

Marina Vishmidt

Tags: [Fredric Jameson](#), [Gilles Deleuze](#), [Karl Marx](#), [Michel Foucault](#)



Maryam Jafri, *Costume Party*, 2005, three-screen video installation, 13min. Installation View, Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, May 2006. Photograph: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy the artist

Over the past decade and a half, Maryam Jafri has been working across film, installation and photographic tableau, producing highly stylised and densely researched reflections upon war, identity and economy. Media images form both the object and the medium of enquiry in her work. In this conversation Marina Vishmidt and Maryam Jafri discuss her recent film *Avalon* (2011) and earlier works such as *the Siege of Khartoum, 1884* (2006), *Costume Party* (2005) and *Running* (2000), looking at the contingency of desire and the contemporary possibilities of allegory.

Marina Vishmidt: Your photographic and moving-image work demonstrates a great economy of means, with formal expression and political argument in tight synthesis. *Avalon*, for example, is a short film that shows – but also doesn't show – the manufacture of S&M equipment by women workers in 'an unnamed Asian country' who are led to believe they are crafting innocuous items for military or circus use. It alludes to 'insider' documentaries but all the scenes are in fact staged, albeit based on extensive interviews. The film exhibits a formal restraint in accord with the erotic restraining devices whose manufacture we are shown. This stylisation and restraint brings with it a rigour that almost turns the film into a gestural tableau. In contrast, the photo-collage *Siege of Khartoum, 1884* is imbued with historical conflict: its epic sweep evokes historical melodrama, action films and the cinematic more generally. I wonder if you could say something about the relationship between moving and still images in your work?

'My aim was to depict desire as neither totally blocked nor totally free, but instead tensely hovering between the two.'

Maryam Jafri: *Avalon's* formal restraint was something I consciously worked with in order to underscore how effectively the modern workplace directs desire towards ends deemed productive. The five scenes show sites of labour and/or consumption, since the flipside of the modern

cubicle is the supersized mall, the latter acting as a sort of safety valve for the former. Thus there is no eruption of movement in *Avalon*, but neither is there absolute stasis. My aim was to depict desire as neither totally blocked nor totally free, but instead tensely hovering between the two. *Siege of Khartoum, 1884* is built up entirely from documents – each of the 28 posters contains one contemporary, usually iconic, image from the Iraq War or the 'war on terror' and juxtaposes it with a news article that seems to

correspond to the image but in fact is an archival newspaper text on some earlier imperial intervention in the Middle East, Vietnam, Panama, the Philippines, etc. My choice of medium – whether moving or still images – is guided by the source material. With *Avalon*, the initial source material was documentary footage anonymously obtained from the factory, whereas for *Siege of Khartoum, 1884* it was in the form of texts and photos, and thus well suited to collage.

For *Avalon*, moving image seemed the ideal way to approach the theme of role-play as it is a process that unfolds in time, involving language and bodily gesture. For me at least, moving image is more closely aligned with desire and the unconscious. By the unconscious I don't mean the mythologised Freudian (or Jungian) artefact, but the terrain haphazardly mapped by Deleuze and Guattari that is as open to history and politics as it is to individual upbringing. This was also Foucault's critique of the Freudian unconscious as well – it has no history.



Maryam Jafri, *Avalon*, 2011, single-screen HD video, 11min 40sec, still. Courtesy the artist

MV: Following from this, I wonder if perhaps we can extend the discussion of a tension between blockage and flow, or stillness and animation, in the direction of 'allegory'? I recently came across a description of the 'photofilmic image' as 'a place or an event where heterogeneous temporalities, perceptions, uses, functions and meanings encounter each other and overlap, ... [where they are] "multi-mediating pictures"'.<sup>1</sup> Allegory also incorporates different time strata and builds it into a narrative. The installation *Costume Party* comprises a three-screen video projection with a loose narrative enacted by archetypal characters from history or popular culture, or, rather, history as filtered by popular culture. Because it is a costume party, masquerade is part of the narrative as much as the history it refers to. So here the pantomime is enacted by characters such as the cowboy or the Roman, whereas in *Avalon* the forces of production are personified in the unnamed people we see working and being interviewed. Because of this focus on anonymous people and unmarked locations, the realism of *Avalon* evokes Fredric Jameson's definition of allegory as a means of mapping these larger, abstract forces through contingent rather than overdetermined characters.<sup>2</sup> I'm intrigued by this shift in the handling of historical time in your work and the way it creates links between representation and abstraction.

'Discussions about labour, economy and value in the art world have been very fruitful but have sometimes under-articulated the element of desire.'

MJ: *Costume Party* deployed allegory in the way you mentioned. However in that work I also used television-style acting, low production values, canned laughter, and split the image and narrative into three different screens... I found Rainer Werner Fassbinder an inspiration; he really mastered turning postured, rather effete, high cultural tropes such as allegory into campy

melodrama. *Avalon* is a more recent work and certainly doesn't touch upon allegory in the same way, but rather operates more according to Jameson's definition. However, rather than attempting to map larger historical forces through contingent characters, *Avalon* actually started out with the reverse proposition: how is individual desire forged by broader historical and economic trends so that choices that seem the most personal or idiosyncratic – sexual orientation, bodily gestures, mental health – are at least partially determined by the broader socio-historical trends, including the economy? In a culture obsessed with the power of the individual it seemed a relevant question. I think the discussions about labour, economy and value in the art world have been very fruitful but have sometimes under-articulated the element of desire, which is why Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari are still so important – they repeatedly point out that no economic structure can survive if it doesn't channel desire into forms that are pleasurable for those it operates on. Regimes based on total fear or absolute faith can only last for so long without imploding, but a system from which even a victim can derive some pleasure (or thinks he or she will at some point in the future if he or she just works hard enough) – now, that is much more difficult to root out. Furthermore, much of the current discussions around labour, particularly immaterial labour, seem divorced from the, yes, very obvious but still very important point that material labour is what makes immaterial labour possible. Factory labour still exists, as does slave labour, for that matter. An iPhone isn't just a communication or information device, but a physical object that is made in a factory somewhere, partly on an assembly line. There are more factories now than ever and more truck drivers than computer programmers in the US – someone has to haul those boxes with items from Amazon that we all order online. Thus in *Avalon* the ability to bring together different economies, temporalities and geographies (Fordism/Post-Fordism, North/South, East/West) was crucial because our current economic system relies on rendering those relations invisible.



Maryam Jafri, *Running*, 2000, video, 4min 26sec, storyboard of stills.  
 Courtesy the artist

MV: I agree. The way that economies of desire and affect saturate what we think of as the more mechanical or abstract operations of the economy is key to developing an aesthetics – a rendering visible, as you say – that can disrupt and destroy, not just fuel, the operations of the political-libidinal economy in which we all take part. The way the market is anthropomorphised – in common parlance ‘the market fears’, ‘the market believes’, etc. – is another displacement of agency onto what Karl Marx argues is the only real ‘subject’ of our social relations, that is, capital.

Can you say more about how this focus on desire has developed over the years, and how it has taken on different formal valences in your practice? In an early video like *Running* (2000), where it's just you in close-up, acting different characters through slight adjustments to your appearance or by using a different voice and playing out elements of a ‘family melodrama’, there is a minimal, bare-bones approach to narrative. You mention your work has now moved in a more overtly narrative direction. Can we think of desire in your work as a desire for narrative, or a desire that gets articulated by means of narrative, is ‘narrativised’?

MJ: I studied literature and narrative has always been important to my work, from early works such as *Running*, which I wrote and performed, to *Avalon*. Furthermore my work with photography, also an important strand of my practice, almost always involves text of some kind. Benjamin suggested that the illiteracy of the future would not be of the

‘The question is, how did wartime strategy turn into a peacetime lifestyle?’

photograph, but of the caption.<sup>3</sup> I work mostly with found photographs, and re-contextualising the images by juxtaposing them with other images or texts is an important methodology for me. The challenge with the work that I'm in the process of making, *Mouthfeel* (2014), is to determine how far can you condense a sustained socio-economic critique into a conversation between two characters forged from a realist rather than allegorical impulse? I feel that dialogue remains a relatively under-explored strategy for generating the sort of rigorous critical analysis that we have come to associate with the voice-over (there are a few notable exceptions – Melanie Gilligan comes to mind here). I won't say more about the new work since it's still in development, but it focuses on Big Food and the script research involves studying a lot of nineteenth-century realist drama, especially Henrik Ibsen, and also US sitcoms from the 1950s to 70s, such as *I Love Lucy* and *Three's Company*. The post-War television sitcom takes off at the same time as the rise of processed food – the TV dinner being the most obvious example. During the war years an entire food industry mushroomed around feeding soldiers convenient, fast food with an indefinite shelf life. The question is, how did wartime strategy turn into a peacetime lifestyle?

MV: This reminds me of the writing of Dolores Hayden and others on how the post-War expansion of the suburbs in the US was an attempt to resolve the social problems presented by the returning soldiers, as well as the newly independent women on the 'home front' – shoring up gender relations by putting women back in the home, and tying the family to mortgage debt in the suburbs, away from the potentially politicising influences of city life.<sup>4</sup> The processed food industry, with its promises of convenience and leisure, was a big part of that domestication.

Perhaps we can make a link between the experimental attitude to portraying history that the kind of realism you're discussing seems to make possible, on the one hand, and the contemporary currency of 'research' as a way of extending the temporalities and register available to works of art, on the other. I'm interested in how a desire for a certain political efficacy or simply legibility enters into the research process for your work. The 'research-based practice' has become a commonplace enough articulation of what many artists do – where do you see the research beginning and ending?

MJ: In my moving image work there is a clear demarcation between the research and the production period. With *Avalon*, the final outcome is a highly distilled version of my findings. Even with my photo/text works I never present photocopies or vitrines with artefacts, but rather something as condensed as the moving image works, albeit more discursive. I recognise the advantages of avoiding commodification by showing research as work. However at this point in time, when we are bombarded with information non-stop by the internet, I'm not sure how effective or inspiring it is to keep inundating people with more and more without providing an interpretative filter. Ultimately I think it's also down to personal affinity rather than any pre-meditated artistic or political strategy – I fundamentally enjoy the editing, the sifting, the removal process, it's my role as an artist, as an author really, and I feel that the information removed is still there as some sort of absent presence.

'Mouthfeel', Maryam Jafri's first solo exhibition in London has just opened at Gasworks, featuring the newly commissioned short film of the same name and a new photo-text work entitled *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation* (both 2014). The exhibition continues until 18 May 2014.

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## Footnotes

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## Comments

1. Call for papers for 'Photofilmic Images in Art and Visual Culture', a conference organised by Université catholique de Louvain, KU Leuven and Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 12–15 March 2014. See <http://arthist.net/archive/5756> ↑
2. See Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, No. 15 Autumn, 1986. ↑
3. "The illiteracy of the future", someone has said, "will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography." But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be

no less accounted an illiterate? Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph? Such are the questions in which the interval of ninety years that separate us from the age of the daguerreotype discharges its historical tension. It is in the illumination of these sparks that the first photographs emerge, beautiful and unapproachable, from the darkness of our grandfathers' day.' Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', *Selected Writings: Volume 2 1927-1934* (ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith; trans. Rodney Livingstone et al.), Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p.257. ↑

4. See Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work and Family life*, New York: W.W. Horton & Company, 2002. ↑