

# *The suburban trilogy: Abigail Child's cake and stake*

Article

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Rachel Garfield

The Suburban Trilogy

"I thought of it as three approaches to *the education of the girl child*"

It says something about the education of a girl child that the initial film in The Suburban trilogy, *Cake and Steak* performs, if not invents, a language where unintelligibility holds its own knowability. It says something about the way children absorb the world around them and try - and often - fail to make sense of it while they become the product of their context and milieu. Like many of Child's films, the intelligence of the trilogy, and its radicality, is the way in which it inhabits contradiction. It does this in formal terms and also through a structural drive. Continuing the stylistically heterogeneous approach that Child had already shown in her epic suite *Is This You Were Born For?*, this trilogy also works through a range of methodologies. We see the contradictions in the constellation of the trilogy and also culminating within the final film *Surf and Turf*, as the subjects of its gaze speak their own contradictions about their communities and allegiances. The trilogy uses different devices to take a view (or rather a series of views) on twentieth century middle class life in a particular corner of New Jersey; and the first explicitly Jewish films of her oeuvre.

The Suburban Trilogy made in the early 2000s consists of, respectively: *Cake and Steak* (2002), *The Future is Behind You* (2004) and *Surf and Turf* (2011). The periodization of each film is as important as its formal approach. The first and the one that I will mostly focus on, *Cake and Steak*, uses a *mélange* of found footage, with Child's signature of heavily manipulated, fast edited montage amplified by sound mash up of music and adverts; the second uses black and white historical found photographs from the 1930s, as a poignant narrative of loss, and the third, *Surf and Turf* is shot and edited as a documentary of [a contemporary](#) Jewish community [located on the](#) New Jersey shore.

Structurally the trilogy becomes amongst other things, a rumination on the transient contingencies of community, in looking at New Jersey towns, through communities, one mostly catholic and one Jewish, at two historical moments. The [people](#) in *Cake and Steak*, [from North](#)

*Jersey*, give way here to the Ashkenazi and Sephardi (in this case, Syrian) Jews *in the shore town of Deal*, in *Surf and Turf*. In the latter film, these communities are explicitly discussing their Jewishness and the importance of belonging in their lives is ~~also~~ of contrast to the post war generations in *Cake and Steak* who were intent on being accepted as Americans, despite their Jewishness. The contemporary self-presentation as proudly Jewish American speaks to the ways in which different historical moments impact on one's sense of self as well as the cultural differences of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewishness.

The trilogy is in some ways a systemic framing: *Cake and Steak* is an affective journey into the American dream, *The Future is Behind You*, the second film, in its sequencing, speaks to the long creeping shadow of the holocaust hovering underneath the lived experience of the seemingly idyllic American Jewish world. A lesser filmmaker would have put all the films in a chronologically periodised order. To put *The Future is Behind You* second suggests, intimated also by the title, how the holocaust infuses all other experiences as a tacit knowledge, just below consciousness in everyday life. It is nowhere visible in *Cake and Steak* but adds an inflection into the opening shots which shows a series of split shots of suburban detail, roofs, hedges, sky, cars in the car park, all with music playing from the classic Hitchcock film *Psycho*. These shots read also as the setting of a mood that specifically punctures the myth of the great American picket fence life invoking the critiques of say *Twin Peaks* or *Stepford Wives*; that beneath the dream was a repressed nightmare. Its uniqueness - in this case - is that it is a somatic journey from the point of view of the girl. The doubling is also a device that not only poses the obvious critique of representation through its irreconcilability but offers a metaphor for difference in posing reality as uncanny. So instead of an establishing shot that situates the viewer into a normality of the setting for the film, Child here uses a device that is associated with *ostrananie*, an idea that incorporates dualisms, contradiction and critique. Introduced by the Russian Formalist Victor Shlovsky it defines estrangement as a form of poetry that invokes sensation rather than the display of things as they are already known. *Cake and Steak* does this in part by building up an array of motifs that tease out the impossibility of psychic stability. At the most fundamental level, the film is divided into numerical chapters that are not

chronologically ordered, chapter headings jump back and forth, numbers get missed out that also defy the usual need to make sense of cinematic time.

Building on this device the work goes beyond a Brechtian distancing towards an hysterical discombobulation that comprises the 'making of a girl'. Both race and class are noted as well as gender and picked up through juxtaposing image with text that is played on the surface - such as a found sequence of children in a class in black face, singing, with Child's intertitles displaying a list of working-class jobs that presumably are taken up by others, often African Americans, such as "caretaker, housekeeper, gardener, driver, cleaning lady and usher". The shock of the found footage - as seen today - is amplified by the text drifting past. Earlier in the film is a sequence of a large birthday picnic with the words "nanny/maid/au pair/help" displayed reminding us that these middle-class activities rely on the hidden labour of working-class women. One asks oneself how much of this has actually changed.

After the initial mid shots of depopulated spaces, the film moves through a range of peopled foci, from a backyard barbeque, through to children's parties, cocktail parties and a swim club, to the final sequences that include an array of parades, American colonial reenactments and "cowboy and Indian" shootouts that set the ideological framework of American life.

In each sequence of this 18 minute film of 16mm found footage, Child is picking out details and *détourning* them with either a juxtaposition, repetition or upending the image and sometimes all of these devices at once. Often a pan is repeated in the manner of a stuck record that keeps coming back to the same place, rendering the image absurd, compounded by the atonal montaged sound scape. Each sequence of imagery is played for its absurdity amplified by the treatment of sound that is an aural mirror to the visuals. In this period odyssey Child plays with pro tools generating soundscapes that thread through the film. Along with song lines from 'splintered broken lps of my older sisters' '78 collection complete with labels from their teenage years. In some ways, you could say I was creating a "new tendril of glitch,"

focusing on disturbed broken records and creating new sounds through gating software.’ (Child, email to author 18 December 2021)

There is a series of striking sequences about half-way through that characterizes the film, of women on display. The first, is of a woman practicing her majorette set in a garden, and the second is of a blonde woman in a fur coat at a family party<sup>1</sup>. These two sequences are split by quick shots of boys running around a tree and a man taking aim of his rifle to shoot - underlying the divergent gendered expectations of the time. In the first part of this section a woman is whirling her baton amid a cacophany of edited found sound. She is twirling as the footage is edited, montaged, upside down and on a diagonal, moving between mid-shots, close ups, fragments and repetitions. For a full two minutes the majorette is depicted through these critical devices that question this all-American teenage aspirational pastime which is followed, in chapter 8, by a blonde fur coated woman being led by another woman across the screen, this pan is repeated again and again so that it changes our understanding of the shot as one woman slips her arm into another as if to lead her to some people as an introduction, to a repeated darkly humorous motif of one woman, caught in an endless cycle of being dragged to nowhere by her peer.

The end of the film returns to the early shots of garages, a reflection on the seemingly calm surface of things with short interlude of some women in their furs exiting a home with their children, again, these women are knowingly on display for the camera. However, the last two shots set a different tone, of a girl looking at a clear blue sky followed by a blurred shot denoting the life of possibility that a girl should have rather than the prescribed future of a life of suburban display.

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<sup>1</sup> in fact all the footage in CAKE + STEAK except a few sequences of the beach club and Deal house which reappear later in Surf and Turf, come from found footage given to Child by a colleague Chris Eickoff over a number of months (email to author 18 December.)