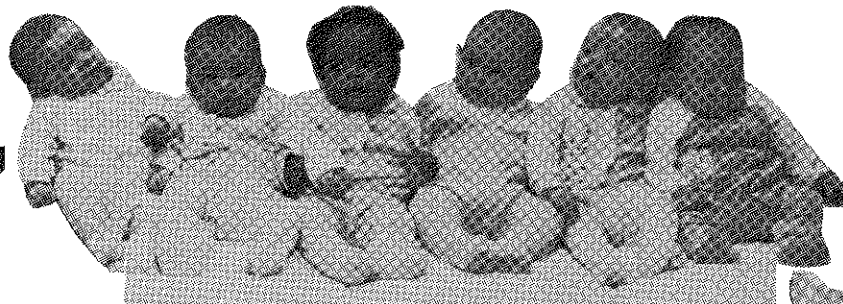


I n t e r s e c t i n g O r i g i n s



Within the hullabaloo and maelstrom of image choice offered by Toronto's Festival of Festivals, there exists a category of film that often is pre-empted by more seductive fictions. The documentary film, usually glossed over by buffs and cognoscenti alike, sits quietly on the sidelines. For most viewers, the presence of "real" people on the screen, telling their own stories, drains the image of "otherness", thus depriving them of the transformative magic invoked by "real movies". Francoise Ramond's *Mix Up* stands out as one documentary that questions the classification non-fiction and its effects, inventing a new form of hybrid film in the process.

Mix Up is a strange composite that underscores the complex interplay between history, discourse and memory. It is played out at the juncture between the real and the imaginary. Through the sometimes playful, sometimes painful re-enactment of a popular memory of two families, a collective "talking cure" takes place. And it is this self-scrutiny by the participants, regarding themselves from a distance, relating the sequence of events twenty to thirty years prior, that comprises the unique site of the film.

Ramond takes for her subject a specific incident, a bizarre but true tale, of two English babies mistakenly exchanged in a Nottingham maternity home in 1946. Margaret Wheeler wound up with Blanche Rylatt's baby Valerie, and Blanche, with Margaret's baby Peggy. Twenty years later, it is acknowledged that a terrible mistake had occurred. The film does not fix responsibility, does not explain how this event occurred. Instead, through interviews that are often poignant, at times lunatic, it exposes how the six people most concerned were affected and how they dealt with a situation that is comical in fiction, but tragic in life. *Mix Up* is a farcical tragedy that recalls a fiction inscribed in the real: it plays out every mother's nightmare and every child's fantasy. And in this way a hyperreal effect is struck, contributing to its familiar, yet strange, aspect.

Margaret Wheeler, the mother who "knew", the one who was convinced of the switch, is the "star" who doubles and plays both the good and bad mother. (Her warm fleshy aspect recalls the mother of Hollywood fiction.) Her knowledge of the exchange, however, caused an emotional withholding towards Valerie, the child that she reared. In this way, she becomes the villain of the piece, a role unintentionally adopted.

Mix Up opens with an image of a scale symmetrically balanced with two babies suspended, a visual reminder of the myth that is encoded in all of us, that justice prevails, that equality and fairness rule the world. Margaret Wheeler then begins to recount the events in the nursery. She was shown a long and skinny baby, and

received flowers and telegrams for Mrs. Rylatt, engendering suspicion. The film then alternates between interviews with the others involved, and the occasional re-enacted sequence, showing Margaret's campaign to establish the truth. In her empirical crusade, she sought the advice of genetic scientists and Bernard Shaw. During the years following the exchange, the Rylatt family received a barrage of photographs, blood samples and entreaties from Margaret. Given that Blanche Rylatt and Peggy, the daughter she reared, immediately bonded, the remonstrations from Margaret Wheeler were equated with post-partum pottiness. Blanche Rylatt evidently felt no doubt and brought up Margaret's child as her own. One family denied, the other knew.

Ramond read about the incident -- with its eccentric English tone of "Oh, what a mix up, but now we are one big happy family" -- in a newspaper on the occasion of Margaret and Fred's golden wedding anniversary. And she knew that beneath the hegemonic family veneer, trauma and division were sure to be lurking. In Ramond's hands, through re-presentation, the impossibility of a univocal history/appeasement emerges in spite of the efforts by those depicted to graft the image of a homogeneous family onto the film. This effort, their "we are one" stance, constitutes the desire to weld, to forge these multiple memories together into one narrative, the ideology of the family.

Mix Up dissolves this mask of "we are all one" through the sufferings of Valerie, Margaret's foster daughter and Blanche's real daughter -- the victim of the tale. Valerie confesses that for twenty years she felt that she did not belong, explaining her present insatiable need for love. The scene in which Valerie re-enacts her first arrival in the Rylatt house is especially poignant. When she hears the gate close behind her, the gate that opens on the home she never had, she muses that this is the sound she should have been hearing for twenty years. The family facade also is put under erasure by the film's mode of depiction. In the last shot of the film, for example, the extended members of the two families pose for a family portrait, the edge of the frame is bordered by another frame. The camera continues to shoot longer than is necessary, the family members switch places, but a general tone of uneasiness pervades the scene, undercutting the portrait's cohesiveness.

The non-fiction classification of this film presupposes a seemingly unmediated relation with the real, and often preempts any critical consideration of its construction. Ramond counters this dilemma of transparency by inventing a new form: she breaks away from the usual straight interview format.

By drawing attention to the distance between the bizarre events being recalled and the rational ordinary world in which the story was played out, this hypertension, this double movement, differentiates the film from other documentaries. *Mix Up* is truly stranger than fiction.

Ramond's subjects are grounded in a realism (this drama did indeed occur and the participants themselves tell the story) but she separates the telling of the story from the story itself. The spectator distinguishes between the extremely stylized scenes and the mannerisms of the characters, and moves beyond the material confines of the story. This meaning effect comprises a new form of documentary, the other side of the authorial voice-over that we associate with the documentary. Generally, one participant delivers a line and another picks up the story line. For example, Blanche reads a story to a child on a rug. Later the child is replaced by Valerie, her grown up daughter. And the repeated (obviously re-enacted) image of two young girls criss-crossing on railway tracks visually replays the psychic site of the film. The additional use of numerous devices for reflecting and doubling, such as mirrors and windows again asserts the doubleness of things, how Valerie is lost, in the throw of the dice, the balance of happiness. A constant double edged tone informs the work. The swap does not transcend class: Valerie receives a university education intended for Peggy but does not recover from the early neglect; whereas Peggy appears well adjusted, with somewhat limited horizons. It is a black comedy that slips from pathos to the cartoon-like, and vice versa in a flash.

The "family romance", a term coined by Freud, to characterize the fantasy of origins as a universal phenomenon, is evoked by this tale. As myth, the family romance is played out here by the mother who "knows" and by the foster daughter who voices her suspicion. (Valerie once told Margaret that "if there was a fire in the house, you would save the other children first".) The family romance usually involves the fantasmagoric invention of ideal parents by children to replace real ones -- correcting reality against the disappointments of life. This often involves the re-production of the foundling or bastard scenario. *Mix Up* however, does not take place at the same locale as *The Changeling*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, or numerous fables that precede and follow the Moses legend. Through the intersection of myth, memory, discourse and history, *Mix Up* is constituted in a dialectical play of the fictive and the real. And in this way, the *petite fabulateur* of the family romance rejoins the cinema spectator: both are fictive elaborators of story origins, remaking the world to the measure of desire.

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