"Leslie Thorton, Su Friedrich and Abigail Child: No More Giants" by William C. Wees
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1

Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, and Abigail Child

Although Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, and Abigail Child began making films in the 1970s, all three became major figures in the generation of American avant-garde filmmakers who came to prominence in the 1980s. Each has worked in video as well as film, and each integrates teaching into her professional life as a filmmaker. All three reside in New York.

Leslie Thornton is particularly important for her experiments in narrative forms and her recycling of archival footage. The result is a highly regarded but difficult-to-classify body of work that explores complex formal and subjective territories. She is best known for her seven-part epic serial, *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1985–96), a singularly dark, meditative body of interrelated films and videos that contemplate issues of technology, ethics, and consciousness. It has been cited in "Year's Best" lists in the *Village Voice,* the *New York Times,* and *Cahiers du cinéma.* She began a second cycle of *Peggy and Fred* with *Chimp for Normal Short* (1999) and appears to have completed it with *Paradise Crushed* (2002). Included among the more than thirty other works she has produced to date are *Have a Nice Day Alone* (2001), *Another Worldy* (1999), *The Last Time I Saw Ron* (1994), *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1988), and *Adynata* (1983). She has received the Maya Deren Award and an Alpert Award in Media, as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Jerome Foundation, Art Matters, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She was included in the 1993 issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* devoted to "160 cinéastes d'aujourd'hui."

Among the institutions with her films in their collections are the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (Paris), San Francisco State University, the University of California at Santa Cruz, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and City University of New York. Since 1984 she has taught in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University.

Su Friedrich's work crosses several genre boundaries: documentary, autobiography, and experimental/avant-garde. Her works examine the forces that shape women's sense of themselves and their social/sexual relationships. She has produced and directed fifteen films and videos, including *The Head of a Pin* (2004), *The Odds of Recovery* (2002), *Hide and Seek* (1996), *Rules of the Road* (1993), *First Comes Love* (1991), *Sink or Swim* (1990), *Damned If You Don't* (1987), *The Ties That Bind* (1984), *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), and *Cool Hands, Warm Heart* (1979). Her films have won awards at the Athens International Film Festival, Outfest '97 in Los Angeles, the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the Melbourne Film Festival, the San Francisco Film Festival, and the Atlanta Film Festival. Retrospectives of her work have been presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Rotterdam International Film Festival, the Stadtkino in Vienna, the Pacific Cinematheque in Vancouver, the National Film Theater in London, the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, the Wellington Film Festival in New Zealand, and the Anthology Film Archives in New York. She has received, among other honors, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, and multiple grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Jerome Foundation. Her work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Royal Film Archive of Belgium, the Centre Georges Pompidou, the National Library of Australia, as well as many university libraries. She teaches at Princeton University.

Abigail Child is best known for her intricate, rhythmic editing of sound and image, which often derives from found footage. Formally rigorous, her work displays a wry, even dark, sense of humor combined with sharp-eyed critiques of cultural stereotypes and contemporary social mores. She also publishes poetry collections, among them *Scatter Matrix* (1996), *Mob* (1994), and *A Motive for Mayhem* (1989). Her recent film work includes *The Future Is Behind You* (2004); *The Milky Way*, a film-installation work (2003); *Where the Girls Are* (2002); *Dark Dark* (2001); and *Surface Noise* (2000). Her seven-part cycle *Is This What You Were Born For?* (1981–89) includes her most widely seen (and most controversial) film, *Mayhem* (1989), a mix of found and original

footage that integrates the conventions of film noir with vignettes of goings-on in the East Village. Her films have won prizes at the Black Maria Film Festival, the Ann Arbor Film Festival, and the Images Festival in Toronto, and she has been awarded a number of prestigious fellowships and awards, including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Film, a Banff Centre for the Arts Residency Fellowship, and grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and Media, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Jerome Foundation. Major museums have acquired her films for their permanent collections: the New York Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Georges Pompidou, the Melbourne Museum (Australia), and the Art Institute of Chicago. She teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

WILLIAM C. WEES

No More Giants

During the 1980s, North American experimental/avant-garde film underwent a paradigm shift that many supporters of the older generation of avant-garde filmmakers either failed to recognize or saw only as a falling off in quality, originality, and artistry. For example, in the *Village Voice* for June 16, 1987, J. Hoberman described the recent work of American avant-garde filmmakers as "increasingly sterile, derivative, and self-involved," and he later pronounced the avant-garde movement "moribund . . . the shadow of a shadow" (174). Similarly, Fred Camper announced "The End of Avant-Garde Film" in the spring 1987 issue of *Millennium Film Journal.* "The works of the newer generation," he complained, "for the most part lack the authentic power of the original, and often still-active, masters, and . . . the qualities that they do have instead often seem related to, but also only as diminished shadows of, the achievements of the original filmmakers" (109). And seemingly without irony, Camper headed the last section of his essay, "There were giants in the earth in those days.—Genesis 6:4" (122).

What Camper seemed unable to appreciate is that many of the avant-garde filmmakers who emerged in the eighties contested the whole notion of "giants." They rejected its Romantic, Emersonian, Great-Man Theory of individual creation as well as its perpetuation of a canon of great films and filmmakers, and they were well aware that, with the exception of Maya Deren, all the "giants" were men. Despite important work produced in the sixties and seventies by women avant-garde filmmakers like Marie Menken, Storm de Hirsch, Carolee Schneeman, Gunvor Nelson, Chick Strand, Joyce Wieland, and Barbara Hammer, there is a great deal of truth in Ruby

Lawder's programs was particularly notable because two of the most important developments in North American avant-garde film during the eighties were the increasing presence of important women filmmakers and the evolution of collage films into an incredibly rich and varied range of what had come to be called, by the late eighties, found footage films.[3] Neither program reflected these significant developments. To be fair, I should note that the congress included a panel devoted to Abigail Child's 1987 film *Mayhem,* and several curated programs were composed of films made during the eighties. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the congress seemed biased toward Camper's and Hoberman's low opinion of new avant-garde work and reflected their reverence for the achievements of past avant-gardes and their "giants."

Consequently, as preliminary information about the congress began to circulate in the winter and spring of 1989, an anti-congress mood developed among younger American filmmakers, and shortly before the congress opened, they issued an "Open Letter to the Experimental Film Congress."[4] Declaring that "the time is long overdue to unwrite the Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde," they went on to complain that "the overwhelming majority of [the congress's] announced participants consists of representatives of the sixties Avant-Garde and its decaying power base." The work to be featured at the congress, they said, was "chosen to minimize linguistic, sexual, and cultural difference, typically to conform to the model of the 'universal language of form' so dear to institutional esperantists." And, they insisted, "The revolutionary frame of mind pervading activity in film in the teens and twenties and again in the fifties and sixties—which seemed to die in the seventies—continues to thrive, but only where it has shifted and migrated according to changing historical conditions." The letter concluded, "The Avant-Garde is dead; long live the avant-garde."

The uppercase "A" and "G" in "The Avant-Garde is dead" and lowercase "a" and "g" in "long live the avant-garde" might be taken as a kind of typographic dismissal of the concept of avant-garde "giants," in favor of a more democratic and egalitarian vision of an avant-garde that, in the language of the open letter, "respect[s] the complexity of relations among the many competing and overlapping histories which make up the activity within the field." The letter was signed by seventy-six people, including the three filmmakers I will discuss here as representative of the new generation of American avant-garde filmmakers: Leslie Thornton, Su Friedrich, and Abigail Child, all of whom produced a substantial body of work during the eighties and have continued working in both film and video up to the present.

Without downplaying their individual, unique accomplishments, I want

to suggest three ways in which these filmmakers represent the paradigm shift I referred to at the outset of this essay—beginning, of course, with the fact that they are women, and their films offer points of view on issues like patriarchy, sexuality, and gender roles that are rare in the male-dominated "Institutional Canon of Masterworks of the Avant-Garde."

Secondly, their films engage in complex, dialectical relationships with the media and popular culture, which reflect postmodernist dissolutions of the traditional boundaries between high art and popular culture. This is particularly apparent in their use of found footage, though it should be noted that Friedrich makes less use of images and sounds appropriated from film and television than do Thornton and Child. In various ways all three find methods of, in Paul Arthur's words, "enmeshing the prerogatives of personal experience—memory, autobiography, direct observation of everyday life—with the constraints of a socially-shared past, recasting radical subjectivity as the interpenetration of public and private spaces" ("Lost and Found" 17).

Thirdly, they have reworked and made innovations in some of the principal forms and genres of traditional avant-garde film, notably, experimental narrative (in Thornton's *Peggy and Fred* cycle), autobiography (in Friedrich's *Sink or Swim*), and collage/montage (in Child's *Is This What You Were Born For?*). It would be a mistake, however, to reduce these works to a particular formal or generic category. Indeed, part of the strength of the films by Friedrich, Thornton, and Child (and a number of their contemporaries) is their resistance to categorization, especially of the kind P. Adams Sitney used in his extraordinarily influential *Visionary Film,* the third edition of which appeared in 2002. Moreover, their new or mixed or hybrid forms helped to subvert previous standards for measuring "giants" and opened the way for more flexible and heterodox measurements of value and relevance in avant-garde filmmaking.

Though different in many significant ways, *Peggy and Fred in Hell, Is This What You Were Born For?* and *Sink or Swim* have comparable overall structures. All three are large, open-form works that draw upon a variety of sources (original and "found") for their sounds and images, and all three are composed of distinct parts—separate films in *Peggy and Fred* and *Is This What You Were Born For?* and separate, clearly divided sections or chapters and a coda in *Sink or Swim.* Seen in their entirety, these works clearly reveal the unifying control of a single maker, but it is a unity incorporating diversity—diversity of sources, of cinematic styles, of voices, and modes of representation.

Su Friedrich could be speaking for all three filmmakers when she says, "To

me the most fantastic part of constructing a film is taking many disparate elements and making some sense out of them, making them work together and inform each other" (MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 2* 305). Found footage, as I already noted, is one source of "disparate elements" for these filmmakers. Moreover, even their original footage (especially in *Sink or Swim* and *Peggy and Fred*) frequently has a removed, impersonal quality—"off-centered, disinterested," in the words of Catherine Russell—that makes it virtually indistinguishable from their found footage.[5] This tendency to play down the distinctiveness of their own footage can be seen as an implicit rejection of a high-modernist hierarchy of images, in which banal, work-a-day, mass media images are at the bottom and an artist's unique, personally expressive—yet, somehow, universally meaningful—images are at the top.

Friedrich's, Thornton's, and Child's films participate in, rather than rise above, media-saturated modern life, not passively nor in a shallow postmodernist spirit of pastiche or what Fredric Jameson calls "blank parody," but analytically, critically, and, sometimes, appreciatively too. Abigail Child has put it this way:

> My generation of filmmakers, people born after World War II—we are TV kids. We were easily influenced by media and by how the media influence our world. . . . Now, what I think a lot of us are doing: we're using emotional images, images that mean something to us, powerful resonant images—not taking just anything, but being attentive to what images say and mean and how they can be read, actually approaching the flow of image-meaning, representation—and then rolling those representative images into structures that might share more formalist ideas. (qtd. in Wees 71)

The nature and consequences of these "formalist ideas" for all three filmmakers should become apparent as we take a closer look at *Peggy and Fred, Sink or Swim,* and *Is This What You Were Born For?* In these films we can find forms as subtle, complex, and meaningful as any employed by the earlier "giants" of avant-garde film.

Narrative as Free Fall

Leslie Thornton's film *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Prologue* appeared in 1985; it was followed by *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* (video, 1987), *Peggy and Fred and Pete* (video, 1988), *[Dung Smoke Enters the Palace]* (film and video shown simultaneously, 1989), *Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory* (video, 1993),

Whirling (film, 1996), and *The Problem So Far* (film and video shown simultaneously, 1996). The running time of what Thornton now calls *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The First Cycle* is eighty-seven minutes,[6] during which scenes with the children Peggy and Fred (Janis and Donald Reading) are juxtaposed with a wide variety of found footage, frequently accompanied by appropriated sound as well. Other than the fact that Peggy and Fred get somewhat older as the work progresses, there is little to suggest that a narrative is in progress. Indeed, as Catherine Russell observes, the children are "points of reference in an otherwise random, unordered series of images and events" (243). Nevertheless, narrative form preoccupied the filmmaker. "A fundamental objective of the *Peggy and Fred in Hell* project," Thornton has written, "is to challenge the limits of narrative form and push through to an uncharted, delicate space which we might call narrative, or we might not name" ("We Ground Things" 14). Whether we name it or not, that "uncharted, delicate space" requires examination if we are to appreciate the originality and richness of Thornton's work.

An interview with Thornton published in the Chicago-based magazine *Lightstruck* includes a drawing of a fat little girl falling head downwards through empty space. A friend, Thornton explains, made a series of drawings about "my relation to narrative." This particular one "he calls . . . my 'theory of narrative' as a free fall. It's like that dream event," she continues, "that we all have, especially when we are children, of falling and falling. As you fall, you have an apprehension or understanding of everything in a way, but it moves very quickly past, while at the same time you do produce some understanding for yourself." Narrative as free fall implicitly repudiates what Thornton calls "2,400 years of beginnings, middles and ends," referring to Aristotle's *Poetics,* where, she says, "we find one of the earliest and most enduring formulations of narrative, a shape we still all privilege and practice." But she notes that in a university course on narrative, she gives the students "an exercise where they have to construct a narrative space around a kind of configuration that exists in Noh Drama—instead of Beginning, Middle, and End, they have to work with Introduction, Destruction, and Haste—they do it!" ("Leslie Thornton Interviewed" 9).

Her own search for alternative forms of "narrative space" is reflected in one of her descriptions of the *Peggy and Fred* cycle:

> Peggy and Fred are children. Every day they go out looking for a better place to live. In the evening they come home.
>
> They go out often.

> There are no other people in the world. Something has happened to them, but Peggy and Fred are unconcerned. Their problems are more immediate: how to make avocado dip, getting lost in their own house, receiving imaginary phone calls and death threats, deciding what things are for. They are adrift in the detritus of prior cultures, cast loose in a world of post-apocalyptic splendor.
>
> Peggy and Fred approach this flattened spectacle like one would any desert—they keep moving. ("We Ground Things" 13)

Despite the echoes of Samuel Beckett in this capsule scenario, the narrative space Thornton constructs for Peggy and Fred differs significantly from the wastelands and immobilized characters Beckett frequently used to chronicle the malaise of modernity and the twilight of modernism. Peggy and Fred "keep moving," in contrast to the resigned inertia typical of Beckett's characters ("VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go? ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. *They do not move.*" [61]), and unlike the spare, diminished worlds of Beckett's characters, Peggy and Fred's is chock-full of objects, images, sounds, and events that come from their own actions and immediate mise-en-scène and from Thornton's "found" images and sounds.

If "keep moving" describes the action of Thornton's protagonists, whose lives are governed by make-believe, improvisation, and bricolage (not unlike, in many ways, the film itself), it also applies to our reception of the work as we try to comprehend the content of, and relationships between, the episodes featuring Peggy and Fred and the appropriated images and sounds that occupy the rest of the narrative space. We too must keep moving, surrendering a fixed point of view to an openness to whatever comes next—as in a dream of falling when "you have an apprehension or understanding of everything in a way, but it moves very quickly past, while at the same time you do produce some understanding for yourself." Thornton's film not only forces us to give up the usual expectations about beginning-middle-end and causal links between narrative events, it also erases the line between the diegetic "fictional" world of Peggy and Fred and the nondiegetic "factual" world of the film's archival materials. For, although Peggy and Fred remain oblivious to it, the found footage is, as it were, part of their environment. An extension of their junk-cluttered rooms and the depopulated, anonymous exterior locations they occasionally explore, it represents "the detritus of prior cultures" and "a world of post-apocalyptic splendor" in which Peggy and Fred are "adrift" or, in more active terms, through which they (and we) "keep moving."

Peggy and Fred in Hell: Prologue introduces us to this interpenetration of

diegetic and nondiegetic spaces composed, respectively, of "original" and "found" footage. Before Peggy or Fred makes an appearance, found footage from a film made by Bell Laboratories presents close-ups of vocal cords rhythmically vibrating in extreme slow motion. The disconcerting first impression produced by the image, as Thornton and others have noted, is of a vagina with pulsating and fluttering labia—a surreal metaphor that gives an erotic charge to a "scientific" penetration into the source of the human voice. It also alerts us to ambiguities and multiple meanings in many of the images to follow.

In this case, the original found footage was silent, and the sound track added by Thornton combines a segment of Handel's opera *Rinaldo* with the voice of Yma Sumac, once famous for its incredible range (supposedly seven octaves), and at one point there is near-perfect synchronization between Sumac's voice repeating "bom-ti-ti-bom" in a low register and the slow motion flapping of vocal cords. Shortly thereafter a very high note introduces the first shot of Peggy: a close-up of her head leaning into and drawing back out of the frame. But almost immediately the found footage returns with a step-printed shot of a man inserting a long thin light bulb into his open mouth, presumably to demonstrate how the vocal cords were lighted in order to be filmed.

An establishing shot of Peggy and Fred's room follows, beginning with a close-up of a light bulb and other debris on the floor, followed by a zoom back to reveal more debris and a partially obscured TV screen in the background. There is a cut back to the light bulb, then to another view of the room and the TV screen, which now contains images of a bullfight. At the same time, an appropriated sound track offers a discussion—with examples—of the "preferred pitch" for male and female voices. In both cases a lower pitch is "preferred." This unintentionally funny demonstration of cultural stereotypes shifts the Bell Lab's physiological representation of the voice toward sociological issues of gender construction. It also comments ironically on the aesthetics of Yma Sumac's performance of high ("female") and low ("male") pitches produced by the same set of vocal cords (though it would not be unreasonable to suspect that the two ends of her vocal range were extended artificially in the recording studio—a suspicion encouraged by Thornton's frequent modulation of "found" voices in subsequent sections of the *Peggy and Fred* cycle).

Peggy and Fred enter directly into this nexus of vocal cords, song, and voice as a site of culturally prescribed constructions and divisions of gender. When Fred appears for the first time he is energetically and unselfconsciously

singing a mangled medley of songs ("took a luger and shot off her head. . . . bang-ba-bang-bang. . . . Oh Mr. Noah, oh Mr. Noah. . . . They all went down to Amsterdam, Amster, Amster, dam, dam, dam," etc.), all the while stuffing puffed cheese sticks into his mouth. In contrast to Fred's boisterous, self-confident performance, Peggy's is restrained, self-absorbed, and oddly affectless as she sings Michael Jackson's "Billy Jean." In addition to the incongruity of a young girl representing a boy singing about a girl who gave birth to his child, the scene is striking for its implicit summary of the issues of gender, socialization, self-fashioning, and self-expression introduced through the combination of the found and original material dealing with the human voice and the range of sounds it can produce.

While the voice plays an important role, formally and thematically, in the rest of the work, I use it here simply to illustrate the kinds of readings Thornton's open, free-fall narrative sets into play. As the work proceeds, found footage continues to introduce and expand upon references to cultural and historical forces that have shaped the (post)modern world, most notably: mass media, technology, and war. Meanwhile, the two children provide a reference point, a dual subjectivity, through which those cultural and historical forces are given an immediate, human context. While we can appreciate and identify with them because of the strong impression they make as unique individuals who are ingeniously coping with unpromising and unpredictable circumstances, they also serve as, in Thornton's words, "ciphers for everything else that is going on in the film. In a way they are the center of the work, but only in the sense that everything passes through them, or surrounds them, or contextualizes them. They are markers. Subjects" ("Leslie Thornton Interviewed" 9).

If voice provides a basis for one kind of contextualization, another is flight. "Hey, look at this picture!" Peggy calls out to Fred in *Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory.* She has just noticed a huge photograph of the surface of the moon at one end of their crowded, debris-filled room. Earlier, in *[Dung Smoke Enters the Palace],* similar NASA images of the moon are juxtaposed with old Edison films of a foundry and a turbine plant. The broken machinery and other debris of Peggy and Fred's world are like remnants of the machines of early twentieth-century, labor-intensive, heavy industry preserved in the Edison films, which are now obsolete due to the ascendancy of "clean," high-tech industries epitomized by the space program and represented in the NASA footage—though now even the NASA footage looks dated. It is already archival and, in that sense, on a par with the much older Edison films. In *Peggy and Fred in Kansas,* Fred evokes the

space program when he puts a broken glass globe from a lamp on his head. It becomes his space helmet as he hunches down in a chair, goes through a contorted "count-down," and "blasts off," making rocket sounds as he steers his imaginary ship like a fighter pilot or racing car driver. Then, after a few intervening shots, he suddenly brings the whole game back to earth by grabbing an alarm clock and gasping, "Oh God, I'm going to be late for work! Oh no, I have to get the milk!"

A reminder of an earlier, heroic age of flight appears in *Peggy and Fred in Kansas* when Fred, pretending to be a talk show host, interviews Peggy, who is supposed to be Amelia Earhart. "All clap your hands for Amelia Earhart," Fred urges at the end and then adds, for no apparent reason, "And folks, don't, don't, don't forget Jack Nicholson," after which he launches into a frenzied dance while chanting, "Get down, baby. C'mon, ya gotta get down, baby!" It's not clear if either Fred or Peggy has any clear notion of who Amelia Earhart is, or was. It's enough that she is someone who might be interviewed and therefore is a celebrity, like Jack Nicholson. Four films later, at the beginning of *Whirling*, the real Amelia Earhart appears in a newsreel interview. Standing by her plane in her pilot's gear, the wind blowing her hair, she speaks loudly and clearly for the sake of the microphone. She compares flying over the Atlantic with flying over the Pacific and concludes with a smile, "Of course on both flights, I was very glad to see land." Black leader immediately follows, and "tail," written on the film, flashes past, an ironic reminder, perhaps, that Earhart's final flight did not achieve such satisfactory closure.

Narrative as free fall has no closure either. On the other hand, due to Thornton's careful balancing of serendipity and conscious artistic control, neither is it formless. As I have tried to indicate with a few examples of parallels, intersections, and cross-references that emerge as the cycle of films progresses, narrative as free fall makes connections—and makes sense—tangentially, at a distance, in passing. It integrates the past with an ongoing present and remains open to the future. At one point in *Introduction to the So-Called Duck Factory* Peggy asks Fred what he is eating.

> I dunno, just found it in the refrigerator.
> What refrigerator?
> Over there [he points off-screen].
> I don't see no refrigerator.
> You will.

Third-Person Autobiography

Su Friedrich's forty-eight-minute film *Sink or Swim* (1990) does not announce itself as autobiography, and in fact Friedrich has said, "Some people have told me that they weren't even aware it was autobiographical, which I like" (MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 2* 309). The film's most obvious deviation from the usual autobiographical mode is its third-person, voice-over narration spoken by a young girl who recounts, in chronological order, episodes in the life of an unnamed woman to whom she refers as "the girl," "she," and later, "the woman."[7] Friedrich explains,

> I was using stories from my own life and began by writing them in the first person, but I got tired of that very quickly. I sounded too self-indulgent. Writing them over in the third person was quite liberating. The distance I got from speaking of "a girl" and "her father" gave me more courage, allowed me to say things I wouldn't dare say in the first person, and I think it also lets viewers identify more with the material, because they don't have to be constantly thinking of me while listening to the stories. (MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 2* 308)

No doubt these are valid reasons for adopting the third person in order to tell the story of her deeply ambivalent relationship with her father, but Friedrich's decision has broader implications, which relate not only to the form of the work and how it is received, but also to the very notion of a unique, unified subject "I" and the possibility of representing it on film.

By switching from first to third person, Friedrich removed her work from the orbit of autobiographical films by American avant-garde "giants," such as Jerome Hill's *Film Portrait* (1970); Bruce Baillie's *Quick Billy* (1970); James Broughton's *Testament* (1974); Stan Brakhage's *Sincerity* and *Duplicity* series (1973–80 and 1978–80, respectively); and Jonas Mekas's *Walden* (1964–69), *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1949–75), and *He Stands in a Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life* (1969–85). Not only do these filmmakers represent themselves in their autobiographical work, but they draw upon an aesthetics of "personal expression" that equates the form and style of a work with a filmmaker's unique perceptions, feelings, and life experiences. Every aspect of their films is intended to express a first-person point of view. Friedrich's third-person point of view, on the other hand, distances the filmmaker from her film, allows viewers a greater range of readings ("they don't have to be constantly thinking of me while listening to the stories"), and encourages a view of the

autobiographical "self" as a social subject and, in cinematic terms, as an *effect* of the film's form and content rather than its *cause.*

The film's narration puts the filmmaker's personal experience in third-person terms; but its most innovative formal device imposes strict, arbitrary constraints on "personal expression" and, at the same time, emphasizes the social basis of individual identity, or in poststructuralist terms, the construction of the individual as subject through language, as a *locus* of discourses. The form of the film is based on the minimal units of our symbol system for written language—the letters of the alphabet. It is composed of twenty-seven short sections (the letter "m" is accorded two sections) with their titles in reverse alphabetical order (from "Zygote" to "Athena/Atalanta/Aphrodite"), followed by a coda that wittily repeats the alphabet in the form of a children's song while ironically—timidly yet defiantly—introducing the first-person singular to end the film.

Although Friedrich has linked her use of the alphabet to "the fact of [her] father's being a linguist" (MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 2* 308), it has much broader ramifications, beginning, as I have suggested, by determining the number of parts the film could have and limiting the choice of words that could serve as titles for each part. This produces a strict and predictable pattern that has some affinities with avant-garde "structural films" of the late sixties and the seventies. Friedrich has acknowledged, "I feel somewhat akin to the structural filmmakers, since I do like to play with the frame, the surface, the rhythm, with layering and repetition and text, and all the other filmic elements that are precluded when one is trying to do something more purely narrative or documentary." But at the same time she characterizes the structural filmmakers as "avoiding the use of personal, revealing subject matter," and as being "more concerned with how film affects one's perception of time and space than with how it can present a narrative" (MacDonald, *Critical Cinema 2* 308).

Nor have structural filmmakers shown the kind of interest in exploring the formation of the social subject that one finds in *Sink or Swim.* Moreover, the alphabet in Friedrich's film is not only a formal structuring device and a means of alluding to the construction of self through the socially shared medium of language; it also alludes to one of the earliest experiences (along with learning to count) of formal, systematic learning. Memorizing the "A-B-Cs" is a significant step in "growing up." It marks the beginning of the transition from the immediacy of oral learning and verbal expression to a more indirect, regimented, and fixed form of communication: the printed word.

While this is a universal experience among literate people, it applies specifi-

cally to Friedrich's film, in which books and writing figure significantly in the girl's development and her relationship with her father. There are references to articles and books published by her father, a linguist and anthropologist, including two articles on kinship systems written during the year of her parents' divorce. Years later, the girl—now a woman—looks up the articles "in the hopes of learning something about [her father's] approach to family life. . . . For an hour she tried to read through the first one, but couldn't understand a word he'd written." But she eagerly reads his book on Aphrodite and Demeter, in which he speculates on the possibility of there being "an earlier goddess who embodied the qualities of both Aphrodite and Demeter, and argues for the need to reintegrate those two states of being. The book," the narrator adds, "is dedicated to his third wife."

The girl's own book learning is encouraged by her father, who gives her a book of stories drawn from Greek mythology for her seventh birthday. "She would sit in the closet and read the stories long after being sent to bed." One night she recounts the story of Atalanta to her father, but he falls asleep before she reaches the end (Atalanta's marriage to Hippomenes and their subsequent transformation into lions by Aphrodite). Her own writing includes entries in a diary that "she carefully hid under her bed." Nevertheless, she discovers that an entry on her parents' impending divorce has been erased: "Her mother was the only possible suspect." There is also a letter to her father written after she is a grown woman. Typed out on screen, it recalls her mother's unhappiness after the divorce and refers to a recording of Schubert's "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel," which her mother would play over and over again (it is heard on the sound track of an earlier section of the film). The "tragic lyrics" and "ecstatic melody," as she calls them, perfectly express, she concludes, "the conflict between memory and the present." Then she adds a wistful postscript: "I wish that I could mail you this letter." In many different ways, then, written language and its various modes of presentation embody the ironies, ambiguities, thwarted communication, and occasional revelations that are central to the film's account of suffering and surviving the unequal, shifting balance of power in family relationships.

If the alphabet is the foundation for learning to read and write, it also offers a simple, familiar system for organizing information. Friedrich uses it to impose order and organization on the welter of conflicts, anxieties, traumas, desires, and discoveries in her life by alphabetizing them under headings like "Realism," "Quicksand," "Pedagogy," "Oblivion," "Nature," "Memory." However, the relationship between the title of each section and

the accompanying images and narration is, more often than not, indirect, metaphoric, or symbolic; adding to the complexity and richness of these relationships are many cross-references between different sections. This is still another way Friedrich breaks down the usual first-person, one-to-one relationship between an autobiographical subject and the form and content of an autobiographical film. The "I" is dispersed among cultural references, recollected personal experiences, and the open, multilayered structure of the work itself.

One example has already been mentioned: Schubert's "Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel" played on the sound track of "Kinship," while the young woman's description of the song appears in a letter to her father typed out in "Ghosts." Kinship, meanwhile, is dealt with explicitly in "Discovery," where the father's articles on kinship systems are described as unreadable, and the imagery is an animated chart of the father's three marriages and the offspring they produced. In a sly critique of patriarchy and the nuclear family, Friedrich labels the chart "The American Kinship System ca. 1950–1989." In "Homework," the narrator's description of the girl coming home after school to watch TV is accompanied by vintage footage (without the original sound tracks) from the opening sequences of *Make Room for Daddy, The Donna Reed Show,* and *Father Knows Best*—all family shows with well-behaved, clean-cut kids and handsome, smiling parents. The section concludes with a scene from *Father Knows Best* in which Robert Young consoles an unhappy little girl, who responds with a smile and big hug—a bittersweet contrast to the episodes of conflict and neglect the girl in Friedrich's film experiences with her own father.

Another idealized relationship of father and daughter is evoked in the film's opening section, "Zygote." While microscopic images from a science film show the union of ovum and sperm and the beginning of mitosis (thus equating the beginning of this autobiography with the biological beginning of "life" itself), the film's young narrator tells about how Athena "sprang from [Zeus's] head fully grown and dressed for battle. She became chief of the three virgin goddesses and was known as a fierce and ruthless warrior. Because she was his favorite child, Zeus entrusted her to carry his shield, which was awful to behold, and his weapon, the deadly thunderbolt." This juxtaposition of ordinary human procreation (announced in the section's title and illustrated by the found footage) with the miraculous, asexual creation of Athena (a story that not only eliminates the mother but glorifies the father and fulfills a daughter's desire to monopolize the father's atten-

tion and love—to be his "favorite") introduces the film's main theme: the conflict between the girl's unrealistic expectations and the realities of actual family relationships, exacerbated by divorce and the father's departure.

The opening section also introduces a subtheme concerned with issues of sexuality and gender, beginning with its characterization of Athena as a virgin and a "fierce and ruthless warrior." The girl's diary, described in "Journalism," includes entries about "fighting with boys," and in "Pedagogy" we are told, "The girl loved to play games and also loved to win. It gave her a special thrill whenever she beat a boy in a game or a wrestling match." (However, when the girl beats her father in a game of chess, "the victory tasted sweet until she realized that the price had been the loss of her favorite partner. From that day on, he never played her again.") In "Temptation," the girl tells her father the story of Atalanta, "a great athlete and hunter" who "vowed never to marry, and would race any man who hoped to win her hand." She always won until, with the help of Aphrodite, Hippomenes tricks her into losing the race. The visual accompaniment to the story is footage of oiled, muscular bodies of female bodybuilders: contemporary Atalantas, perhaps, but also "temptations" for women desiring other women—a reading that is supported by the inclusion, in "Kinship," of murky images of naked women in a sauna and shower room, including one of two women embracing in the shower. In "Competition," the section describing the father's book on Aphrodite and Demeter, there are erotic drawings of Asian women making love—intercut with similar drawings of heterosexual couples and paintings of the Madonna and Child. And in the young girl's imaginary world described in "Virgin," "her tree house was a harem filled with beautiful women wrapped in silk and covered with jewels."

The film's accumulated images and allusions leave little doubt about the girl/woman's sexual orientation, but unlike some of Friedrich's other films, such as *Gently Down the Stream* (1981), *Damned If You Don't* (1987), and *Hide and Seek* (1996), *Sink or Swim* does not present lesbian desire as a major theme. It is implied to be an important factor in the daughter's sense of herself and her social relationships, and it provides a means of escape from the nuclear family and its patriarchal power structure, but it is secondary to the film's exploration of the ambivalent and sometime abusive father-daughter relationship—and the daughter's ability to survive it.

Survival is implied by the film's title. Rather than sink under the weight of that relationship, the daughter learns to swim, to become independent and self-reliant. The title is given literal meaning when the father teaches her to swim. He takes her to a swimming pool, we are told in "Realism,"

and after explaining "the principles of kicking and breathing," he tosses her in. "She panicked and thrashed around for awhile, but finally managed to keep her head above water. From that day on, she was a devoted swimmer." The swimming motif recurs several times, most poignantly in the story of the father's sister, who drowned when they were still children, but its full metaphorical significance only emerges in "Athena/Atalanta/Aphrodite." At the lake where she had spent her summers as a girl, the daughter decides to swim all the way to the opposite shore as her father had often done, but at the halfway point she begins to debate with herself: "[H]e loves me in spite of this . . . he loves me not . . . I have to do this . . . I'll never make it . . . I'm halfway there . . . I want to rest." If she drowns, she wonders, will her father realize she was swimming across the lake "for his sake"? Then she remembers how long and fruitlessly her mother tried to hold on to her father, and after resting, she turns around and swims back to shore. Her decision *not* to prove herself by her father's standards breaks his hold on her sense of her own self-worth.

Although this makes a suitable conclusion for an autobiography, the film continues with a coda that not only reopens the question the previous section seemed to have answered, but gives the final word to the filmmaker—in the first person. In home-movie footage, a long-legged girl in a bathing suit (Friedrich at approximately age twelve) smiles and waves at the camera. The image is superimposed on itself and then superimposed again and again, until there are six layers of images, at which point the superimpositions gradually disappear, and the film ends with the original single image of the smiling, waving girl. At the same time, a mature woman's voice (Friedrich's) sings the traditional children's "Alphabet Song," which is rerecorded and superimposed to create a canon or round that duplicates in sound the increasing and decreasing layers of images, until the final, single image is accompanied by the single voice singing, for one last time, the final lines of the song: "Now I've said my A-B-Cs / Tell me what you think of me." It is a brilliant recapitulation of the alphabetical organization of the film (while reestablishing the conventional A-to-Z order of the alphabet).

At the same time, it alludes to the multiple selves that make up a single individual, and given what we have learned about the girl's life, it prompts a skeptical reading of this typical home-movie image of happy childhood. Moreover, it challenges the basic premise of all autobiographical films by implicitly asking, can any image truly represent who someone is or what she feels? Isn't anyone, including the filmmaker, always a third-person character in film? The sound track complicates the issue further. At one level it suggests

a reversion to a child's desire for parental approval: "What do you think of me?" But at another level, where first and third person meet, the question comes directly from the filmmaker and is addressed to us, the film's viewers. Now that she has recited her A-B-Cs in the form of a thematically complex and formally intricate film, what do *we* think of *her?* Closing with that question perfectly suits the film's problematic relationship of autobiographical subject, third-person narrative, and indeterminate audience reception.

"Think Is Cut"

Abigail Child's *Is This What Your Were Born For?* includes seven short films running for a total of seventy minutes.[8] The title comes from one of Goya's etchings in his famous series *The Disasters of War,* "Para eso habeis nacido," which is commonly translated as "Is This What You Were Born For?"; it has also been translated more literally as "For This Were You Born." In the etching, several corpses lie together on the ground, a man stands over them vomiting, and a dark cloud of smoke looms in the background. Nothing this grim appears in Child's films, but by appropriating Goya's title, Child prompts us to recognize that some of the outrage and the sardonic view of the human condition graphically expressed (in both senses of the term) in Goya's work also inform her cooler, hipper critique of contemporary mores.

Unlike *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* the cycle's films are not arranged in strictly chronological order, and unlike *Sink or Swim* and *Peggy and Fred in Hell,* there are no central characters or overall narrative devices (however loosely construed) to hold the work together as a whole. In fact, Child has called *Is This What Your Were Born For?* a work of "detachable parts, each of which can be viewed by itself for its own qualities. The films don't form a single line, or even an expanding line," she says, "but rather map a series of concerns in relation to mind, to how one processes material, how it gets investigated, how it gets cut apart, how something else (inevitably) comes up" (*Retrospective* n.p.). While this critical and creative practice has significant ties to dadaist and surrealist collage, as Maureen Turim shows in her contribution to this volume, the resulting films are thoroughly, even aggressively, contemporary in form as well as thematic concerns.

Prefaces (1981), composed principally of found footage from many different sources and edited at a very fast tempo, or what Child has called "bebop rhythms," introduces the series. "It becomes," Child says, "a kind of preconscious of the films to follow, whose scope and image banks are more

narrowly defined" (*Retrospective* n.p.). *Mutiny* (1983) presents a kind of collective portrait of modern, urban women with a variety of footage (most of it original rather than found) cut to a fast tempo that gives the film as a whole the intense energy depicted in some of the individual shots (e.g., an acrobatic dancer, two women stomping on a trampoline, a woman rapidly bowing a violin with a toothbrush). With some nice comic touches, the film playfully, exuberantly, celebrates women's diversity, individuality, independence, and inventiveness. *Both* (1988), a short, silent, black-and-white study of two nude women, temporarily slows the pace and reduces the intensity of the previous films' montage.

But the intensity and staccato pacing return in *Perils* (1986), where Child uses actors to stage scenes and adopt poses reminiscent of silent-film melodramas and cliff-hangers (the title recalls *The Perils of Pauline*). Black-and-white film stock, jump cuts, and occasional undercranking (to make movements appear unnaturally quick and jerky) add further references to old, silent films, but the film retains, at a somewhat slower pace, the editing rhythms of *Prefaces* and *Mutiny.* The tempo picks up in *Covert Action* (1984), and in place of the overwrought gestures and melodramatic situations staged for the camera in *Perils,* Child works with real-life situations also staged for the camera, but in this case it is the home-movie camera. With her quick and compelling editing rhythms and sharp eye for revealing details, Child deconstructs home-movie footage of couples on holiday (two men with, it appears, different women on each occasion). By breaking apart and reconstructing shots of the couples kissing, horsing around, or just posing for the camera, Child cracks the veneer of the original home movies' holiday "good times" and exposes the barely repressed aggressiveness and self-satisfaction of the men in their relationship with the women and the women's compliance with the men's expectations. Although there are occasional hints of resistance on the women's part, the only empowering moments for the women appear to be when they are enjoying each other's company, including a frolic in a field with two women playing leap frog. But even then, they are aware of the camera, which, no doubt, is in the hands of one of the men.

Mayhem (1987) is the longest (at twenty minutes) and most ambitious film in the series, and it pursues, more elaborately and aggressively, the gender issues raised in *Covert Action* and *Perils.* While shades of melodrama persist (particularly in scenes of two men dressed like Parisian *apaches* stalking a fearful woman), *Mayhem*'s more specific cinematic reference is to film noir, in part through found footage, but principally through Child's cinematography (threatening shadows, dark corners, ominous spaces) and staging of

noirish moments of shock, fear, and (imagined or implied) violence against women. But rather than concocting a pastiche of Hollywood conventions, Child deconstructs them through imitation and by depriving them of narrative continuity and Hollywood's high production values.

At the same time, Hollywood's adherence to heterosexual standards of sexuality and gender roles undergoes a radical revision. The film, as Liz Kotz has put it, "embraces sexuality and the relationality of sexual identities" and offers "a multiplicity of gazes and forms of desire" ("Complicity" 115). In images that are more documentary than film noir, men and women pose provocatively, touch, kiss, engage in mild forms of S&M, and join in tableaux of hetero-bi-homo sex play (reminiscent, at times, of the somnolent orgy in Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* [1963]). Child intercuts these images with her own film noir and melodramatic images, as well as passages of found footage, and she brings the film to a conclusion with old, faded pornographic footage of two women enjoying sex together (briefly joined by a man). Accompanied by lively Latin music, a looped shot of one woman mounting the other from behind (echoing the leap-frogging women of *Covert Action*) brings the film to a sprightly, comic conclusion. Throughout, Child combines intricate visual montage with an equally intricate collage of sound effects, fragments of dialogue, musical phrases, and moments of pregnant silence. While maintaining the formal ingenuity of the earlier films, Child raises the level of critique and provocation as she weaves together images of anxiety, fear, and threatened violence (with men the aggressors and women the victims) and images of desire, pleasure, and gratification (participated in equally by men and women).

Mercy (1989) completes the cycle by returning to the style of the first film of the series, *Prefaces*. With a witty, paratactic montage of original and found footage drawn from a wide diversity of sources, Child develops a cluster of associations among images of science, technology, heavy machinery, metallic surfaces, muscular males, and the military ("How does it feel to see your son become a man?" intones a male voice in a recruitment ad, as a young man in uniform runs across a parade ground to embrace his mother). Some images suggest that women too are caught in these forces of domination, control, and regimentation: switchboard operators at work; drum majorettes in short-skirted uniforms marching in tight formation; a woman inside a huge MRI apparatus that is turning her like meat on a spit; a woman rolling the length of a shiny board-room table—and off the end; a woman gyrating on the sidewalk in front of a pile of dirt while the jaws of a backhoe hover nearby.

The film ends, however, with an alternative to the domination of machin-

ery, rigidity, and social control. In a time-lapse shot, a dark rhizome sends out many tiny white rootlets, each slightly different in shape, size, and rhythm of its movement, but together they form an organic pattern of growth spreading in all directions (and offer a striking contrast to the final image of *Covert Action* in which a tree chained to the back of a tractor is violently pulled out of the ground). On the sound track a male voice barks, "Nein!" A soft female voice responds, "Yes, yes." Another "nein" follows, but it is said more quickly and with less assurance and is answered by a strong female voice swooping down two or three octaves singing, "Ahhh-ooooooah," ending in a series of nonsense syllables—or pure sound poetry. The screen goes dark, and in the darkness there is a soft rapid tapping and a final distinct "tap." Thus the film—and the series—concludes with rhizomic growth and a female affirmation countering male negation—a suitable metaphor for the way Child's films send out many suggestions rather than asserting a single position. Their montage sequences generate meanings through clusters of associations that are always growing in complexity rather than following a straight, strictly logical argument to a foreordained conclusion.

A brief passage in *Mercy* offers one among many examples of the formal and thematic complexity of the sound-image collage or "vertical montage" that is characteristic of Child's films. It begins with a man in his undershirt breathing through a tube attached to some sort of measuring device. A male voice announces, "It's colorless, it's odorless," and continues, "and if you could drink it, it would be tasteless!" over a brief shot of a dark shadow advancing along a railroad track (accompanied by a rattling sound and strong bow strokes on a cello), an equally brief and ambiguous image of water or steam streaming behind rocks or a metal structure, and a longer shot of a man's bare arm bending at the elbow and flexing its muscles synchronized with the sound of a creaking door or floorboard. A cacophonous mix of sounds dominated by a pulsing rhythm on the cello coincides with the arm unbending, followed by a dissolve to a schematic drawing of an arm's muscles and tendons. The sound continues over a very brief shot of two large disks or wheels turning on what may be a ship's deck, followed by an even briefer shot of a mechanical hammer striking red-hot metal. A strong, firm note from the cello is synchronized with a cut from the fiery blow of the hammer to an aerial view of a line of simultaneous explosions along the edge of a quarry. In addition to the man-machine, arm-hammer associations, Child's editing creates an action-reaction effect: the impact of the hammer "detonates" the explosions; its downward thrust "produces" an upward burst of dust and debris and at the same time releases the mounting tension gener-

ated by the tempo of the montage and by energetic movements within the shots. Taken together the shots and accompanying sounds of this brief sequence produce an image embodying one of the film's major themes: the domination of nature and human beings by science and technology.[9]

Child's ingenuity in reworking sounds and images is the most distinctive quality of her work. Her editing is, in and of itself, an investigation of "how one processes [audio-visual] material," as Child put it in the statement quoted earlier. Like the great theorist (and practitioner) of montage, Sergei Eisenstein, she brings social-psychological and ideological considerations to bear on her practice of montage, as well as exploiting its potential for creating thematic coherence among extremely diverse images and sounds, while binding them together in rigorously structured graphic and rhythmic relationships. A virtuoso of montage, Child combines a formalist's skill at creating unexpected and illuminating juxtapositions with a deconstructionist's determination to prevent a purely aesthetic appreciation or easy, unthinking consumption of media-generated images and sounds—including her own: "My goal," says an intertitle in *Covert Action,* "is to disarm my movie."

The same might be said of Friedrich's and Thornton's films. But to "disarm" a movie is not to discard aesthetic considerations or deprive audiences of the pleasure offered by skillfully made, formally complex works of art. Rather, it means finding ways of assuring that the art of the work furthers, rather than forestalls, insights into *how,* as well as *what,* the work communicates. Perhaps Leslie Thornton says it best: "I think if it's important right now in this world to have a critical perspective as a cultural producer, it's just as important to pursue forms of address that we call aesthetics. You can't just cut one off and say it's, you know, questionable, bourgeois, corrupt, or whatever. It all goes together, and the work that's going to last is art. Art's going to be there" (Wees 99). While earlier avant-garde "giants" would fully concur with the last part of Thornton's statement, it is the coupling of aesthetic concerns with "a critical perspective as a cultural producer" that makes the films of Thornton, Friedrich, and Child exemplars of the best avant-garde work of the eighties—and after.

NOTES

1. See Arthur, "Lost and Found," and in the same volume, Tom Gunning, "New Horizons: Journeys, Documents, Myths and Counter Myths," 35–49, and Manohla Dargis, "Beyond Brakhage: Avant-Garde Film and Feminism," 55–69. See also Tom Gunning, "Towards a Minor Cinema: Fonoroff, Herwitz, Ahwesh, Lapore, Klahr and Solomon," *Mo-*

tion Picture 3.1–2 (1989–90): 2–5; Steve Anker, "Testament to an Orphaned Art," *Blimp* 20 (1992): 26–31; and Mellencamp, "An Empirical Avant-Garde."

2. A more extensive discussion of the Toronto Congress, accompanied by relevant documents, appears in William C. Wees, "'Let's Set the Record Straight': The International Experimental Film Congress, Toronto 1989," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue canadienne d'études cinématographiques* 9.1 (2000): 101–16.

3. These two developments are highlighted in Scott MacDonald's "Experimental Cinema in the 1980s," in *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood under the Electronic Rainbow,* ed. Stephen Price (New York: Scribners, 2000), 390–444, which is volume 10 of *The History of American Cinema.* MacDonald calls the eighties "a remarkable decade for women filmmakers" and notes, "If a new sensually aware, cinematically refined feminism was the most discussed ideological trend of the 1980s, what has come to be called *recycled cinema* (*found footage film* remains a popular term for it) was the most visible formal tendency of the decade" (408). P. Adams Sitney makes the same points about feminism and found footage films at the beginning of the chapter entitled "The End of the 20th Century," in his *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000,* 3rd ed., rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 410.

4. The open letter was distributed in Toronto just days before the congress began and published in the *Independent Film and Video Monthly* 12.8 (1989): 24, and in the newsletter of the Chicago Experimental Film Coalition, *Workprint* 6.3 (1989): 17.

5. Russell is referring specifically to the conflation of original and found footage in *Peggy and Fred in Hell:* "Thornton's combination of archival imagery with original footage tends to blur the edges between the two orders of representation, mainly because she has shot the scenes with the children in an off-centered, disinterested way, evoking the sense that is often created by found footage, of a lack of purpose" (244).

6. The first installment of *Peggy and Fred in Hell: The Second Cycle,* entitled *Chimp for Normal Short,* appeared in 1999. Other films in the second cycle are *Bedtime* (2000–2002), *Have a Nice Day Alone* (2001), *The Splendor* (2001), and *Paradise Crushed* (2002).

7. The complete text of the film appears in MacDonald, *Screen Writings,* 241–56.

8. Abigail Child's remark "Think is cut" is quoted in Monica Raymond, "The Pastoral in Abigail Child's *Convert Action* and *Mayhem,*" *Cinematograph* 3 (1988): 61. At one state of its evolution, Child's series included another short, silent, black-and-white film of a beating heart, which was called *Both 1,* and the current *Both* was called *Both 2.* Moreover, Child writes that in recent screenings of *Is This What You Were Born For?* "I have been showing the work in other orders and in combination with other of my films" (letter to the author, August 30, 1999).

9. The description of this sequence, somewhat modified here, previously appeared in Wees, 17–18.