

## Breaking ground, crippling mirrors; or lesbians don't waltz by themselves: on Jacqui Duckworth's *A Prayer Before Birth*

Dr Nat Raha

The third film of Jacqui Duckworth, *A Prayer Before Birth* (1991), shot in 16mm and running twenty minutes, might have gathered dust in the context of LGBTQ (sub) cultures and experimental British cinema in the years between its completion and the recent revival of interest in its director. In 'Coming Out Twice', a photo essay on the film published in Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser's important 1991 anthology *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*, Duckworth describes *A Prayer* as:

[A] fictionalised account of my personal experience of multiple sclerosis [MS] [that] attempts an insight into the traumatic nature of the disease. Using surrealism to evoke an increasing sense of unreality as the disease inexorably enters day life, the narrative highlights the psychological and emotional effects of MS.<sup>1</sup>

As Marsha – the film's protagonist played by Adjoa Andoh – writes out in slow tremors in the opening scene, Duckworth is in search of a "new style", "a way of putting fresh air between the letters", perhaps between reality and fiction. Writing with tremors, not against them, Marsha/Duckworth posit the need for a different aesthetic direction to make a crip intervention into the moment of lesbian visual culture from which the film emerged, which was driven by the pursuit of strategic subversions of lesbian representation. The staging of fantasy through lesbian subculture and a lesbian gaze was a key tool in this emergent aesthetic – as Laura Guy discusses of *Stolen Glances*, the book and the work featured "framed fantasy as an underexploited strategy in contemporaneous critiques of the photographic image".<sup>2</sup> In a recent essay discussing *A Prayer*, Lucy Howie emphasises how the film, alongside *Stolen Glances*, "pose a challenge to film and photography's accepted correlation to the 'real'" by "intervening" at an "intersection of photo-theory and political activism".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Duckworth's construction of an unreality seems more about experience and vision that are intangible to a real order according to ableist and heterosexist norms, and less

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1 Jacqui Duckworth, 'Coming Out Twice', in Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser (eds), *Stolen Glances: Lesbians Take Photographs*. London: Pandora, 1991, 155-161, 155.

2 Laura Guy, 'Backward Glances in Lesbian Photography'. *Photoworks Annual*, no. 27 (2017). Online at <https://lauraguy.net/2017/11/01/backwards-glances-at-lesbian-photography/>.

3 Howie continues: "Much of the work in *Stolen Glances* featured co-opted images from a social imaginary of the past to re-write conventional heterosexual narratives, weaving in fragments from the past to form images constituting an emerging lesbian feminist aesthetic." Lucy Howie, 'Culture Club: Watching *A Prayer Before Birth* by Jacqui Duckworth', *Club des Femmes*. Online at <https://www.clubdesfemmes.com/portfolio-item/culture-club-watching17/>.

less about conventional understandings of unreality as that which isn't real. Centring Duckworth's experience of MS in *A Prayer* thus works to demonstrate how disability can question the 'real' while complicating a lesbian gaze and lesbian desire, proposing alternate visual, imaginative and affective strategies.

In the space that emerges between fiction, personal experience and surrealism, *A Prayer* enacts an avant-garde lesbian aesthetic working to come to terms with being in a disabled body, that places the emotional turbulence of this experience front and centre while confronting affects through which ableism coheres. The film directly addresses the troubles of producing a (crip) lesbian gaze, a perspective that emerges via breakups, the deployment of melodramatic horror, and sitting at the table with emerging challenges of undertaking essential activities in life. It's also in the space between crip embodiment, emotional turbulence and confronting ableism in which Duckworth's synthesis of a crip lesbian visual language, through the character of Marsha as played by Andoh, seems to encode a disabled black lesbian desire that diverges from Duckworth's autobiography – but more on that later. Centring the film, this essay discusses the substance of this synthesis, alongside the affective possibilities that are carried through it by the Director.

### **Situating A Prayer**

Given the marginal/ised position of both *A Prayer* and Jacqui Duckworth in UK queer cinematic history, it's worth taking a moment to situate the film. While 'isolation' emerges as an important narrative element of the film, *A Prayer* itself was produced in the context of a vibrant lesbian and gay/queer experimental cinema and visual culture of the early 90s.<sup>4</sup> Greater London Arts funded the film. The film was screened internationally, including at San Francisco's Frameline festival in June 1992, alongside lesbian shorts by Barbara Hammer, Jean Carlomusto and others. On this particular occasion, Kate Bornstein described the film "a disturbing and loving work".<sup>5</sup> *A Prayer* formed a part of Cinenova's *New Wave Women* series, a touring programme of four sets of "short experimental films focusing on female identity and representation", screening alongside films by Abigail Child and Barbara Hammer with shared concerns of "reworking" cinematic forms "to expose and challenge representations of the feminine and female sexuality within dominant culture" and through lesbian aesthetics especially.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the "commercial crossover" of new queer cinema, *A*

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4 For an contemporaneous account of independent lesbian film-making, somewhat different aesthetic pursuits to new queer cinema, see Cherry Smyth's essay 'Beyond Queer Cinema: It's in her kiss'. In Liz Gibbs (Ed.), *Daring to Dissent: Lesbian Culture from the Margin to the Mainstream*. London: Cassell, 1996, 194-213.

5 Kate Bornstein, 'How many ways can you say 'lesbian'?', *Bay Area Reporter*, June 18 1992, p32.

6 'CINENOVA presents: NEW WAVE WOMEN', Cinenova/Liane Harris, 1992, p1-3.

*Prayer* was distributed on video in the UK by Out on a Limb, an organisation that Cherry Smyth contemporaneously described as “consolidating the ‘queer’ film market beyond the whims of a mainstream media fad”.<sup>7</sup> Women Make Movies also distributed the film in North America. Lesbians seeking films such as *A Prayer* in the years after its release would have likely encountered it listed in resource sections at the back of crucial lesbian books and anthologies, including Making Black Waves of Scarlet Press’ Lesbians Talk series and *Pushing the Limits: Disabled Dykes Produce Culture*.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, *A Prayer* was not alone as a queer film directly addressing disability in that moment either. In the same year, the film screened at the 12th Chicago Lesbian & Gay International Film Festival, alongside Pratibha Parmar’s documentary on disabled lesbians and gays, *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*, which was produced for Channel 4’s ‘Out’ series, and films by Marlon Riggs and Lori Levy.<sup>9</sup> Parmar’s documentary – available through Cinenova’s archive – features Indian disabled gay writer and actor Firdaus Kanga as a primary narrator, interweaving talking heads, performance, footage of discos and community groups, and luxurious poetic sequences to address the challenges of disabled gay and lesbian life in and around London and the ableism encountered on the gay and lesbian scene.<sup>10</sup> 1992 was also the year Duckworth’s *A Short Film about Melons*, also starring Adjoa Andoa, screened as part of BBC2’s ‘Feelings’ – a series of programmes by disabled people.<sup>11</sup>

*A Prayer*, Duckworth’s first film after 1984’s short *An Invitation to Marilyn C* and her MS diagnosis, is also Duckworth’s first to centre the self-exploration of an individual lesbian – her previous works, *Home Made Melodrama* (1981) and *An Invitation*, are a deep explorations of lesbian relationality and the working conditions of marginalised women in the adult film industry respectively. Both films pivot on what forms of life, what opportunities to live otherwise, can emerge from lesbian relationality. *A Prayer* diverges from these two works in, firstly, presenting a contrasting example of how a lesbian relationship seemingly centred around able-bodied-ness and physical exertion can close down the possibilities of love and recognition when one can’t meet the demands of its norms. Secondly, *A Prayer* reads as centring a *black* disabled lesbian,

7 Smyth in *Daring to Dissent* 198.

8 Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta, *Making Black Waves*. London: Scarlett Press, 1993, 62; Shirley Tremain (Ed.), *Pushing the Limits: Disabled Dykes produce Culture*. [Toronto]: Women’s Press, 1996, 234.

9 Chicago Reader, November 12 1992, online at <https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/chicago-lesbian-gay-international-film-festival-11/>

10 Kanga also starred and wrote screenplay for *Sixth Happiness*, the 1997 feature-length drama based on his autobiography.

11 BBC Two, Thursday 23rd July 1992, 1930hrs. <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/0656199ab-c48a26353a1e75d908fd1ae>

which both produces specific resonances in regards to race/blackness and lesbian desire, and furthermore frustrates simple attempts to read the film as clearly autobiographical of Duckworth. Duckworth was a white woman, who Smyth describes as “lesbian, feminist, disabled, Northern, working-class woman” who was foremost “an avant-garde artist”<sup>12</sup> – all elements at play across her works. *A Prayer* was produced in a moment where black and Asian lesbian auteurs, photographers and artists more broadly were addressing the stakes and possibilities of black and Asian lesbian image creation and representation. In an absence of affirmative black lesbian images in popular culture, by the early 1990s experimental cinema had already become a space to explore representations of relationships between women of colour, including in works by Tanya Syed, Isiling Mack-Nataf and Pratibha Parmar. Putting these artists into dialogue at that time, film-maker, writer and performance poet Maya Chowdhry elaborates that while most black and Asian artists would agree on the importance and necessity for images and representations produced by black and Asian lesbian individuals, some would argue – as photographer Sherlee Mitchell does – for the importance of dialogue and comment between black lesbians and artists who are neither black nor Asian.<sup>13</sup> While being produced by a white director, the inclusion of *A Prayer* in the resource list of *Making Black Waves* suggests that the film’s representation of disability resonated for black and Asian audiences. Moreover, Valerie Mason-John, who co-authored *Making Black Waves* and edited *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out*, provided their voice to *A Prayer*, presumably in the multiple voices and whispers associated with the mannequins.

Furthermore, there are resonances between blackness and disability, both of which have faced objectification and dehumanisation historically and culturally, that cannot be separated from each other. While it’s beyond the scope of this short essay and the film to discuss these (often dehumanising) elements in detail, they undergird the context of Marsha’s athleticism, her experience of healthcare, and what emerges from her surrealist unreality.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the late 1980s and early 1990s were also a period in which disabled artists of black and Asian descent were actively advocating for better access to the resources necessary for making films and images. Writing in the 1989 *Feminist Art News* special issue on Disability Arts, producer and writer Pamela Roberts describes her “bitter memories” of the “constant knock-backs and insults” she faced in trying to pursue specialised

12 Cherry Smyth, personal correspondence with the author, 6th April 2022.

13 Maya Chowdhry, ‘Shooting the Shots: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent in the Media.’ In Valerie Mason-John (Ed.), *Talking Black: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out*. London: Cassell, 1995, 130-150.

14 For further reading, see Christopher Bell (Ed.) *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. Michigan State University Press, 2012; Therí Alyce Pickens (Ed.), *Blackness and Disability: This. Is. The. Remix. or I Thought I told You That We Won’t Stop*. CLA Journal Special Issue, 64:1, March 2021.

training to become a director in the film industry.<sup>15</sup> As “a Black, disabled woman,” Roberts actively “confronted” the industry, “whose training courses were expensive and definitely not designed for people with disabilities”. She describes how “producers would gasp in astonishment, mop their foreheads fervently and adjust their glasses to make sure they saw right”. Also in the issue, photographer and teacher Samena Rana, “an Asian disabled woman”, describes her experiences of facing inaccessible classrooms and spaces in art schools, while also working with Camerawork to modify their darkroom to make it accessible for wheelchair users, and looking for people who could modify cameras.<sup>16</sup> Rana articulates how transformative the new Camerawork darkroom was for her practice, and highlights the need for “more practical constructive improvements” in the visual arts, including better access to travel to arts spaces. Prejudice and physical spaces were – and can continue to be – major obstacles for disabled artists working in film and media; yet in challenging these obstacles, disabled artists made industry professionals sweat.

### **Crip-gazing**

In an essay ‘Disabling Surrealism: Reconstituting Surrealist tropes in contemporary art’, Amanda Cachia argues that Surrealist strategies can provide disabled artists the opportunity to “wield agency over how their own bodies are being portrayed, rather than being objectified from a distanced gaze”.<sup>17</sup> Cachia considers the work of contemporary disabled artists Lisa Bufano and Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi who, referencing Surrealist tropes that make bodies ‘strange’, centre their disabled bodies as bodies “already ‘strange’”, in order to address bodily experience, social stigma, and present “self-defined ideals of beauty” and the erotic.<sup>18</sup> Cachia’s descriptions of these aesthetic strategies resonate loudly with those pursued by Duckworth in *A Prayer*, as Duckworth emphasises the interplay between Marsha’s disabled lesbian body and the inextricability of her (and Duckworth’s) gaze from this body. As Duckworth shows this is by no means a simple endeavour, given the pressures of chronic illness upon this body. Marsha’s gaze is reiterated throughout the film, emphasised from both in front and behind the camera – early shots feature her brown eye peering through a hole in broken glass, her pupil poignantly centred as she looks in different directions, the eye intact yet the surrounding fractured and cracking. At first glance, it might be tempting to read the cracked glass around Marsha’s eye as representing the debilitating changes

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15 Pamela Roberts, ‘Pamela Roberts: videomaker’, FAN: Feminist Art News, 2:10, Spring 1989, 18.

16 Samena Rana, ‘Disability and Photography’, FAN: Feminist Art News, 2:10, Spring 1989, 22-23.

17 Cachia, Amanda, ‘Disabling Surrealism: Reconstituting Surrealist Tropes in Contemporary Art’. In Ann Millett-Gallant and Elizabeth Howie (eds), *Disability and art history*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017. 132-54, 132.

18 Cachia, ‘Disabling Surrealism’, 140-141.

of her body, producing a new form of vision through her brokenness.<sup>19</sup> However, the glass itself may be more reflective of the perception of viewers – of queer viewers in particular. Describing the sentiment of “coming out twice”, first as a lesbian and then as having a disability, Duckworth describes her “surprise at how that earlier ‘coming out’ is mirrored in people’s reactions when they realise I have a disability and their previous assumption of normality is shattered”.<sup>20</sup> In literally turning the camera back at the viewer, is it our perception or reaction that *A Prayer* is working to shatter, of contemporaneous queer viewers or those of us watching now? Including the sentiments of ableism that both the audience and director are working through?

Shortly after, we see Marsha lying on the floor of a room, on top of newspapers and clumps of grass, possibly after her fall, breathing heavily. Marsha looks up at a print of cellist Jacqueline Du Pre, cleaved into two pieces but appearing larger in her splitting. We hear the sound of Du Pre performing Elgar. Is Marsha pondering if her fate will be the same as Du Pre’s, whose career was cut short by MS and who died in 1987? At this juncture, it’s worth stating that Duckworth’s film does not seem to be interested in soliciting pity from the viewer for her character’s struggle in coming to terms her disability – indeed pity was one sentiment challenged by the Disability Arts Movement in the UK in the late 1980s, countered through positive representations of disabled people. Duckworth furthermore intends to demonstrate the trials of life, and of making independent work with radical aesthetic qualities, that emerge from a lesbian disabled and chronically ill body.

In another early scene, Marsha is behind a video camera, filming a woman of colour who is classically posed with her naked back exposed to the camera, before two bright white lights absorb the screen. The model calls out to Marsha over the scratch of cello strings. Marsha crouches, over but away from the viewfinder, painfully rubbing her eyes in a temporary loss of vision. As we learn from the brief scientific voiceover early in the film, visual disturbances can become a common experience for people with Multiple Sclerosis.<sup>21</sup> The assertion of Marsha’s gaze seems inextricable from her struggles with visual disturbances; as Howie writes, discussing the cuts of this scene through the theory of Kaja Silverman and Laura Mulvey, Duckworth here “merg[es] the cinematic vision in crisis with physical realities of vision challenged by disability”.<sup>22</sup>

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19 For a discussion on both challenging preconceptions of disabled people as broken, while considering “what might happen if we were to accept, claim and embrace our brokenness?”, see Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, 158-163.

20 Duckworth, ‘Coming Out Twice’, 155.

21 In addition, studies have shown that African American people with MS tend to experience worse visual impairment than Caucasian counterparts. See Fiona Costello (2016), ‘Vision Disturbances in Multiple Sclerosis’. *Semin Neurol* 2016; 36(02): 185-195. DOI: 10.1055/s-0036-1579692; D.J. Kimbrough et al., ‘Retinal damage and vision loss in African American multiple sclerosis patients’. *Ann Neurol.*, 77, 2015: 228-236. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ana.24308>.

22 Howie, ‘Watching A Prayer Before Birth’.

Duckworth skilfully presents them as a part and parcel of the film's unfolding aesthetic experiments. The "crisis" or challenge to, and of, Marsha's gaze is also here suggests that lesbian visual aesthetics will necessarily be inflected by disability – a crip gaze cannot take lesbian visual pleasures for granted. When facing beauty, one's eyes may falter; the camera might capture an image perceived through physical agony. A crip gaze encourages us to question how these visual pleasures emerge, how able-bodiedness is centred in lesbian aesthetics and relationality, and in what directions one's gaze might be led.

In the solemnity suggested in the film's title, Duckworth returns us in the next scene to Marsha crouched on the floor in the foetal position, sat on the floor with her knees bent, then on her hands and knees, multiple images layered over each other. The camera turns to hold Marsha's gaze as she looks back at us; strings sound out long notes of increasing pitch, the cry of a baby is audible. Re/birth comes for Duckworth through the layers of fractured glass and celluloid, where the cut can bare an unreality of a lesbian disabled body. However, such a new vision seems to require jettisoning the ground on which Marsha runs.

### **This Love?**

At the outset of *A Prayer*, Marsha is in an interracial lesbian relationship with a white Irish woman and poet Rose, played by poet and visual arts scholar Cherry Smyth. Smyth would have been familiar to lesbian audiences – having graced the cover of *Stolen Glances* in an image by Jean Fraser, in which she sits naked with two clothed nuns, in a garden, drinking wine and reading, while Smyth and one of the nuns look back into the camera. In the spirit of independent lesbian cinema, creativity and relationships went hand-in-hand: reflecting on working with Duckworth, Smyth describes how "film was crucial to our relationship and our lives at that time: watching and making and discussing".<sup>23</sup> She also authored the poem recited by Rose for the film. The early sections of *A Prayer* are intercut with footage of Marsha and Rose, in running gear, jogging in green spaces, alongside a river and through clear, narrow paths. In an early scene, Marsha and Rose sit up in bed, in a blue room adorned with flowers and black and white prints of the two of them, while Rose reads a poem lamenting over the loss of a lover. "*Naked I have run / run up and down stairs / kept a voice in my head / long after the mouth I've kissed is gone*". Cut over the top of Rose's recitation is the 'authoritative' voice of a doctor (or, perhaps a news reporter) describing multiple sclerosis and its symptoms. While the pitch and timbre of the voices remain distinct, language and subject become a blur, as the pathologising voice seems to become inextricable from the emotion of Rose's poem. This is the only scene of explicit dialogue, between two human characters, of the film, in which Marsha, appearing deeply unimpressed in a

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23 Cherry Smyth, personal correspondence, 6th April 2022.

close up, answers Rose, “I don’t want this love. It stops me from seeing myself”.

Marsha’s voiced refusal is primarily of an ableist sentiment, where Rose’s love seems to be unable to hold space for Marsha’s growth and transformation of coming to terms with, and seeking love in and through, her disabled body. The poem seems to condemn its love object to an early demise – prioritising the feelings of its author over that which is its subject (or object). Its mournful tone can seem more difficult to tune into than the description of the symptoms of MS. Marsha’s refusal is also a refusal of the framing of these affective priorities – of white abled lesbian relationality. Indeed the running, the repeated cuts of jogging shots, and the repetition with which we are returned to Marsha walking up and down stairs, walking through a corridor of a non-descript institutional or hospital building, begin to feel exhausting, claustrophobia meeting the demands of constant exertion. Marsha’s break-up sets her off on her own track, to run and, ultimately, end up on the floor.

### **Breaking Ground, Tables and Mirrors**

*& if the ground on which this lesbian love runs... the direction of the running track is set & acutely measured, its starting and finishing lines determined from the outset. Its here, as if in a cataclysmic scene from sporting herstory, that Duckworth stages Marsha’s fall from able-bodied exuberance, part horror, part melodrama, part disabled dyke camp. The fall places a spanner in the affective expectations of experimental cinema. In the scene, we see a white glove, growing rapidly like a mushroom, emerging from and breaking the ground on which Marsha runs, grabbing her ankles in multiple cuts of film. Marsha whimpers, caught mid-air in slow motion, as she trips and crashes into the ground. We are with her, empathetically, in shock, in catastrophe. She tries to grab onto the ground, the grass, which seems to be pulling her asunder. Even the camp resonance, which may be comic, is decidedly neither tragic nor funny.*

*The glove seems to explicitly locate the forces of Marsha’s disablement as beyond her body – a white, medical glove, tearing through the ground from underneath her feet. It’s suggestive of the pressures of medical pathology in overdetermining the course and outcomes of MS as a condition – in which doctors seem have the power (or the say) in what direction one’s life may take, what treatment may be available, and what and how much of a future one may have.<sup>24</sup> Here is the site of the broken pane of glass that Marsha gazes through, perhaps suggesting that through the fractures in it’s structure Duckworth/Marsha can reconstitute her/their gaze as a crip gaze. The horror scene of Marsha’s fall is the first of two loaded with symbolism, together producing a comment on debilitation and medicine that, in the spirit of avant-garde cinema, is far from clear or determined. A Prayer draws us next into a medical institution peopled by objects and spirits instead of doctors. If healthcare works to objectify disabled bodies through*

24 Alison Kafer discusses how disabled people are often the only people who can see a future for each other. See *Feminist, queer, crip*. Indiana University Press; Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2013.



*pathology, here healthcare is all objects, no care. In the following scenes, we see repeated shots of multiple takes in which Marsha runs towards and opens a door – the camera spins us 3600 around the blue and white walls of an 1980s or 1990s NHS building, windows closed, to meet her shocked and taken aback by a wheelchair confronting her at the door. Repeated four times in total with increasing dizzying speed, in the final shot Marsha screams in horror.*

*Still in the hospital, in another room, Marsha encounters a cloaked figure in elaborate dark robes, seemingly death but more specifically the clocked figure of death from Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). As Howie argues in her essay on *A Prayer*, Duckworth “redeploys the recursiveness of *Meshes*, whereby the protagonist repeatedly opens, closes and looks through doors that continually return to a central corridor space and a barren, blue room”.<sup>25</sup> This is one spatial and visual strategy whereby Duckworth's “increasing unreality” echoes that of Deren's *Meshes*. *The figure turns, runs past Marsha and down the corridor, leaving Marsha to call out “wait!”*, word reverberating crisply. *If the two interactions in the hospital are propositions on Marsha's possible futures as a disabled, chronically ill person – suggestions which do not play out in the film – the strategies of avant-garde aesthetics seem to propose another way.**

## **Beyond Waltz**

*Isolation, however, is social & material. In particular forms of queer love, in the coincidence of ableism & whiteness & heteronorms that slowly cut marginal crip, black and brown, & queer and trans bodies adrift. It's typically not as glamorous as the table for fine dining at which Marsha tries to enjoy a meal alone, her body animated with tremors, refusing to co-operate with the essential activity of eating. The camera zoom draws us towards Marsha, patient spectators at the table, watching without staring. It's already hard enough being a woman of colour choosing to dine alone in public. We face Marsha's frustration with her body as the intensity of her tremors in her arms crescendo – between the buttering of bread, the tearing of salami, of her hands meeting her mouth, to tear and swallow. Time slows. The longest scene of the film, the four minutes that it runs seem like forty – this includes a three-and-a-half minute single shot (interrupted only with a flash of Marsha and the wheelchair staring each other down), as the sharp edited cuts elsewhere in the film are laid down for this long moment. Exasperated, Marsha swears at her body. If this body cannot enjoy the set up, the menu, if it refuses the pleasures of drinking the nectar of the earth, it doesn't mean that one cannot flip the table, literally throwing over this finesse.*

*Yet, to be divorced from the world of the white abled norm allows for the unreal to become the central stage of the film, for an/other(ed) world to be drawn into focus. To dive deeper in what Suzanne Césaire describes as the domain of the marvellous, “a question of seizing and admiring a new art which leaves humankind in its true condition, fragile and dependent,*

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25 Lucy Howie, ‘Watching A Prayer Before Birth.’

*and which nevertheless, in the very spectacle of things ignored or silenced, opens unsuspected possibilities to the artist”.<sup>26</sup> To find and create through such explorations and methods to (re) present expressions of joy, affection, anger and upset – to build empathy from within then, to encounter a way towards loving one’s body in the context of abjection. To forge aesthetics with and through all of this.*

*An immense silence, frustration – left with music to occupy rooms, meeting treasures in the solitude of bodymind. It’s within an externalisation of the bodymind in celluloid that Marsha encounters a number of black mannequins, their voices echoing with the opening a large padlocked wooded chest, assembling the(ir) bodies which ac/company her for the second half of the film. With all of their limbs attached, the mannequins only have whispers about Marsha, who pushes these figures back to floor. The mannequins further elaborate a relationship between disability and Surrealism: Cachia addresses the use of mannequins in the photography of Hans Bellmer and other historical Surrealist works, considering if such mannequins are “generally disabled” and challenging the desires of surrealist artists to work with “fictional” disabled bodies over actually existing disabled bodies.<sup>27</sup> She muses, “Why didn’t the fictional disabled body and the real disabled body have a more substantial dialogic relationship?”<sup>28</sup> Duckworth proposes a black crip lesbian desire – to be worked through with its ambivalences – as a means towards such a substantive relationship, both to rebirth the a relationship with oneself and with another. *These scenes are undoubtedly about Marsha trying to find a way to love herself, but you also can’t waltz with just yourself.* Over the objectifying curiosity that Cachia describes in the work of Bellmer and other non-disabled artists, Duckworth demonstrates how crip imagination can produce both the disabled bodymind and the fictional mannequin as key elements of a surrealist aesthetic and radical affect.*

*In which dance and affect speak bodies over words. In a mirror, Marsha eyes another of her new styles, checking out her jagged, robotic arm movements with proud lustre. This leads to an invitation: a black plastic arm emerges from the bottom left of the screen, tapping Marsha upon her shoulder, bringing her to dance, Marsha leading a waltz while Patsy Cline loudly plays. It’s a sweet and all too brief moment of affection and respite in the pleasure of bodies moving together, Marsha’s hand holding the back of her dance partner’s upper leg, the mannequins arms jutting out behind her neck, organic and plastic life in sway. Animated in desire, Surrealism’s tightrope draws a crip lesbian, and black, joy. We’re held finally, momentarily by it. Until the record skips, the groove condemned to repeat “nd I fall”, sequence, dance, phantasmal moment of intimacy coming to a crashing break, Marsha pushing her dance partner into a full length mirror in upset.*

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26 Suzanne Césaire, ‘The Domain of the Marvellous’, 1941. Césaire’s use of the idea of humanity’s dependency on the forces of nature could be usefully put into dialogue with the concept of interdependency within disability studies and culture.

27 Cachia, ‘Disabling Surrealism’, 150.

28 Cachia, ‘Disabling Surrealism’, 150.

The depth of Marsha's frustration, presenting the ambivalence of having to negotiate chronic illness throughout one's every move, are as central to the film as its aesthetic experiments. The affective drive also opens the film up to viewers perhaps less familiar with experimental cinema, encouraging empathy and solidarity from other queer people. Frustration functions to ground the visual unreality of *A Prayer*, an emotional real in a film seeking the imagination for direction in MS and crip life.

*In a penultimate scene, Marsha climbs the stairs, meeting the sounds of someone crying – a black mannequin, with an ashen face, one arm that ends at their wrist, and one leg attached in a brace, weeping in upset. The mannequin's upset is clear – from the emotional turmoil of navigating disabled life, self-reflection, ableist architecture and social abandonment. Marsha opens herself to embrace the mannequin with comfort, love in hugs and supportive words. It's in this moment that Marsha (again) finds self-reflection, in identity as a/nother black disabled lesbian. It's an opening that proposes relation both within and beyond herself, that debilitating illness can open aesthetic paths to the unreal, to other kinds of love and affection. The light changes, the crying stops, replaced with the sounds of children playing. Marsha exits to swing in the world outside knowing this.*

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**The Work We Share** is a film programme of ten newly digitised films from the Cinenova collection, captioned by Collective Text. The Work We Share gathers a number of films that previously existed in precarious conditions, in some cases, with negatives being lost or distribution film prints being the only copy. Produced between 1972 and 1994, the films address oppositional histories and questions of difference through the lenses of gender, race, sexuality, health, and community. The Work We Share intends to acknowledge Cinenova's interdependency: from organisation to filmmakers, cultural workers, communities, and individuals.

**Cinenova** is a volunteer-run charity preserving and distributing the work of feminist film and video makers. Cinenova launched in 1991 following the merger of two feminist film and video distributors, Circles and Cinema of Women, each formed in 1979. Cinenova currently distributes over 300 titles that include artists' moving image, experimental film, narrative feature films, documentary and educational videos made from the 1910's to the early 2000's. The thematics in these titles include oppositional histories, post and de-colonial struggles, representation of gender, race, sexuality, and other questions of difference and importantly the relations and alliances between these different struggles.

Current Working Group: Tracey Francis, Emma Hedditch, Charlotte Procter, Irene Revell, Moira Salt, Louise Shelley. For press inquiries, contact Reman Sadani, [coordinator@cinenova.org](mailto:coordinator@cinenova.org).

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