The mannequin with a woman's wig indicates her desire to compose herself and shift in and out of gendered identities. The handmade drawings of Egyptian goddesses hint at her concern for other societies that use mythology and symbolism, possibly surfacing a respect for the collage-like identity of Egyptian mythic beings – individuals that are part animal, part god and part human.

We begin to recognize that identity, and gender itself, can be related to a process of collage and discontinuity. Everyday, even in our most private moments, we compose, decompose, and recompose ourselves with bits and pieces of cultural imagery and accouterments. Gender, as Claudelle reveals, is often read off of articles of clothing, shaping one's body and performance into a particular, pre-existing category. However, queer gender performance can be creative, pushing back against the binaristic nature of these categories. These binaries can be troubled and broken down, as Claudelle teaches us, by sampling from different sources that span history and mythology. Appropriately, the circular editing, the use of jump-cuts, reflects a kind of temporal backwardness, or playful schizophrenia, in the fashioning of queer gender performance.

Ahwesh deploys film's radical capacities in order to challenge the presumed solidity, and stasis, of gender expression. Ahwesh's primary material in the portrait film is not the cinematic apparatus, then, but rather gender "essence." Her filmmaking displays an overarching interest in arranging and re-arranging the gendered character of her documentary subjects, presenting documentary records of this process. Through an aesthetic of collage, in which the editing pattern deconstructs a stable sense of self, and which juxtapose

characters in disorienting situations without a stabilizing context, the characters perform no inner truth but show us the performance of the self.

Autoethnographic Portraiture: *Para-Normal Intelligence*

Part II of the *Trilogy*, *Para-Normal Intelligence*, is an exploration of how the camera operator relates to the performer, a crucial interest driving Ahwesh's filmic experiments. A young, spiky-haired woman named Margie Strosser, in striped T-shirt and shorts, is shown in her apartment in the South Side.

Margie delivers an intimate confession to the camera, explaining her desire to have a "normal" (read: heteronormative) life, with kids, a house, and a husband. Ahwesh immediately interjects, undermining this confession from behind the camera. She says to her, "Well, that's boring, that's a stupid project. You need to continue working with your other projects." From there the conversation descends into a full-blown argument. Margie lashes out, claiming she is being misunderstood and "defensive about [her] identity."

While the two women argue, the camera is highly fluid, roving gesturally around. It pans left to right, right to left, tilting up and down. The movement visually echoes and amplifies the tension unraveling the verbal discussion. The conversation reaches an emotional highpoint with Ahwesh finally admitting that she herself has difficulty expressing her emotions, that she too often remains quiet, detached and observant from those around her. Margie demands at one point, "Why don't you talk to me, explain to me what's going on… this is a dialogue even if I'm the only one in the fucking frame!" By the scene's end, both women laugh and shout playfully at each other. The camera is unfixed, wobbly from laughter. At one point Ahwesh puts her own hand in the frame, interrupting the visual portrayal of Margie. The film transforms, briefly, into an autoethnographic self-portrait.

Fig. 5 Ahwesh frames herself with subject Margie Strosser, in *Para-Normal Intelligence*.

The portrait's camerawork offers a stark contrast to the stable, zoological gaze associated with much ethnographic filmmaking. The camera reframes and unframes its focus on Margie, making her appear near and far, displaying a looseness toward the visual field which hints at Ahwesh's desire to pry loose the stable binarizations of observer and observed. As Russell observes of the "roving camera" and purposely unreliable framing of subjects in her films,

When shooting people talking or performing, the framing [in Ahwesh's films] is often 'too close': it lops off a head, it wanders away from the person being filmed, or it refuses to follow people as they walk out of a shot

[…] camera movements are never directly tied to the filmmaker's movements. Instead, they take on a life of their own, literally 'floating' over the field of vision (1998, 362).

At several points, we see Ahwesh reflected in a large circular mirror in the room. The image of the filmmaker, miniaturized in the mirror, offers a playful consideration of the filmmaker as though she were a child playing with a toy. William Wees has characterized the use of toys and models as a source of "acting out" and "playing primitive," describing the Super 8mm films as "little playgrounds" (2007, 291). Margie's direct address to the camera, and Ahwesh shattering the observational frame by adding her own verbal commentary as she records the situation, is a reminder of Trinh's claim that the camera operator is always orchestrating and framing the visual material in a particular way. She eschews the expectation to be a neutral observer, a fly-on-the-wall, as in cinema verité or direct cinema traditions. Ahwesh makes matters worse by projecting herself into the film. She is seen prodding, joking, and hurling insults at her subject. At the height of point of tension between each other, she tells Margie to quit complaining about the troubles of the artist's life and simply get a job.

Manifesting an anti-voyeuristic ethos, Margie as a filmic subject seems unwilling to disclose herself in a way that is transparent or coherent. She complains that Ahwesh does not express her emotions, and does not announce to the world how she really feels. Interestingly, Ahwesh chooses to edit the film portrait in such a way that includes this potentially damaging disclosure, and thereby describes the working relationship that Ahwesh and Margie have together generally, in their creative pursuits.

Figgs 6-9 Examples of Ahwesh's "free-floating gaze," or the mobile camerawork that embeds the viewer in a tense argument between the filmmaker and Margie. In Fig 8, Ahwesh thrusts her own hand into the camera frame, revealing that the true subject of this film portrait is autoethnographic, i.e., her own artistic relationship with Margie. From *Para-Normal Activity*, Peggy Ahwesh.

The portrait reveals that Ahwesh relates to her subjects much in the same way that Warhol did. Ah-

wesh's textual absences (her lack of exposition or didactic framing of the action) are complemented with intrusive, authorial gestures of presence, signaled through her technical ineptitude. Like Warhol, Ahwesh appears unable to film a scene properly – as when she knocks over a light fixture in the portrait, or placing her hand in between camera and the camera's subject.

This blurring of documenter and documented characterizes experimental ethnography. In the words of Russell, "The utopian project of experimental ethnography is to overcome the binary oppositions of us and them, self and other, along with the tension between the profilmic and the textual operations of aesthetic form" (1999, 19). Ahwesh pursues this utopian project without any sense of utopianism. Much like the Super 8 Chic films that circulated at this time, the film exists primarily as a document of its own conditions of being created, inviting the audience to participate in the everyday mythologies generated by the subjects of the films. This portrait reflects how Ahwesh orchestrates a particular situation, a world of social relations organizing around her recording camera. Russell's observation that the Super 8mm films are often records of their own creation is indeed apropos here: "Ahwesh's performers are often flamboyant and dramatic, but they always retain a certain cultural integrity as people that underwrites their performances and grounds their stories in a history, if only the history of the making of the film" (1998, 364). The doubling of Margie as object/author of Ahwesh's film undoes the presumed power dynamic of confessional address. Much more so than Margie, Ahwesh herself ends up the object of scrutiny, thanks to the chaotic porousness of the profilmic recording situation.

Repetitious Structures and New Forms of Ethnographic Data: *Nostalgia for Paradise*

Nostalgia for Paradise moves away from issues of gender or artistic collaboration, toward questions of language, storytelling and the ambiguity of communication. Roger Schwab, the proverbial Benjaminian storyteller, is shown in a state of "transformative repetition" (Margulies 1989-90, 31). In the opening sequence, he is shown telling a story about the Philadelphia philosophical society and the nature of language. The repetitious structure of the segment (8 nearly identical shots of Roger telling the same sentence of a story) breaks down the linguistic relation of signifier and signified. His speech and story-telling, under these conditions, reveal anthropological details about himself. The repetitious presentation discloses data about his authoritative and self-serious manner of speaking, and how he orients himself in a social space.

His words, like Ahwesh's unruly camera, float freely, unfixed from a single determinate meaning. Repeated ad nauseum, Roger's words like "Rhinoceros" simultaneously mean something and nothing. In the process of seeing Roger repeat the same sentence over and over again, the viewer is reverted to the position of the child who latches onto a word for reasons other than meaning, only to delight in phonetics and the material shape of linguistic expression. As Ahwesh strains our ability to listen solely for symbolic content, Roger is thus denied the satisfaction of a well-told story and his desired self-presentation as an entertainer. Her repetitious montage of Roger turns the presentation of his words and his overall demeanor into a text in itself, standing out against the deliberate stylelessness of her home-movie framework.

The presentation of Roger echoes the visual repetition technique employed by Birdwhistell in *Microcultural Incidents*, where he shows scenes over and over. At one point, a group of children running down a walking path; in another, he shows a father and daughter watching animals. In both cases he replays the same image multiple times, while his voice-over symptomatically examines the footage for hidden, transcultural information on familial dynamics. The idea behind this repetition is that our eyes often deceive us, but that focusing on the same action reveals details deep below the surface, which we might otherwise miss. Ahwesh uses the ethnographic technique of replaying the same human activity multiple times, but abandons Birdwhistell's voice-of-God narration, giving more interpretive agency to her viewer.

Fig. 10 The final portrait, *Nostalgia for Paradise*, centers on a strange, lonely man named F. Roger Schwab, a high-IQ MENSA member who partly lived at a halfway house and partly with his depressed mother.

Through his stuttered speech, Roger becomes like a skipping turntable, repeating fragments without moving forward. Ahwesh is not, however, aiming at the nihilistic abolition of meaning or the absence of knowledge completely. What do we gain from the repetitious cut-up treatment of Roger's voice? Underneath the repeated story, we hear the nasal pitch of his voice; we notice his rigidity of expression when he tells jokes intended to make us laugh; we observe how he awkwardly tries to situate himself in space alongside others. We notice how Roger, in fact, is a deviously tricky subject to film, that he usually eschews the spotlight, preferring to lob comments from the peanut gallery outside of view. Russell points out, "As ethnography, [Ahwesh's] work is profoundly unscientific, and consistently challenges all forms of objective representation" (1998, 357). Indeed, it is this deep questioning of visual realism which makes her valuable and relevant to both ethnographic and experimental traditions. The collision of ethnographic and experimental-film tropes across her work offers an alternative set of terms for a renewed experimental film language.

As Tom Gunning argues, in place of the highly mannered Structural film which had become a staid, "international" style, and positioned against the Romantic, self-aggrandizing ethos of Stan Brakhage's visionary tradition, Ahwesh led to a third way for women filmmakers working within an avant-garde milieu at the beginning of the 1980s (Gunning 1989-90, 4).[16] She subjected cinematic realism to processes of stylistic collage, resulting in subversive "minor" films that did not recapitulate logo/phallocentric authority over the documentary subject.

Conclusion: Ahwesh's Anti-Voyeuristic Model of Filmmaking

This article argued for positioning the *Pittsburgh Trilogy* as a blend of portrait-like intimacy and reflexive ethnography, transmitted through the low-grade immediacy of small gauge film. I tried to clarify the connections Ahwesh forged between distinct spheres of film practice, modernism and anthropology, highlighting her obsession with visual thick-description, repetitive editing, and foregrounding the situation of filmmaking.

More broadly, the abruptly-edited texture of the films, the treatment of performance-as-text, forecloses the epistephilic pursuit of knowledge and prevents voyeuristic looking. I claim that the devious suspension of meaning and ethnographic convention joins Ahwesh with a reflexive paradigm in ethnographic filmmaking in the 1980s. In this, she followed other pioneering women filmmakers such as Su Friedrich, Michelle Citron, Janis Lipzin, Leslie Thornton, and Abigail Child.

Above all, her portrait films demonstrate a desire not for knowledge but for a merging with the objects and subjects being portrayed. It is this "integral relationship" toward Otherness that makes Ahwesh unique among other documentarians working in the Rust Belt. Where others, like her Pittsburgh filmmaker-documentarian colleague Tony Buba, wanted to make sense of economic industrial ruin from a liberal-humanist ethos, Ahwesh wanted to stop making sense, and instead aestheticized her surroundings and social milieu for the viewer's pleasure.

Ahwesh involves herself—and the audience—with the documented subject. She does

not merely describe, she merges with her object. Her hand entering the film frame, in *Pa-ra-Normal Intelligence*, is the visual distillation of this ethic of relationality, but many other textu-al features of her films reflect the open and porous nature of social experience that interests her.

As an experimental ethnographer, she deliberately breaks from the technophobic bias of realist observation (the ban on references to the camera apparatus), and she challenges the conceptual/technical suppositions underlying the ethnographic recording of people. Her analysis of behavior in the social actor, for instance, departs from the staid visual conventions of a static camera or series of long and medium shots that are meant to give a sense of a social actor undisturbed by the filmmaker. She references the material conditions of production, and reveals the intrusive but constitutive role of the filmic apparatus, whether showing herself in a mirror with a camera or having the microphone wires visible and allowing technical commentary (normally edited out) remain in the finished piece. Her subjects directly address the camera, talking to it (and to us). Sometimes it seems as though they are directing Ahwesh herself. Thus, as in autoethnography, we see as much of the subjective vision of the filmmaker as we do the social actors on screen. Frequently she conspires to dissolve boundaries of the filmic text all together.

Pittsburgh Trilogy prefigures the future trajectory of Ahwesh's art career, not least by its fixation on marginal groups that mainstream audiences normally do not or wish not to see. In this fixation, Ahwesh does not allow for a classical kind of epistephilic relationship to take place. She mobilizes a range of tech-niques of visual mistakes and "errors" that make the apprehension of the social actor fraught, challenging. As in Warhol's films, where his subjects frequently break out of character and shatter the narrative illusion-ism of the story, similarly Ahwesh favors a presentation of the social actor that is schizophrenic, cycling from acting to authenticity, not just a one-to-one relationship of subject and their social milieu. Overall, Ahwesh favors the possibilities of "transformative repetition," repeating imagery and dialogue that verge on meaninglessness. Words and images often stop making sense, and the one-to-one relationship of signi-fied and signified, on which ethnographic film depends, breaks down.

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Endnotes

1   For an extended discussion on the poetic and Structural currents of 1970s filmmaking in Pittsburgh, see Haller 2005.

2   Many artists associated with Pittsburgh Filmmakers recall the startling and disjunct interior décor of the media arts center, and the indelible mark it left in their memories. See Ahwesh 2017.

3   Ahwesh states of her time in Pittsburgh in the late 1970s: "I was into Erving Goffman then. I remember *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* but I might have gotten ideas from Vito Acconci. An important source for me was Ray Birdwhistell—Pitt had 16mm prints of his films you could borrow from their library— so my interests tipped towards the ethnographic, body language and small group dynamics." Peggy Ahwesh, interviewed by Benjamin Ogrodnik, July 6, 2015.

4   Birdwhistell was an American anthropologist who founded a subject area called "kinesics." His film projects, focused on the close analysis of motion/movement in a variety of social contexts, expanded the repertoire of anthropological filmmaking to include high-tech, military projection units, such as the PerceptoScope, which enabled analysis of movement in greater detail. In both the selection of film equipment and the surprisingly poetic conceptual methodology driving his projects, Birdwhistell could be considered "avant-garde."

5   Goffman's seminal research defines human behavior with notions of acting and performance, utilizing dramaturgical tools to describe the layers of performativity in different social spheres, such as the workplace, relationships and family. See Goffman 1959.

6   Bersani and Phillips 2008; Glissant 1997; Crimp 2012; Russell 1999; Foster 1996, 302-309; Lind Hito Steyerl 2008; Enwezor 2008; and Demos 2013.

7   For a filmic expression of this critique, see her *Reassemblage*, 1982, 41 minutes. She has also written many critical essays on this subject; in particular, Trinh 1990.

8   In *Blow Job*, Warhol displaces the viewer's focus away from the off-screen sexual act. Crimp deems this strategy "anti-voyeuristic." Crimp writes of Bookwalter, the human subject of the film, "We cannot make eye contact. We cannot look into this man's eyes and detect the vulnerability that his submission of being pleasured surely entails. We cannot take sexual possession of him. We can see his face, but we cannot, as it were, have it. This face is not for us."

9   For two recent book-length investigations on exchanges between experimental film and visual anthropology, see MacDonald 2015; and Schneider and Pasqualino 2014.

10   The "Peggy Ahwesh dossier" in the Winter 2014 issue of *Screen* represents a wide range of current methodologies and approaches to her work. See Gorfinkel and Rhodes 2014, 490-493; Cleghorn 2014, 500-506; Pierson 2014, 507-513; and Gorfinkel 2014, 514-521.

11   Ahwesh claims that her *Pittsburgh Trilogy* has no (intentional) connection to Stan Brakhage's own 1971 *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (also titled *Pittsburgh Documents*), focused on the Hill District police, the Western Pennsylvania hospital, and the city morgue. But, despite Ahwesh's assertions to the contrary, we can see in both projects an overriding "ethnographic" interest. This overlap in visual observation is evident in various aspects: in both artists emphasizing extended filmic duration, documenting various kinds of social actors, closely observing the human body in motion, and more. For more on Ahwesh discussing the Pittsburgh work of Brakhage, see MacDonald 2003.

12   Bill Nichols uses the term "social actor" referring to individuals who appear in documentary films. Such individuals function as representatives of a class or social group. Nichols writes, "Those whom we observe are seldom trained or coaxed in their behavior. I use 'social actor' to stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance." (Nichols 1991, 42).

13   For more information on the Pittsburgh film scene in the 1980s, and the culture of the city, see Ogrodnik 2018a; and Ogrodnik 2018b.

14   Peggy Ahwesh, interviewed by Benjamin Ogrodnik, July 6, 2015.

15   Between 1950 and 1958, John Marshall made four expeditions to film a group of Bushmen of the Nyae Nyae region of Namibia (then South West Africa). During this time, Marshall shot over 300,000 feet of 16mm film (157 hours). He later produced a total of 23 films exclusively from this footage. 15 of those are short films that Marshall referred to as „sequence films." Each focuses on a single event, providing the viewer a brief introduction followed by an uninterrupted sequence. See !*Kung Short Films*, John Marshall, 1958/ digitally remastered 2009, 161 minutes.

16   Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the literature of Franz Kafka, Gunning claims that Ahwesh is representative of a movement that does not break from experimental film, but parasitically situates itself in relation to the once-dominant tendencies of the 1970s.