

Wrestling with Representation

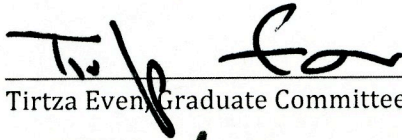
by Charles Fairbanks

Bachelor of Arts, Stanford University, 2003

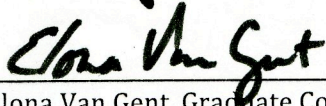
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Approved by:



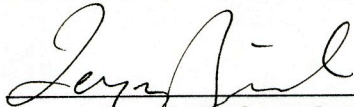
Tirtza Even, Graduate Committee Chair



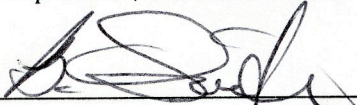
Elona Van Gent, Graduate Committee Member



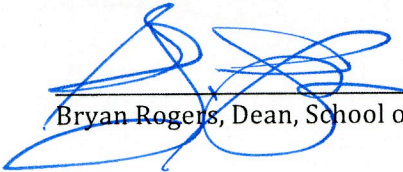
Maria Cotera, Graduate Committee Member



Zeynep Gursel, Graduate Committee Member



Brad Smith, Associate Dean for Graduate Education



Bryan Rogers, Dean, School of Art & Design

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Abstract

As they embrace sensual experience and emphasize the social encounter, my films are unequivocally engaged with reality. This thesis is my attempt to articulate what, for me, are the most significant aspects of my process, by concentrating on specific examples from several of my films. I believe that poetics and epistemology are essentially inextricable from form in (my) documentary films. However, I hope that by unpacking a few specific aspects of my work – including allegory, intersubjectivity, improvisation, embodied ethnography, and the unmarking of whiteness and masculinity – readers will have an enriched sense of the work, and of my relation to it.

Acknowledgements

It's true that the journey is more important than the destination, but it still feels great to finally arrive. I sincerely thank everyone who helped me along the way. A very special thanks goes to Jan Estep in Minnesota, Laurent van Lancker in Brussels, and my thesis committee at Michigan: Tirtza Even, Maria Cotera, Zeynep Gürsel, and Elona Van Gent. Thanks also to Ruth Behar, Markus Nornes, Rebekah Modrak, Nick Tobier, David Chung, Kath Weider-Roos, Phoebe Gloeckner, Danielle Abrams, Dan Price, Steve Panton and Malcolm Tulip for generously sharing their eyes and minds. To my fellow graduate students, thanks for the laughter and (dubitable) sanity. Muchas gracias a los amigos luchadores en México: sobre todo a Irma Gonzalez, Serpiente Negro, Black Boy, Dragón del Caribe, y Alacrán. Gracias también a Tomás Johnson, Alejandro Jasso Vazquez y Julio Pimentel Tort. To Forest Bright, Aaron Johnson-Ortiz, Neepa Acharya, Paola Garcia Nieto, Alfredo de la Rosa, Cathy Fairbanks – thanks for being awesome. To my parents, Dave and Carolyn Fairbanks, thanks for everything. And to my dearest Bariza, thank you for being you, with me, as we continue this beautiful journey.

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We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for the future.

- Donna Haraway -

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INTRODUCTION

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I am a photographer, a filmmaker, and a wrestler. My films are not necessarily about wrestling, but they're all made by grappling – in one way or another – with other people, and with how they see and engage the world. Therefore, identity – my own, and those of my subjects – plays a role in all my work, since it is the foundation of our thoughts, our perceptions, and our reactions.

This methodological grappling requires me to be present to another person: someone who isn't aware of – and doesn't care about – the theories that influence my practice. Face-to-face with my subject, I must forget whatever I thought I knew about him and instead listen, be attentive, improvise and compromise as we craft a representation of his world, of our encounter.

Like the films of Jean Rouch, this method implies an *epistemology of intersubjectivity*,¹ wherein the knowledge produced results from the presence of the filmmaker, with the camera, interacting with and provoking human subjects who, for their part, can opt out of the film, give feedback on it, and present themselves to it as they wish.

I highlight intersubjectivity because the encounter is at the core of my process, and it differentiates my filmmaking philosophy from that of conventional documentaries. A process of intersubjectivity demands that my subjectivity as the filmmaker – including my relationship to the subject – be articulated, communicated, or implied in the film itself. Such a process is rare in documentary – rarer still in films whose authors are categorically unmarked: e.g. white, hetero- men – because when a film's subjectivity remains unmarked it is more likely to be perceived as "objective" – universally true – and thus powerful.

I, however, believe neither in universal truth, nor in my ability to speak for others. Instead I aim for something akin to Donna Haraway's notion of *feminist empiricism*: "the view from a body,

¹ Steven Feld introduces this term in the Editor's Introduction to Jean Rouch's book *Ciné-Ethnography*, 17

always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.”²

From this body – this subjectivity – this point of view – I want to share stories that leave spectators unsure what they saw yet hungry for more; I want them to sense that my movies are saturated with reality though crafted by a storyteller; and I want them to doubt as they ask themselves “how is this ‘film truth’ related to the world I know?”

To do so, I have incorporated strategies from a wide range of sources: the disciplines of Anthropology and Screen Studies, the interdisciplines of Performance Studies and STS (Science, Technology, and Society), the philosophy of Existential Phenomenology, the aesthetic principle of Allegory, and the film traditions of Documentary, Ethnographic, and Experimental Film have all influenced my artistic process or the ways I describe it.

This thesis attempts to outline my priorities and my process of filmmaking. Its skeleton is theoretical, but grounded in practice via artworks that inspire me, my art, and my life.

² From *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*: 187, 195

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PART 1

MAKING MEANING

ETHNOGRAPHY AND DOCUMENTARY FILM

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The notion and practice of *documentary* has emerged only since the rise of photographic technology. Unlike painting, for example, photography, film, and video³ are indexical forms of representation – they index something real, much like a handprint represents the hand that made it. Andre Bazin's essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* describes the affective power of these recording technologies:

Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.⁴

It is this human desire, described by Bazin, to take an object's likeness for the object itself, that causes us also to long for films to be transparent representations: for documentaries to be windows unto reality wherein referents speak for themselves, directly to viewers. By the mid-20th century, documentary filmmakers – much like scholars and journalists – had developed conventions to efface their own authorship, to make it seem as if 'the objects' simply and straightforwardly presented 'themselves' up to viewers. Reacting against this *appearance* of objectivity, the poststructuralists argued that truth is inherently constructed, a

³ Video's status as indexical, however, is debatable: D.N. Rodowick argues that video is ontologically distinct from photography and film, since it is always, at base level, an electronic signal modulated by an array of sensors, rather than an image our eyes can recognize as a view upon the photographed thing. I, however, have no qualms with describing video as 'indexical' because it is effectively and affectively the same as film in terms of how it works on our sensorium (especially now, in high definition).

⁴ *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* is the first essay in Bazin's *What is Cinema?*

cultural artifact, and that objectivity itself is a “theoretical fiction.”⁵ In the words of Roland Barthes,

At the level of discourse, objectivity, or the absence of any clues to the narrator, turns out to be a particular form of fiction, the result of what might be called the referential illusion where the historian tries to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself.⁶

Now, in 2010 – decades after Barthes wrote this statement – documentary films are enjoying unprecedented popularity, yet most have not heeded the poststructuralist critique of objectivity: they have not taken ‘responsibility for their epistemologies,’ to paraphrase Vivian Sobchack.⁷ Most still naively recycle the conventions used to connote objectivity, their films riding on the backs of the objects themselves (rather than driven by a critical engagement with the process of representation).

However, simply showing that a film is subjective – that it has an author – is no real solution: subjectivity has its own conventions, which are increasingly used to signify truthfulness. There are no prescriptions, no easy solutions to problems of representation. Rather, filmmakers must find their own ways to portray the delicacy of existential truth, without falling back on the shopworn conventions for producing “Truth.”

Three filmmakers have been especially inspirational as I learned the art of documentary. Errol Morris, Nicolas Philibert, and Kazuo Hara have very different approaches, but all three succeed marvelously at representing particular ‘realities’ while, simultaneously, revealing the constructedness of the ‘realities’ thus presented.

Errol Morris is the most commercially successful of the three, and he is widely known as a master of the documentary interview. But Morris insists that a good interview has little to do with objectivity or truth:

⁵ Jacques Derrida suggests this term in *Margins of Philosophy*.

⁶ From Barthes’ essay *Death of the Author*, in *Image Music Text*.

⁷ Describing what film and film theory have to gain from phenomenological process and philosophy, Sobchack writes: “Existential phenomenology would suggest that we are as responsible for our epistemologies as we are for our methods and our ends.” (27)

There is no such thing as a straight interview – although I would admit there are good and bad interviews. A good interview captures the complexity of the subject, and a good interview captures the complexity of the relationship between the interviewer and the subject.⁸

Elsewhere Morris describes the development of his interviewing style:

... I started to ask fewer and fewer and fewer questions. I became interested in the stream-of-consciousness interview. It's the exact opposite of adversarial interviews, where you're supposed to pose the extremely difficult and embarrassing question and watch the interview subject squirm. I had this one interview that I was particularly proud of that was on a 120-minute cassette tape - I had piles of these tapes - and my voice wasn't on the tape. It was just the other person speaking. I would play this weird game. I'd wonder, How can I keep them talking without talking myself?⁹

Morris's take on interviewing saved my movie *Pioneers*, and it continues to influence my approach to filmmaking. When I started *Pioneers*, I had very specific ideas of what the movie would be about, and what my subjects – who were my parents – would say. I even designed long lists of questions to evoke – or provoke – the monologues I imagined as the core of the film. This failed miserably. Their responses were never what I expected, and I was so intent on conjuring specific quotes that I hardly noticed what they actually said. After a month of frustrated interviewing, I began researching Errol Morris's approach to interviews. The passages above helped me abandon, once and for all, my preconceptions to instead embrace a process of improvisation, acceptance, and provoking the unexpected. As I became more open and generous with my subjects, they became more invested in the project, as when my father suggested a shot of him standing in a field of corn "to show how tall it is." This became my favorite scene in *Pioneers*, as it manifests his generosity, and the strange and tender relationship between us.

⁸ In *Errol Morris's Topic*, *The Transom Review*: Volume 10, Issue 2. Available at: <http://transom.org/guests/review/200301.review.morris.html>

⁹ From *The Eleven Minute Psychiatrist: The Stop Smiling Interview of Errol Morris*, by James Hughes. Available at: <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/interview/stopsmiling0306.html>



In *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary*, Abé Mark Nornes writes:

Western documentary film theory focuses on the relationship of signified and signifier raked by the subjectivities of producer and spectators. Because these two groups approach the referent only through the signification system, the theory closes off discussion of the profilmic world. ... Japanese theoretical and popular discourses do not suffer from this linguistic confusion between subject and object. In post-1960 film theory and filmmaking, it is precisely the relationship between subject and referent that produces the sign. Where the American filmmaker creates a sign from a referent in the world, the Japanese filmmaker's intimate interaction with the referent leaves a signifying trace we call a documentary film. It is a subtle but decisive difference one would have difficulty articulating with the critical tools of contemporary documentary theory outside of Japan.¹⁰

Along the lines developed by Nornes in this passage, the films of Hara Kazuo have been tremendously influential to my development as a filmmaker. *Extreme Private Eros*, for example, is a stunning documentary – though it is difficult to say exactly what it is

¹⁰ Nornes: *Forest of Pressure*, 96-97

documenting. At one level it is a portrait of an intriguing woman careening between cities, ideologies, and lovers (including a black American G.I., her female flatmate, and filmmaker Hara). On another level it is an exquisite portrait of multifarious Japanese countercultures of the 1970s. But really it is a portrait of a feeling that transcends culture and time: the melancholic longing of love lost. We know this from the first minute of the film, where Hara announces that he began making this film because he desperately wanted to be near his ex-wife.

Extreme Private Eros showed me that a film's subject need not be discretely defined: subjects that are ephemeral or immaterial – like feelings – can be as personally moving and culturally revealing as anything else. But more than this, Hara's films have shown me that venturing forth with other people, as a filmmaker, into the unknown, can mean simultaneously exploring yourself inside. In this, Kazuo Hara has helped me understand the limits and possibilities of documentary.

As a subset of documentary, ethnographic film has conventions and preconceptions that are culturally revealing and tellingly problematic. Ethnographic filmmakers Tim Asch and John Marshall wrote: "the camera will be to anthropologists what telescopes are to astronomers and microscopes are to biologists."¹¹ Embedded in this claim is a philosophy that conceives of human beings as things, raw material to be gathered by the filmmakers who, in this conception, are the only ones to express subjectivity in the filmmaking process. In contradistinction, the films of Jean Rouch are crafted through a process of generosity: Rouch rejects Asch's formulation of the filmmaker as *Scientist* using *Observational Tools* on his *Human Research Material*. Instead, for Rouch the filmmaking apparatus provides the occasion for shared storytelling and a shared anthropology. He writes:

At the beginning of the social sciences, Auguste Comte argued that we have to consider human beings as things, observe them as if they were things. For years and years this view persisted, in different forms inherited by both Marxism and psychoanalysis, even by most ethnographic films. But my position, which was also Marcel Mauss's, is that human beings are human beings – wonderful and mysterious. Mauss disagreed with his uncle Durkheim, who was a Comtist. So this positivist

¹¹ Asch and Marshall use this assertion to begin their article *Ethnographic Film: Structure and Function*. In the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, October 1973.

distortion goes back to the beginning. I trace my orientation to Mauss, trying not to theorize about people in such a way as to introduce a gap between observer and observed, but to try to ask good questions, the answers to which will open up new questions. Total knowledge of human beings is impossible.¹²

The vastly different approaches delineated here manifest an ongoing battle in the field of anthropology: between an embattled yet imperious scientism, and strategies of textual, social, methodological, and poetic resistance.

In the best examples of such strategies we find scholars grappling with the act of representation – including their own power and privilege (as anthropologists, as Americans, etc.) in relation to their subjects.¹³ And yet, through such struggles many of these writers insist on the value of trying to communicate across cultures.

Two ethnographies were particularly helpful to my intellectual training for wrestling in Mexico: Loïc Wacquant's *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, and Robert Murphy's *The Body Silent*. Each of these books describes its author's journey, through his respective body, to embody a culture to which he had previously been an outsider: boxing in a black Chicago ghetto for the French sociologist Wacquant; disability – particularly quadriplegia – for Columbia University anthropology professor Murphy.

Wacquant trained in a South Chicago boxing gym as an integral part of his research. In *Body and Soul*, he tries to connect his own physical experience training – which is shared and comparable to the other boxers in the gym – to life in this urban ghetto, to which he is absolutely a foreigner despite living on the ghetto's East edge: his privileged identity prevents him from really knowing the challenges faced by ghetto residents, since he can leave at any time.

Body and Soul validated the work I had already done as a photographer and wrestler in Mexico, and it inspired me to return to the ring as El Gato Tuerto (The One-Eyed Cat), with a video camera built into my mask. Although I had wanted to do this since my experience in 2004, I delayed by telling myself that the reasoning was too thin: masked wrestling didn't

¹² Quote from an interview with Lucien Taylor. In Rouch's *Ciné-Ethnography*, 143

¹³ Examples include Clifford Geertz's *After the Fact*, Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*, Renato Rosaldo's *Grief and a Headhunter's Rage*, and many more.

seem serious enough conceptually, or academically. But in Wacquant's study I saw that the physical experience of masculine fighting sports are not necessarily antithetical to serious academic research, or to sincere engagement with one's fellow practitioners. Wacquant's study inspired me to write about, and then practice, what I now call *embodied ethnography*.

The Body Silent also emerges as *embodied ethnography*, but with a crucial difference: whereas Wacquant can leave the community and culture he's coming to embody (which he eventually does – for Harvard's Society of Fellows), Robert Murphy doesn't have that luxury. His book portrays the process of becoming a paralytic: while describing the changes to his body, and his (lack of) control over it, he goes off on long tangents of auto-psychoanalysis, anecdote, and theory – loquaciously avoiding all emotional expression. Murphy intellectualizes his experience as a form of denial, but that doesn't make *The Body Silent* any less evocative. Rather, Murphy's book made me more acutely aware of the silent layers of my privilege: like being able-bodied compared to Murphy, and being mobile – geographically, linguistically, and otherwise – in relation to wrestlers in Mexico.

Anthropologist Ruth Behar writes: "What happens within the observer must be made known ... if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood." She continues, "Vulnerability of the observer" should help portray "the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed."¹⁴ Thinking specifically about vulnerability helped me to better understand masculinity in the ethnographies mentioned above: it is Wacquant's physical vulnerability – and his descriptions of the physical damage he suffered – that makes the rest of his study so compelling. The same goes for Robert Murphy, though the author's circuitous avoidance of emotional vulnerability speaks volumes about how vulnerable he really felt: in his vulnerability we more clearly see his masculinity reacting to the loss of physical strength.

While these anthropologists and documentarians have helped me clarify my ideas and refine my methods, they also serve as a source of courage: ultimately I aspire, like Hara Kazuo, to venture bravely, vulnerably into the unknown.

¹⁴ From Behar's book *The Vulnerable Observer*, 14

PART 2

RESISTING 'MEANING'

STRATEGIES IN MY CURRENT WORK

To enhance the atmosphere at the gallery, my MFA thesis exhibition included a photograph taken of a Lucha Libre locker room, my tights and the mask of El Gato Tuerto, and athletic-type bleachers where spectators sat to watch my movies.



Sitting on the bleachers gave the audience a sense of togetherness foreign to the gallery context: spectators responded audibly, laughed together, and otherwise expressed their emotions more than I've seen at any gallery show.

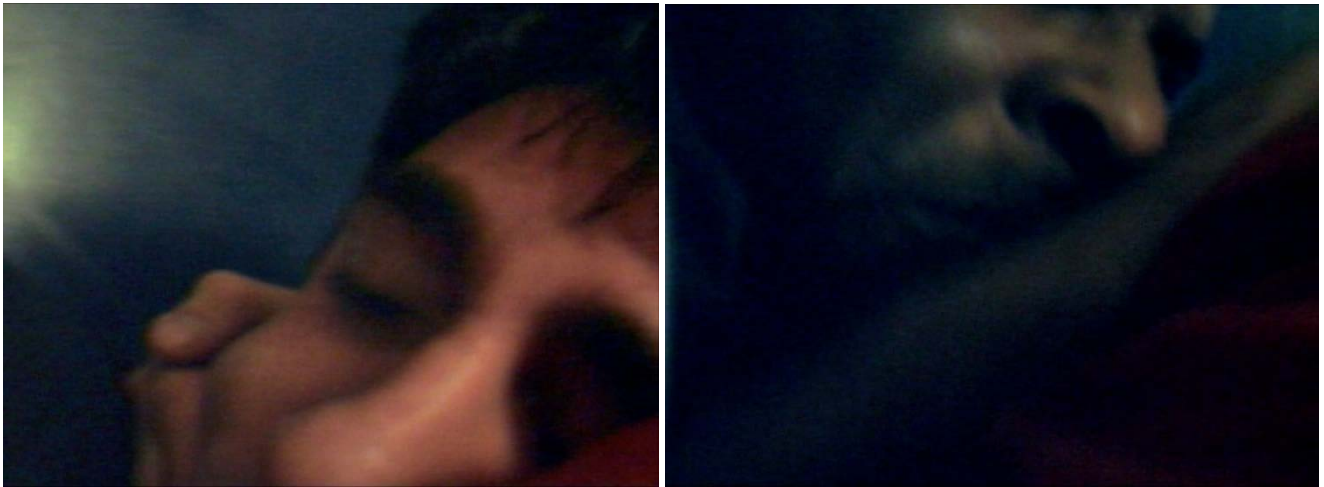


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ALLEGORY IN THE MEN

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The Men starts out with static – an image obscured by signal interference – but soon the static fades and before us is a man's bearded face, close-up, as he struggles for something we can't comprehend. We see more static at intervals, often corresponding to the struggle. Extra arms enter the frame; the camera zooms in, rolls out. We see another t-shirt on another torso: it's ours, implicitly the viewer's body, as the video embodies – quite literally – a man's point of view. We see a hand (also 'ours') grab behind the other's head; hands clasp; arms wrapped around a neck; silence. Is this a choke or a hug? We see lips, an eye – our faces must be touching. Suddenly – darkness. Then static. A different shirt, then a man's black arms pulling our own.



We see several other men over the course of this three-minute film, but the relationship captured remains disorienting in its intimacy: our view is too close to the subjects to know if 'we' are fighting or fondling: we sense violence, but also tenderness. Bursts of struggle are followed by stillness, breathing. The film is silent but we read frustration, desire, and determination in the faces: silence only adds to the ambiguity.¹⁵ Our minds quickly spin

¹⁵ The unnamed subject is actually Brazilian-Jiu-Jitsu: a terribly effective martial art with extremely violent connotations. I find it to be perfectly cinematic because the rules encourage fighters to face each other at all times, at close proximity, usually on the ground – whereas in

overlapping themes of excessive violence and – we can't help but think – sexual intimacy. These themes are present to us simultaneously: they supplement each other; the meanings overlap and multiply. I would argue that the multiple, simultaneous associations of this video express a particularly complex valence of masculinity: an ambiguous connection between intimacy and violence. The aesthetic tension that allows for such expression might be described as allegorical. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that allegory can uniquely communicate “conceptions of the mind that are not in themselves objects” – masculinity, for example, as it is variously lived, expressed, and embodied.¹⁶



intercollegiate wrestling, for example, my head-camera would mostly see the back of my partner's head.

¹⁶ James Clifford describes how, in order to appear scientific and objective, modern scholarship has made every effort to excise allegorical references. Likewise, Craig Owens describes how allegory became unfashionable for early modern artists determined to create an aesthetic unique to the modern era; the same could be said for abstract expressionists seeking to demonstrate their professed individuality of expression. Conversely, the connotations that these modern writers and artists were trying to avoid – allusions to representations from the past, or to the author's subjective and idiosyncratic point of view – are exactly why I am attracted to this aesthetic form.

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EMBODIED SPECTATORSHIP IN
WRESTLING WITH MY FATHER

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Wrestling with my Father features my father sitting on bleachers, facing the camera. We hear



a whistle and he tenses up, reacting physically to the action that remains offscreen, hidden to us. He plants his feet, sways his hips, leans, grabs, and grimaces, wrestling – or is it dancing? – with the object of his gaze. Given the title, viewers may surmise that he is watching his son wrestle, responding physically – sympathetically – by miming wrestling moves he learned decades ago (and this, indeed, is the case). However, viewers may also think about a father's hopes and fears for his child; about a son's struggle to differentiate himself from his father; about the physical and emotional aspects of spectator identification; or about how culture, sports, and even gender are so thoroughly embodied.

Watching from their own bleachers,

viewers become conscious of themselves as spectators to my father's spectating, and thus self-conscious of their own active (or, perhaps, disembodied) identification with the subject of their gaze.¹⁷

¹⁷ On embodied viewing see Vivian Sobchack's *The Address of the Eye*. On spectators' psychological identification in film see Christian Metz, especially *The Imaginary Signifier*.



FLEXING MUSCLES

GENDER PERFORMANCE AND A CRITICAL USE OF THE MALE GAZE

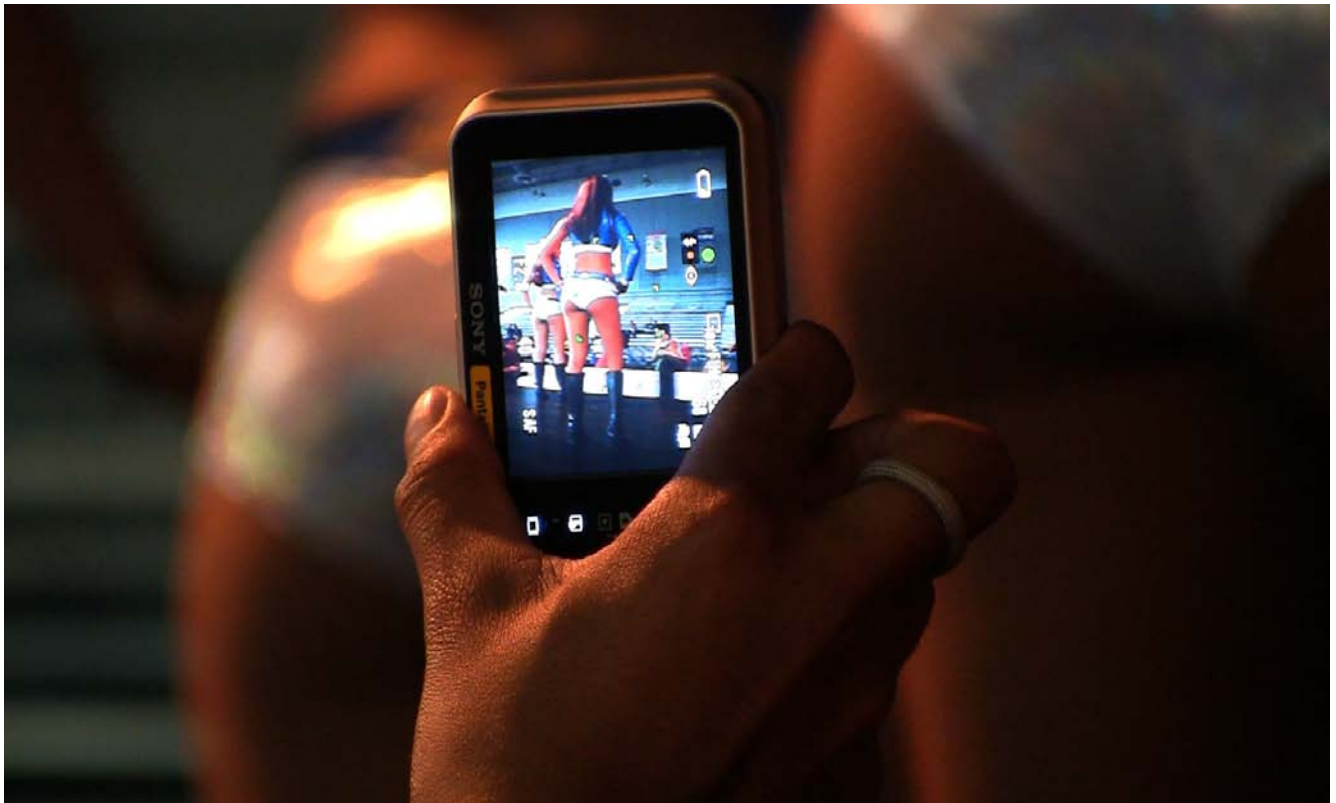
The opening scene takes us into a small but packed arena. Before us, a crowd anxiously awaits the upcoming show – we watch from our own bleachers, doing the same.





As in *Wrestling with my Father*, I intend for this effective mirroring to make viewers conscious of their own position relative to the people and cultures represented – I want them to immediately feel a sense of identification as spectators mutually present to each other, but then to also become conscious of their differences, culturally and economically, even if this means doubting where those differences really lie.

In the film's next scene, father and son pose with a masked wrestler: before a bevy of cameras they all flex, showing off their biceps. This shot is followed by another gendered spectacle performed for the spectator's camera. The music begins; dancers' hips swing back and forth to the rhythm; the photographer's hand and camera follow their nubile bodies, privately dancing with them. Because his screen is our only way to see their busts, arms, and faces – while our point-of-view looks directly at the dancers' shaking derrières – viewers may become aware of themselves staring not just at the movie, but at booty, and aware that the filmmaker did the same. This shot has many layers of literal and psychoanalytic signification, but until recently I wouldn't have dared make this shot, familiar



as I was with Laura Mulvey's incisive (and now canonical) critique of the male gaze in cinema.¹⁸ The assumed malfeasance of a shot that so clearly manifests the male gaze would have prevented me from making it. But, in the words of a friend, "any straight man with a pulse would be hypnotized by these dancers." This shot is as sincere as it is sensational, but to make it I first had to accept the fact of my own masculinity.

In my last term as an undergraduate at Stanford I took a class in cultural anthropology, on masculinity. I learned a lot, and am glad to have a critical lens to look at gender, but the class made me feel like it was not okay to be masculine. Although the professor was male, as were two other students, our class discussions took it for granted that masculinity – both specifically, and in general – is malevolent, the root cause of all violence and destruction (and this seemed to be proven daily in news headlines at the time, during George W. Bush's cowboyish entry to war in Iraq).¹⁹ Six years later, still struggling with identity as a self-

¹⁸ In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey analyzes Hitchcock's *Rear Window* to develop her theory of "male gaze." Mulvey's position is summed up by Barbara Kruger as "Your gaze hits the side of my face" – suggesting that the male gaze is simply insulting to women who it's directed at, and to women in general: like a slap in the face.



¹⁹ This section is heavily indebted to Judith Butler's writings on gender performance. I have chosen my images carefully to suggest: how gender is taught and learned at a young age; how performative utterances, variously gendered, affect all aspects of life; how resisting gender can itself be a gendered activity – since the (auto-) eradication of masculinity seems, to me, a particularly masculine response to the perceived problem; and how, despite everything, there may still be something biological to gender that we can't unlearn.

emasculating male, I had the opportunity, in Satoru Takahashi's graduate seminar, to create an assignment based on my own artistic struggles. I asked the class to define masculinity in their own lives, in their own way, and I signed off as "Charles – a feminist who still wants to be a man." In class the next week, these artists helped me realize that masculinity was neither monolithic nor necessarily nefarious. I no longer had to efface my own masculinity.

For me the above shot is successful exactly because it does not spurn masculine visual desire. As a filmmaker and ethnographer I was fascinated by the way these men relate, through their cameras, to dancing women, and I filmed them with a degree of critical distance. Meanwhile, as a man I was hypnotized by the curvaceous bodies shimmying and shaking in front of my own camera. In this shot these two regards overlap – the beauty is that they're completely inextricable, much like the facets of my own identity.

Thereafter, *Flexing Muscles* includes several other manifestations of identity and gender, masked and unmasked, until it is no longer clear what – or where – the borders are between performance and reality.









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POSSESSION

KINO-EYE, CINE-TRANSE, & EL GATO TUERTO

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Allowing myself to be masculine, and to express it with my camera, figures even more strongly in a film I call *Possession*. The movie's final scene begins outside a weather-worn building. Clouds roll across the sky and someone arrives on a bicycle. We hear birds chirping, a breeze blowing, then see a masked wrestler – Serpiente Negro – march into the building. In the following shot we are inside: it's a wrestling ring. The camera – our view – is no longer fixed. Serpiente vaults in from the side. We follow him, circle together, and he speaks: "Fuckin' tourist!" He reaches out, brings our head close, but suddenly we fall back sending Serpiente flying through the air! Back to our feet quickly, he greets us with two fists to the stomach. Grunts and groans. Voices outside the ring chant ME - XI - CO! Suddenly our view shifts – we glimpse the top of Serpiente's head before he slams us to the ground. Staring up at the lights we have a hard time focusing; slowly we stand up. More fighting and trash-talk, but now we're fighting back; we gain an advantage. At one point he's down, having taunted us, so we kick him in the ribs. Now he rolls under the ropes, out of the ring, shouting "Loco! Gringo Loco! You're crazy! Go back to your own damned country!"



Here, as in *The Men*, I film from a clearly subjective, situated perspective: this is a “view from a body,” to revisit Donna Haraway’s term, a necessarily “complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.” Audiovisually and theoretically, my approach here owes much to Russian director Dziga Vertov – and particularly to the dynamic camera movement of *Man With A Movie Camera*. However, whereas Vertov insists that his films break with human experience – “Now and forever, I [a machine,] free myself from human immobility” – I use the camera to approach the subjective experience of other human beings; the unknown world that I hope to “decipher in a new way” is comprised of particularly human sensations and rhythms.

This piece also relates to the notion of ciné-trance, proposed by Jean Rouch when describing “*Tourou et Bitti*” – an eight minute film, made in a single take, of a possession ritual in Niger. Rouch writes that in the ciné-trance, the filmmaker can “really get into the subject. Leading or following a dancer, priest, or craftsman, he is no longer himself, but a mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear.”

Rouch’s notion of ciné-trance is why I call this piece “Possession.”²⁰ However, for me, even Rouch’s formulation isn’t quite right: I wasn’t in a rapturous trance through my camera: my camera was attached to my head, and all I could think about was wrestling. Rather, I was possessed by a spirit of aggressively nationalistic masculinity.

This same spirit also, implicitly, possesses spectators of the film – through my point of view they are brought along for the ride: without completely disengaging, they cannot escape being incorporated into the fighter’s perspective. Viewers must “try on” this exaggerated and aggressive masculinity. Given that they don’t have a choice in the matter, the ‘performative’ nature of gender is emphasized performatively – that is, in a way that compels viewers to consider themselves in such a role. Furthermore, the particular masculinity I assume highlights the fact that this encounter is between men of a different race, class, nationality, and so on.²¹ Though spectators may not have the same gender, race, class, or country as the

²⁰ With this title I also intend to evoke the history of ties between avant-garde film and possession ritual. Examples include Rouch’s film *Les Maîtres Fous*, which focused on a possession ritual in Niger that mocks Europeans and colonial power, and Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, which focused on a ritual dance of possession by Vodoun gods.

²¹ I intentionally included the barbs from *Serpiente* described above: they mark my identity in relation to his, and to the cultures of *Lucha Libre* in the overall film. This is very intentional: I

filmmaker, they may still be compelled to consider their relation to this adversary. This is particularly true because of the nature of Serpiente's address: when he greets us with "fuckin' tourist!" Serpiente is simultaneously addressing the character of The One-Eyed Cat, me as a filmmaker and, by extension, all viewers.²²

didn't want my relation to the subject to remain unmarked, or unarticulated, as is generally the case in even the best ethnographic film. Peggy Phelan describes this absence in the fascinating and otherwise wonderful film *Venus is Burning*, a film about gender and identity performance where the documentary filmmaker's identity remains unmarked.

²² Michael Renov describes a similar instance of direct address to a shared subjectivity: "The sudden confluence of these three registers of spectatorship threatens to dislodge *histoire* and its invisible network of suture." From the chapter *The 'Real' in Fiction* in Renov's book *The Subject of Documentary*, 30-31.

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CONCLUSION

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To paraphrase Vivian Sobchack, my films “interrogate vision – vision as it is performed, vision as it signifies, vision as it radically entails a world of subjects and objects to make sense of them and of itself as it is lived.” My work here “is less theoretical than empirical. Or, rather, if it is theoretical, it is radically – materially – so, grounding itself in an interrogation and description of the experiential phenomenon of sensing, enworlded bodies that can see and be seen.”²³

As they embrace sensual experience and emphasize the social encounter, my films are unequivocally engaged with reality. My filmmaking process involves venturing forth, vulnerably, out to the world and in to my self. Our world, in my view, is not rational or cohesive, but strange and wonderful, so the poetics, epistemology, and viewer experience in my films is appropriately one of observation and discovery.

Trinh Minh-ha states that:

the stereotyped is not a false representation, but rather, an arrested representation of a changing reality. So to avoid merely falling into this pervasive world of the stereotyped and the clichéd, filmmaking has all to gain when conceived as a performance that engages as well as questions (its own) language.²⁴

The fundamental question my work poses about (its own) film language is how whiteness and masculinity might be indicated, integrally, within films, in a way that resists – however subtly, artfully – their tendency to be unmarked and invisible. All my films discussed here could be seen as particular ethnographies of masculinity (or, in the case of *Pioneers*, of gender and whiteness), though not just that: the work is much richer, I believe, if such themes are not imposed and viewers can instead find their own meanings, points of connection, or interpretations.

²³ *The Address of the Eye*: xvii

²⁴ This is excerpted from *Speaking Nearby*, an interview with Trinh Minh-ha by Nancy N. Chen, which appears in *Visualizing Theory* (ed. Lucien Taylor) 441

To accomplish this, I incorporate strategies from myriad disciplines: allegory, intersubjectivity, improvisation, performativity, and embodied ethnography are a few terms that help describe my process. I use these methods and others to try, above all, to make the best scenes I can, the best films I can, not in the name of 'pure truth' – Truth with a capital T – but to achieve a film-truth, akin to Vertov's *Kinopravda* or Rouch's *Cinéma Vérité* – what Werner Herzog calls poetic, ecstatic truth: "mysterious and elusive, [it] can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization."²⁵

²⁵ From Herzog's Minnesota Declaration, available: <http://werner-herzog-film.org/52.html>

Note that what Herzog calls "cinéma vérité" in the declaration is actually more akin to what is now generally called "direct cinema," described by its practitioner Robert Drew as "to have one or two people, unobtrusive, capturing the moment, without intruding." Jean Rouch's *cinéma vérité* was very much akin to the "ecstatic truth" Herzog advocates.

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