Review: Jaimie Baron, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era*

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Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era
By Jaimie Baron
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In our digital world, where so much of the audio-visual materials are accessible online to a range of practitioners, appropriation is a growing and prominent media practice deserving scholarly attention. In her first, widely influential book, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (2013), Jaimie Baron has already rethought the theoretical groundworks of appropriation film, focusing on the spectatorial experiences and the reception of reused archival footage.[1] In her second book, Baron turns to the ethical challenges that inevitably ensue in the act of all kinds of audio-visual appropriation while similarly recognising the role of the audience in these ethical valances. Baron redirects readers, scholars, and practitioners to the complex and often ambiguous ethics vis-à-vis the subjects of reused materials and encourages us to recognise our complicity in such ethical transgressions as equally responsible viewers and listeners. Importantly, the book does not offer ways to regulate such practice but rather coins a useful vocabulary applicable across a diverse spectrum of usages and approaches.

While numerous studies have addressed the ethics of documentary filmmaking, the book's introductory chapter, "Theorising Misuse", adds nuance to these discussions by laying out the different ethical stakes when an already existing actuality footage, image, or sound is repurposed.[2] According to Baron, every reuse is a misuse since the existing materials are put into a different context, but this does not imply that every misuse is unethical. It is essential to distinguish between works where such misuse is for actively ethical ends, and the act of appropriation is self-referential, not aiming to deceive the audience. Works categorised as abuse are a perceptible form of exploitation and produce an ethical violation. Baron is,

however, specifically interested in the liminal cases through which she dissects the ethical dimensions that are always subjective, not reducible to a single variable, and context dependent. For this analysis, she introduces the concept of the layered gaze, encompassing three gazes: the film subject's, the original maker's, and the appropriationist's. The relation between these three perceptions determines the structures of appropriation media's ethical reading. Building on Vivien Sobchack's phenomenology of the ethical gaze, Baron finds the concept of "subjective responsiveness" particularly useful, which in the case of appropriation film must be encoded both in the choice of the materials and editing, attesting to the appropriationist's ethical (mis)treatment of the original subject.[3]

Throughout, Baron's detailed and compelling descriptions help ground the reader in the various ethical trespasses that the act of appropriation mitigates. Chapter 1 "(Re)exposing Intimate Traces" focuses on the reuse, or more precisely, the misuse of intimate artifacts. Through the example of films that remix home movies, medical photographs, love letters, or surreptitiously recorded audio, Baron considers whether such appropriations can produce intense attentiveness (attentive gaze), respect the anonymity and secrecy of such materials (occluded gaze), or elicit responsibility (disclosing gaze) instead of unethical treatment.

Chapter 2 "Speaking Through Others" outlines contemporary practices, referred to as "archival ventriloquism," which can become a productive means of exposing misrepresentations or function as political satire and critique if recognised (playful, satirical gaze). However, Baron also alerts us to the rising tendency of "framing," an intentionally misleading practice that can fake indexicality and misrepresent the subject (denigrating gaze). Although the voice still belongs to the subject, the message is the appropriationist's, acknowledging the power relations and the agency of subjects thus becomes particularly potent in cases of racial ventriloquism.

As its title already reveals, Chapter 3 "Dislocating the Hegemonic Gaze" focuses on the various ways that a hegemonic gaze, be it white, straight, colonial, or male, can be countered and resisted through appropriation. Through the concept of "embodied interruption," Baron discusses works that challenge and transform dominant discourses through inserting foreign bodies and voices to times and places where they used to be, or still are, excluded and misrepresented (dislocating gaze).

The ethical debates only get more complex in Chapter 4 "Reframing the Perpetrator's Gaze," which reviews the ethics of reworking footage made from the perpetrator's perspective and thus materials upon which the unethical gaze is already imprinted. Although working with such materials is risky, Baron identifies three ways of conscious misuse calling for justice and reparation: reveal the perpetrator's intentions (revelatory gaze), offer an explicit counter gaze (accusatory gaze), and require revision (reformative gaze).

Finally, Chapter 5 "Abusing Images" considers cases of abuse, works that fail to adhere to certain ethical standards (endangered gaze). Baron discusses two very different texts that slip ethically because of the contrast between solicited and elicited gaze yet also acknowledges how certain works can be unintentionally ethically abusive, standing in stark contrast to those that deliberately solicit an endangered gaze.

One of the great merits of this book is the wide range of media texts it discusses. Baron does not limit the study to documentary or experimental films only but examines paintings, video installations, YouTube videos, or even memes. At the same time, all of these cases are contextualised and revisited through an interdisciplinary scholarly lens ranging from law, philosophy, psychology to film and media scholarship. As such, the set of questions that this book offers are relevant beyond creative film and media practices. Despite predominantly

discussing the North American context, except for the appropriation of Nazi propaganda films (Chapter 4) or the shocking abuse of Anne Frank photographs in anti-Semitic memes (Chapter 5), the ethical considerations that need to be recognised transcend spatial or temporal confines. Although each chapter considers a very different type of appropriation and thus generates a set of different ethical issues, Baron identifies the underlying connections between these debates and weaves together a coherent analysis of such a subjective and fluid matter.

The concept of layered gaze proves especially useful in discussing the film *Sara Nokomis Weir* (Brian L. Frye, 2014) that (re)appropriates a previous form of appropriation, a video impact video. Baron here (Chapter 4) identifies four gazes: the preservationist gaze of the original photographs and videos of Sara Weir, the memorial gaze of the video impact video, the judgmental gaze when this video was played in court, and finally, the reformative gaze of the appropriationist who reveals the wrongdoings against the subject through the reuse of these materials. However, the challenge remains to locate all the different gazes and grasp their distinct implications throughout the book. The taxonomy of appropriation practices that Baron lays out often coincide with rhetorical strategies of labelling gazes – dehumanising, clinical, secluded objectifying to name a few – which distract from the vocabulary aiding the ethical evaluation of audio-visual works. Further, though the book emphasises that in works of appropriation it is always a case of layered listening, the conceptual structures of sound appropriation need to be widened and focused more on audial specificities. Chapter 2 devoted to archival ventriloquism suggests a start in acknowledging the equally important and complex issue of ethics of listening, but admittedly needs a more refined analysis.

The book has already become a discipline defining piece in recognising the various layered discourses and their ramifications in assessing the ethics of audio-visual appropriation. As this is an issue we will be dealing with more because of technological developments, Baron's

detailed and informative interrogation of specific works functions as a framework for thinking about, questioning, and evaluating (our) ethical responsibilities. Though this book cannot and perhaps should not provide a fixed set of rules, it redirects our gaze to spot unethical ways of appropriation and the stakes of ethical misuses, thus making our gaze alert and critical. As such, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse* becomes a necessary manual for our contemporary media scape grappling with ethical conundrums.

Notes

[1] Baron, Jaimie. *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London; New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014).
[2] Baron discusses Bill Nichols' "axiographics" and Stuart Katz and Judith Milestein Katz's "image ethics" in detail in the Introduction. Further detail in: Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991); Stuart Katz and Judith Milestein Katz, "Ethics and the Perception of Ethics in Autobiographical Film" in *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photograhps, Film, and Television*, ed. Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz, and Jay Ruby (London: Oxford Universtiy Press, 1988). She acknowledges Thomas Elsaesser's essay that addressed the ethics of audio-visual appropriation. Thomas Elsaesser, "The Ethics of Appropriation: Found Footage between Archive and Internet," *Found Footage Magazine* I (October 2016).
[3] Vivian Sobchack, "Instribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).