

Uploading the Archive, Copy/Pasting the “Classical”

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This video essay (Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/685533663>) combines a series of fiction feature films, made between the late-1990s and 2010s, in which futuristic androids and robots trade in digitised classical Hollywood archival film fragments as pedagogical and expressive traces, amassing an amateur archive. I call these fragments “film quotations” to denote the process of selection, citation, and reappropriation in these film-within-a-film moments.¹ In this video essay, *Flubber* (Mayfield, 1997), *Simone* (Niccol, 2002), *Teknolust* (Leeson, 2002), *WALL-E* (Stanton, 2008), and *Prometheus* (Scott, 2012) all “quote” classical Hollywood films, in the form of short excerpts of sound and image, projecting (or uploading?) Hollywood’s archival past onto their imagined versions of the future. As this cohort of robots explore and amass personal visual archives, mining Hollywood history for meaning and mimicry, their viewership reveals several interrelated classical Hollywood ideologies and biases: the robot-amassed archives replicate hyper-traditional behaviour, both in conforming to strict copyright rules and in depictions of gender, sexuality, and monogamy. While only *Teknolust* self-consciously and critically replicates hegemonic, heteronormative media logics, this essay seeks to reveal how these robots’ sensorial experience of the archive select and project a misleading selection of history into the future. While touting a paradoxically easy-to-access Hollywood history, these robots cling to a tightly limited, licensed, entirely white and compulsorily cis-het digitised Hollywood archive.

Repeated shots of the “MIMIC” button (pulled from *SIMONE*) emphasise the pedagogical mimicry in each film, as robots replicate gestures, dialogue, and gender roles communicated by classical Hollywood film fragments. As Barbara Klinger argues, “movie re-enactments demonstrate the

strategic importance of ephemera's tangled relationship with its apparent opposite - the iconic and canonical...As literal 're-doings,' re-enactments help to preserve a film's place in cultural memory."² The films in this essay extend the preservation and memorialisation of film clips by staging the on-screen reenactment as copy/pasting the filmic past into the future, a sensorial archive-making. These supposedly representative fragments of the past, repositories of cultural memory that command rapt robot attention, claim a kind of universal appeal (as in, even a robot can love it!). Yet, as Janet Staiger remarks of film canons, "claims for universality are disguises for achieving uniformity, for suppressing through the power of canonic discourse optional value systems...It is a politics of power."³ In other words, the robots' uninterrogated fascination with the classical Hollywood archive disguises the intense selectivity therein. The value system communicated in this digitised archive projects the fantasy/fallacy of going back to a previously less complex, less diverse, less divisive time, as though the archive could ever project hegemonic uniformity.

The covertly curtailed archive, as viewed and remembered by these filmic robots, is shaped most insistently by film licensing and intellectual property laws. Most of these films flaunt easy archival access, whether via WALL-E's VHS, a wall-mounted screen in *Prometheus*, a computer in *SIMONE*, or within *Flubber*'s personal robot interface. Yet, in reality, each and every film quotation bears a legal, contractual, negotiated backstory with rights holders. Using *Flubber*, a Disney Production, this essay emphasises the brand-name boundaries in which Disney's robot exists, revealing how Weebo co-opts the Disney back catalogue into her sensorial reactions and emotions. This video essay reveals the paradox of supposed expressive freedom in an on-screen "future," while off-screen, Disney owns each of Weebo's projected images. As a rebuttal, a spectating android from *Teknolust* confronts a more realistic digital archive when she meets with

“Access Denied,” a brief acknowledgement of paywalls, subscription siloes, and digital prosecution of “piracy.” By flattening the classical Hollywood archive into digital files to be uploaded, copied, and pasted, *Flubber*, *SIMONE*, and *WALL-E*, especially, obscure the strict licensing and stark selectivity of these supposedly open archives.

Building from the conservative adherence to studio properties, these on-screen archives tout similar values in representing gender, sexuality, and cis-heterosexual desire. Troublingly, both *SIMONE* and *Flubber* feature similar scenes in which the Hollywood archive appears to include only white women, offering a model of Eurocentric beauty from which a robot is programmed. These depictions fit Richard Dyer’s assessment of the trope of “the white woman as angel,” constituting “both the symbol of white virtuousness and the last word in the claim that what made white special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities.”⁴ *Flubber* fits this ethereal archetype in the glowing white human that Weebo programs for herself, a ghostly haunting, while *SIMONE* programs its robotic actress from an exclusively white digital archive. In Steven Cohan’s assessment, *SIMONE*’s programming scene “derives from both a misogynist and contradictory anxiety about powerful, unregulated women in present-day Hollywood and a yearning for the old days of the studio-era star system.”⁵ This combination of present fear and nostalgia for the past, Cohan argues, might contain a critique of the masculine hunger for control over women, past and present. Yet, *SIMONE*’s copy/paste scenes, as Al Pacino programs his computerised actress, prioritises appropriative opportunities over any critique of gender or agency therein. In this video essay, only *Teknolust* critiques the reappropriation of this limited archive, revealing the absurdity of copy/pasting “classical” romance into the contemporary. *Teknolust* counters nostalgia for a false cohesive past by making heterosexual tropes strange, in part through Tilda Swinton’s star image. As So Mayor argues, “Swinton is often able to make sense where

others cannot, and she fuses the bizarre with the serene.”⁶ This seems the precise combination with which Swinton reframes Novak’s original lines from *The Man With the Golden Arm* (Preminger, 1955) into a strange, strained pick-up line. Following Mihaela Mihailova, this archive-informed style of production should raise “concerns about the gendering of digital labour along familiar patriarchal power structures,” such that, “as novel and exciting as the creative possibilities opened up by digital technologies may be, they continue to be shaped by sexism and capitalist exploitation.”⁷ With this in mind, the co-opted voices of Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, Kim Novak, and even the racialised Alec Guinness, as Prince Feisal in *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962), echo across the robots’ repetitions as a gendered, racialised, and capitalist appropriations.

This narrow archive also communicates compulsory heterosexuality, transposing sexist film grammars, including the male gaze and objectifying fragmentation of female-presenting bodies, into the imagined future. In this way, *WALL-E* (perhaps surprisingly!) fits with Jason Lee’s theorisation of the sex robot when he argues, “the sex robot challenges what it means to be human and simultaneously enables us to reflect on human nature itself.”⁸ In this case, *WALL-E*’s robot desires, reframed in this essay, reveal some heterosexual strangeness. *WALL-E* learns heteronormativity, including a desiring, stalking gaze to cast upon his co-star, a (gendered female?) robot named EVE, from viewing *Hello, Dolly!* (Kelly, 1969). While Eric Herhuth registers no discomfort when he recounts how “*WALL-E* continues to court the unresponsive EVE,” I see this disregard for consent, personal space, and autonomy, as lessons in *WALL-E*’s Hollywood-facilitated heteronormative education.⁹ As *WALL-E* replays and then re-enacts heteronormative desire and romantic pursuit from *Hello, Dolly!*, he wields a voyeuristic, scopophilic gaze over EVE, dramatising the “politics of power” within the Hollywood archive, ripe for replicating masculine domination. Again, as rebuttal, *Teknolust* (the only female-directed film of this essay)

critiques the use of classical Hollywood as heterosexual blueprint. Discussing how *Teknolust*'s robots repeat lines from classical Hollywood films, Jackie Stacey argues that "the film plays sexual stereotypes and cinematic clichés back to its audience in a deadpan style. The human and the nonhuman become almost indistinguishable here ...The cinema as a technology of idealized feminine heterosexuality is taken to comic absurdity."¹⁰ This brief denaturalisation reveals how heteronormative logics, gendered roleplay, and sexist film grammars demand critical interrogation. By attending to the conservative media politics regarding copyright and sexuality in these on-screen archives, this essay hopes to dramatise the dangers of an uninterrogated assemblage. As a sensory experience of the archive at one remove, through the eyes of the on-screen robot, this essay demonstrates how a delimited archive transmutes a stunted, strained version of visual culture.

Notes

¹ For a broader theorisation of "film quotation" see Palis, "Race, Authorship, and Film Quotation," *Screen* 61.2 (2020): 230-254. Briefly, I position film quotation within the umbrella of what Noël Carroll calls "allusion." Though Carroll himself mentions quotation, he does not consider how physical archival presence offers unique potentialities as allusive practice. Noël Carroll, "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," *October* 20 (1982): 51-81.

² Barbara Klinger, "Re-enactment: Fans Performing Movie Scenes from the Stage to YouTube," in *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Cultures from Television to YouTube*, ed. Paul Grainge (London: British Film Institute, 2012), 196.

³ Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (1985): 10.

⁴ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 122, 127.

⁵ Steven Cohan, *Hollywood by Hollywood: The Backstudio Picture and the Mystique of Making Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 143.

⁶ So Mayer, "Holy Tilda Swinton!" in *Cléo: A Journal of Film and Feminism* 3 no. 3 (2015).

⁷ Mihaela Mihailova, "Collaboration without Representation: Labor Issues in Motion and Performance Capture," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11 no.1 (2016): 52.

⁸ Jason Lee, *Sex Robots: The Future of Desire* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 1.

⁹ Eric Herhuth, "Life, Love, and Programming: The Culture and Politics of *WALL-E* and Pixar Computer Animation," *Cinema Journal* 53, no.4 (2014): 57.

¹⁰ Jackie Stacey, *The Cinematic Life of a Gene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 207.

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