

## Online Reviews

Posted by Liz Leeber, Issue 6, Summer '09

## Sexual Freaks and Slasher Flicks: EFA's Chaperone Series by Liz Leeber

A free film with beer and popcorn is hardly a difficult assignment on a humid July night, even when the film proves to be as challenging to the viewer as Ulrike Ottinger's 1981 work, *Freak Orlando*. This film, screened as part of the EFA Project Space's summer film series, Chaperone—a program where artists select a film to screen that has influenced or interested them in some way—is not as easy to digest as more traditional fare with a clear plot and obvious structure. But that in no way means that the undertaking is not worthwhile.



Freak Orlando

In my experience, I've found that the artistic or intellectual consciousness responds most readily when directly challenged by the unfamiliar. The effect of viewing a work so defiantly disorganized and, at times, seemingly impenetrable forces the viewer to participate by confronting his or her dependence on categorizations and frameworks.

*Freak Orlando* clearly had such an effect on New York artist K8 Hardy, best known for her queer feminist artist collective and journal *LTTR*, who chose this film to screen (on her designated night) at Chaperone. Hardy's work is primarily performance-oriented and feminist in nature, but avoids didactic messages and consistently rejects an us/them dichotomy in regards to patriarchal society. As she explains in the program catalog, "I connected with the film's shameless portrayal of sexual and physical freaks and Ottinger's refusal to justify or explain her characters. She reifies the notion that freaks do exist, that they do not need to be contextualized or normalized."

Hardy's comments about the lack of contextualization in the film become even more resonant when the viewer realizes just how much one relies on concrete structures of time and space when experiencing art. *Freak Orlando* is divided into five episodes,

each depicting a different time period and following the actions of Orlando's latest incarnation. Very generally, the episodes represent five stages in the development of human society and culture. A point-by-point plot reconstruction of these episodes would be near impossible and tedious for the reader, as the "action" is imparted by the visual impact of the various scenarios. Like the Virginia Woolf novel Orlando upon which the film is loosely based, time is fluid, as is the gender, physical appearance, and social status of the protagonist.



Freak Orlando

Magdalena Montezuma (Orlando), who appears in a number of Ottinger's films, has a disarming and powerfully androgynous beauty that seems to transmute itself with each new alias. Despite the lack of linear narrative, the movie is held together as a cohesive whole by powerful symbolic images, each made more magnetic and meaningful by Montezuma's ability to fully inhabit her various personas. If any woman can be sexually magnetic while portraying a two-headed hunchbacked prophetess, it is her.

The most emotionally resonant element of the film and its closest tie to the novel is the reappearance in each episode of Orlando's beloved, played by Delphine Seyrig. In the fourth vignette, which seems to have partially inspired Katherine Dunn's 1989 circus freak novel *Geek Love*, Orlando (appearing here as "Mr. Orlando" in Katharine Hepburn-style white menswear) falls in love with one half of a pair of Siamese twins called Lena. Her conjoined sister, Leni, grows increasingly jealous and drinks ferociously, despite Lena's protestations over the damage being done to their shared liver.

In a starkly powerful scene, Mr. Orlando stabs the hysterical Leni, inadvertently killing Lena and leaving their child motherless. Mr. Orlando is then killed by Lena and Leni's circus freak family, a punishment that he accepts with stolid resignation. Underlying this tragic scene is the implication that Mr. Orlando and Lena will meet again, as they have before, in a different incarnation but never fully independent of the restraints of corporeal reality.

Another continuous thread is the presence of a group of energetic men who variously appear as flagellants on a pilgrimage, ecstatic tribal worshippers, violent inquisitors, and contestants in "The World's Ugliest Person" contest, the last being emceed by Orlando as "The Entertainer." The men seem to represent a force of free-floating, collective, cultural angst that manifests itself in whatever form is most readily available. At one point, they desperately attack Orlando because she will not stand upon a pillar

to be worshipped as a saint. This refusal is an especially potent example of the artist's resistance to occupy a fixed place in society or participate in meaningless rituals. Orlando's continuous reincarnations are a triumphant resurgence of that spirit despite the dictates of external societal circumstances.

The lack of didactic message is what seems to have drawn K8 Hardy to the film, as she explains that she was "exhilarated to see a feminist legacy that did not righteously reject an indulgence in excess and the aesthetics of representation." This embracing of the extreme, the unordered, and the grotesque is what makes the film both visually appealing and slightly uncomfortable to watch.



Scream 3

The EFA Project Space, where Freak Orlando and the other Chaperone screenings took place, is a second-floor auditorium consisting of two spacious, high-ceilinged rooms in midtown Manhattan. It is the perfect backdrop for artistic projection, oddly mirroring the film's refusal to provide concrete contextualization for its episodes.

The film series Chaperone was created by EFA Curator Michelle Levy and New York artist Ian Cooper. Over dinner the preceding spring,

Levy and Cooper hashed out the specifics: Levy was looking for a way to utilize the EFA Project Space and engage the local artistic community outside of the traditional exhibition context, and Cooper was the first artist she knew she wanted involved.

In a way, Ian Cooper's work sets the tone for the entire series. He works in a mixed-media format, recycling images, set pieces, and artifacts from popular film and television. His latest project, for example, is "a full scale recreation of a row of multi-colored gym lockers from the '80s Canadian children's television program, You Can't Do That on Television...made from cordura nylon (backpack material) and embroidered felt in place of the graffiti (think varsity letters)."

The artists who participated in Chaperone are all similarly intrigued by notions of deconstructing media. For instance, Brooklyn artist Kalup Linzy used John Waters' *Desperate Living* (also the film he screened for his part of the series) as the framework for his own sexually investigative video piece, *Conversations Wit De Churen 4: Play Wit De Churen and KK Queen Survey*. More specifically, the artists involved have deep connections with the mediums of film and TV, which is fitting considering their predominance in modern life. Seeing familiar images from TV and film recontextualized as art pieces forces the viewer to examine his or her relationship with these mediums and to

acknowledge their pervasive influence in our lives.

Cooper chose to screen Kevin Williamson's slasher movie sequel *Scream 3*, a film that he freely (and proudly) admits does not carry the same kind of art-house cache as some of the more obscure selections. As he explains, "I was hell-bent on screening a film that wasn't a 'good' movie. I loathe the magic-wand phenomenon of artists bolstering their street cred by paying homage to cinematic works that are plain and simple artistic works in and of themselves... [*Scream 3* is] a ballsy meta-ness of a film that falls yards short of being even a good movie."

What particularly appealed to Cooper was the movie-within-a-movie structure of the film. The plot revolves around the production of a movie based on the events of *Scream* and *Scream 2*, and how this framing mediates the experience of the viewer. Oddly, this is the same point of interest that drew Hardy to *Freak Orlando*; while the latter utilizes minimal framing devices, it is this very lack of structure that highlights the viewer's dependence on it.

The program's organizers and the space in general exhibited a refreshing lack of pretension, or to put it in a more personal context, not once did I feel self-conscious about my \$3 Old Navy T-shirt and lack of knowledge of Brunel. Similarly impressive is their desire to include cultural events and trends that are accessible to a larger audience. The fact that a Chaperone attendee can view *Freak Orlando* one week and *Scream 3* the next speaks volumes about EFA's ingenuity in breaking down the barriers of what is traditionally, or popularly, considered art. The definition of the term "art," as K8 Hardy shows through her film installment, is nothing more than that: "an attempt to describe in finite terms that which is, by nature, constantly changing."



*Scream 3*