



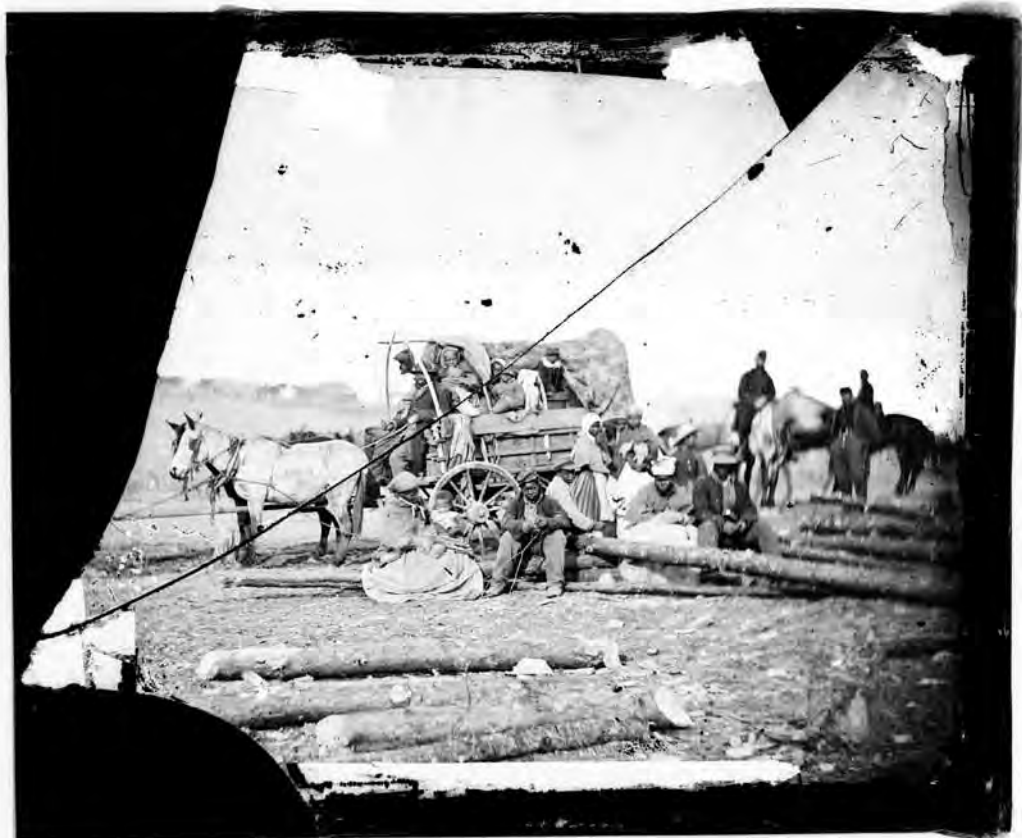
KUNGL. VITTERHETS HISTORIE OCH ANTIKVITETS AKADEMIEN

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# HISTORY IN IMAGES

Towards an (AUDIO)VISUAL historiography



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## Christopher Harris's experimental audiovisual historiography

Christopher Harris's short film *Halimuhfack* (2016) begins with the image of a Black woman wearing a black dress and red hat that suggest the fashions of the early 20th century (*Fig. 1*). She is sitting in front of a screen on which we see ethnographic footage of Maasai people performing a dance in traditional clothing. As the seated woman begins to speak, we hear the voice of a woman – who, we may learn from the programme notes, is in fact the celebrated African-American author and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston – answering a man's questions about her work learning, performing, and recording African-American folk songs in the US South.<sup>1</sup> However, the lips of the visible speaker and Hurston's voice slip increasingly out of synch so that it quickly becomes clear that it is not Hurston we are seeing onscreen. After the short conversation with the interviewer, Hurston sings the song 'Halimuhfack', but once the song is complete, the soundtrack begins to skip and repeat, distorting her words. The ethnographic images behind the lip-synch performer, which were already on a loop, begin to stutter. Soundtrack and image both break down until they become visually and sonically nonsensical (*Fig. 2*). Indeed, the film deploys an aesthetics of interruption that not only refuses to cohere into narrative but also moves increasingly toward incoherence. Nevertheless, an intense form of historical experience inheres in the experience of watching the film: an aesthetics of interruption producing what might be called an historiography of interruption.

Of course, interruption is often viewed as "rude" and as an impediment to dialogue or narrative. However, when dialogue is impossible or narrative becomes ideologically calcified or communicative power is inequitable, interruption may become necessary to the production of an ethical discourse – including an ethical historical discourse. Amit Pinchevski, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, sees "interruption as bearing a special ethical significance: as a point of exposure and vulnerability upon which the relation with the Other may undergo a profound transformation".<sup>2</sup> In my



*Figs. 1 & 2. Halimuhfack (Christopher Harris, 2016). Reprinted with permission of the artist.*

view, certain works of audiovisual history that appropriate existing sounds and/or images enact an interruption that may serve as such a “point of exposure and vulnerability.” By interrupting the flow of one set of images and/or sounds with other sets of images and/or sounds, audiovisual appropriation may open a space in which otherness can be encountered without established preconception. Pinchevski also notes that “there is communication only when there is a moment, however, fleeting or minimal, of non-understanding, of disorientation, or even of stupidity with respect to what is said.”<sup>3</sup> Audiovisual appropriation often generates this moment of disorientation. It is so fleeting that we often do not even consciously acknowledge this brief experience of non-understanding or stupidity. Yet, I want to argue that, in works of audiovisual appropriation – or “found footage” works – which often ask us to synthesize disparate sounds and images that have no instantly apparent connection, there is always a moment of incomprehension before we make sense of the “misuse”.<sup>4</sup>

Some works of audiovisual appropriation transform this moment of incomprehension into an opportunity for disrupting habitual ways of thinking about the past – and about the “other”. Pinchevski writes:

The Other’s interruption makes evident what is oppressed and denied by “innate” communal structures: the immanency of a relation transcending similarity and like-mindedness. Rather than having or working to have something in common, this community is realized in the approach and exposure to the foreign: the outcast, the mental patient, the immigrant, the Indian, the stranger, the enemy.<sup>5</sup>

In my view, Harris’s short experimental films literally and metaphorically interrupt dominant discourses, producing an encounter with iterations of the “foreign” in ways that, I argue, reveal the rule of “like-mindedness” when it comes to thinking about the practice of producing history. By interrupting established forms of historiographic discourse literally and metaphorically, sonically and visually, spatially and temporally, his films call upon us to rethink the notions of audiovisual traces as “documents” that ostensibly form the basis of future historical knowledge. Moreover, by placing bodies that refuse to be reduced to a singular identity into times and spaces – or temporal and spatial structures – wherein they do not easily “fit”, Harris’s films interrupt any comfortable epistemological relation between viewer and viewed.

In *Halimuhfack*, there are at least three distinct temporalities in effect from the very beginning of the film. First, there is the temporality of the footage of the Maasai people performing a dance or ritual. Without annotation, this colour footage reads as having likely been taken in the mid-20th century by white Western ethnographers intent on capturing the Maasai before they became “Westernized”, part of the project

of “salvage ethnography”. The bodies of these filmmakers are noticeably absent in the footage but their gaze is emphasized through the repetition of an image of one girl looking back at the camera. The fact that these images are of the Maasai is particularly significant because, as Neal Sobania has explored in depth, the “othering” of the Maasai through visual representation has a long history. He notes, “Everyone ‘knows’ the Maasai and Zulu – women in beads with breasts uncovered, in or around their ‘primitive huts’, warriors with spears and shields dancing or charging across the open plains”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, these images likely also generate a sense of familiarity for the viewer as stereotype. A second temporality is represented by the audio recording of Hurston speaking about her ethnographic documentation of African-American songs during the 1930s. As Daphne A. Brooks notes, this was part of Hurston’s larger quest to “celebrate, cultivate, and make more audible to the masses the depth and complexities of Afro diasporic sonic cultures”.<sup>7</sup> In the recording we hear Hurston describe her insider/outsider participant-observer status as she incorporated African-American songs into her own embodied inscription of this tradition. As Brooks further observes, Hurston used “embodied and sounded performance as a tool of ethnographic inscription, as an instrument that might put black voices on the (scholarly) record [...] Her performance doubly inscribes the subjectivity of the black collection whose voices she preserves, as well as her own present, active independent reception”.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, although actual Hurston’s body is not visible in Harris’s film, it is audible, demonstrating that her ethnography not simply a documentation of the ethnographic “other” but an embodied performance of that other’s artistic practice. Finally, there is the temporality of the body of the performer, poet and author Valada Flewellyn, who lip-synchs to Hurston’s words. The synch slips in and out without any effort to convince the viewer that this is, in fact, Hurston’s body. Indeed, Flewellyn’s intentionally imperfect embodiment of Hurston is aligned with the present moment of the making of Harris’s film, closer to – though not coincident with – our own moment of viewing. Flewellyn’s visible body further accentuates the absence of Hurston’s actual body – and of the bodies whose songs Hurston echoes.

Corresponding to this multiplicity of temporalities, a spatial layering is also at work, represented not only by the gap between Flewellyn’s lip movements and Hurston’s actual recorded voice but also by the gap between the impersonator and the rear projection that appears behind her. The gap between lips and voice gestures towards a form of intentionally flawed ventriloquism that indicates the inability of past and present to match up and make a coherent sense. Moreover, the rear projection creates a literally incoherent space. Writing about narrative cinema, Laura Mulvey writes that, “Rear-projection’s clumsy visibility seems to smuggle something of modernism into the mass medium or modernity, creating an unusual paradox, almost a clash of

cultures, within a single space”.<sup>9</sup> Although Mulvey indicates that she means “clash of cultures” metaphorically, *Halimuhfack* seems to literalize this clash of cultures, pointing to the gaps between Western culture and African cultures as well as between African and African-American identity and even between the highly educated Hurston and her working-class subjects. Mulvey also notes that in classical Hollywood film, “There is a further incompatibility, a further paradox, inherent to the rear-projection process. The location footage can seem especially ‘realistic’, almost like documentary film footage, when it intrudes into otherwise wholly-staged narrative dramas”.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in *Halimuhfack*, the footage of the Maasai tribe – contrasted with the obviously staged performance in the foreground – begins to align with the “real”. Yet, this offer of the “real” is plagued by interruptions. As the footage is looped and plays over and over again, it loses something of its voyeuristic, ethnographic appeal in its very repetition. Moreover, as the speed of the looping increases, the footage itself grows increasingly grainy and hard to read. On top of that, the sound of Hurston’s voice starts to loop so that the lyric “Who do? Who do? Who do working?” is transformed simply into “Hoodoo, hoodoo, hoodoo, hoodoo,” which Harris describes in his programme notes as an “incantation”. Thus, both sound and image track seem to lose their denotative function, transforming into non-sense or literal incoherence. Through these temporal and spatial layerings and stutterings, the film refuses to satiate our desire for “real” historical and ethnographic knowledge, which depends on spatial and temporal coherence. Everything we are seeing and hearing is visibly and audibly incomplete, unsynchronized, and actively incoherent.

Jeffrey Skoller has identified a particular tendency within avant-garde films that engage with history, which he categorizes as “shard” films and links to Walter Benjamin’s ideas of historical materialism and allegory. Benjamin was interested in the ways in which the detritus of a past moment can have significance not for reconstructing the actual past but as a means of constructing an understanding of the past through the lens of the present and vice versa. Skoller writes:

For modern artists, the use of discarded, mechanically-recorded images and sounds has allegorical possibility because they remain unchanged while the original context for their existence passes out of visibility. The temporal untranslatability of the object becomes the embodiment of present meaning and is generative of new possibilities for significance.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in *Halimuhfack*, the “discarded” fragments of the Hurston interview and of the Maasai people are revealed in their “untranslatability”. Rather than attempting to reconstruct their original context, the film emphasizes the fact that this context has

passed out of visibility so much so that we cannot understand these traces as coherent messages from and about the historical past. Writing about a different found footage film, Ernie Gehr's *Eureka*, Skoller notes that, "the foregrounding of the present moment of the viewer's gaze through the slowing down of the image denaturalizes it and pulls the viewer out of the image of the past and into an acute sense of the present".<sup>12</sup> This denaturalization and emphasis on the present moment of viewing is clearly present in *Halimuhfack* as well. Any immersion in the past is violently sundered through both the "inauthenticity" of the performer and the aesthetics of interruption.

Yet, in *Halimuhfack* – and in Harris's work more broadly – this denaturalization through interruption is fundamentally political. In our present moment (or the moment of Harris's film's production), Black people are still implicated in scopis and sonic regimes that combine exoticization with denigration, that seek to fix Black bodies and voices in the service of a white gaze or ear. *Halimuhfack*, however, undermines our sense that we can know or understand African or African-American history through audiovisual ethnographic fragments. In particular, by placing the body of the lip synch performer – who functions as a "temporal other" – into the space of the frame, the possibility of knowledge about the past "untainted" by the present is exploded. The gap between her lip movements and the voice we hear, more than anything else in the film, points to that which we cannot access, cannot possess. Indeed, I argue it is in the gesture of placing the contemporary Black body within the historicized space of the appropriated document (with its implicit white gaze and ear) and acknowledging its interruption that the political – and ethical – stakes of interruption most keenly emerge. The discourses of ethnography attempt to produce coherence out of the life and experience of the "other" – usually people of colour – for a white reader or viewer. While there is no reason to reject all ethnographic discourse outright, it must be constantly interrupted to reveal the ways in which representation exerts power over both its subjects and its audience. By offering ethnographic representation of Black people but interrupting it temporally, spatially, visually, and sonically, *Halimuhfack* offers us traces of Black history but reminds us that it is filtered through a particular (usually white) gaze/ear and, moreover, that we have no particular right to this knowledge.

Yet Harris's work is not only concerned with ethnographic representation in relation to Black history. The aesthetics of interruption are also at work in Harris's earlier film, *Reckless Eyeballing* (2004), which, rather than incorporating ethnographic recordings, primarily appropriates fiction footage (Fig. 3). The main sources of footage are D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* and the 1974 Blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown*. Of course, *The Birth of a Nation* is generally regarded as both a masterpiece of early cinematic innovation and a virulently racist misrepresentation of the

American Civil War and Reconstruction. Meanwhile, *Foxy Brown*, made by white director Jack Hill, has been celebrated for its depiction of a strong, African-American heroine but also critiqued as an objectified and simplistic version of empowered African-American femininity. Through an exchange of gazes constructed by Harris's appropriation and editing, Foxy Brown (Pam Grier) appears to look at and be looked at by a variety of men, both Black and white. The most striking example of this occurs when Gus – the villainous would-be rapist of a white woman from *The Birth of a Nation*, who was played by white actor Walter Long in blackface – and Foxy appear to look at one another. We also repeatedly see an image of Black activist Angela Davis and text that says “ANGELA DAVIS IS WANTED”, referring to the fact that she was pursued by the FBI in 1970 on charges of conspiracy and murder. The film emphasizes details of the “WANTED” poster, which includes a list of Davis's physical traits such as “race” and “complexion”. Images of text referring to Black and white “bodies” also appear periodically onscreen; in fact, the terms refer to measuring colour temperature in motion picture photography, but they take on racial connotations in the context of Harris's film. On the soundtrack, the first thing we hear is a voice saying, “Don't let her look you in the eye, whatever you do, for that's how she turns men to stone”.<sup>13</sup> This reference to Medusa is then followed by a single (interrupted) line repeated through much of the film (“She will never look –”) along with snippets of music and other brief bits of dialogue.<sup>14</sup> The title of the film refers to a term that, under slavery, meant a Black slave making eye contact with anyone in a position of authority. Later, under Jim Crow, it referred to any Black man looking at a white woman. (It is also the title of a play by renowned African-American playwright Ishmael Reed.)

Clearly, the act of looking or being looked at is foregrounded in *Reckless Eyeballing* on multiple levels; however, the trajectories of the original gazes are interrupted and rerouted. As in *Halimuhfack*, we are presented in *Reckless Eyeballing* with Black (or blackface) bodies produced within a white scopic regime, a fact made palpable through Harris's interruption of the texts from which his footage derives. At the same time, his act of excising and re-suturing the footage produces an alternative scopic regime that also serves as a history and interrogation of raced and gendered looking. Yet, *Reckless Eyeballing* refuses simple race and gender binaries. For instance, in Harris's film, the term “reckless eyeballing” takes on a new meaning since one of the people we see is a white man (in blackface) “looking” at a Black woman. However, the Black woman is also clearly “looking” back at the disguised white man, her gaze tinged not with desire but hostility. In addition, the frequent use of overexposed images and negative images in which blacks and whites are reversed also complicate our sense of a black/white binary.





Fig. 3. *Reckless Eyeballing* (Christopher Harris, 2004). Reprinted with permission of the artist.

What interests me most is the exchange of gazes between Gus/Long and Foxy/Grier. These looks intersect across clearly disparate temporalities: 1865, 1915, and 1974. Instead of one “temporal other” as in *Halimuhfack*, wherein the presence of the lip synch actress undoes coherence, we have the image of two people who could not be more temporally or politically “other” in relation to one another but who seem – through editing – to be looking at one another. The editing creates a coherence that we know to be false. Yet, it poses a set of questions: what does it mean for Gus to look at Foxy across 59 years (or, diegetically, 109 years) and for Foxy to look back at him, and what implications do these looks have for thinking about history, particularly the history of representation of Black people? Foxy’s gaze is clearly an empowered one. She gazes, blinking slowly, with a subtle sneer, clearly dismissing the object of her

gaze. When this object is edited to appear to be “Gus – the renegade – a product of the vicious doctrines spread by the carpetbaggers”, her gaze reads as an annihilation of this figure, once menacing but now absurd. This annihilation is literalized later in the film when Foxy appears, through Harris’s editing, to point a gun at Gus as well. Moreover, I would argue that, through the appropriation, the fictional elements fall away to emphasize the actual indexical bodies within the fictions. The object of both the woman’s gaze and her firearm ceases to be the character Gus and becomes Long, the white man who performed a particular, racist version of Blackness. Foxy becomes Grier herself – visually aligned with Davis, who was in reality accused of conspiring to murder a white judge – asserting her power. Thus, in this film, the aesthetics of interruption (of the original texts) are combined with a reintegration into a different hierarchy of gazes and power, transforming the meaning of *The Birth of a Nation* and its most notorious and problematic character. This film does not simply historicize Black representation but also refigures it, allowing the present a form of revenge on the past. If, as Skoller argues, films can perform a Benjaminian allegoresis in which traces of the past are used to illuminate the present, Harris’s films do so in the service of revealing the (continuing) incoherence of the white vision of Blackness. The sounds and images that Harris appropriates are not traces of the real so much as traces of white visual and sonic supremacy, the discursive needs of which have structured so much cinematic representation. This structuring power is hardly gone; it must be continually interrupted.

The aesthetics of interruption as exemplified in *Halimuhfack* and *Reckless Eye-balling* have both political and ethical ramifications. If we are to come to grips with the archive of racial (and often racist) representation, we cannot simply narrate these representations as an illustration of the past, safely contained. Instead, by creating a clash of divergent temporalities and spatialities, we may “reactivate” these sounds and images to better understand our current assumptions about the “other”, whom we cannot seem to stop producing. An historiography of interruption may thus be a potential antidote to the simplistic, seamless versions of history that have such currency among ethno-nationalists and their ilk. While Harris’s work circulates almost exclusively within experimental media circles, his editing strategies may provide a model for more mainstream historical texts, both audiovisual and written, that generally tend to present history as unified, uninterrupted, and – all too often – exclusionary. Incorporating the aesthetics of interruption more broadly may, then, move us towards a more ethical historiography.

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## NOTES

- 1 According to the Library of Congress website on which this recording can be streamed, this interview took place in Federal Music Project Office in Jacksonville, Florida, on 18 June 1939. The man interviewing Hurston is identified as Herbert Halpert. See “Halimuhfack’, Library of Congress, accessed 21 March 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/item/flwpa000014>.
- 2 Amit Pinchevski, ‘The ethics of interruption: Toward a Levinasian philosophy of communication’, *Social Semiotics* 15:2 (2005), 212.
- 3 Pinchevski, ‘The ethics of interruption’, 227.
- 4 This may be true of all editing, of course, but I am suggesting that it is often more pronounced in the case of audiovisual appropriation.
- 5 Pinchevski, ‘The ethics of interruption’, 231.
- 6 Neal Sobania, ‘But where are the cattle? Popular images of Maasai and Zulu across the twentieth century’, *Visual Anthropology* 15:3/4 (July 2002), 313.
- 7 Daphne A. Brooks, “‘Sister, can you line it out?’: Zora Neale Hurston and the sound of angular Black womanhood’, *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 55:4 (2010), 619.
- 8 Brooks, “‘Sister, can you line it out?’”, 623.
- 9 Laura Mulvey, ‘Rear-projection and the paradoxes of Hollywood realism’, in *Theorizing world cinema*, eds. Lúcia Nagib, Rajinder Dudrah & Chris Perriam (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 208.
- 10 Mulvey, ‘Rear-projection’, 212.
- 11 Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, specters, shards: Making history in avant-garde film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 5.
- 12 Skoller, *Shadows, specters, shards*, 13.
- 13 This, along with the music included in the film, is appropriated from a 1963 B-movie called *Son of Hercules vs. Medusa* directed by Alberto De Martino.
- 14 The “she will never look” loop is from a self-help book on tape about how to keep your sexual relationship with your partner strong. The complete line is “she will never look at another man, she will never need another man.” Email correspondence with filmmaker, 23 October 2017.