

Amateur filmmaking and the practice of neuroqueer refusal at the intersection of queer learning disability.

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The title of this PhD thesis is

Amateur filmmaking and the practice of neuroqueer refusal at the intersection of queer learning disability.

Glossary of key terms

	<p>This booklet is about a PhD thesis</p>
	<p>A PhD is a university degree.</p>
	<p>A thesis is a very long essay about my research.</p>



This accessible summary and the PhD are written by me, Jenna Allsopp.



I can't tell you about all the ideas from the thesis as it would make the booklet too long.

I want to tell you about the main ideas from each chapter.



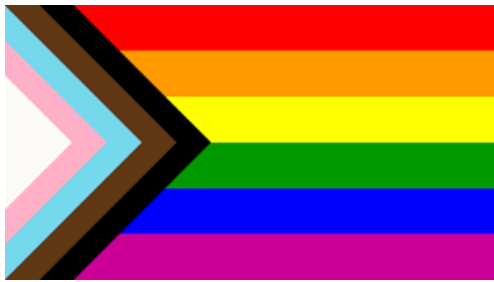
'Amateur filmmaking' means filmmaking that is not professional.



Intersection means when two things cross over, like queerness and learning disability.



'Neuroqueer' is a combination of the word 'neuro', which is short for 'neurodiversity', and 'queer'. It means people who are neurodiverse and queer.



Sometimes instead of saying queer some people like to say LGBTQ.



The title means this thesis is about amateur filmmaking by people who are queer and have learning disabilities.

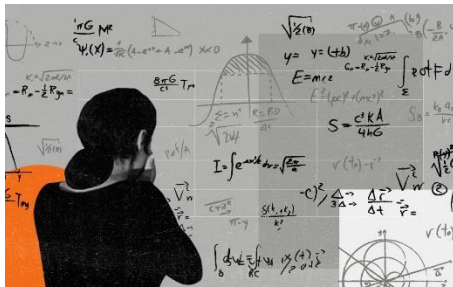


Mattie Kennedy



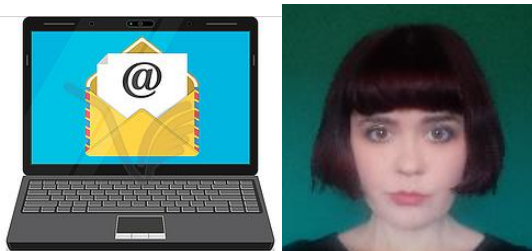
Matthew Hellett

It is about filmmakers Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett



The thesis argues that filmmaking can challenge stereotypes about people with Learning disabilities.

A stereotype is an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic – for example that all autistic people are brilliant at maths



If you would like to ask me a question, you can email me at this address:

jennaphdthesis@gmail.com

Overview:

I am interested in filmmaking by people whose voices are not normally heard. I am very interested in the filmmakers Mattie Kennedy from Glasgow and Matthew Hellett from Brighton. I believe their films can change perceptions about learning disability and challenge stereotypes that you see in mainstream film and television.

They 'refuse' to be silent and make their voices heard through their films.

This accessible summary will tell you about some of the main ideas I have written about in my thesis. I have tried to write this so it is easy for people with learning disabilities who can read to understand.

If you need extra help, please ask someone at Carousel or Oska Bright who can support you to understand the words and ideas.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter lets the reader know what the research is about.

I had never seen a queer learning-disabled person in a film before. When I saw Kennedy and Hellett's films, I thought they were very important about challenging stereotypes of people with learning disabilities.

I use the word 'radical' to describe Kennedy and Hellett's films. Radical means changing something, especially something that is harmful. I think stereotypes of learning disability in film and television are harmful because they make learning-disabled people all the same. I think Kennedy and Hellett's films change these stereotypes to show that learning-disabled people are all different, like everyone else.



Screenshot from the film *Snow Cake* (2006)

- I raised £4500 funding for Kennedy and Hellett to make a short film together.

- Lizzie Banks who works at Carousel and Oska Bright was going to help them make the film.



- Carousel is a learning disability arts organisation in Brighton.

- Oska Bright is the learning disability film festival in Brighton that Carousel started.



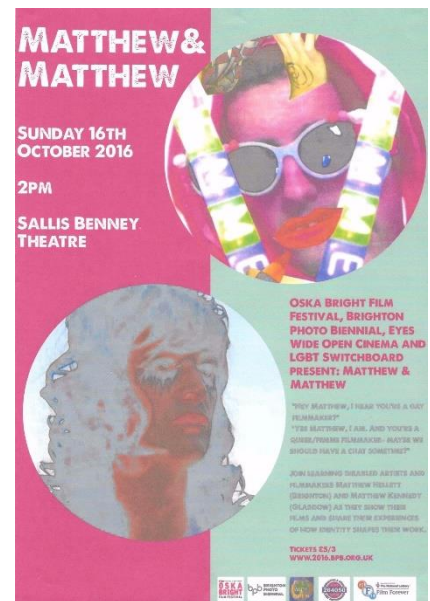
- Because of the pandemic, Hellett took some time away from the project. I asked Kennedy if they would like to use a small bit of the funding to make a film on their own and they said yes. The film they made is called **Not Mythmakers** and was finished in 2022. The film is on Kennedy's Vimeo account. The rest of the funding can be used by Kennedy and Hellett to put towards making a film in the future.



I was also interested in researching Oska Bright Film Festival and the community that they have created.

I wanted to research the Matthew and Matthew Archive that Kennedy started at home. They collect posters and other items about the Matthew and Matthew events.

The Matthew and Matthew events show both Kennedy and Hellett's films together because they are both called Matthew, they are both queer learning-disabled filmmakers and they are friends. Here is the poster for the first event.



Questions I wanted to answer in the thesis were:

1. how do Kennedy and Hellett's films challenge mainstream representations of learning disability? Representation means showing something, like in a film or photo.
2. How does Oska Bright Film Festival build a community for queer learning-disabled people?
3. What do Kennedy and Hellett do in their films to show the viewer that people who are learning-disabled can also be queer?
4. Can being an amateur filmmaker be radical?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter is called a literature review which means I have read books and articles by other people who have done research on the same subject.

This chapter shows what other people have written about, but it also shows what they have missed out. My research fills in the gap that other people have missed out.



My research adds something new to 4 different subjects:

The first is called **disability representation studies**. This is a topic where people write about the ways learning-disabled people have been represented or shown by actors in films and television.

A popular representation of learning disability was the film *Music* by the singer Sia which came out 2021. This film represented autism but the actor who played the character with autism is not autistic, so this upset some people. They said *Music* is a stereotype.



Screenshot from the film *Music* (2021)

I don't think people have written enough about people who make their own representations in films, like Kennedy and Hellett who star in their own films.

The second subject is called **visual activism**. Activism means doing something or protesting something to make a positive change. It is like the word radical I mentioned earlier.



Visual activism is when people do activism in visual ways like film and performing. I think Oska Bright Film Festival and Queer Freedom are like activism.

I think it is activism because it makes a positive change by giving queer learning-disabled people a place to represent themselves.

I also think Kennedy's Matthew and Matthew Archive is like activism because not many archives collect learning disability history. Kennedy has made a positive change by starting the archive.




The third subject is writing about learning disability and queerness.

I mentioned above people who are queer and are learning-disabled have started to call themselves 'neuroqueer'. There is lots of writing about this, but no one has written about queer learning-disabled artists so my research adds something new to this subject.



Drag Queen Tia Anna

The last subject that I add new information to is amateur film studies.

- Amateur comes from the Latin word 'amator' which means love. 
- Amateur means 'not professional' to lots of people. Artists who are amateur often do their art for the love of it, but professional people often do it for money. 
- No one writes about amateur filmmaking by people with learning disabilities and how they are forced to be amateur because they do not always have access to funding and training. 
- I say being an amateur can be radical because it means you can make mistakes and experiment.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A methodology means how you do something. This chapter is about how I did the research. It describes:

- The different writers I talk about to help me understand Kennedy and Hellett's films.
- The ways I analysed Kennedy and Hellett's films. This is called textual analysis.

It means that I watch their films lots of times and take notes about what they are doing on screen.



- How I interviewed Kennedy. I talk about how the interviews were done on Zoom and that I recorded them. When the interview was finished, I listened to the recording and typed out what we both said. I then made notes to help me understand their films more.



- I mentioned above that Kennedy made a film called *Not Mythmakers* as part of this research. I talk about how we planned and made the film.

Chapter 4: 'There is power in looking:' theorising the oppositional stare in the films of Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett

- This chapter is about different ways of looking. I suggest that in real life, people with disabilities are often looked at or stared at by people without disabilities.
- This type of staring happens in films. Instead of someone staring at a disabled person on the street, they can stare at a screen which shows someone pretending to be disabled in a film.
- The ways people show disability in films causes stereotypes and makes people think that all learning-disabled people are like the character.



In this chapter I suggest that Kennedy and Hellett use different cinematic techniques to challenge this type of looking at learning disability. A technique is a way of carrying out a task. The examples of techniques I say they use are voyeurism, direct address and mirror reflections. '

In film, **voyeurism** (pronounced VOY-YUR-ISM) means when the person watching the films spies on someone. The person on screen does not know that they are being watched.

Kennedy and Hellett use lots of shots in their films that are as if the viewer is spying on them and they do not know.

I have included an example from each filmmaker below to show you what I mean by a voyeuristic shot that is like we spy on them without them knowing.



Screenshot from Hellett's film *Mrs Sparkle* (2009)



Screenshot from Kennedy's film *What is Femme Anyway?* (2013)

Direct address is when the person on the screen looks directly into the camera so it is like they are looking directly at us, the viewer. Kennedy and Hellett use this technique and I think this means that they are challenging being spied on by looking back.

I have included some examples below to show you what I mean.



Screenshot from Hellett's film *Sparkle* (2008)



Screenshot from Kennedy's film *Just Me* (2013)

Kennedy and Hellett both use **mirror reflections** in their films and you can see this in the images on page 18 and 19. No popular films or television shows have shown queer learning-disabled people on screen.

I think when Kennedy and Hellett use mirror reflections, it is like they are showing the viewer that they finally see themselves reflected-back, for the first time on screen.

The last part of this chapter suggests that the different ways of looking that Kennedy and Hellett use in their films is not just a challenge to non-disabled people.

I think the looking back can be a way of asking other queer learning-disabled people who are watching the films to look at them. This might be so that other queer learning-disabled people know there are other people like them. I think it is also a way of showing us how Kennedy and Hellett see themselves.

Chapter 5: Community-building through curation and collecting: Oska Bright Film Festival, Queer Freedom and the Matthew and Matthew Archive

This chapter gives more information about Oska Bright Film Festival which happens in Brighton every other year. It is run by the learning disability arts organisation based in Brighton called Carousel.



Hellett is Lead Programmer of Oska Bright. In 2017 he started a section of the festival called Queer Freedom which shows films by or starring queer learning-disabled people.



Matthew Hellett at Oska Bright

Hellett said he wanted ‘to champion the voice of every person with learning disabilities’ and that he ‘didn’t want to leave anyone out’. He said Oska Bright is ‘totally committed to pushing the representation of all learning-disabled people, gay or straight. We believe that the stories and films we show are ones that people everywhere should see’.

This chapter also talks about Kennedy’s Matthew and Matthew Archive. I interviewed Kennedy about the archive and they told me why they started the archive and who they want to be able to access it.

They said that it has photos of Kennedy and Hellett and posters of the Matthew and Matthew Events. The archive is in Kennedy’s house, but Kennedy hopes one day people can look at it somewhere public.



Matthew and Matthew Screenings & Talk

This Sunday 16 Oct 2-4pm
University of Brighton Galleries – Grand Parade
Brighton Photo Biennial, Oska Bright Film Festival and
Eyes Wide Open Cinema presentation, in partnership with
Brighton & Hove LGBT switchboard.

What’s it like to be a queer film maker with a learning disability?
Matthew Hellett (Brighton) and Matthew Kennedy (Glasgow) show
their films and share their experiences of how identity shapes
their work.

£5/3 Book tickets at bpb.org.uk



Poster for a Matthew and Matthew event that is in Kennedy’s archive

I suggest that Queer Freedom and the Matthew and Matthew Archive are radical because they help to build a community of queer learning-disabled people and Queer Freedom provides a space for queer learning-disabled people to show their work.

Chapter 6: Becoming performative subjects and establishing neuroqueer aesthetics in the films of Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett

This chapter is about the ways Kennedy and Hellett tell stories through their films. It looks at the aesthetics they use to tell these stories.

Aesthetics are the ways ideas are communicated through images. In other words, it is about understanding what images mean.

An example could be an artist trying to communicate beauty. They might do this by painting a rose. The rose is a beauty aesthetic. Someone interested in aesthetics might ask, what does the painter mean by painting the rose?

They might think, they are trying to communicate beauty. Another example is that a sunrise could be an aesthetic of happiness.



In this chapter I look at the aesthetics Kennedy and Hellett use to tell stories about their queer identity. I think they do this through 4 aesthetics; transformation, the monstrous-feminine, narration and gender performativity.

By **transformation** I mean how Hellett transforms into his drag queen alter ego Mrs Sparkle. Hellett does this by applying make-up, a wig and jewellery in the film *Sparkle*. He magically transforms into Mrs Sparkle in the blink of an eye in *Mrs Sparkle*.



Screenshot from Hellett's film *Sparkle* (2008)

Kennedy transforms into their queer femme identity when they apply make-up in front of a mirror in *What is Femme Anyway?*



Screenshot from Kennedy's film *What is Femme Anyway?* (2013)

A writer called Barbara Creed invented the term **'monstrous-feminine'** in 1993. Creed thought female characters in films were often made out to be the helpless victims.

She wanted to research female characters who were powerful and frightening instead. These characters were not beautiful like the women in classic Hollywood cinema - they were more like witches.

Kennedy makes me think of the monstrous-feminine because they use a spinster and witch in the animation *Enid and Valerie* which I have shown below.



Screenshot from Kennedy's film *Enid and Valerie* (2018)

I think Hellett uses the monstrous-feminine through Mrs Sparkle who is a drag queen, which is like an exaggerated version of a woman. Exaggerated means over the top. I have also included an image of Mrs Sparkle below.



Screenshot from Hellett's film *Mrs Sparkle* (2009)

Kennedy and Hellett both use **narration** in their films to speak about their identity and this helps them to tell their stories.



Performativity is a word that the writer Judith Butler used to describe how people 'perform' their gender identity.

Butler means that through the clothes we wear and the way we speak and behave is what tells other people about our gender.

This means if a female acts feminine and wears feminine clothing, we understand they are a woman.

If a man speaks masculine and wears masculine clothing, we understand they are a man.

Butler says that men and women can be masculine and men and women can be feminine.

Sometimes people are non-binary which means they don't feel like a man or a woman.



In the films, Kennedy and Hellett explore their own femininity through make-up and drag.

Chapter 7: Expressing and valuing neuroqueer failure through the amateur filmmaking of Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett

This chapter is about the word amateur and what it means.

Some people are amateur filmmakers because they have no access to funding or training. This means they cannot make professional



films on professional cameras. Some people have lots of funding and skills but use amateur cameras because they think it looks better.

This chapter suggests that Kennedy and Hellett are amateur for both of those reasons. People often think learning-disabled people make art for therapy. This means that learning disabled people find it harder to access funding to make more art. This results in learning disabled artists being held back to amateur level.

Kennedy and Hellett also like the freedom that comes with being an amateur. They say there is no expectation. They both said they like that they can 'fail' and not feel bad about it. In this way they also choose to be amateur because there is no pressure on them to make art that makes money.

This chapter looks at the ways that Kennedy and Hellett embrace amateur ways of making films. This includes do-it-yourself also known as DIY for short, like cut-n-paste, collage, and working with friends and family instead of large films crews.



Screenshot from Hellett's film *Cooking with Matthew* (2006)

This chapter also talks about the making of the film *Not Mythmakers* that Kennedy made for this research during the pandemic. The film was made by Kennedy with help from Lizzie Banks at Carousel. It shows how we were forced to be amateur because we were all self-isolating in different parts of the United Kingdom.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This is the last chapter of the book. It summarises all the key points I made in each chapter.

I explain that this thesis is the first large research project that analyses the art of queer learning-disabled people. I say that my research is new because it looks at the film festival and the archive as well as the films themselves as being radical.

I also say that there is a lot more research to be done. This includes looking at queer learning-disabled artists of colour. I think Oska Bright should be researched more to see the positive impact they are having on the learning disability community.

Kennedy and Hellett are the first people to start to build a queer learning disability community and for that reason I argue their work is radical.



Abstract

Broadly this thesis seeks to investigate the radical potential of amateur filmmaking as a practice of neuroqueer refusal. More specifically it examines the work of two queer learning-disabled filmmakers, Mattie Kennedy (Glasgow) and Matthew Hellett (Brighton), whose work I argue produces new queer ways of seeing learning disability; two identity categories which have not had the space to be combined until recently. Through the visual and textual analysis of their films, and the contexts in which they are produced and shared, I make a case that their work transforms the image of learning disability through the production of new (neuro)queer visual narratives.

Inspired by Bonnie Honig's (2021) *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, this thesis explores Kennedy and Hellett's work as a gesture of refusal by analysing how they (i) recontextualise cinematic techniques of 'looking' to both interrogate a heteroableist gaze and encourage looking on their own terms, (ii) contribute to the building of a neuroqueer community through their association and collaboration with the Oska Bright Film Festival, and (iii) use film to assert themselves as performative subjects of self-representation. I conclude by arguing that while amateurism as a practice and an aesthetic is something imposed upon Kennedy and Hellett for various socio-economic reasons, it is also something they both embrace as a deliberate gesture of refusal that challenges traditional politics of queer/disability visibility and inclusion.

By additionally analysing the conditions of the production and circulation of their films, a key research finding is that Kennedy and Hellett's critical intervention into the politics of representation goes beyond the screen by their nurturing of community through film curation and archiving. Further, this research identifies and theorises refusal as a political-aesthetic practice which imagines a neuroqueer gaze and produces neuroqueer sensibilities. My research identified several forms of refusal which I have interpreted and theorised as modes of visual activism.

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Fig.7.23: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo, detailing use of Zoom footage

Acknowledgements

Thank you foremost to Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett for their generous participation in this research and for sharing their thoughts and creativity with me. By extension, a huge thank you to Lizzie Banks at Carousel and Oska Bright Film Festival for her invaluable support and encouragement throughout the project, and for her speedy film editing skills.

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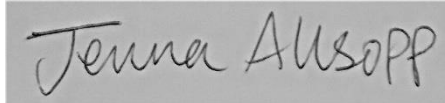
And finally, a huge thank you to Martyn Douglas, the BBB, and Pip, the Sexy Pipolata; thank you both for the much-needed laughs at the endlessly long working days (and nights), I love you both with all my heart and I can't wait to spend some quality time together again. I am eternally grateful to my family and friends for their belief in me when I had none in myself and for their patience and understanding at my hermit-like ways. I love you all very much and could not have got through this without you all - my mam Kath Allsopp; my dad and stepmother Phil and Sall Allsopp; my brother and sister-in-law Phill Allsopp and Christine Raine; my nephews and niece Curtis and Ella Clarkson and our sweet Marcus Abel Allsopp, who I am so excited to have regular play dates with now this is finished; my grandma Joy Allsopp; my wonderful in-laws, Anne, Anth and Shaun Douglas; and my motley crew Becky and Andy Little; Emma Atkinson; Benjamin Alexander; Sarah-Mary Geissler (extra thanks for the motivational memes during the last push) and last but never least, Crysi de Milo.

I finished it!

Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light grey rectangular background. The signature reads "Jenna Alsopp" in a cursive script.

Date: 5 June 2023

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1: Overview

This thesis seeks to investigate the radical potential of amateur filmmaking at the intersection of queer learning disability. Having identified two British filmmakers working at this intersection, Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett, this thesis aims to understand how their films work to transform dominant images of learning disability in screen cultures. A key research finding is that their critical intervention goes beyond the screen. Further, this research identifies and theorises refusal as a political-aesthetic practice which imagines a neuroqueer gaze and produces neuroqueer sensibilities. My research identified several forms of refusal which I have interpreted and theorised as modes of visual activism. I conclude by arguing that the 'amateur' aspect of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, and their wider practice of film festival curation and film archiving, is embraced as a deliberate gesture of refusal that challenges traditional politics of queer and disability visibility and inclusion.

I use the term 'radical' in the way that civil rights activist Ella Baker described using it in 1969, 'getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system'.¹ Bhandar and Ziadah summarise Baker's usage of radical as 'understanding and resisting the root causes of economic, social and cultural oppression', noting that 'the aim of such praxis is not simply to reform aspects of the current system, but to radically transform' it, to draw on 'radical imaginaries for a better world [...] forged in relation to and dialogue with each other'.² This thesis argues that Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, film curation and archiving is radical in that it identifies and refuses the root causes of the heteroableism which marginalises them, it works to transform the image and imagine and produce new queer ways of seeing learning disability, and it does so within the context of community consciousness.

¹ Ella Baker qtd. in Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 1 qtd in Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah. *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought*, London: Verso, 2020, np.

² Bhandar and Ziadah, *Revolutionary Feminisms*, np

This thesis responds to a lack of research at the intersection of queerness and learning disability, particularly in the context of visual culture and specifically in the field of disability representation studies. My research offers new perspectives and ways of understanding visual activism by moving beyond the dominant mode of research – the analysis of the image - to also consider the conditions of its production and impact in the world. In this thesis, the context in which a film was made is theorised as being as significant as the message which the film contains. The theme that runs throughout every chapter of this thesis is that of the politics of representation and self-representation; who has the right to represent and who does not.

This research was approached in two ways, (i) as a sole-authored doctoral thesis and (ii) as a participatory and inclusive project which involved Kennedy and Hellett in the research process (including semi-structured interviews). Having raised £4500 of funding, it was intended Kennedy and Hellett would co-produce a short film, something they have been considering for several years. Unfortunately, due to pressures resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic, Hellett withdrew from the project before the film was fully conceptualised or I had been able to conduct an interview. Kennedy agreed to continue with the project on the condition that Hellett's 'voice' was still present throughout the research, which it was possible for me to honour by drawing upon secondary interviews with Hellett and a chapter they contributed to an edited volume.³ This element of the research resulted in a collaborative film conceptualised and guided by Kennedy titled *Not Mythmakers* (2022).

This chapter provides a general introduction to the research and outlines the key approaches and findings. Section 1.2 introduces my research questions. Section 1.3 outlines my motivations for undertaking this research and the context which surrounds it. In section 1.4 I define some of the key terms I will be using throughout the thesis, followed by an introduction of the key people and organisations that I

³ Matthew Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," Ed. Saba Salman. *Made Possible: Stories of Success by People with Learning Disabilities – in Their Own Words*, London: Unbound, 2020

discuss in section 1.5. The gaps I have perceived in the literature are identified in section 1.6 and I outline my key contributions to knowledge. Section 1.7 reflects on my positionality within the framework of this research and section 1.8 provides an overview of my methods and methodology. Section 1.9 summarises each chapter of the thesis and key findings that emerged.

1.2: Research questions

This thesis specifically discusses the radical potential of the medium of amateur filmmaking. In 2001 disabled activist and scholar Vic Finkelstein argued that the study of culture is crucial to the development of disability studies.⁴ As noted above, representation is a vein that courses throughout this entire thesis, which broadly discusses how amateur filmmaking allows us to see learning disability in new queer ways. More specifically, this thesis poses four research questions which directly concerns the work of Kennedy and Hellett, and which are addressed across Chapters Four-Seven:

- how do the films of Kennedy and Hellett challenge a heteroableist gaze? (Chapter Four)
- how can the learning disability film festival and archive expand current understandings of queer visual activism by taking into consideration the contexts of production, circulation and preservation of filmmaking? (Chapter Five)
- how do Kennedy and Hellett transform the image of learning disability? (Chapter Six)
- what are the radical affordances of amateurism as an approach to queer learning disability filmmaking? (Chapter Seven)

1.3: Motivations and context

In 2016 I was working at a SEND⁵ college in Brighton, UK, as an annual review administration assistant. In one particular review, the carer of a 23-year-old student, who had recently come out as gay, recounted an incident in which he had requested

⁴ Vic Finkelstein qtd. in Sheila Riddell and Nick Watson. *Disability, Culture and Identity*. Harlow, England: Pearson/Prentice Hall, (2003) 2014, 106

⁵ SEND: Special Education Needs and Disabilities

to attend a drag show in his leisure time. The carer approached her line manager to inform her of the student's wishes, but she was told in no uncertain terms that it would be 'inappropriate' for her to take him. The reactions of the review attendees confirmed they were also just as perplexed as I was that it was inappropriate to support an adult to attend a drag show, and issues of human rights abuses were discussed, as well as the infantilisation of adults with learning disabilities who are in some circumstances evidently still seen as 'forever children'.⁶ Several months later, I purchased tickets to a film screening as part of the 2016 Brighton Photo Biennale named 'Matthew and Matthew'. The event poster (Fig.1.1) read,

"Hey Matthew, I hear you're a gay filmmaker?" "Yes Matthew, I am. And you're a queer/femme filmmaker – maybe we should have a chat sometime?" Join learning disabled artists and filmmakers Matthew Hellett (Brighton) and Matthew Kennedy (Glasgow) as they show their films and share their experiences of how identity shapes their work.⁷

The short films of Matthew 'Mattie' Kennedy and Matthew Hellett screened at this event reflected themes of queer identity, with Hellett performing in his films as his drag alter ego, Mrs Sparkle. Here was someone with a learning disability who, not only were they not prevented from attending a drag show, but they *were* the drag queen. In the context of the student who was denied access to their own queer culture, these films were radical to me. Having completed a BA and MA in the field of design history and material culture, it struck me that no lecture or module on either course had considered the art, design or visual and material culture of disabled practitioners. Where were their cultural histories, and why have they been excluded from the narrative of art and design history, I asked myself. I followed Kennedy and Hellett on Instagram, as well as the Brighton-based learning disability arts organisation Carousel which co-hosted the Matthew and Matthew event. I bought tickets to Carousel's bi-annual learning disability film festival held in Brighton in 2017, Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF). This was an important year for the festival as it saw the launch of their Queer Freedom (QF) strand, a dedicated 'LGBTQIA+

⁶ Kate Ashford, "Caring for a forever child," *BBC Worklife*. 4 May 2015.

⁷ "PREVIEW: Brighton Photo Biennial 2016 – Matthew and Matthew – Screenings and Talk." *GScene*. 9 Oct 2016.

screening, celebrating the queer community, love and self-expression'.⁸ I learned Hellett was OBFF's Lead Programmer, and he programmed one of Kennedy's films for this strand, amongst other films with queer themes.

I left the QF event again thinking about the former student and how the issues discussed that evening related to the personal issues he was facing. In a cast and crew Q&A following a film screening, they discussed societal attitudes which continue to have a significant impact on the rights and agency of learning-disabled people.⁹ I undertook some research into these societal views towards people with learning disabilities and their expression of sexuality. One of the first results to appear in a Google search of 'learning disability attitudes towards sex' was a blog post by Paul Richards, founder of the Brighton-based charity Stay up Late which supports adults with learning disabilities to attend live music events.¹⁰ In this blog post, entitled "Sexuality and people with learning disabilities", Richards drew attention to a Tweet he stumbled upon in 2018 by immigration, asylum and EU barrister Allan Briddock who wrote, '@ukhomeoffice doesn't believe my client is gay as it's not credible someone with severe learning difficulties would be sexually active. A new low'.¹¹ Richards used this Tweet, which he explained 'betrays a wider held view that people with learning disabilities shouldn't have sex',¹² as a springboard opportunity to outline the work Stay Up Late also does in the activism for the sexual rights of people with learning disabilities.

⁸ "Queer Freedom," *Oska Bright Film Festival* [nd]

⁹ *Sanctuary* cast and crew, "Q&A," *Oska Bright Film Festival*, Brighton, 2017.

¹⁰ Kathryn Bromwich, "Stay Up Late: 'It's important to be able to have an active social life.'" *Guardian*. 7 Sep 2014.

¹¹ Allan Briddock qtd. in Paul Richards, "Sexuality and people with learning disabilities," *Stay up Late*, 29 Apr 2018.

¹² Richards, "Sexuality and people with learning disabilities."

MATTHEW & MATTHEW

SUNDAY 16TH
OCTOBER 2016

2PM

SALLIS BENNEY
THEATRE



**OSKA BRIGHT FILM
FESTIVAL, BRIGHTON
PHOTO BIENNIAL, EYES
WIDE OPEN CINEMA AND
LGBT SWITCHBOARD
PRESENT: MATTHEW &
MATTHEW**

"HEY MATTHEW, I HEAR YOU'RE A GAY
FILMMAKER?"

"YES MATTHEW, I AM. AND YOU'RE A
QUEER/FEMME FILMMAKER- MAYBE WE
SHOULD HAVE A CHAT SOMETIME?"

JOIN LEARNING DISABLED ARTISTS AND
FILMMAKERS MATTHEW HELLETT
(BRIGHTON) AND MATTHEW KENNEDY
(GLASGOW) AS THEY SHOW THEIR
FILMS AND SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES
OF HOW IDENTITY SHAPES THEIR WORK.

TICKETS £5/3
WWW.2016.BPB.ORG.UK



Fig.1.1: Matthew and Matthew event poster. 2016. diaryofasolitaryhag.tumblr.com

Richards has worked with learning disabled members of the charity to film 'a sex protest' on the streets of Brighton, which featured learning-disabled people carrying placards with the things they demand access to as part of a 'normal'¹³ life, one of which reads 'SEX' (Fig.1.2) carried by an actor with Down's syndrome. Richards recounts how 'one woman came up to me and said quite directly that people with learning disabilities shouldn't be "allowed" to have sex. It was far too complicated in her view and best that restrictions be applied'.¹⁴



Fig. 1.2: "A manifesto for an ordinary life." 2018. StayupLate.org

It can be argued that the expression of sexuality in people with learning disabilities is the last great societal taboo, particularly queer sexuality. This research, which engages with transformative work at the intersection of learning disability and queerness is therefore timely. In 2018, it was reported in the journal of *Sexuality and*

¹³ Paul Richards, "A manifesto for an ordinary life," *Stay up Late*, 14 Dec 2018.

¹⁴ Richards, "Sexuality and people with learning disabilities."

Disability that, 'research that addresses sexual orientation in people with an intellectual disability is limited.'¹⁵ In 2019, four members of the Editorial Board of the journal *Disability and Society* resigned in protest over Tweets made by Editor Michelle Moore¹⁶ which described 'transgender ideology' as 'inherently dangerous' to children and young people.¹⁷ Because people with learning disabilities are often categorised as vulnerable by government agencies and policy, it is often assumed they do not know their own mind and need protecting in every aspect of their lives, removing their agency and right to self-determination. The UK-based drag performance troupe Drag Syndrome, which as the name suggests is made up of a group of drag queens with Down's syndrome, witness this oppression first-hand and regularly receive hate mail from non-disabled people who denigrate the group as 'exploitative'.¹⁸ In collaboration with British *Vogue*, filmmaker Jess Kohl made a short film which documented Drag Syndrome on a day trip to RuPaul's DragCon UK 2019. Kohl noted the film is about 'empowerment', that she 'wanted to change the "oh, they're so sweet" reaction that these individuals often receive'. Drag Syndrome 'are radically challenging preconceived notions of sexuality, gender and disability, while being authentically themselves. What about that is sweet?'¹⁹, Kohl asks rhetorically.

I had envisaged this thesis would include the work of more learning-disabled filmmakers who, like Kennedy and Hellett, were exploring issues of queer gender and sexuality, but it appears Kennedy and Hellett are the only two filmmakers in Britain currently working at this intersection. QF shows other films that speak to this intersection, but they are often films *about* or featuring queer learning-disabled people, they are not films made *by* queer learning-disabled people. This distinction is significant because the aim of this thesis is to consider how amateur filmmaking affords radical *self*-representation. This makes Kennedy and Hellett's work unique

¹⁵ J.M.T. Stoffelen et al, "Women Who Love: An Explorative Study on Experiences of Lesbian and Bisexual Women with a Mild Intellectual Disability in the Netherlands," *Sexuality and Disability* 36.3 (2018), 249

¹⁶ Emma Yeomans, "Journal editors quit in protest over 'transphobic' academic," *The Times*. 26 Jun 2019.

¹⁷ Taylor Oregon, *Twitter*, 3 Sep 2019.

¹⁸ "Drag queens and kings with Down's syndrome - BBC Stories." BBC Stories. YouTube. Web. 8 May 2019.

¹⁹ Jess Kohl qtd. in Alice Newbold, "Prepare To Be Blown Away By The Power Of Drag Syndrome." *Vogue*. 23 Jun 2020.

because their films offer the first opportunity to understand how this intersection is expressed visually, and significantly, from lived experience.

In addition to looking at the filmmaking of Kennedy and Hellett, this thesis is also concerned with understanding how Hellett's curation of the QF strand of OBFF and Kennedy's Matthew and Matthew Archive (MMA) which preserves ephemera related to the Matthew and Matthew events, contributes to the gesture of refusal that I have identified as a mode of 'visual activism'. The context I pose for this activism is the refusal of dominant images of learning disability which is constructed through a heteroableist lens; the refusal of the historical isolation of learning-disabled people from society, art, funding; the refusal of the devaluation of their art through therapy agendas; and the refusal that learning disability culture is invisible and/or unworthy of collection in cultural archives.

Kennedy and Hellett's radical intervention, the activist gesture the refusal takes, is through (i) their filmmaking which transforms the image of learning disability and allows it to be seen in new queer ways, (ii) the provision of a platform in Queer Freedom for marginal voices to speak, (iii) the embracing of imposed amateur approaches, techniques and aesthetics as queer failure and (iv) the archiving of queer learning disabled history for the benefit of future generations.

1.4: Terminology

Building on Foucauldian discourse theory, Johnston and Longhurst (2009) posit that language should be approached from a post-structuralist position to acknowledge that language is not fixed, that there is plurality of meaning of language that can change depending on time and space. This section offers an explanation for my use of specific words and terms over others throughout this thesis, some of which are more established, some which are geographically contextual and some which are only recently emerging.

Unless I am using a quotation or am paraphrasing another's work, I have chosen to use the terms 'learning disability' and 'learning-disabled'. My reason for this is three-fold, firstly it is the preferred term in the UK in which this research is

conducted and where Kennedy and Hellett reside,²⁰ secondly it is the term used by the arts organisation Carousel²¹ and its film festival OBFF²², of which Kennedy and Hellett are affiliated, and thirdly it was the term used in the Matthew and Matthew event advertisement quoted above.²³ I use the term *learning-disabled people* and *people with learning disabilities* interchangeably depending on sentence structure, and in reflection that Kennedy also uses both when referring to their artistic community.²⁴ In 2021 the charity International Service noted that there is continued lively debate into person-first language and as yet no consensus as to the preferred term, but their research found that in general people in the UK prefer to self-identify as 'disabled people' which has stronger connotations of radical activism.²⁵

Although only Kennedy has explicitly self-identified as 'queer'²⁶ (Hellett often identifies as 'gay'²⁷), both are affiliated with QF, so I use queer as an umbrella term to capture the diversity of sexuality and gender identities of both them and their wider community. Queer was reclaimed from its derogatory use as a self-identifier during the gay liberation movement from the late 1970s onwards as a means of disarming its historical violent connotations. It was also reclaimed in opposition to those associated with gay liberation who subscribed to what were considered by some to be assimilative ideas that pathologized queerness as being something one would never choose, or as making marriage equality the focus of their activism. Warner notes 'the preference for "queer" [...] rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal.'²⁸ As Sycamore (2008) asserts, 'the radical potential of queer identity lies in remaining *outside* – in challenging and seeking to dismantle the sickening culture that surrounds us.'²⁹ Halperin (1995) suggests queer 'acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm' and is a positionality available to

²⁰ "Guidance: Learning disabilities: applying All Our Health." Public Health England. 13 Jun 2018

²¹ Carousel [nd]

²² Oska Bright Film Festival [nd]

²³ "PREVIEW: Brighton Photo Biennial 2016 -Matthew and Matthew – Screenings and Talk."

²⁴ *Not Mythmakers*, dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2022

²⁵ "Disabled People or People with Disabilities?" *International Service*. 17 May 2021.

²⁶ "PREVIEW: Brighton Photo Biennial 2016 -Matthew and Matthew – Screenings and Talk."

²⁷ "60 seconds with Matthew Hellett from Oska Bright Film Festival." *Stemme Magazine*. 24 Oct 2017. Web. 25 Oct 2017

²⁸ Michael Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," *Social Text* 29 (1991), 16

²⁹ Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *That's revolting!: queer strategies for resisting assimilation*, Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2008, 6

'anyone who is or who feels marginalised because of her or his sexual practices'.³⁰ This is a positionality, Halperin explains, where 'it is possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviours, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-construction, and practices of community'.³¹ Halperin distinguishes queer from gay and lesbian in its questioning of multiple modes of oppression, which includes race, gender and class, among others, though disability is absent from this list.³²

I therefore follow Warner, Sycamore and Halperin to use queer as a radical term which is inherently critical of and oppositional to norms, which exists at the margins of society and accounts for marginalised sexual and gender identities. It is inherently intersectional and speaks to multiple modes of oppression. Johnston and Longhurst note that queer is in this sense a noun, as in one can be queer, but they note it is also understood as a verb, as in something can be queered.³³ This is useful when analysing the work of Kennedy and Hellett who are queer foremost in their non-normative gender and sexuality identities, but also because within this context I argue they are radical artists who are critical of dominant modes of film production and work in opposition to it. Their work exists at the margins of the film world but also speaks to intersectional marginalised identities. Their work engages with representation, self-construction and community practice, and in the verb iteration of the word, they *queer* learning-disabled filmmaking and image production.

Throughout this thesis I use the word *neuroqueer* which speaks to the intersection of learning disability (or more broadly *neurodivergence*) and queerness, which I will define in greater detail in Chapter Two. This is an emerging project and is a term coined by those to which it relates. By using this term, I am not suggesting that Kennedy and Hellett identify as neuroqueer, and I ensure that my language

³⁰ David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: towards a gay hagiography*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, 62

³¹ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 62

³² Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 63

³³ Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities*, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, 14

throughout this thesis does not presume that they do. Instead, I use this as a theoretical term that speaks to the intersection that their work addresses.

1.5: People and organisations

This section offers a brief biography or description of the key people and organisations that are discussed throughout this thesis.

Mattie Kennedy is a filmmaker based in Glasgow and uses they/them/their pronouns. They started making films in 2013 after deciding to spend £20 of their remaining college grant on a 'toy camera' from Toys R Us. Kennedy wanted to spend the money on 'something meaningful in the long run'³⁴ and used the camera for their first two films, *What is Femme Anyway?* (2013) and *Just Me* (2013). Before working with film, Kennedy was a visual artist who specialised mostly in collage. *What is Femme Anyway?* was made as an accompaniment to a collage for an exhibition and which features as the final shot of the film. Kennedy has worked in stop motion animation (*Versions* [2015] and *Enid and Valerie* [2018]) and has collaborated with several learning disability arts organisations including Carousel. While not an organisation per se, I frequently refer to the Matthew and Matthew Archive throughout this thesis, which, as briefly mentioned above, Kennedy started at home c.2013 to collect ephemera and material related to their artistic practice. The archive expanded to include material related to Hellett and the Matthew and Matthew events following the 2016 event, and was initiated in protest of the invisibility of learning disability culture Kennedy identified in cultural history archives.

Matthew Hellett is a filmmaker based in Brighton and uses he/him/his pronouns. Hellett made his first film, a spoofy cookery show *Cooking with Matthew* (2006) with the help of a support worker as he felt something was missing in his life. This was closely followed by a commission from Brighton and Hove City Council department for transport, *Unusual Journey* (2007). The following year, Hellett performed for the first time as his drag queen alter ego Mrs Sparkle when compèring for a learning disability rock music night. Hellett immortalised Mrs Sparkle on screen in his films *Sparkle*

³⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1, 20 August 2021

(2008) and *Mrs Sparkle* (2009). Appendix Two provides a filmography of Kennedy and Hellett.

Lizzie Banks is Deputy Artistic Director of the learning disability arts organisation Carousel and due to her familiarity with both Kennedy and Hellett, has acted as a mediator throughout the entire research process.

Carousel is a learning disability arts organisation which launched in Brighton in 1982. They offer a creative platform for, and bring together, learning-disabled people in order that they can explore their creativity and learn new arts skills.

Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF) is one of Carousel's largest projects and was founded in 2004 by a group of learning-disabled filmmakers associated with Carousel who were 'frustrated at having nowhere to show their work.'³⁵ Hellett joined the OBFF committee around 2007 and has been their Lead Programmer for three festivals as of 2022. Hellett notes the name Oska Bright is a play on words inspired by the 'Oscars' and 'Brighton' where the festival is predominantly held.³⁶ Beginning as a one-day showcase celebrating the work of learning-disabled filmmakers, OBFF has since grown to become 'the world's leading festival for films made by or featuring people with learning disabilities or autism'.³⁷ OBFF runs every two years and, in-between festivals, regularly tours nationally, supported by external funders including the BFI.³⁸ In 2017, Hellett initiated the Queer Freedom (QF) strand which, noted above, is a dedicated 'LGBTQIA+ screening, celebrating the queer community, love and self-expression'.³⁹

1.6: Gaps in research and contribution to knowledge

As noted in section 1.1, I have approached this subject matter as an historian of design, visual and material culture with an interest in radical artistic practice. I was motivated to undertake this research having perceived a distinct gap in visual culture studies broadly, and film studies specifically, that has omitted learning disability

³⁵ "About Us," *Oska Bright Film Festival*, [nd] <https://oskabright.org/about-us>

³⁶ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 164.

³⁷ "Our Story," *Oska Bright Film Festival*, [nd] <https://oskabright.org/about-us>

³⁸ "Disability And... Film with Oska Bright," *Disability Arts Online*. 31 July 2020.

³⁹ "Queer Freedom," *Oska Bright Film Festival* [nd]

narratives, and in particular queer ones. This thesis considers the films of Kennedy and Hellett as interstices into this erasure and absence, offering never-before-seen images of queer learning disability on screen which challenge our understanding of both queerness and learning disability. Broadly this research contributes new understandings of the politics of representation, visibility and inclusion through questioning who has the right to represent and who are Kennedy and Hellett seeking to be visible to and included by.

Kennedy and Hellett's work straddles four bodies of knowledge which have informed this research and which make up the literature review in Chapter Two. In disability representation studies I perceived a lack of attention paid to disability *self*-representation and found that the field is dominated by research into how representation has constructed cultural understandings of disability. This research is foundational to understanding the context within which Kennedy and Hellett's work exists, but my research moves beyond this focus on representation to instead articulate how it is being refused through *self*-representation. Additionally, this research is the first study into disability self-representation from an intersectional perspective.

The field of visual activism is heavily preoccupied with the visual content of material and has not until recently (Jenzen et al, 2019; Lewin, 2019) considered contexts of production and circulation of visual material as part of the activist gesture. This thesis posits the amateur film festival and amateur film archive as alternative modes of visual activism which contribute to community and collaboration. I do not believe Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, curation or archiving was done with explicit activism in mind, but due to the marginalisation of the learning disability community, particularly the queer learning disability community, their work becomes inherently radical just by existing. I am locating the activism in the collective conscious that Kennedy and Hellett demonstrate through their filmmaking, curation and archiving, which to me represents a form of visual activism because it is transformative. I also do not think this activism is accidental because it was born of an urgency to intervene in the system of representation that rendered queer learning disability narratives invisible.

The intersection of queer learning disability has been increasingly acknowledged in cross-discipline academic writing over the last three decades, most recently in the emerging *neuroqueer* project. The majority of literature at this intersection is informed by discourses of social policy, medicine, self-help, critical theory and personal memoir. To date, no in-depth study explores how this intersection is expressed visually, so by analysing the work of Kennedy and Hellett, my research contributes new knowledge to the fields of visual culture, disability studies, queer studies and visual activism.

The field of amateur film studies is dominated by debates into the distinctions between amateurism and professionalism, with significant literature that considers amateurism as something either enforced for various socio-economic reasons, or is a chosen subversive or avant-garde aesthetic. My research moves forward this conversation by arguing that amateurism can be both, that for learning-disabled filmmakers like Kennedy and Hellett, amateurism is imposed upon them but also embraced as a radical celebration of queer failure, hitherto unacknowledged as an approach within amateur film studies.

1.7: My positionality

In Chapter Three I reflect in detail on my positionality as an able-bodied academic undertaking research which involves working with people with learning disabilities who are not involved in academia. I draw particular attention to the contradictions of working within participatory and inclusive research principles in the context of a sole-authored PhD and the ethical tensions this presented. I articulate how I have navigated these tensions by designing the participatory element to involve Kennedy and Hellett in the areas which directly relate to their creative practice, whilst taking on the more mechanical aspects myself. I have ensured their voice is present throughout the thesis by drawing on interview transcripts and secondary sources, allowing their voices to guide and support my analysis.

Germon (2005) reflects on the relationship between disability activists and academics and suggests considering 'how far disability theorists contribute constructively to the struggle will depend on how they define their work in relation to the movement and take their lead from the movement', emphasising that 'this is not

only about a shared philosophical position but about coming together to write the research agenda'.⁴⁰ I acknowledge that academia is not the most appropriate forum through which to engage with learning disability art when learning-disabled people are predominantly excluded from academic conversations, but I accept that it is often difficult to undertake this type of work anywhere except academia where funding is more accessible. The main question that I asked myself was who does this research serve and who can access it? The research serves academia because it contributes new knowledge to the fields outlined in section 1.6, but the research is also intended to benefit Kennedy and Hellett by writing their work into these bodies of knowledge as pioneers in their chosen medium. The participatory element of the project was intended to benefit Kennedy and Hellett by providing funding for them to co-produce a film together of their own conception, something they have both been pondering for several years and which contributes to their respective creative practice. Because Hellett withdrew from the project, this could not be realised, but Kennedy was able to make a solo production as a result of this project, which has contributed to their filmography. The remaining funding can be used by Kennedy and Hellett towards their co-production outside the timescales of this thesis.

Germon states that 'if research is to be useful and meaningful it must be able to be used by the activists'.⁴¹ My own research is not aimed at any particular disability movement or cause, but it is hoped the film made by Kennedy, and the eventual film to be made by both Kennedy and Hellett, can contribute to the ongoing dialogue of the self-representation of queer learning-disabled people. Additionally, it is envisaged any future publication of this research, in academic and non-academic formats, will provide access to future funding through the increased visibility of Kennedy and Hellett's work across different contexts. As the first in-depth study into Kennedy and Hellett's work, it was my intention that my research would contribute further context to their work by analysing it in detail through various key and overlapping themes.

⁴⁰ Penny Germon, "Activists and Academics: Part of the Same World or a World Apart?," *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, Ed. Tom Shakespeare, London and New York: Continuum, (1998) 2005, 249

⁴¹ Germon, "Activists and Academics: Part of the Same World or a World Apart?," 249

When Germon speaks of research being used by those to whom it relates, she raises issues of accessibility which has been a key concern of mine throughout the research process. This again relates to the tensions of navigating accessibility and inclusive ethics with institutional standards of language and theory expected of a doctoral thesis. As detailed in Chapter Three, this thesis is preceded by an accessible short summary of each chapter (Appendix One) inspired by Hargrave (2015) and guided by UK charity Mencap's guide for accessible writing, *Am I making myself clear?* (2012). I have queered the traditional structure of the appendices by positioning the accessible summary at the start of the thesis, rather than as a subsidiary document following the bibliography. This is in acknowledgement that the prioritised audience of this research is the community of queer learning-disabled people of whom it speaks.

Finally, it is envisaged that Kennedy, Hellett and I will co-author the publication of this research in alternative accessible formats targeted at learning disabled people. Kennedy and I have already presented the collaborative film made as part of this research at an online conference in 2022,⁴² and we have discussed the intention to present it at future events.

1.8: Methods and methodology

This section outlines the theoretical frameworks which I am entering into dialogue with and the contributions my research makes to each.

The context of this research is both constructivist, in that I am concerned with how representation produces meaning, and discursive, in that I am also concerned with the effects and consequences of representation and how knowledge is linked to power.⁴³ Underpinning this approach is Michel Foucault's ([1969] 2002) concept of discourse, which he defines as a body of anonymous, historical rules which are always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period.⁴⁴ My

⁴² Mattie Kennedy and Jenna Allsopp, "Documenting a DIY intervention into the invisibility of learning-disabled narratives in amateur film archives," Paper presented at Invisible & Under-Represented? Disability History, Objects & Heritage conference, 23 March 2022, Online.

⁴³ Stuart Hall et al. Ed, *Representation* (second edition), Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2013, xxii

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge, (1969) 2002, 131

research moves beyond this thinking, to consider the ways in which the knowledges and representational powers of queerness and disability are being refused through self-representational practices.

The main text I have drawn upon throughout this thesis is Bonnie Honig's *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021). This text has provided an interpretive framework through which to analyse Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as a form of refusal and has informed the structure of Chapters Four-Seven. In this text, Honig draws on various philosophies and cultural texts to re-read Euripides' tragedy the *Bacchae* as a feminist 'arc of refusal'. In the *Bacchae*, Agave, along with other women/'bacchants', under the watch and encouragement of the god Dionysus, withdraw from the city of Thebes in protest of gender inequality, refusing patriarchy and their subservient roles.

Honig offers three refusal methods which make up her arc of refusal. The first is the concept of inoperativity, which is represented by the bacchants up and leaving the city of Thebes in refusal of their maternal duties and feminine expectations. The second method is inclination, represented by the bacchants retiring to the heterotopia of the mountain range of Cithaeron where they indulge in new pleasures hitherto unafforded them. The bacchants experiment in new, collaborative ways of being, exercising a repertoire of care and sorority. Cithaeron is a space where new ways of being and knowing are rehearsed, and where old normativities are unlearned. The third and final method of the bacchants' refusal is fabulation. Led by Agave, the bacchants return to the city of Thebes to tell the tale of their new ways of being, demanding acceptance of their new normativities and permanent transformation of the rights of women. As a method of refusal, fabulation is generative, transformative and the action whereby meaning is constructed. The authority of the patriarchal city is contested and a new, more equal, future is proposed. Ultimately the bacchants' radical proposition is rejected by Cadmus, ruler of Thebes, and the bacchants are exiled from the city. The *Bacchae* is considered a tragedy due to this failure, but Honig's feminist re-reading of the play instead interprets it as a tragedy of the city who were not ready to accept the equality proposed by the bacchants.

This theory is of relevance to the refusal that emerged from my analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking for the following reasons. (i) Kennedy and Hellett's refusal of dominant learning disability representation and active engagement with the politics of self-representation symbolises their *inoperativity*. They refuse their position as objects of representation and demand the right to subjectivity. (ii) Through OBFF, QF and the MMA, Kennedy and Hellett thrive in a filmmaking heterotopia which provides the space for *inclination*, where an emphasis is placed on amplifying marginalised voices, the building of community and the nurturing of collaboration. (iii) Through their films, Kennedy and Hellett *fabulate* their own neuroqueer subjectivities and in doing so they transform the image of learning disability which allows it to be seen in new queer ways. The films represent their return to the city, to demand their place within representational narratives, which also has a transformative effect on their cultural agency and visual culture more broadly. (iv) Finally, Honig's feminist re-reading of the bacchant's' supposed failure inspired my rearticulation of amateurism as queer failure and the radical possibilities it affords for grounding new queer ways of seeing learning disability.

Honig emphasises the importance of reading the *Bacchae* as an 'arc' of refusal because of the bacchant's' return to the city to claim their rights, which is the crucial transformative element of her feminist refusal theory. Honig argues throughout her theory that each of the refusal methods practiced individually is not transformative until *all* are practiced. By incorporating inoperativity, inclination and fabulation as an arc, the bacchant's return to their point of departure, the city, to transform it, rather than merely turning their back on it. They return for the benefit of the bacchant's left behind and demonstrate a collective consciousness. Kennedy and Hellett can be said to do the same. They take filmic representation as their point of departure, refuse its dictates, nurture a filmmaking community which inspires new queer ways of seeing learning disability, and fabulate their own filmic representations which transform the dominant image. Each element of their filmmaking, including curation and archiving, works within this 'arc' and it is for this reason that I interpret their amateur filmmaking as a practice (or 'arc') of neuroqueer refusal.

Honig notes the subjects of a feminist theory of refusal need not be women as such, but those shaped by feminist theory and practice, typically the overlooked and

marginalised. Feminist theory has informed disability rights activists and scholars from its first formations in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the mantra ‘the personal is political’, so it is fitting to draw upon its concepts for my own research. The feminist film theory of bell hooks figures significantly throughout this thesis and has shaped my approach to understanding Kennedy and Hellett’s intersectional identity as queer learning-disabled filmmakers. hook’s theories of critical spectatorship and the oppositional gaze have informed my analysis of how Kennedy and Hellett’s films refuse the heteroableist gaze of dominant filmic representations, whilst imagining a radical neuroqueer gaze. Synthesising the oppositional gaze with Garland-Thomson’s (2009) re-reading of staring has additionally provided the foundation for my theory of the oppositional stare proposed in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five I draw on hooks’ theory of *talking back* in the context of inclination to highlight the importance of community and collective identity when working towards social change. In Chapter Six, hook’s theory of radical black subjectivity has been a productive model through which to argue Kennedy and Hellett’s films offer counter-perspectives and transformative ways of seeing and thinking queerly about learning disability.

I imagine my application of hooks’ intersectional feminist film theories to the work of Kennedy and Hellett raises questions and may be perceived as problematic due to my lack of engagement with black filmmakers throughout this research, so I here want to outline the rationale for drawing on hooks’ work as a key theoretical framework. Like Honig describing her feminist theory as not just being of relevance to women, hooks also describes her theories, which are predominantly aimed at ‘progressive black people’ as also being relevant to what she calls ‘allies in struggle’ who ‘must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority.’⁴⁵ hooks lists these ‘allies in struggle’ as including ‘anti-imperialist, feminist, gay rights, black liberation, or all of the above and more’.⁴⁶ hooks does not directly reference disability rights allies, but we can assume they would fall into her ‘more’ category due to the oppression and marginalisation disabled people have faced throughout history into the present day, and particularly

⁴⁵ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, 4

⁴⁶ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, 4

when considering disability in the context of oppressive imagery. Wayne State University (WSU) has explored the relationship between Civil and Disability Rights and note:

If it weren't for the Civil Rights Movement, the Disability Rights Movement, and resulting civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities would probably never have existed. The Civil Rights Movement inspired individuals with disabilities to fight against segregation and for full inclusion under the law.⁴⁷

One of the key players in the intersection of Black Power and the Disability Rights Movement was Brad Lomax (1950-1984), a black man who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his teens and was a wheelchair user. As WSU explain, 'Lomax founded the Washington D.C. Chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and used his leadership to *join the forces* of civil rights and disability rights activism'⁴⁸ (my emphasis). Lomax was instrumental in the implementation of Section 504 of the US Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which prohibits discrimination based on disability and was modelled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁴⁹ So here there is a clear historical link between black activism and disability activism. Not all those involved in disability activism were black and not all black activists were disabled, but as WSU highlight, this was a 'joining of forces'. Additionally, Gay Liberation looked to the Civil Rights Movement as a template for activism and took as their inspiration for the 'gay is good' mantra, 'black is beautiful'.

So my recontextualization of hooks' theories to new intersectional contexts in this research is approached in the spirit of this tradition of seeking inspiration and a joining of forces. As hooks summarises, if all these allies in struggle worked to transform image-making, 'we would be ever mindful of the need to make radical intervention. We would consider crucial both the kind of images we produce and the

⁴⁷ "Civil Rights and Disability Rights: a celebration of intersectionality," Disability Rights Michigan, [nd], Web, 10 Feb 2023.

⁴⁸ "Civil Rights and Disability Rights: a celebration of intersectionality."

⁴⁹ Nakisha Pugh, "Exploring the Intersection of Black History and Disability Inclusion," *U.S. Department of Labor Blog*, 23 Feb 2021, Web, 10 Feb 2023.

way we critically write and talk about images.’⁵⁰ Here hooks effectively instructs the reader to apply her theories to different but radical contexts, and so this thesis offers an attempt to recontextualise her work in the context of the liberation of queer learning disability image-making.

Similarly, my research contributes to Honig’s feminist theory of refusal by considering it as a foundation for a neuroqueer film theory. This is done by reading it alongside writers such as hooks and Garland-Thomson, amongst others. My research contributes to each of these writers’ individual theories by recontextualising their theories in new intersectional ways. Land explains that ‘an intersectional view is enriched by considering how oppression and privilege might play out in even more complex, contingent and shifting ways within and between distinct social worlds.’⁵¹ As queer learning-disabled people, Kennedy and Hellett represent a minority within a minority and so intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Shields, 2008; Villa, 2011, Bilge, 2012; Mohamed and Shefer, 2015), while not a theory per se, is a foundational approach to this research to understand how power and oppression operates and intersects. hooks was fundamentally concerned with how power and oppression operates, but by writing in a filmic context her works has been productive to understand how power operates in screen contexts on intersectional identities. However, it does not speak to disability, so I contribute to these approaches to film by applying them in new neuroqueer ways. The intersection of queer learning disability is significantly under-theorised so this research, by drawing on other more established theories of marginal screen studies like hooks’, uncovers how oppression, and more importantly to this research, *resistance* plays out in other complex ways.

On the topic of privilege that Land refers to, it must be acknowledged that while I am drawing on film theory which originated in black female contexts, the filmmakers under discussion are white but race is not explicitly interrogated in this research. As explained above, my research aims to recontextualise hooks’ film theories to understand how they can speak to other marginalised identities. I discuss

⁵⁰ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, 4

⁵¹ Clare Land, *Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles*, London: Bloomsbury, 2022, 257

the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett refuse several norms, but the norm that is not addressed explicitly is, to quote Dyer, 'the matter of whiteness'.⁵² There are many intersectionalities at play in Kennedy and Hellett's work and amongst them whiteness is part of that, but themes such as disability, gender and sexuality are more explicitly platformed in their work over others. The 'invisibility of whiteness'⁵³ Dyer describes is ever-present in Kennedy and Hellett's work because they reflect white bodies on screen, but their whiteness is unpronounced and assumed. It raises the question as to why this part of their identity is unacknowledged. As white people, Kennedy and Hellett's marginalisation as queer learning-disabled people will be tempered by their race and will be vastly different to queer learning-disabled people of colour. As Mirzoeff posits, 'other-than-white people, needless to say, see and experience lived realities'.⁵⁴ This acknowledgement responds to Nash's call for more attention to be paid to the variations of marginalisation and the ways in which both oppression and privilege intersect.⁵⁵ In Chapter Eight I outline the need for future research to explicitly engage with the additional intersection of race to offer a more nuanced perspective of neuroqueerness, but in my analysis chapters I consider some of the ways in which whiteness is visible in Kennedy and Hellett's films.

In Chapter Three I outline my methodological approach to this research in more detail and the methods I have designed in order to answer my research questions. In addition to theorists cited above, this research draws on gender performativity and the queer theory of Judith Butler ([1990] 1999, 1993), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) and Jack Halberstam (2011). As mentioned briefly in section 1.1, the ethics underlying the collaborative part of this research are participatory and inclusive, so I draw on disability studies scholarship to map how these research principles emerged from emancipatory research frameworks. Disability studies is predominantly mobilised throughout this research when considering sociological issues, but queer theory is drawn upon which more usefully-addresses the cultural dimensions of neuroqueer marginalisation and Kennedy and

⁵² Richard Dyer, "The matter of whiteness," Ed. Paula Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (third edition), New York: Worth, 2005.

⁵³ Dyer, "The Matter of Whiteness," 11

⁵⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 1

⁵⁵ Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-thinking intersectionality," *Feminist Review*, 89 (2008) 11-12

Hellett's gestures of refusal. Other methods designed in order to answer my research questions include textual film analysis, semi-structured participant interviews, the making of a collaborative film and keeping a research diary of observations. The next section offers a roadmap of this thesis, outlining the aim of each chapter, the key themes that emerge, the arguments posed and the contributions to knowledge made by each.

1.9: Chapter overview

Chapter Two reviews the literature of four bodies of knowledge which have shaped my thinking and approach to this research, the gaps of which I have identified are summarised in section 1.6. My research contributes to this field by foregrounding Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as an exemplar of disability self-representation which challenges dominant visual narratives of learning disability. In the field of visual activism, my research widens understanding of the 'visual' by also considering the conditions of the production and preservation of filmmaking. In the emerging field of neuroqueer studies my research offers the first large-scale theorisation of the visual expression of the intersection of queerness and learning disability. Finally, my research expands understandings of amateurism in filmic contexts by theorising it as a celebration of queer failure.

Chapter Three outlines the methods and methodologies I have utilised in order to answer my research questions, as detailed in section 1.8. This chapter also outlines the changes that were made to the research design along the way, which was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting national lockdowns and social distancing measures.

Chapter Four is the first of my four 'analysis' chapters of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking. This chapter considers how the films of Kennedy and Hellett confront a heteroableist gaze and expand upon the notion of a neuroqueer gaze. This chapter undertakes a visual analysis and close reading of Kennedy and Hellett's films to demonstrate how they establish a sophisticated visual vocabulary to interrogate the politics of looking.

Chapter Five explores the radical potential of the learning disability film festival and archive to expand current understandings of queer visual activism. By taking into consideration the contexts of production, circulation and preservation of filmmaking, this chapter articulates Kennedy and Hellett's commitment to building and nurturing community through collaboration and collective consciousness.

Chapter Six explores how Kennedy and Hellett establish a neuroqueer aesthetics which positions them as performative subjects to transform the image of learning disability.

Chapter Seven discusses the radical affordances of amateurism as an approach to queer learning disability filmmaking and argues the refusal gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's films can also be found in their embracing of the amateurism that is imposed upon them as a celebration of queer failure. This contributes new knowledge to amateur film studies which has hitherto not theorised the medium through the lens of queer failure.

Chapter Eight offers a conclusion which synthesises the key arguments of my thesis and suggests areas for future research. The key finding from this research is that Kennedy and Hellett have established an alternative visual vocabulary which is collective and collaborative, consisting of archiving, networking, researching and mapping, among other tools. I argue their work operates in the service of a vision of transforming how learning disability is represented and who has the right to self-represent. Additionally, I argue that Kennedy and Hellett's practice expands understandings of visual activism and poses a challenge to traditional politics of visibility.

This thesis is limited in that it focuses on a very specific form of artistic practice, so future research is required to explore how the intersection of queer learning disability, or an emerging neuroqueer aesthetics, is articulated in other artistic forms, specifically performance and the impacts of Drag Syndrome. Further research is required to understand the impacts and increasing relevance of OBFF as a radical space for neuroqueer community building. The politics of animation that surround Kennedy's filmmaking is not addressed, but the potential of animation to

disrupt or reinforce arguments within the field of animation studies would benefit from future research. To reiterate, this thesis does not discuss race and whiteness as extensive as gender and sexuality (section 1.8), which extends to the absence of the cultural production of queer learning-disabled women throughout this research. As I discuss in Chapter Eight, a limitation of textual analysis as a method is that it does not account for context which is significant to my argument that Kennedy and Hellett produce neuroqueer images. Therefore, discussions around authorship provide opportunity for future research, particularly in conversation with the forthcoming edited volume *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method* (Mills and Sanchez, 2023).

This thesis does not wish to explore what hooks describes as ‘good and bad imagery’⁵⁶ which is essentially just ‘critiquing the *status quo*’.⁵⁷ Rather, hooks argues:

it is about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation.⁵⁸

This thesis therefore seeks to create the context for such a transformation, to offer the first in-depth critical study of artistic practice which works to transform the image of learning disability through the amateur filmmaking of Kennedy and Hellett. The images Kennedy and Hellett produce are not subversive, they are transformative.

⁵⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 4

⁵⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 4

⁵⁸ hooks, *Black Looks*, 4

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature of four fields of knowledge which have shaped my approach to this research; scholarship on disability representation; visual activism; the intersection of queer learning disability and the emerging neuroqueer project, and amateur film. The themes that are teased out across the analysis chapters (Four-Seven) are based on a combination of a comprehensive review of the literature within this chapter and empirical analysis of primary material. There are distinct overlaps between these fields, but more conspicuously they all deal with the politics of representation.

Section 2.2 focuses on disability representation studies and identifies the lack of scholarship on disability *self*-representation and who has the right, or not, to represent. This lack of attention to self-representation in disability studies guided my analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's films in Chapter Four where I argue that they represent a refusal of dominant images of learning disability. By using cinematic techniques which interrogate the politics of looking, Kennedy and Hellett's films seem to pose a challenge to the objectification of traditional disability representation by positioning *themselves* as subject.

Section 2.3 identifies a gap in the field of visual activism as traditionally focusing on the message of the visual material as the source of activism, rather than the aesthetics and modes of production. This lack of focus on aesthetics and approaches informed my research in Chapter Five which argues the amateur film festival and the DIY archive are radical spaces integral to producing counter-narratives of learning disability. By focusing on the aesthetics and production of Kennedy and Hellett's films more broadly across Chapters Four-Seven, my research addresses this gap by showing how the activist gesture of refusal can be found in the cinematic techniques and aesthetics of their films and the amateur ways in which they are produced and shared. Often the 'message' of Kennedy and Hellett's films is relatively abstract, but the gesture of refusal can also be found in the context of their production, circulation and preservation through the film festival and archive.

Section 2.4 reviews scholarship at the intersection of gender, sexuality and learning disability, with particular reference to queerness; an intersection which has historically not had the space to be combined until the last several years. This section identifies that most scholarship at this intersection is from a medical discourse or personal narrative perspective and that there is a distinct gap when focusing on how this intersection is represented visually. This literature specifically underpins my research in Chapters Four and Six where I argue Kennedy and Hellett's films offer a unique opportunity to understand how this intersection is visually represented through film, and where Kennedy and Hellett position themselves as performative subjects. This section additionally offers a definition for my use of the term 'neuroqueer' which usefully engages with this complex intersection and to which I make the first argument for a neuroqueer aesthetics. I offer a further contribution to knowledge by differentiating neuroqueer studies from the field of queer crip studies, which I critique as being more relevant to physical disabilities.

Section 2.5 draws on amateur film studies to engage with definitions of the amateur/professional divide. This section demonstrates how traditional amateur film scholarship dictates that amateurism is something either enforced on, or embraced as a subversive strategy by, filmmakers. This binary distinction guided my intervention in Chapter Seven where I articulate how Kennedy and Hellett as filmmakers challenge this binary by doing both – they *embrace* the amateurism which is *imposed* upon them as a deliberate gesture of refusal and celebration of queer failure, a theory hitherto not addressed in amateur studies. Additionally, my research in Chapter Seven argues for a new understanding of the amateur filmmaker, one that challenges the amateur/professional, identifiable through necessary collaborative working with professionals to access skills and funding.

This research contributes more broadly to histories of visual and material culture, which is more reflective of my own academic background as a design historian. I review this literature not as a media or disability studies scholar, or someone trained in the social sciences, but as someone who interprets the films of Kennedy and Hellett as being objects of cultural design with a socio-political

purpose. By approaching this contextual literature from the perspective of ‘outsider’ to each of the individual fields of study, and by analysing this research through the lens of the history of visual culture, I argue that my research advances knowledge across each of the disciplines.

2.2: Disability representation matters

Sandahl and Auslander (2005) note how disability studies emerged in the 1980s as a sub-discipline of the social sciences, humanities and medicine, but it was not until the mid-to-late 1990s that the arts were incorporated into debates about disability rights. Disability studies was traditionally suspicious of the arts which had a reputation for perpetuating negative images and stereotypes of disability or of viewing the intersection of art and disability as a form of therapy.⁵⁹ As disability scholars and activists were redefining disability in non-pathological terms, concern with the arts was not primarily, at least initially, of major concern to the wider disability movement.⁶⁰ Sandell and Dodd (2010) state how ‘matters of representation are intricately bound up with the broader struggle for disability rights, perhaps even more so than for other civil and human rights movements’ and that ‘central to the achievement of disability rights has been a desire to bring about a widespread and radical shift in the way disability is conceived’.⁶¹ This section maps the history of scholarship into disability representation studies, which I argue, and that Sandahl and Auslander allude to, reflects a preoccupation with exposing how disability is negatively *represented* in mainstream contexts, rather than on contexts of powerful *self-representation* which uncovers sites of agency.

Sander L. Gilman has written extensively on the representation of ‘insanity’ and ‘madness’ since the 1980s and is still frequently cited by the majority of disability representation scholars in recent years. In *Seeing the Insane* (1982), Gilman explores how the portrayal of stereotypes through art from the middle-ages to the start of the twentieth century has both reflected and shaped the perception of those living with ‘mental illness’. Gilman demonstrates that the ‘mentally ill’ have been the

⁵⁹ C. Sandahl and P. Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008, 6.

⁶⁰ Sandahl and Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion*, 6.

⁶¹ Sandell and Dodd, "Activist Practice," Ed. Richard Sandell et al, *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 4

subject of the artist long before they were the subject of psychiatric study and that these subjective representations are aligned to the personal tastes and inclinations of the artists.⁶² Gilman's later text, *Difference and Pathology* ([1985] 2009), builds on the arguments raised in *Seeing the Insane*, to understand the psychological function of the stereotyping of marginal groups and the human propensity to think in those terms. Gilman argues that stereotypes 'project an image of the world that has little basis in reality'⁶³ and suggests that cultural texts are an 'ideal source for a study of the fluidity of stereotypical contexts' as 'they function as structured expressions of the inner world in our mental representation'.⁶⁴

This idea that images of disability both reflect and constitute disability was continued by Gartner and Joe in the 1987 edited volume *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images*. The title is suggestive of this argument that images of disability can themselves be disabling, affecting how disabled people see themselves. Barnes (1992) lifts this phrase for his detailed report into disability representation, explaining how 'disabled people and their organisations have been drawing attention to the connection between disablist imagery, the media and discrimination since at least the 1960s'.⁶⁵ Barnes quotes disabled writer Paul Hunt who explained 'we are tired of being statistics, cases, wonderfully courageous examples to the world, pitiable objects to stimulate funding'.⁶⁶ Barnes methodically maps the specific typecasts of disabled people as represented in media as including, but not limited to, 'pitiable and pathetic', 'sinister and evil', 'super cripple', 'burden' and 'sexually abnormal'.⁶⁷ He concluded that 'the vast majority of information about disability in the mass media is extremely negative [...] disabling stereotypes [...] form the bed-rock on which the attitudes towards [...] disabled people are based'.⁶⁸

⁶² Sander L. Gilman, *Seeing the Insane*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982

⁶³ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, (1985) 2009, back cover

⁶⁴ Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 26

⁶⁵ Colin Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media: an Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People*. Ryburn: British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, 1992, np.

⁶⁶ Paul Hunt qtd. in Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media*, np

⁶⁷ Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media*, np

⁶⁸ Barnes, *Disabling Imagery and the Media*, np

The 1990s saw a wealth of literature emerge which examined the representation of disability in film and television. In the same year as Barnes' report, Cumberbatch and Negrine published *Images of Disability on Television* (1992) and Hevey published his oft-cited examination of disability and charity advertising, *The Creatures Time Forgot* (1992). Three of the most significant contributions to the field was Norden's 1994 text, *The Cinema of Isolation* which, as the title suggests, articulates how disabled characters have consistently been 'isolated' from their non-disabled counterparts in western cinema. This was closely followed by two Garland-Thomson texts, *Freakery* (1996) and *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997), the latter being the first critical study into the representation of disability in North American literature. Davis (1995) offered a more philosophical contribution to the field where he contests cultural assumptions surrounding disability; a category which he describes as 'an extraordinarily unstable one'.⁶⁹ Davis considers what constitutes 'normal' in society, a concept he argues has created the issue of disability,⁷⁰ meaning effectively one is only disabled in comparison to a culturally-constructed understanding of normalcy. Davis argues that disability should not be a binary distinction, suggesting that just as society fails to see whiteness as a hue, not an ideal, society should avoid denying the variability of the body. The category of disability starts to break down when one scrutinises who make up the disabled, Davis claims, and highlights that most citizens will have some level of impairment or physical difference from others, and that most humans find as they age that they become less able. Thus, the disabled category 'expands and contracts' to include so-called 'normal' people and Davis employs the term 'the temporarily able' to refer to those considered non-disabled'.⁷¹ Davis's work is specifically in the context of deafness, but these Foucauldian notions of the construction of knowledge and its relationship to power⁷² have influenced other disciplines, including queer theory.

Darke (1998) works within Foucauldian discourse and Davis's work on the social construction of 'normalcy' and applied this to the context of cinematic representations of disability. Darke argues that the majority of writing on disability

⁶⁹ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, London: Verso, 1995, xv

⁷⁰ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 23

⁷¹ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xv

⁷² Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*

imagery focuses on how accurately disabled people are represented. Arguing that 'it doesn't matter that normality or abnormality does not exist in any psychological or essentialist real way, Darke suggests it matters that it exists as a social construct with an almost total consensus in a largely medical-model nexus'.⁷³ Darke argues that to call for normalising representations of disabled people as being just like everyone else ignores the important notion of and acceptance of difference (not deficit). Instead, he argues that

Cultural and cinematic images of disabled and other marginalised people provide the opportunity to identify and deconstruct many of the tropes, nuances and stereotypes constructed in them. These images also offer a measure by which we can identify shifts in social attitudes towards disabled and marginalised people and an indication of sites of resistance.⁷⁴

In agreement with Davis in the sense that 'disability imagery works to create the illusion or simulacrum of normality out of the reality of abnormality',⁷⁵ Darke for the most part disagrees with what he terms the 'normative fallacy' (labelled by Macheray, 1978), which suggests there is a 'true' way of seeing disability. Rather, Darke notes the key issue with what he calls 'disapproving disability writing',⁷⁶ so that which merely disapproves of the content, and the mere identification of stereotypes, is that it is a

fallacy to argue there is a true way in which certain images can represent impairment and disability, apart from the fact there is no true way of representing anything, it is even more pernicious that most disability imagery writers insist on more normalised images which they consider more positive.⁷⁷

Darke argues these images validate normalcy, the illusion at the heart of disability oppression, not difference,⁷⁸ noting how disability representation writers are now

⁷³ Paul Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability," Ed. Tom Shakespeare, *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, London and New York: Continuum, (1998) 2005, 191

⁷⁴ Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability" 181

⁷⁵ Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability" 183

⁷⁶ Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability" 183

⁷⁷ Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability" 183

⁷⁸ Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability" 183

moving away from simple classification and disapproval to a more synthesised way of looking which is multidiscipline. Such writers combine cultural, literary, feminist, sociological, discursive and disability theory to instead reveal the meanings of, power of, and number of images as contributing to this illusion of normalcy.⁷⁹

While continuing with this theme of focusing on negative imagery, Mitchell and Snyder (2000) offered the useful term 'narrative prosthesis'⁸⁰ to describe the ways in which disabled characters serve a very particularised function within film and literature to further the plot and symbolise abstract qualities which augment their non-disabled counterparts within the narrative. Disability thus becomes a useful tool through which a character's internal subjectivity can be externalised, the most obvious being the use of disability to either represent villainy or triumph. The disabled character is rarely the protagonist and instead serves as a prosthesis to the narrative to help it along.

An example Mitchell and Snyder offer to illustrate this theory is of one of their children's storybooks, *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*. The premise of the story relies on a young boy opening a box of tin soldiers, all of whom are indistinguishable in their (literal) uniformity, with the exception of one who has a missing leg. This physical difference allows this soldier to be singled out from the others, and it is he who furthers the narrative of the story by embarking on various wild adventures. Mitchell and Snyder note the soldier's physical difference is no longer acknowledged once he has provided the basis for the story as 'the deficiency inaugurates the need for a story but is quickly forgotten once the difference is established'.⁸¹ Ultimately the soldier's fate ends in demise, as is typical for representations of disability, and the tin soldier is thrown into the fire by the boy, having served his purpose for providing the grounds of the story. In this case, Mitchell and Snyder interpret the soldier's demise as punishment for a disabled character daring to desire a non-disabled character, a pirouetting paper maiden who he mistakes as also having only one leg.⁸² Mitchell and Snyder put forth a strong argument for disability as metaphor. In the case of the

⁷⁹ Darke, "Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability" 183

⁸⁰ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis. Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

⁸¹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 56

⁸² Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 56

tin soldier, his adventuring represents the infinite possibilities of difference in juxtaposition to the 'anonymity of normalcy', whilst simultaneously representing tragedy in his demise.⁸³

Moving away from disability as metaphor to considering disability as informative, Nadesan (2005) and Murray (2008) reflect the shift in focus of disability representation scholarship in the mid-2000s to focus specifically on the cultural construction of autism in the social imaginary. Murray argues that *Rain Man* (dir. Levinson, 1988) and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2001), both popular and acclaimed texts, work as 'explanatory markers' and 'autism events',⁸⁴ which, although fictitious, have 'achieved the status of sociological documents in the ways in which their representation of the condition was received [...] No doubt viewers felt they were experiencing a specific insight into the nature of autism'.⁸⁵ Murray argues that both examples 'act to produce an idea of autism through a process of conveying knowledge', which 'allows the viewer/reader to feel they have engaged in a significant learning moment', making you feel you know more about the condition.⁸⁶

Baker's contribution to Osteen's (2008) volume explains that

When the public has no direct experience with a disability, narrative representations of that disability provide powerful, memorable definitions [...] a character comes to exemplify people with that particular disability, demonstrating how individuals with that disability behave, feel, communicate, exhibit symptoms and experience life. In short, a character with a disability serves as a lens through which an audience can view and define that disability.⁸⁷

⁸³ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 55

⁸⁴ Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, 12

⁸⁵ Murray, *Representing Autism*, 13

⁸⁶ Murray, *Representing Autism*, 88

⁸⁷ Anthony D. Baker, "Recognizing Jake: Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film," Ed. Osteen, *Autism and Representation*, 229

While not passing a particular judgement if these examples constitute good or bad imagery, they do not move beyond Darke's lamentation of the good imagery/bad imagery debate, because they continue to focus on classification and stereotyping. Pre-empting the motivations of crip theory, Darke called for scholarship into representation that embraced difference as resistance which reveals power and pleasure. This echoes Shakespeare et al (1996) who state 'there is a tendency within disability studies literature only to explore the barriers and structures which disable, which can sometimes detract from focussing on the individual strengths and potentials of disabled people, as social actors, to resist and create space for change'.⁸⁸ They are not specifically referring to the analysis of cultural imagery but their point is the same as Darke's in that the focus ought to shift towards more empowering or radical narratives of disability and agency.

Sandell et al (2010) speak to this call, albeit in the less traditional disability representational context of activism within the museum. They highlight the *Rethinking Disability Representation* initiative of 2006-2009 which involved nine museums, together with a 'think tank' of disabled activists, across England and Scotland staging experimental interventions to offer 'new, progressive ways of seeing and frame the ways in which visitors engaged with and participated in disability rights-related debates'.⁸⁹ They achieved this through 'the presentation of disabled people's own voices, opinions and experiences, sometimes alongside (and, very often, in place of) the mediating curatorial voice of the museum'.⁹⁰ This reflects a shift in disability representation to become more inclusive and participatory, and simultaneously a shift in disability representation studies to begin to focus more on matters of self-representation. Garland-Thomson notes that while inaccurate to say there has been a complete transformation of disability imagery in the twenty-first century, it is fair to say that the images that are being produced are certainly more nuanced.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Tom Shakespeare et al, *The Sexual Politics of Disability: Untold Desires*, London and New York: Cassell, 1996, 183

⁸⁹ Sandell and Dodd, "Activist Practice," 13

⁹⁰ Sandell and Dodd, "Activist Practice," 16

⁹¹ Garland-Thomson paraphrased by Sandell and Dodd, "Activist Practice," 7

In 1993 'disabled comedian, poet and writer'⁹² Allan Sutherland stated, 'that the very fact that previous representations of disability have been narrow, confused and unimaginative leaves the way open for disabled writers and filmmakers. What we can produce can blow the past away'.⁹³ Several years earlier in 1989, he stressed in a conference paper that

If we want to explain ourselves to the outside world, or simply to announce our presence, then we need to define ourselves as different from the pathetic cripples that are created by the media and by charity fundraising. One of the fastest and most effective ways of demonstrating that difference is through our arts and culture.⁹⁴

In this thesis more broadly, but specifically in Chapter Four, I contribute new knowledge to the above scholarship by focusing not on the disabling imagery of so-called negative representations of disability, but on the power and pleasure that Darke called for in images of disability that self-represent. There is a distinct lack of academic attention focused on disability self-representation on screen, despite activists like Sutherland calling for it since at least 1989. In light of this striking absence of scholarship, my research contributes new understandings of disability representation on screen by focusing on what Dawn describes as the 'people with disabilities (who) are conspicuous by their absence from mainstream popular culture',⁹⁵ and I would add to that, academic engagement with this issue. My focus shifts from traditional scholarship which centres on disabled people as objects of representation to a more active understanding of disabled people being the subjects of their own self-representations. This is a heavily under-researched area of disability representation studies, and my research has unveiled erasures and absences that illuminates the neglect of the field to foreground the creative agency of disabled cultural producers. My research closes these gaps by drawing on the work of

⁹² "Allan Sutherland," *National Disability Arts Collection & Archive* [nd]

⁹³ Allan Sutherland qtd. in R. Dawn, "The politics of cinematic representation of disability: "the psychiatric gaze,'" *Disabil Rehabil* 36.6 (2014): 517-519

⁹⁴ Allan Sutherland, "Disability Arts, Disability Politics," Paper presented at 'Movin' On' Festival conference, 1989.

⁹⁵ Dawn, "The politics of cinematic representation of disability," 517

Kennedy and Hellett which challenges these traditional and repressive ways of seeing disability on screen.

2.3: Queer visual activism

'Visual activism' is a phrase popularised by South African photographer Zanele Muholi to describe their own practice of documenting and making visible black LGBTQI communities in South Africa. First used by Muholi during a solo show in 2004 in San Francisco, it is a term that is often attributed to them and has come to be heavily associated with their practice, though Lewin (2019) notes that Cvetkovich used the term as early as 2001 when writing about queer activist groups in New York.⁹⁶ As an academic field of study, visual activism builds upon historical and contemporary conversations within art history, performance, and visual culture and the intersection of art and politics.⁹⁷ Lewin notes that although grounded in and 'coterminous with art activism', visual activism differs in that it 'exceeds or is situated outside the formal institutions of the art world'.⁹⁸ Mirzoeff (2015) notes that visual culture has converged around visual activism which is now more concerned with self-representation than representation.⁹⁹ While offering quite a narrow view of visual activism, Mirzoeff notes this shift in thinking began around 2001, exemplified by the participatory movement slogan 'They do not represent us.'¹⁰⁰ When you do not see yourself represented, you must find ways to represent yourself.¹⁰¹ This guided my understanding of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, curation and archiving as a form of visual activism because, as pointed out in section 2.1, representation and self-representation is the key issue which is threaded throughout this thesis.

The actual term 'visual activism' is not widely used in academic contexts. In 2014, the International Association of Visual Culture (IAVC) held the first dedicated conference on the subject in San Francisco, which coincided and overlapped with a

⁹⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, "Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture," Ed. E. Bronfen and M. Kavka, *Feminist Consequences*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, 285 qtd. in Tessa Lewin, *Queer Visual Activism in Contemporary South Africa*, University of Brighton, 2019, PhD, 26

⁹⁷ J. Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction: Themed Issue on Visual Activism," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15.1 (2016): 8.

⁹⁸ Lewin, *Queer Visual Activism in Contemporary South Africa*, 26

⁹⁹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, London: Penguin, 2015, 290

¹⁰⁰ Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 291

¹⁰¹ Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 293

Muholi exhibition. Convened by Bryan-Wilson et al, the conference and an accompanying 2016 special issue was itself inspired by the 2012 IVAC conference 'Now! Visual Culture'. Convened by Mirzoeff, the conference integrated visual culture studies and visual culture practice with a particular focus on justice, protest and change in the context of the contemporary Occupy events of 2011 and 2012. Bryan-Wilson et al in their Introduction to the special issue describe the Now! Visual Culture conference as 'an important standing point and inspiration for the "Visual Activism" conference and which served as a model in that it proposed that activism ought to be an essential concern of visual culture more broadly'.¹⁰²

Central to questions of what constitutes visual activism, is what first constitutes activism. Azoulay (2021) understands activism as 'inter-activism',¹⁰³ the combined actions of maker/doer and spectator which form 'reiterable statements resonating beyond their authors and resisting appropriation'.¹⁰⁴ In other words, Azoulay argues the image does not become a form of visual activism until it is understood by another as making visible the invisible, and questions are asked about this invisibility. This pertains to how I have understood the activism in Kennedy and Hellett's work, because the images they create make visible what was previously invisible, raising the question of why no images exist of queer learning-disabled subjects. As noted in Chapter One, this was a question I asked myself after attending the first Matthew and Matthew event. Azoulay elucidates on the 'etymological association of activism with action' which 'tempts us to forget that actions are always segments; their meaning is shaped by the way others interact with them, through other statements'.¹⁰⁵ These 'other statements' refer to the context in which Kennedy and Hellett make, share and archive their work, which I argue represents gestures of activism because it challenges the idea that learning-disabled people do not have creative agency and that their work is of lesser-value than non-disabled filmmakers. Lewin undertook a similar project to my own and shifted attention from the purely visual in visual activism to highlight how the activist gesture can be found in the contexts of production and dissemination. Lewin's research

¹⁰² Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 11

¹⁰³ Ellie Armon Azoulay, "Actions, Non-Actions, Interactions, and so on and so Forth." *Journal of Visual Culture* 15.1 (2016): 27

¹⁰⁴ Azoulay, "Actions, Non-Actions, Interactions, and So On and So Forth," 27.

¹⁰⁵ Azoulay, "Actions, Non-Actions, Interactions, and So On and So Forth," 27.

focuses on queer visual activism in South Africa and locates the radical meaning through a work's community-building potential. Similarly, Donovan (2022) has drawn on the concept of affective media networks to theorise LGBTQ film festivals as 'mediated spaces of community, ritual, and history' within contexts of 'significant socio-historical importance like group belonging, pride, and activism'.¹⁰⁶ Lewin and Donovan's research has guided my own thinking when looking beyond the actual films of Kennedy and Hellett to see the filmmaking process – from production to circulation to archiving – as part of the refusal gesture. This research has produced new meanings when analysed through a community context, particularly when the historical isolation of people with learning disabilities is considered.

Bryan-Wilson et al understand visual activism in the traditional sense of direct action to effect change, but also more fluidly as forms of intervention or acts which disrupts the 'business as usual' status quo, if only briefly.¹⁰⁷ Crediting Muholi for using the phrase visual activism 'as a flexible, spacious rubric',¹⁰⁸ Bryan-Wilson et al highlight Muholi's work as 'less immediately readable as "activism" in a narrow sense'.¹⁰⁹ They understand activism 'as a word riven by ambiguities, and consider it less in its common usage (to mean active or vigorous campaigning) than to signify the abandonment of neutrality'.¹¹⁰ 'No art is neutral',¹¹¹ they state.

Echoing Azoulay's arguments, Bryan-Wilson et al question what should be visible and invisible in visual culture and consider visual activism as that which confronts these 'visual absences' and active forms of 'visual erasure'.¹¹² I use visual activism as a framework to argue that Kennedy and Hellett's films confront the visual absences and erasure of queer learning-disabled narratives from dominant visual (screen) culture. For Mirzoeff, visual activism is the process of creating new self-images, 'new ways to see and be seen, and new ways to see the world',¹¹³ which is exactly what Kennedy and Hellett achieve through their filmmaking. Mirzoeff states

¹⁰⁶ Sean M. Donovan, "Over the corporate rainbow: LGBTQ film festivals and affective media networks," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 20.2 (2022), 268

¹⁰⁷ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 6

¹⁰⁸ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 7

¹⁰⁹ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 6

¹¹⁰ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 8

¹¹¹ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 8

¹¹² Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 17

¹¹³ Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 297

that in visual activist projects, 'there is an alternative visual vocabulary emerging. It is collective and collaborative, containing archiving, networking, researching and mapping among other tools, all in the service of a vision of making change'.¹¹⁴ What Mirzoeff describes can be explicitly applied to Kennedy and Hellett's wider filmmaking practice which I analyse from a visual activist perspective throughout Chapters Four-Seven. They work collaboratively and their attitude is collective. They archive, network, research and map new ways of being.

Activism has been theorised in visual culture beyond the banners and vigorous campaigning that Bryan-Wilson et al allude to. Sandell et al (2010) have interpreted interventions into disability representation in museums as activism. Edell (2021) explores how Black and Latinx teenage girls use the tools of performance to advocate for social change. McIntyre (2021) researches the Street Dance Activism 'Global Dance Meditation for Black Liberation' twenty-eight-day collective healing project to theorise dance as activism. More relevant to this research, the relationship between film and activism has been theorised by Rabinovitz ([1991] 2003) in *Points of Resistance: Women, Power, Politics in the New Avant-Garde Cinema, 1943-71*, a challenge to the erasure of women's cinema from a male-dominated cannon. Presence (2015) maps the landscape of contemporary video-activism in Britain, focusing on five oppositional video-activist organisations. Presence argues that grass-roots video-activists such as Undercurrents; SchMOVIES; Camcorder Guerrillas; Reel News and visionOntv operate within an environment dominated by larger organisations and so their practice must be understood in relation to this. Nicholson (2019) has researched what she calls 'socially engaged filmmaking'¹¹⁵ to explore the use of historical amateur film to explore issues of public health, welfare and housing. My research contributes to these narratives by platforming the films of Kennedy and Hellett as forms of visual activism, but by moving beyond the film to understand the community contexts in which it is made and shared, I expand on understandings of the relationship between film and activism.

¹¹⁴ Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 297

¹¹⁵ H.N. Nicholson, *Amateur film: meaning and practice, 1927-1977*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

The intention of Bryan-Wilson et al's special issue is to 'ask about, but not resolve, both how art can contribute to political discourse and how activism takes on specific, and sometimes surprising, visual forms that are not always aligned with or recognizable by art-world frameworks'.¹¹⁶ It is these 'surprising visual forms' to which my research contributes; those which do not typically present themselves as visual activism. Other recent interventions which broaden the scope of what visual activism can take include Jenzen et al's (2019) theorisation of the protest music videos uploaded to social media during the 2013 Gezi Park protests as digital activism. López's (2016) research on the *Travesti del Perú* (Transvestite Museum of Peru) is another such example of these surprising visual forms. Founded in 2004 by the Peruvian philosopher and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano (1969–2013), the *Travesti del Perú* attempted a 'queer counter-reading' and intersectional rethinking of history which collected objects, images, texts etc. in order to encourage actions, stagings and publications to fracture dominant discourses of human bodies. López notes the museum did not intend to represent and integrate minority bodies into 'dominant discourses of progress', but to 'underscore the theatrical nature of all history and to challenge the privileged place of heterosexual subjectivity in all historical narratives'.¹¹⁷

Returning to the theme of making visible the invisible, López notes the museum posed important questions about how does one 'write the history of subjects who have been continuously erased from history?', and 'what kinds of knowledge do the bodies of sexual minorities produce that are still unintelligible to the dominant modes of discourse and narrative construction?'¹¹⁸ The museum's solution to these questions was to deny the dominant taxonomy of identification, classification and surveillance, while prioritising queer subjectivity by staging 'alternative hypotheses for imagining queer cartographies through fiction'.¹¹⁹ The museum worked to denaturalise what it perceived as false heteronormative histories by 'summoning a new coalition of monsters, postporn virgins, native androgynes, and trans-Andean indigenous people' in order to question colonial discourses of

¹¹⁶ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 9

¹¹⁷ Miguel A. López, "Taking Control of History," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15.1 (2016), 39

¹¹⁸ López, "Taking Control of History," 39

¹¹⁹ López, "Taking Control of History," 39

gender and sexuality and suggest alternative forms of resistance and action.¹²⁰ For López, this is interpreted as a demand for self-owned narratives, for fictions which work to liberate alternative forms of existence. The arguments I pose throughout Chapters Four-Seven articulate how Kennedy and Hellett challenge the erasure and absence of bodies which are continually erased from screen cultures by producing their own 'fictions' through film. In my interpretation, their films do not show who the 'real' Kennedy and Hellett are, but instead offer multiple perspectives by positioning themselves as performative subjects. Lopez's work on the *Travesti del Perú* has also been instructional when understanding the radical potential of Kennedy's *Matthew* and *Matthew Archive* and the ways in which it challenges dominant historical discourses of what art is considered valuable and how this discourse can be resisted at the grassroots level.

In their analysis of the Gezi Park protest music videos, Jenzen et al (2019) paid particular attention to the aesthetics of the videos as part of the activist gesture, rather than just the message the videos communicated. Scholarship on art, visual culture and activism has its origins in the study of social movements and visual communication, which has been dominated by a focus on the content or message of the visual being analysed. Jenzen et al's attention to aesthetics therefore marks a break from this focus and widens understandings of where the activism in visual activism can be found, beyond the identifiable message. Additionally significant with this shift towards aesthetics is a move away from the traditional literature of visual activism which is determined by journalistic photography and documentary. This is an epistemological heritage shared by amateur film studies, a body of knowledge which has also significantly shaped my research. Shand (2013) identified that over the last fifteen years, the study of amateur film has almost always focused on documentary film, at the expense of the fictional genres which are favoured by so many amateur filmmakers.¹²¹ In 2019 I undertook a six month work placement at the North East Film Archive/Yorkshire Film Archive and discovered they alone hold at least fifty fictional amateur productions dating back to 1929, yet Shand and Craven's

¹²⁰ López, "Taking Control of History," 40

¹²¹ Ryan Shand, "Introduction: Ambitions and Arguments – Exploring Amateur Cinema Through Fiction," Ed. Ryan Shand and Ian Craven, *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering Amateur Fiction Film*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013, 2

text *Small Gauge Storytelling* (2013) was the first attempt to document this genre and account for its meanings.

Shand believes the omission of fiction from amateur film histories is symptomatic of early attempts at 'justifying amateur cinema as a legitimate object of study which has already established interests in documentary and issues of socio-cultural importance'.¹²² He blames this lack of appreciation of fictional genres not just on academic concerns but on broader understandings of the semantics of the term 'fiction'. Particularly in a journalistic context, 'fiction' is associated with subjectivity, deception, lying and the untrue, whereas documentary connotes objectivity, truth and transparency, which evokes the rationale of Walter Benjamin's 'aura'.¹²³ This reductive interpretation of 'fiction' is deeply unhelpful, Shand argues, when exploring amateur film's sub-genre's cultural value and validity,¹²⁴ but is a convincing argument for documentary's privileged status within amateur film and film studies more broadly. Optimistically interpreting this as a moment of opportunity, Shand illuminates the 'potentially fascinating and productive directions' for the theoretical considerations of amateur film which open up when the focus of research is moved to works that seemingly do not 'fit' the dominant paradigm.¹²⁵

There are parallels to be drawn between the fields of amateur film studies and visual activism whereby the process of examining these new iterations of cultural production and consumption prompt new ways of thinking about what constitutes amateur film and also what is 'visual' and what is 'activism'. Some of Kennedy and Hellett's films draw on techniques such as direct address and monologic narration which evoke the style of documentary and journalism, but their work is more readily likened to a fictional narrative through a highly-stylised visual language of resistance. Their films offer the opportunity for using visual activism in new ways, by instead focusing on the aesthetics they employ to offer counter-representations and challenge the invisibility of queerness and learning disability.

¹²² Shand, "Introduction," 2

¹²³ Walter Benjamin, *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Dickinson, North Dakota: SAI Press, (1936) 2021.

¹²⁴ Shand, "Introduction," 2

¹²⁵ Shand, "Introduction," 2

Rancière's (2013) writing on the relationship between aesthetics and politics has provided a useful theoretical framework when positioning Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as visual activism. Rancière defines aesthetics as 'a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise',¹²⁶ and politics as that which 'revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak'.¹²⁷ This directly relates to the findings of my analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking which is that their work speaks to issues of visibility and representation and challenges traditional understandings of what is visible and who gets to represent. Kennedy and Hellett engage with these issues through what Rancière describes as 'aesthetic practices', or 'forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they "do" or "make" from the standpoint of what is common to the community'.¹²⁸ This quote encapsulates each facet of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking that I articulate as a gesture of refusal – the actual films, the curation of Queer Freedom and the establishment of the Matthew and Matthew Archive – all are forms of visibility which claim space for the benefit of community building and all are undertaken in the context of opposing erasure, invisibility and isolation. Rancière states this model 'disturbs the clear-cut rules of representative logic that establish a relationship of correspondence at a distance between the sayable and the visible'.¹²⁹ Kennedy and Hellett disrupt traditional notions of the sayable and the visible by transforming the image of learning disability and challenging who has the right to represent learning disability narratives.

Rancière says the image becomes political when connections are forged between 'mediums' which creates newness and invention.¹³⁰ By claiming space in contexts from which learning-disabled people have historically been excluded, and by recontextualising cinematic techniques and aesthetics to produce new meanings, Kennedy and Hellett engage in an aesthetics practice which renders their work political to those who can find common ground. Echoing Azoulay's points above,

¹²⁶ Jacques Rancière, and Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London, New York, New Delhi, Oxford and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2013, 8

¹²⁷ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8

¹²⁸ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 9

¹²⁹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 10

¹³⁰ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 11-12

this, Rancière argues, is how politics becomes 'sensible' - or understood through the senses - through community contexts and engagement with others. This relates to arguments posed all throughout this thesis; in Chapter Four through the use of cinematic techniques to both challenge objectivity and foreground subjectivity, in Chapter Five through considering the real and imagined future community through curation and archiving, in Chapter Six through performative subjectivity which presupposes futurity and in Chapter Seven through amateurism which celebrates queer failure. Unlike in traditional understandings of visual activism, none of this is explicitly stated by Kennedy and Hellett, but it is inferred through subtle aesthetics, where meaning is produced by the senses of the targeted spectators.

I will expand upon this theme of visual activism as radical aesthetics in the next section where I outline the body of knowledge which led me to argue in Chapters Four-Seven that Kennedy and Hellett have established a neuroqueer aesthetics. I posit that it is not just what the visual *shows* that is radical but it is also the *ways* in which something is shown that has radical potential for offering counter-representations to disrupt the 'status quo',¹³¹ as Bryan-Wilson et al phrase it.

2.4: The intersection of disability and gender/sexuality and defining 'neuroqueer'

Writing in the context of disability and embodiment, Shildrick (2009) posits, 'sex is not something that bodies engage in, or in which subjects seek an identity: it is what constitutes us as embodied selves'.¹³² Egner (2019) notes 'disabled people are frequently de-gendered and de-sexualized in media, popular imagination, and research'.¹³³ From the earliest moments of the Disability Rights Movement, attention was paid to the sexual rights of disabled people and this recognition of the disabled body as *embodied*. One of the first and oft-cited large scale interventions into this debate was the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Disability* (Shakespeare et al, 1996) which notes that by the mid-1990s in the UK there was 'quite an industry producing work around the issue of sexuality and disability', but that it was an

¹³¹ Bryan-Wilson et al, "Editors' Introduction," 6

¹³² Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009, 126

¹³³ J.E. Egner, "'The Disability Rights Community was Never Mine': Neuroqueer Disidentification," *Gender & Society* 33.1 (2019), 125

industry controlled by professionals and medical practitioners, with the disabled experience almost always absent.¹³⁴ *The Sexual Politics of Disability* represents an intervention by collecting first-hand perspectives from disabled people, in their own words, printed mostly verbatim. Participants speak of the barriers that they face to their sexual rights, but the text also foregrounds the ways in which these barriers are resisted and challenged. While valuable as an early attempt to capture such personal experiences, Shakespeare et al recognise the limitations of their study as being 'at best a cross section of the disabled community',¹³⁵ and identify the absence of 'older disabled people, disabled young people, black and ethnic minority disabled people, and people with learning disabilities', who they say 'have not adequately been represented within our research'.¹³⁶

In relation to their use of verbatim first-hand accounts, Shakespeare et al note in their introductory paragraph that 'no book of this kind has previously been available',¹³⁷ however predating *The Sexual Politics of Disability* by two years, and cited in its bibliography, is Schwier's 1994 text *Couples with Intellectual Disabilities Talk about Living and Loving* which also offers verbatim first-hand experiences. The difference between the two texts is that Schwier does not explicitly engage with the politics of disability and sexuality as Shakespeare et al do, but instead amplifies the voices of the couples entirely.

Fraser (2018) differentiates the first wave of disability studies as that which 'focused above all else on the physical body and constructions of able-bodiedness', and notes a shift to what he suggests could be known as a second-wave of disability studies which is 'more willing to explore cognition and constructions of able-mindedness'.¹³⁸ My own research would fit into this model of a second wave of disability studies by focusing on learning disability, which can be interpreted as a minority within the minority of disability studies, as exemplified by Shakespeare et al's admitted omission of learning disability experiences from their project.

¹³⁴ Shakespeare et al, *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, 4

¹³⁵ Shakespeare et al, *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, 12

¹³⁶ Shakespeare et al, *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, 12

¹³⁷ Shakespeare et al, *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, 1

¹³⁸ Benjamin Fraser, *Cognitive Disability Aesthetics: Visual Culture, Disability Representations, and the (In)Visibility of Cognitive Difference*, Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2018, 3

Predating *The Sexual Politics of Disability* by almost twenty years, the journal *Sexuality and Disability* was founded in 1978, and while predominantly publishing articles related to physical disabilities, has published more than two hundred articles to date related to learning disability and sexuality. Likely the ‘industry’ to which Shakespeare et al refer to above, the articles published in *Sexuality and Disability* often originate from an educational, professional, social policy or familial perspective, but they are comprehensive in geographical breadth including research from, but not limited to, South Africa, China, Malaysia and Nigeria. *Sexuality and Disability* has paid increasing attention to queer sexualities in the last two decades, with a notable article by O’Toole (2000) whose participants noted, ‘there is a presumption of heterosexuality unless something is done to contest it, but with disabled women it’s doubly assumed [...] and if people *do* see that people with disabilities can be sexual—they usually assume we’re all straight. GLBT people with disabilities are invisible’.¹³⁹ Tremain (2000) argued that this assumption of heterosexuality is pervasive not just within general society but also within disabled sexuality studies.¹⁴⁰ Abbott and Howarth (2005) addressed this lack of attention to queer sexualities, focusing on the experiences of British youths and drawing attention to the ableism their participants experienced within queer social contexts.¹⁴¹

O’Toole (2000) notes that in addition to the myth of heterosexuality, the myth of assumed asexuality is also pervasive, as is its opposite, the myth of assumed hypersexuality, both of which come to be seen as part of a disabled person’s pathology.¹⁴² This context is significant to my research as it supports my arguments throughout this thesis that the films of Kennedy and Hellett allow us to see learning disability in new queer ways. If people with learning disabilities are represented in media, it is always, until very recently, under the assumption of asexuality, and almost never in the context of queerness. Section 2.2 explored cultural representations of disability, but scant literature exists which interrogates these

¹³⁹ Participants qtd. in Corbett Joan O’Toole, “The View from Below: Developing a Knowledge Base About an Unknown Population,” *Sexuality and Disability* 18.3 (Sep 2000), 201

¹⁴⁰ Shelley Tremain, “Queering Disabled Sexuality Studies,” *Sexuality and Disability* 18.4 (2000), 283

¹⁴¹ D.W.F. Abbott and J. Howarth. *Secret Loves, Hidden Lives? Exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2005.

¹⁴² O’Toole, “The View from Below,” 210

representations in the context of sexuality. Block (2000) proves to be a rare exception in her examination of twentieth century media representations of women with 'cognitive disabilities', drawing particular attention to the film *The Other Sister* (dir. Marshall, 1999) which features Juliette Lewis and Giovanni Ribisi as two people with learning disabilities who fall in love and become sexually active. Block's example of *The Other Sister* challenges the stereotypes O'Toole highlights such as that of learning-disabled women being asexual or learning-disabled men being hypersexual.¹⁴³ In his 2015 text *Already Doing It: Intellectual Disability and Sexual Agency*, Gill traces the history which underpins these stereotypes and assumptions. Exposing the sexual ableism (in US contexts) which denies the sexual agency of people with 'intellectual disabilities',¹⁴⁴ Gill also highlights how these people, as the title suggests, are refusing these barriers and are having sex anyway.

In the last decade, a wealth of literature has emerged exploring the relationship between learning disability and/or autism and gender variance, predominantly in the context of clinical or medical discourses. This is a research area fraught with political motivations driven by an ideology that sees trans as pathological, and is a discourse that I do not intend my research to contribute to. I highlight it here by way of context, but I do not want to reproduce it by citing any references.

Aside from medical and professional literature, the majority of literature emerging at the intersection of disability and queerness more broadly is from the perspective of memoir, self/advocacy or self-help (Liddiard, 2019; Mendes and Maroney, 2019; Dale, 2019; Ekins, 2021). Clare (1999) offers one of the first and significant memoirs to deal with this intersection. Self-described as 'queer',¹⁴⁵ 'a gimp, a cripp, disabled with cerebral palsy',¹⁴⁶ Clare illuminates the concurrencies between disabled and queer oppression and how both communities have reclaimed

¹⁴³ Pamela Block Sexuality, Fertility, and Danger: Twentieth-Century Images of Women with Cognitive Disabilities. *Sexuality and Disability*; New York Vol. 18, Iss. 4, (Dec 2000): 239-254. ProQuest 18 Apr 18 - Page 241

¹⁴⁴ Michael Gill, *Already Doing It: Intellectual Disability and Sexual Agency*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015

¹⁴⁵ Eli Clare, *Exile & Pride: Disability, Queerness and Liberation*, Cambridge, South End Press, 1999, 29

¹⁴⁶ Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 2

particular words such as 'crip' and 'queer' as celebratory and disarming, but notes the complexity and messiness of such reclamation as being subjective and dependent upon one's personal histories and experiences.¹⁴⁷ Clare offers the example of the word 'freak' as unsettling to them personally due to their experiences of feeling that the hospital is the modern freak show.¹⁴⁸ Clare offers a deeply personal perspective of disability and queerness, drawing on personal memories and idealisms dating back to childhood, but in doing so illuminates the complexities of intersectional identities and identification. These complexities are pertinent to my research because Kennedy and Hellett do not identify in the same ways with regards to gender and sexuality, so this knowledge has shaped the ways in which I tease out meaning throughout their work. Kennedy's visual expression of their 'queer femme'-ness differs from that of Hellett's expression of being a gay man who has a drag alter ego, not to mention how generic a term 'learning disability' is. To assume that because both identify under an umbrella term of 'queer' and 'learning-disabled' that they share an identical lived experience would be simplistic and essentialist. Furthermore, this does not take into consideration class, race, age or geography, which is particularly significant for future research when thinking of this queerness and disability beyond the work of Kennedy and Hellett.

Kafer (2013) explores futurity, highlighting the contradiction of the dominant narratives of disability being either a pitiable misfortune or that which positions ableism as an obstacle to a good life'.¹⁴⁹ Kafer instead imagines more accessible futures 'in which disability is understood otherwise: as political, as valuable, as integral'.¹⁵⁰ My research in Chapters Five and Six contribute to this idea of a disability futurity by exploring Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking in the context of imagined spectators and audiences which affirm and encourage participation. This moves beyond, whilst not denying, the dominant narrative of ableism creating obstacles by foregrounding how ableism is refused through action.

¹⁴⁷ Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 93

¹⁴⁸ Clare, *Exile and Pride*, 94

¹⁴⁹ Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013, 2

¹⁵⁰ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 3

Kafer's text, simply named *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, positions her project within and across three intersecting disciplines; feminism, queer studies and crip studies. I will expand upon crip theory in more detail in Chapter Three, but briefly as a concept, crip theory differs from disability studies in orientation and aim. As Kafer notes, 'crip theory is more contestatory than disability studies, more willing to explore the potential risks and exclusions of identity politics',¹⁵¹ which, she notes paradoxically, has shaped the disability rights movement. One of the main appeals of, or problems with, crip theory, depending on your position, is the expansiveness of the term, which Sandahl notes has expanded to include those it did not originally define, i.e. those with 'sensory' or 'mental impairment,' as well as physical.¹⁵² Halperin has also noted this expansiveness as being either a positive or negative related to the word 'queer'.¹⁵³ Kafer suggests 'this inclusiveness is often more hope than reality'¹⁵⁴ and that 'crip pride or crip politics often explicitly address only physical impairments'.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, inspired by Davis's concept of the 'temporarily able',¹⁵⁶ crip has also been adopted by writers and activists without any identifiable impairment, meaning in theory, anyone can be crip. I would add how this disidentification approach, while inclusive in intent, ignores the material realities for people with impairment. In her project, Kafer calls for a moving beyond crip, for 'critical attempts to trace the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity'.¹⁵⁷ Kafer does not use the term directly, but her call seems to be addressed by the recent emergence of the project 'neuroqueer'.

Walker (2015) notes on their blog *NeuroQueer.com* that they, along with Elizabeth J. (Ibby) Grace and Michael Scott Monje Jr. coined the term neuroqueer independently but simultaneously. They also cite Yergeau (2018) as being an originator of the concept in reference to their text *Authoring Autism: on rhetoric and*

¹⁵¹ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 15

¹⁵² Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9.1-2 (2003), 27 qtd. in Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 15

¹⁵³ Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 64

¹⁵⁴ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 15

¹⁵⁵ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 16

¹⁵⁶ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xv

¹⁵⁷ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 17

neurological queerness.¹⁵⁸ The tagline for the *NeuroQueer* blog reads ‘queering our neurodivergence, neurodiversifying our queer’,¹⁵⁹ which offers a simple definition of the concept. All four originators worked on pinning down a definition, which Walker published on the blog. There are various ways to understand neuroqueering, one of which on the blog reads like the disidentification inherent in crip theory and that scholars such as Bone (2017) critique:

Engaging in the “queering” of one’s own neurocognitive processes (and one’s outward embodiment and expression of those processes) by intentionally altering them in ways that create significant and lasting increase in one’s divergence from dominant neurological, cognitive, and behavioral norms.¹⁶⁰

So here anyone can be neuroqueer if they deliberately alter or ‘queer’ their cognition. I accept one can neuroqueer their approach to how they think about cognition, to think more inclusively, but I am sceptical as to how one can increase divergence from a neurological or cognitive norm. While I agree with Bone’s critique of such disidentification as an attempt at solidarity, and argue that neuroqueer seemingly falls into the same pattern, I do find some productive uses for the term and concept as speaking to the intersection of queerness and learning disability that queer theory alone, and crip theory cannot.

Walker describes neuroqueer as ‘both a verb and an adjective’ which is similar to queer/ing in that sense; that one can be neuroqueer and one can neuroqueer. Walker notes that being neuroqueer involves ‘being both neurodivergent and queer, with some degree of conscious awareness and/or active exploration around how these two aspects of one’s identity intersect and interact’.¹⁶¹ Yergeau notes the *NeuroQueer* blog ‘emerged from digital communities of autistic and other neurodivergent people,’ which they refer to as ‘the autistic blogosphere,’ where autistic people ‘narrate their lives, communities, cultures, and ways of being in the world’ and which can be read as a ‘neuroqueer mode of engaging, resisting,

¹⁵⁸ Nick Walker, “Neuroqueer: An Introduction, by Nick Walker,” *NeuroQueer*, 4 May 2015. 16 July 2020.

¹⁵⁹ NeuroQueer [nd]

¹⁶⁰ Walker, “Neuroqueer: An Introduction”

¹⁶¹ Walker, “Neuroqueer: An Introduction”

claiming, and contrasting the interstices of sociality'.¹⁶² Kennedy's now defunct blog could perhaps be filed under this description. Neuroqueer is a 'relatively new' term and an entirely 'web-based invention'¹⁶³ Yergeau notes (in 2018). Neuroqueer subjects are described by Yergeau as 'verbed forms',¹⁶⁴ in much the same way that queer is used as a verb, and that the project is characterised by a resistance to norms which can be recognised as a possible 'disability rhetoric'.¹⁶⁵ Yergeau notes the movement has transformed 'a diagnostic category into a neuroqueer culture that extends beyond the mere-ness of autism and embraces a plurality of queer/crip experiences, personas and performances'.¹⁶⁶ This resistance to pathology includes the term 'Allism', coined in 2003 as a diagnostic term for nonautism to pose the suggestion that not having autism could have its disadvantages.¹⁶⁷

While I want to acknowledge the genealogy of the term neuroqueer as emerging from what Yergeau calls 'autistic culture',¹⁶⁸ I used the term more broadly in its wider meaning of neurological queerness. The language associated with the neuroqueer movement is heavily focused on autism, for example, neuroqueer narratives are often referred to as 'autistexts' or anti-ethnography¹⁶⁹ by Yergeau, which is fun wordplay but speaks only to a specific form of neurodivergence – autism. Moreover, Yergeau draws on examples of 'the flap of a hand or the fluttering of a wrist'¹⁷⁰ or 'meltdowns'¹⁷¹ as rhetorical acts, all of which are specifically associated with autism. I do not know the specific diagnoses of Kennedy and Hellett beyond their identification with the term learning disability. Autism is not technically a learning disability, but in UK contexts it is often included under the 'learning disability' umbrella. It would be disingenuous to draw on this type of language that, like crip theory in its preoccupation with physical disability, speaks to a very particular form of neurodivergence which I cannot be sure speaks to the subjects of this research.

¹⁶² Melanie Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: on rhetoric and neurological queerness*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018, 23

¹⁶³ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 27

¹⁶⁴ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 27

¹⁶⁵ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 27

¹⁶⁶ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 67

¹⁶⁷ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 168-169

¹⁶⁸ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 23

¹⁶⁹ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 24

¹⁷⁰ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 24

¹⁷¹ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 176

Therefore I use the term neuroqueer throughout this research as a framework which encapsulates the intersection of neurodivergence and queerness, but also in the radical verbing sense that it resists cultural norms.

Yergeau's project challenges the notion of neurodivergence in general, and particularly neurodivergent narrative, as being characterised by lack, a lack of narrative structure or coherence, a lack of audience awareness or a lack of self-reflection.¹⁷² This understanding of neuroqueerness speaks to my project by foregrounding the work of Kennedy and Hellett as their gesture of refusal. Like my arguments explicitly made in Chapter Seven regarding a rejection of the art-as-therapy agenda, the neuroqueer project subverts 'medicalized storytelling' of neurodivergence, which as Yergeau notes is a challenge to the concept of the involuntariness associated with neurodivergence.¹⁷³ Like Yergeau's neuroqueer project which foregrounds a shift in perception of passivity to action, my own neuroqueer project maps the shift in disability representation from object to subject. Ultimately the neuroqueer project is about agency and a challenge to medical and cultural discourses on queerness and disability.¹⁷⁴ Neuroqueerness queers 'the contours of diagnosis' and resists the 'cultural inscriptions' of autism diagnoses.¹⁷⁵ Drawing on Muñozian ideas of queerness as futurity, Yergeau posits that 'autistic stories are, at root, queer stories',¹⁷⁶ and that neurodivergence is 'a kind of neurological queering'.¹⁷⁷ So in this sense, Yergeau's neuroqueer differs from the *NeuroQueer* blog's neuroqueer in that it is not necessarily just related to queerness as it can be understood as non-normative gender and/or sexual expression, but as in the verb to queer from any notion of normalcy. Clearly neuroqueer as a term is contested ground and is still somewhat open to interpretation.

I argue that the term neuroqueer can be applied to the work of Kennedy and Hellett because both filmmakers have actively spoken to the ways in which their gender, sexuality and learning disability position them as minorities and people who

¹⁷² Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 7

¹⁷³ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 7

¹⁷⁴ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 26

¹⁷⁵ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 24

¹⁷⁶ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 18

¹⁷⁷ Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*, 27

experience marginalisation, even within queer contexts.¹⁷⁸ I will argue their work not only queers disability imagery, but that it *neuroqueers* disability imagery by refusing the discourses surrounding both disability and queerness. Their work represents a shift from object to subject and from passive to active, their work demonstrates neuroqueer agency, it is transformative and draws on a unique visual and verbal vocabulary to challenge the concept of queer or disabled lack. This demonstrates a consciousness of this intersection and their filmmaking represents the 'active exploration' of such by offering a visual expression of how the two aspects of their identities - their respective queerness and disability - intersect and interact.

Egner (2019) notes,

Work at the intersections of gender, sexuality, disability, and neurodiversity from neuroqueer perspectives is required to not only refine crip and intersectional theoretical models but also to consider implications for the complex lived experiences at these intersections.¹⁷⁹

So as Egner highlights, neuroqueer as a project intersects with gender and sexuality studies, disability studies and 'neurodiversity' (a 'paradigm/politic/movement that recognizes the diversity of human neurology'¹⁸⁰) and importantly it considers lived experience, which crip theory often does not.¹⁸¹ Neuroqueer therefore is 'a queer/crip response to normative discussions about gender, sexuality, and disability as pathology'.¹⁸² Echoing Yergeau, Smilges (2021) states that it 'has long been established in disability scholarship that neurodivergent people are often denied agency or the ability to think about and for themselves',¹⁸³ and suggests that a neuroqueer approach asks, 'how does neurodivergence affect meaning-making?'¹⁸⁴ This is relevant to my research and moves beyond queer theory to understand how the intersection of queerness *and* learning disability produces new meaning and

¹⁷⁸ "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation," Carousel. YouTube. 27 Oct 2016.

¹⁷⁹ Egner, "The Disability Rights Community was Never Mine", 125

¹⁸⁰ Egner, "The Disability Rights Community was Never Mine", 124

¹⁸¹ K.M. Bone, "Trapped behind the glass: crip theory and disability identity," *Disability & Society* 32.9 (2017), 1304.

¹⁸² Egner, "The Disability Rights Community was Never Mine", 124

¹⁸³ J. Logan. Smilges, "Neuroqueer Literacies; or, Against Able-Reading," *College Composition and Communication* 73.1 (2021), 114

¹⁸⁴ Smilges, "Neuroqueer Literacies," 107

confronts the issue of who has the right to produce meaning by questioning both heteronormativity and ableism. I address this broadly across the whole thesis but more explicitly in Chapter Seven when I argue Kennedy and Hellett's work challenges the art-as-therapy agenda within learning disability contexts and foreground their claims to creative agency. As Shildrick notes, 'it is hardly surprising, then, that where disabled people have been so often treated as passive objects of concern, rather than as subjects in their own right, the question of self-directed agency should become a political issue'.¹⁸⁵ This also relates to my contribution to the field of visual activism by considering this context of agency as part of the refusal, or activism, inherent in Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking.

My research contributes to the emerging field of neuroqueer studies by arguing that Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking represents a visual representation of neuroqueerness. Through the use of cinematic techniques and amateur approaches and aesthetics which hold queer and neurodivergent connotations, I argue Kennedy and Hellett establish a language of neuroqueer aesthetics by expanding on such techniques and approaches to produce new (neuroqueer) meanings when both the intersection of queerness and neurodivergence/learning disability is considered as one. A Google search of 'neuroqueer aesthetics' produced just one result, a journal article which undertook a neuroqueer reading of the 1982 film *Blade Runner*.¹⁸⁶ A Google search of 'neuroqueer aesthetic' produced just six results, one of which was the aforementioned reading of *Blade Runner*, the rest, the PhD thesis of the author of the *Blade Runner* article,¹⁸⁷ a book review of Yergeau (2018) and Rodas (2018),¹⁸⁸ a defunct Tumblr hashtag search, a book listing for Rodas (2018), and finally reference to a scholar's supervision of an MFA project on neuroqueering heritage.¹⁸⁹ My research therefore offers the first articulation of what a neuroqueer aesthetics looks like when produced by people who identify as operating at the

¹⁸⁵ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, 7

¹⁸⁶ David Hartley, "'Is this to be an empathy test?': Autism and neuroqueer expression in *Blade Runner* (1982)," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 1.2 (summer 2022): 123-144.

¹⁸⁷ David Hartley, "The Fantastic Autistic: Divergence, Estrangement, and The Neuroqueer Screen in *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (2007) and *Community* (2009-2015)," *Academia* [nd]

¹⁸⁸ Michael Bérubé, "AUTISM AESTHETICS," *Public Books*, 23 Sep 2019.

¹⁸⁹ "Researcher: Dr Bianca Hester." *UNSW Sydney*. [nd]. Web. 17 Aug 2022.
<https://research.unsw.edu.au/people/dr-bianca-hester>

intersection of queerness and learning disability, rather than neuroqueer being attributed to readings of other, historical work.

2.5: Defining amateurism

As Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking sits on the margins, this section draws on amateur film studies to position Kennedy and Hellett in opposition to professional (dominant) film discourse. Traditional amateur film scholarship engages with definitions of the amateur/professional divide and dictates that amateurism is something either enforced on film enthusiasts due to lack of skill, leisure time or funds, *or* embraced by avant-garde and experimental filmmakers as a subversive strategy and process of unlearning. Despite the nuances that are teased out in this section where scholars attempt to refine the amateur/professional divide, I have perceived a distinct lack of consideration that amateurism can be both imposed *and* embraced. The narrative that will emerge in this section is that there is typically a process that is understood within amateur film studies that one either starts off as an amateur and strives towards professionalisation, or that one unlearns their professional training as a subversive embracement of amateurism. In Chapter Seven I argue that Kennedy and Hellett as filmmakers challenge this amateur/professional binary by doing both – they *embrace* the amateurism which is *imposed* upon them as a deliberate gesture of refusal of professional/canonical standard and the pressures of external expectation. However, I also posit in Chapter Seven that by working with arts organisations to produce their films through the provision of technical skills and funding, Kennedy and Hellett complicate the amateur/professional divide by straddling both through their collaborative working. This contributes new knowledge to the field of amateur film studies by moving beyond the refinement of the amateur/professional divide to show how both work together.

The majority of scholarship on amateur film studies is concerned with pinning down a firm definition of what it is, a task Fox (2004) understands is fraught with difficulty. 'Ask someone for a concrete definition', he notes, 'and rarely do they respond with an answer of what amateurism *is*, constructing a meaning, instead, in terms of what it is *not*—not sophisticated, not technically adept, not pretty or

polished, not of popular interest, or perhaps most frequently and opaquely, “not professional”.¹⁹⁰

American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren’s oft-cited article “Amateur vs Professional” (1965) is one of the first such attempts to confront the negative tones and, what she calls the ‘apologetic ring’, which has typically surrounded the term ‘amateur film’. Illuminating the etymology of the word ‘amateur’, Deren traces its roots to the Latin word ‘amator’ which translates as ‘lover’. This, Deren states, ‘means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity’.¹⁹¹ Deren published this article in defence of the amateur, which she believed to be more artistically expressive and free than the professional filmmaker who has other concerns and compromises to consider when payment for work is involved. For Deren therefore, the distinction between amateur and professional is an economic one; amateur film is made for love and pleasure, professional film for commercial success and monetary return. This is a position shared by Shand (2013) who describes amateur filmmakers as ‘lone workers’ who make films that are ‘made for love not profit’.¹⁹² They are films that have ‘fallen off the cultural radar’ and they are rarely recognised in traditional film histories which prioritise commercial and professional film as being more valid of research.¹⁹³

Zimmermann (1995) shares these aims of disrupting traditional histories, noting amateur and home movies occupy the underside of commercial film as they are located in the everyday.¹⁹⁴ Zimmermann interrogates the distinction in greater detail, noting the ‘professional vs amateur’ argument conceals more complex social relations and is historically and socially located. Described as a ‘covering term for the complex power relations defining amateur filmmaking’,¹⁹⁵ Zimmerman suggests ‘amateur’ is a ‘political definition located more specifically within its social relations to dominant cinematic practices, ideologies and economic structures, rather than in its

¹⁹⁰ Broderick Fox, "Rethinking the Amateur: Editor's Introduction," *Spectator* 24.1 (Spring 2004), 5

¹⁹¹ Maya Deren, "Amateur vs Professional," *Essential Deren: collected writings on film*, New York: Kingston, 2005.

¹⁹² Shand, "Introduction," 1

¹⁹³ Shand, "Introduction," 1

¹⁹⁴ Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, x

¹⁹⁵ Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, x

presumed textual innocence'.¹⁹⁶ So while she agrees that amateur filmmaking is not only defined by its aesthetic or technical qualities, but by economics, she suggests it is more complex and is related to what it is not, rather than what it is. Building on the work of Jürgen Habermas,¹⁹⁷ Zimmermann defines amateur film through its 'social distance from professional film', which relates to 'specialisation of technique, technical rules, skills acquisition, extension of market control and power'; all of which she summarises as the 'rise of the expert'.¹⁹⁸

Significantly, a number of amateur filmmaking magazines (often produced by film studios) emerged during the first half of the twentieth century which placed great emphasis on the development of skills and acquiring better equipment to enable filmmakers to move from amateur to professional. Regarding this 'rise of the expert', Zimmermann proposes it disrupts the traditional distinction between private/amateur and public/professional as 'the acquisition of technical skills promotes stratification'.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, if the once-amateur is not paid but has access to professional equipment and masters the technical skills and plays by the rules of dominant representation standardisation, they can be elevated beyond their economic position and become part of the professional/dominant discourse by perpetuating it,²⁰⁰ at the expense of autonomous individual or collective expression. This is significant to my research because I challenge this assumption that the acquisition of skills or equipment equates to stratification from amateur to professional. I posit instead that access to funding, equipment and skills through collaborative working can give the impression of a more professionally-produced film, but that fundamentally the work was approached as amateur in its rejection of expectation and standard.

Chalfen (1982) defines amateur filmmaking as being typically produced by non-professional photographers using inexpensive and mass-produced equipment, though he adds that the sophistication of the camera or the photographer is less

¹⁹⁶ Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, xxi

¹⁹⁷ Habermas, Jürgen, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *New German Critique* 3 (Fall 1974): 49-55 paraphrased in Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, 1-2

¹⁹⁸ Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, 1-2

¹⁹⁹ Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, 3

²⁰⁰ Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, 2

significant than the 'communicative use of the imagery'.²⁰¹ Chalfen's definition is less concerned with technical features or monetary payment, but is based on the social characteristics and function of the film, which are predominantly centred on the family and familial events. This relates to arguments posed in Chapter Five which foregrounds the 'social characteristics' as Chalfen terms it as the location of the refusal gesture, i.e. the contexts in which a work is made and shared which contributes to its meaning.

Moran (2002) argues for the economic distinction of amateur film, rather than as a generic label for technology and aesthetics. Moran believes 'amateur film' as an economic distinction should serve as an umbrella term for any non-industrial media practice, a 'set of preferred characteristics that ultimately set sub-modes of amateur practice against each other'.²⁰² Moran complicates the typical 'for love or payment' distinction and Zimmermann's 'rise of the expert' by using the example of the wedding videographer. More often than not, the wedding videographer is paid for their work, so it ought to technically fall into the professional/industrial category, but often the equipment used, the expertise of the camera operator and the final results can be indistinguishable from the unpaid amateur film they simulate.²⁰³ So it is difficult to distinguish the wedding videographer as amateur or professional as they are working for money not love, but are not necessarily technically skilled, and so their status remains arbitrary.

Craven (2009) further problematises the overly simplistic binary of amateur and professional by drawing on leisure theory to consider the amateur filmmaker as either the serious or casual amateur. Craven draws on the work of Robert Stebbins who has written extensively on the amateur in the sociological context of leisure from the late 1970s through the early 1980s. Craven summarises Stebbins by noting the casual amateur activity is the domain of the player, dabbler or novice and remains 'fleeting, mundane and commonplace', whereas the serious amateur's activities 'assume many of the attributes of paid employment undertaken on professional

²⁰¹ Richard Chalfen, "Home Movies as Cultural Documents," Ed. Sari Thomas, *Film/Culture: Explorations of Cinema in its Social Context*, Metuchen and London: Scarecrow Press, 1982, 127

²⁰² James M. Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Movie*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, xviii

²⁰³ Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Movie*, xix

terms, whilst remaining non-remunerative'.²⁰⁴ This in itself is an economic distinction as the difference between the casual and serious amateur will likely be determined by the amount of time and money they are able to invest in the activity, which is related to the many factors such as employment status and income, all of which are also frequently gendered.

Tepperman (2013) continues to unpick the nuance of the amateur category by offering the title of the 'advanced amateur', which he differentiates from the home movie-maker. The advanced amateur encompasses individuals that treat amateur filmmaking as a serious hobby and produce personal, experimental, and documentary filmmaking. These qualities distinguish the advanced amateur from home movie-makers by undertaking pre- and post-production work on their films, as opposed to the typical 'point-and-shoot' filming of the home movie-maker. The advanced amateur develops sophisticated technical and aesthetic strategies, and joins or becomes associated with relevant filmmaking organisations and national and international competitions for amateur work.²⁰⁵ Tepperman's definition encompasses Craven's understanding of the 'serious' amateur who invests time in their work and Zimmermann's suggestion that the amateur more closely aligns to the professional ('advanced') once their technical skills and aesthetic concerns increase.

Craven and Tepperman's research has guided my own thinking when considering the disability status of learning-disabled filmmakers because their circumstances complicate Craven and Tepperman's arguments. The Nuffield Trust reported that 'the proportion of adults with a learning disability in paid employment has decreased over time, from 6.0% in 2014/15 to a low of 5.1% in 2020/21'.²⁰⁶ This would suggest that filmmakers with learning disabilities have more leisure time to dedicate to their practice, but less funds to realise it. Also, the use of pre- and post-production work is heavily dependent on access to training and funding and does not consider those who want to undertake this work but cannot. Amateur film studies has

²⁰⁴ Ian Craven, "Introduction," Ed. Ian Craven, *Movies on Home Ground: explorations in amateur cinema*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2009, 8

²⁰⁵ Charles Tepperman, "Color Unlimited: Amateur Color Cinema in the 1930s," Ed. Brown et al, *Color and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 138-139

²⁰⁶ "Supporting people in employment," *Nuffield Trust*, [nd]

paid significant attention to the gendered distinctions of the practice but there is a distinct lack of attention paid to how disabled people are disproportionately affected and which complicates distinctions that rely on economics. My research presents new knowledge to the field by complicating these debates.

The most significant characteristic to problematise the amateur/professional distinction is the increasing prevalence of digital technology. As Fox asked in 2004, with ‘the present digital revolution poised to make every desktop computer a potential site for film/video editing, web and CD/DVD-ROM design, and routes of alternative distribution, are traditional amateur/professional divides being blurred, or rendered obsolete?’²⁰⁷ Since Fox posed this question, digital technologies have advanced far beyond the need even for desktop computers with the proliferation of smart camera phones and 5G cellular network which allows short films to be recorded, edited and uploaded to sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Vimeo within a matter of minutes.

Shand notes that academic writing on both amateur cinema and digital media ‘has proceeded along parallel, yet rarely intersecting paths’.²⁰⁸ He contrasts the study of amateur cinema which had mostly focused on the past, with the study of digital media which prioritises contemporary filmmakers. He notes that ‘despite the potential for overlapping debates, most studies of these practices make little reference to writing on the other topic’.²⁰⁹ Motrescu-Mayes and Aasman (2019) attempt to bridge this divide by asking, ‘how do we understand amateur media in the age of YouTube culture?’,²¹⁰ by drawing on examples of YouTube content makers whose work straddles both private and public filmmaking. This raises the question if the amateur work of YouTubers and those uploading content to other social media platforms still constitutes amateur filmmaking. My research orbits around this question but it is not within the scope of this thesis to address it. Kennedy and Hellett

²⁰⁷ Fox, "Rethinking the Amateur," 5

²⁰⁸ Ryan Shand, "*Amateur media and participatory cultures: film, video, and digital media*: ANNAMARIA MOTRESCU-MAYES and SUSAN AASMAN, 2019 Abingdon and Oxon, Routledge pp. xiii + 164, illus., £120.00 (cloth), £34.99 (paper)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 41.1 (Mar 2021), 207

²⁰⁹ Shand, "*Amateur media and participatory cultures: film, video, and digital media*," 207-208

²¹⁰ Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Susan Aasman, *Amateur Media and Participatory Cultures: Film, Video, and Digital Media*, London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 45

are not particularly engaged in social media, so although their content is available on YouTube and Vimeo, it is used more as a repository than a networking tool.

Amateur film is undeniably more accessible to an ever-increasing global public²¹¹ and is no longer confined to weekly cine clubs, home viewings or sporadic showings at festivals.²¹² Rascaroli et al (2014) acknowledge the subversive potential of such digital distribution networks and technological advancements as resisting, or at least questioning, long-established power structures and ideological hierarchies of filmmaking networks.²¹³ This also relates to Donovan's research (detailed in section 2.3) into the radical potential of LGBTQ films festivals as mediated spaces of community. Where screen representation has traditionally always been in the hands of the film and TV studio, accessible digital equipment and social media platforms have allowed filmmakers to circumvent these traditional distribution networks, who can now have their films on screen in minutes.

With regard to digital equipment, scant literature exists on disability and filmmaking, and the majority of literature that does exist focuses on animation, particularly mainstream animation which features disabled characters (Cheu, 2015; Norris, 2019), much like the majority of disability representation reviewed in section 2.2. More recent literature explores the potential of animation as a communicative or advocacy tool for people with learning disabilities to explore complex issues (Brock and Rajinder, 2011; Eckersley, 2017). Amateur film historians position animation as a 'persistent strand of non-professional cine activity in Britain since [...] the 1920s'²¹⁴ and animation scholars such as Silvio (2010) and Herhuth (2016) have explored the political and radical potential of animation as a site of agency. Greenberg's forthcoming text *Animated Film and Disability: Crippling Spectatorship* (2023) promises to focus 'not only on representations of internal psychological worlds and conditions but also the subjective viewpoints of people with disabilities' by analysing

²¹¹ Rascaroli et al (eds), *Amateur Filmmaking: The Home Movie, the Archive, the Web*, London, New York, New Delhi, Oxford and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2014, 1

²¹² Rascaroli et al, *Amateur Filmmaking*, 2

²¹³ Rascaroli et al, *Amateur Filmmaking*, 2

²¹⁴ Chalke, Sheila. "Animated Explorations: The Grasshopper Group 1953-1983," Ed. Ian Craven, *Movies on Home Ground*, 240

'30 animated works that represent disabled characters',²¹⁵ including those made by people with disabilities themselves. Despite Kennedy using animation for two of their films (*Versions*, 2015 [not analysed in this thesis] and *Enid and Valerie*, 2018), discussions into the politics of animation is beyond the scope of this research. It is a medium with clear transgressive potential as Greenberg highlights, and as an emerging field of studies in the context of neurodiversity, I have identified in Chapter Eight that it requires further research.

In the context of increasing social media platforms, the rise of YouTube and Instagram influencer culture, the amateur/professional divide is further-disrupted when considering the vast remunerative potential of 'follows', 'views' and 'likes' on such platforms, where content creators record, edit and upload amateur images in minutes for monetary gain and to attract lucrative sponsorship deals. In fact, the more amateur and spontaneous the film the better in these contexts because they are perceived to be more authentic by the audience.²¹⁶ However Rodriguez (2022) cautions against 'uncritical celebrations' of platforms such as YouTube which he argues 'privately discriminates against LGBTQ users creating content about queer sex education, lesbian sexuality, and transgender identity—topics in conflict with advertising and community guidelines'.²¹⁷ This discrimination manifests as 'demonetization, age restriction, video deletion, account termination, and harassment facilitation'.²¹⁸ Similarly, Are (2021) draws attention to the practice of 'shadowbanning', a user-generated term for Instagram's 'vaguely inappropriate content' policy which moderates nudity through dramatically reduced visibility of the post or suspension of the offending account. Are notes how this is a heavily gendered practice which is well-known amongst app users for censoring female, but not male nipples.²¹⁹ Duguay et al (2020) analysed the governance of Tinder Instagram and Vine and noticed that the flagging mechanisms which are used to enact the type of shadowbanning Are describes above do not protect queer women

²¹⁵ Slava Greenberg, *Animated Film and Disability: Crippling Spectatorship*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, (forthcoming) 2023.

²¹⁶ Vilma Luoma-aho et al, "Primed Authenticity: How Priming Impacts Authenticity Perception of Social Media Influencers," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13.4 (2019), 352

²¹⁷ J.A. Rodriguez, "LGBTQ Incorporated: YouTube and the Management of Diversity," *Journal of Homosexuality* (2022), 1

²¹⁸ Rodriguez, "LGBTQ Incorporated," 1

²¹⁹ Carolina Are, "The Shadowban Cycle: An autoethnography of pole dancing, nudity and censorship on Instagram," *Feminist Media Studies* (2021): 1.

users from harassment, discrimination, and censorship, which they found 'significantly limited queer women's ability to participate and be visible on these platforms, as they often self-censored to avoid harassment, reduced the scope of their activities, or left the platform altogether'.²²⁰ This recent research would suggest that despite the supposed democratisation of the internet for the self-publication of amateur film on social media apps, the rules of engagement are heavily cisheterosexist and favour a particular type of conservative content that contradicts its supposedly revolutionary potential. While the rise of social media has democratised self-representation, albeit it through the watchful eye of app censorship features, my research has uncovered that this is not always embraced by amateur filmmakers such as Kennedy and Hellett who are not active social media users, and in Kennedy's case they actively avoid it as much as possible. In Chapter Four I highlight Kennedy's attitudes towards social media and influencer culture, which they distance themselves from. This complicates understandings of the self-publishing impulses of producers of digital film which involves performance and that which is posted online.

2.6: Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature of four research fields which have informed my approach to this research and for which I have outlined my contribution to knowledge in each area. There are distinct overlaps between these fields, but more conspicuously they all deal with the politics of self/representation. Disability representation studies provides context for the motivations of filmmakers like Kennedy and Hellett to self-represent in the absence of queer learning-disabled visual narratives. The concept of neuroqueerness speaks to the intersection of queerness and learning disability, or neurodivergence. Kennedy and Hellett's amateur filmmaking offers a unique visual expression of this intersection. By situating Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as a form of visual activism, it is possible to demonstrate the radical potential of self-representations like theirs to challenge dominant images of learning disability, particularly when they are approached from the anti-capitalist position of the amateur filmmaker.

²²⁰ S. Duguay et al, "Queer women's experiences of patchwork platform governance on Tinder, Instagram, and Vine," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 26.2 (2020): 237

My research contributes knowledge (i) to disability representation studies by theorising Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as a challenge to the erasure and omission of self-representational narratives in the field. This moves beyond the tired narrative of disability representation studies of the disabled person as object of representation to highlight the creative agency of Kennedy and Hellett in positioning themselves as subjects. (ii) by demonstrating how the activist gesture of refusal can be found in the cinematic techniques and aesthetics of Kennedy and Hellett's films, the amateur ways in which they are produced and shared in community contexts, and in refusal of the art-as-therapy agenda. (iii) by offering a unique intervention by foregrounding Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as the first examples of the visual expression of the intersection of queer learning disability and making the first argument for a neuroqueer aesthetics. (iv) by challenging the amateur/professional distinction by articulating how Kennedy and Hellett both *embrace* the amateurism which is *imposed* upon them as a deliberate gesture of refusal. I additionally put forth an argument for amateur film which moves beyond binary distinctions to show how disabled people navigate amateurism and professionalism through necessary collaborative working to access skills and funding. The next chapter will introduce the methods and methodology I designed in order to address my research questions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1: Introduction

This chapter outlines the iterative research process I designed which combines different types of methods and draws on different primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the films of Kennedy and Hellett (see Appendix Two for a filmography), transcripts of two semi-structured interviews with Kennedy, my research diary which includes reflections and observations made throughout the research process, and the making of a collaborative short film. Secondary sources include relevant theoretical and contextual literature to support my arguments, as well as interviews with Kennedy and Hellett undertaken by other people predominantly found in online magazines. A significant secondary source is the chapter “Sparkle and Space” written by Hellett for the edited volume *Made Possible: Stories of Success by People with Learning Disabilities – in Their Own Words* (2020).

This research was approached in two ways, (i) as a sole-authored doctoral thesis and (ii) as a participatory and inclusive project which involved Kennedy and Hellett in the research process. The participatory and inclusive element of the research was the making of a collaborative short film with Kennedy, supported by Lizzie Banks (Carousel). This research straddles both inclusive and participatory research methods to align with the mantra of the Disability Rights Movement, ‘nothing about us without us.’ Walmsley and Johnson define inclusive research as ‘research in which people with learning disabilities are active participants, not only as subjects but also as initiators, doers, writers and disseminators of research’.²²¹ This thesis aims to align with these principles, to include Kennedy and Hellett not just as the subjects of my interpretation of their work, but as initiators through the making of a film of their own conceptualisation and making. This was originally envisaged as a co-production by Kennedy and Hellett, however Hellett withdrew from the project in 2021, meaning Kennedy produced a film more attuned to their personal interests, meaning only Kennedy became an active participant in this research. Kennedy was

²²¹ Jan Walmsley and Kelley Johnson, *Inclusive Research with People with Intellectual Disabilities: Past, Presence and Futures*, London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003, 9.

involved in the production of the collaborative film and co-presented it with me at an academic conference as part of the dissemination of the research. Hellett's involvement in the larger research project will resume, but it will be beyond the timeframe of this thesis.

The collaborative film by Kennedy titled *Not Mythmakers* (2022) is analysed alongside Kennedy and Hellett's other films throughout Chapters Four-Seven. The participatory and inclusive element of the research therefore provided two data collection opportunities: (i) by producing a new film to analyse and (ii) by producing observational data through the making of the film, in the context of adaptive amateur approaches during the global pandemic.

My methodology is a queer methodology, which is as Halberstam describes, 'a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior'.²²² Though I am not studying human behaviour, I am studying amateur filmmaking and the conditions of its production, dissemination and impact. Therefore I *am* using different methods outlined in this chapter to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional visual and material culture studies. This research makes an intervention into this exclusion, and by drawing attention to the unique work of Kennedy and Hellett, and, by encouraging their participation in the research process, I have been able to ensure their voices guide my interpretation of their cultural production in several contexts.

Section 3.3 discusses the way I approached the analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's films through textual analysis to understand how refusal is expressed through aesthetics and cinematic technique. Section 3.4 reviews scholarship on participatory and inclusive methods and describes my approach to the participatory element of the research. This section includes an explanation of why I kept a research diary throughout the research process. Section 3.5 details the ethics

²²² J. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (twentieth anniversary edition), Durham: Duke University Press, (1998) 2018, 13.

application I submitted to the University of Brighton in order that I could undertake the participatory element of the research. Section 3.6 reflects on the semi-structured interview process and the planning and making of the collaborative film. This section also outlines the changes that were made to the research design along the way, which was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting national lockdowns and social distancing measures. Section 3.7 briefly notes the additional research methods I have drawn upon to add contextual support to my arguments. The following section 3.2 provides an overview of the theoretical concepts and disciplines which underpin this research.

3.2: Theory

The approach I have taken to this research is predominantly informed by feminism, queer theory, critical disability studies and decolonial studies, all of which have common threads in that they question structures of power and how they operate within oppression and othering.

Queer theory represents a significant approach when working with intersectional identities and their complex nuances of gender and sexual expression. As Halperin (2003) reflects, 'queer theory has effectively re-opened the question of the relations between sexuality and gender, both as analytic categories and as lived experiences; [...] it has supported non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality'.²²³ Halperin highlights that scholars who invented feminism and gay and lesbians studies, and who later introduced queer theory as an academic field, were predominantly concerned with transforming 'what could count as knowledge'.²²⁴ This aligns with the aims of my thesis which is to transform what counts as knowledge in the bodies of knowledge I reviewed in Chapter Two. By introducing neuroqueer perspectives to these fields, their inclusion transforms the knowledge that they reflect.

²²³ David M. Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45.2-4 (2003), 341

²²⁴ Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," 343

Duggan echoes Halperin, stating 'queer theorists are engaged in [...] the critique of identity categories presented as stable, unitary or "authentic",²²⁵ ideas which disability and critical race scholars have also engaged with since the formation of the respective rights movements and academic disciplines. Shildrake ascribes 'the strong take up of queer theory within disability studies' as having the 'potential to radically disrupt the devaluation of the disabled body'.²²⁶

The critical race theory of bell hooks, on whom I draw on heavily throughout this research due to her engagement with the politics of representation (particularly film), is a productive body of thought when working through the multiple oppressions and othering of intersectional identities such as queerness and learning disability. As Nash explains, intersectionality is a primary analytical tool used by feminist and anti-racist scholars²²⁷ which emerged from critical race studies,²²⁸ so it is logical that my work will turn to this discipline for guidance on how to analyse an hitherto under-theorised intersectional identity and when theorising identity in 'a more complex fashion'.²²⁹ Although I noted in Chapter One that intersectionality is not a theory per se, McCall (2005) has highlighted the lack of guidance on how to study intersectionality from a methodological perspective. Ultimately she calls for the need for interdisciplinarity when studying intersectional identities,²³⁰ which is a foundational approach to my research and why I have looked to other fields of study.

As acknowledged in Chapter One, 'the matter of whiteness'²³¹ that Dyer describes is not explicitly articulated in Kennedy and Hellett's work and thus neither is it analysed extensively in this thesis. Themes of gender and sexuality are prioritised in their films, but as I wish to argue here by drawing on critical whiteness studies, their whiteness is ever present and intersects in their identities as much as does their gender and sexuality. I have approached this issue throughout the analysis chapters by asking myself open ended questions of how whiteness is

²²⁵ Lisa Duggan, "The Discipline Problem: Queer Theory Meets Lesbian and Gay History," *GLQ* 2.3 (1995), 181

²²⁶ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, 125

²²⁷ Nash, "Re-thinking intersectionality," 1

²²⁸ Nash, "Re-thinking intersectionality," 2

²²⁹ Nash, "Re-thinking intersectionality," 2

²³⁰ Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs* 30:3 (2005), 1795

²³¹ Dyer, "The matter of whiteness"

played out in their work and how whiteness is visually represented. Blight (2019) has explored the social and political hegemony of whiteness through the analysis of early colonial photography, contemporary social media and photography to demonstrate the role of visual culture in maintaining whiteness as a norm. Jenzen's (2017) attempt to deal with whiteness in mainstream images of the 'lipstick lesbian' was to make it visible. Using the example of a 1993 *Vanity Fair* cover which portrayed k.d. lang and 'rumoured bisexual' Cindy Crawford, Jenzen analyses whiteness as an unlocking mechanism of the shift or transition from the monstrous lesbian to the marketable lesbian through a forceful play on whiteness as a means to offset the deviation of queer sexuality. Jenzen posits that here whiteness is foregrounded to make slightly more relevant to a wider audience what is an otherwise minority issue (queerness). Similarly, Hawkman (2022) and Jackson et al (2021) have explored whiteness in the context of queer studies, with Jackson et al finding that LGBTQ+ literature in postsecondary education largely minimises the role that racism, anti-Blackness, whiteness plays in shaping LGBTQ+ realities in higher education. In Chapters Five-Seven, I highlight moments in Kennedy and Hellett's films in which their whiteness is pronounced.

Garland-Thomson's extensive feminist research into the representation of disability in visual culture has been influential on the approach of this research in the context of ways of seeing disability and how this can be resisted. As detailed in Chapter One, Honig's feminist theory of refusal (2021) has been mobilised as a structuring framework to compartmentalise the different forms of refusal that have emerged from my analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking. I have synthesised Honig's theory of refusal with disability studies and critical race theory throughout the following chapters to articulate the detail of the refusal I have identified, all of which I have queered by synthesising their work with queer theorists including Butler ([1990] 1999; 1993), Sedgwick (1993) and Halberstam (2011). My research contributes knowledge to each discipline by recontextualising the concepts in new neuroqueer ways.

When working at the intersection of queerness and learning disability, it would seem logical to analyse my research through a crip theory lens, so I want to briefly offer an explanation for its omission from this research and build on issues I raised in

Chapter Two. My position on crip theory aligns with Bone's (2017) critique, which exposes it as continuing 'a cycle of silencing and marginalization that widens the divide between disability studies and the lived experiences of the disabled rather than bridging those critical gaps in meaningful ways'.²³² Bone notes that a fundamental principle of disability studies is that any research undertaken should strive to improve the living conditions of the people being researched, which she argues crip theory fails to realise.²³³

Exploring the theory through multiple frameworks, Bone concludes the following: (i) the reclamation of the word 'crip' privileges physical disability,²³⁴ noting that McRuer (2006) makes no mention of 'intellectual disability' in his writings,²³⁵ (ii) crip is a term claimed by those to whom the original pejorative use of the word did not define, exemplified by both Schalk's 'disidentification' with the term as a not-yet-disabled person,²³⁶ and McRuer who presented an academic paper wearing a t-shirt with the words 'HIV positive', despite being HIV negative.²³⁷ Crip theory permits 'claiming an identity that is not one's own' in the name of solidarity.²³⁸ This authorises anyone to speak on behalf of the disabled rather than prioritizing actual disabled voices', Bone argues, which 'limits the types of disabled voices we hear from'.²³⁹ (iii) Like the social model of disability, which focuses on the cultural construction of disability rather than the political marginalization of disabled people, crip theory's claimed radical potential is not realised because it avoids engagement with disability activism²⁴⁰ and represents academic 'chatter', to borrow a phrase from Mike Oliver.²⁴¹ Bone draws on Mark Sherry to posit that those who self-identify (or disidentify) with 'crip' are distinct from the disability community at large who do not use the term 'because it does not focus on the lived experiences of poor and working-class disabled people, and instead represents 'privileged people' who use

²³² Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1298

²³³ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1298

²³⁴ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1302

²³⁵ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1306

²³⁶ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1303

²³⁷ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1308

²³⁸ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1303

²³⁹ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1308

²⁴⁰ Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1305

²⁴¹ Mike Oliver, "The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years on," *Disability & Society* 28.7 (2013): 1024 qtd. in Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1305

crip 'in the context of the safety of academia' which 'masks enormous embodied, classed, gendered, sexualized, and racialized privilege' inherently embedded in the act of 'reclaiming' a derogatory term'.²⁴² I therefore suggest that crip theory fails to account for those with learning disabilities and does not contribute to meaningful societal change, so I prioritise more productive interpretive frameworks such as feminism, critical race theory, queer theory and the emerging neuroqueer project (see Chapter Two), all of which are more productive when analysing intersectional identities.

Therefore, in this work, I challenge the epistemology of crip theory as extrapolated from or informed by queer theory. In contrast to queer theory, whose core principle is that it is intersectional and was founded as a discipline to incorporate feminism, sexuality, race, class, disability studies and the concept of the double or multiple other, crip theory may add a nuance to the complexity of intersectional identities, but it is heavily focused on physical disabilities and physically disabled bodies in neoliberal societies. It is not wholly representative of learning disability contexts, though McRuer's focus on the critique of the concept of 'normalcy' is useful, albeit it to a limited extent. The next section discusses the method of textual analysis which I used to analyse the films of Kennedy and Hellett.

3.3: Textual analysis

In addition to the semi-structured interviews and contextual secondary literature, I have performed close textual readings of Hellett and Kennedy's films to answer my research questions, giving attention to both narrative, form (aesthetics) and the context of their production and distribution. The main method to support this analysis comprehensively is textual analysis. Brennan (2021) describes textual analysis as being about how language is used and what it represents in meaning-making practices. Language in this context is not just the literal language that is spoken, but the broader means through which 'our social realities are constructed',²⁴³ which can be a visual form of communication. The 'texts' of textual analysis are the cultural

²⁴² Mark Sherry, "Overlaps and Contradictions between Queer Theory and Disability Studies," *Disability & Society* 19.7 (2004): 769-783 qtd. in Bone, "Trapped behind the glass," 1304

²⁴³ B. Brennan "Textual Analysis," *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies* (third edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2021, 212

artifacts of our daily lives²⁴⁴ which we use to make meaning, film being one such example. Undertaking a textual analysis therefore allows me to understand the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett use spoken and visual language in film to make meaning.

The broad aim of this thesis is to understand how Kennedy and Hellett use film to transform the image of learning disability and how this represents a practice of refusal. I argue they do this by using images and discourses that disrupt norms around identity and film theory. I use textual analysis to demonstrate this, by analysing not just the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett construct or represent their own social realities through film, but how their social realities are reflected *in* the films they produce, and how they disrupt them. The subjective experiences they represent show learning disability in new queer ways, so a semiotic reading of their films allows me to see how they *transform* the image of learning disability. I will return to semiotics in more detail below. The ‘refusal’ element of my analysis is uncovered by understanding the conditions in which the films were made; the social realities of Kennedy and Hellett that are present in the films. Textual analysis therefore allows me to address both aims of my thesis by analysing both the text and the context in which it was made.

When Kennedy and Hellett made their films, they imbued them with their own particular meanings, but this is not necessarily the meaning that I interpret in their work. This speaks to Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding, which argues that any meaning the producer intentionally encoded in a text during its production is not necessarily the one decoded by the person receiving the text.²⁴⁵ Therefore the meaning Kennedy and Hellett encoded in their films will likely differ from the meaning decoded by someone watching them, depending on their cultural position. This thesis is *my* decoding of Kennedy and Hellett’s work and is based on my own cultural position as an academic engaged in research at the intersection of queer learning disability.

²⁴⁴ Brennan “Textual Analysis,” 213

²⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” Ed. T. Corrigan et al, *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, (1973) 2011

My decoding of Kennedy and Hellett's films therefore is looking for a specific meaning: how is learning disability represented in new queer ways. This guided my analysis of the films, meaning I selected films from their larger body of work that engaged with themes of queer gender and sexuality. The intersection of queerness and learning disability has not been self-represented on screen before, which is what makes Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking so unique. Not all their films engage with this intersection, so I consciously selected the ones that did.

The first time I watched Kennedy and Hellett's films was at the Matthew and Matthew event in 2016. The only film which was produced after starting this research is Kennedy's animation *Enid and Valerie* (2018). When I started the research proper, watching the films was the first thing I did, and I watched them by filmmaker rather than thematically as I had no sense of what themes would emerge at that point. This included watching *all* their films, and it was through this first round of viewing that I decided certain films did not 'speak' to the intersection of learning disability and queerness, which was the key theme I was looking for.

In order to identify this theme and the films which *did* speak to queerness, I was looking for specific cultural markers of queerness, which were presented in the films as Hellett's drag queen alter ego Mrs Sparkle, or for example in the title of Kennedy's film *What is Femme Anyway?* I immediately read this film as queer as my own cultural knowledge understands the word 'femme' as being used in predominantly queer contexts. In the film, Kennedy speaks of androgyny and the possibilities of 'unisex' which also spoke to queerness, and they applied make-up in front a mirror while these on-screen discussions took place. In *Just Me*, Kennedy explains how gender and identity are important themes to them in the context of their filmmaking, whilst placing labels upon their body, which conjured thoughts about how society labels and categorises difference. Kennedy also speaks of being 'gay', cross-dressing and referenced the queer classic film *Calamity Jane* (dir. Butler, 1953), so this film also discusses queerness quite explicitly. Both Kennedy and Hellett speak of the pressures of the external world in their film narration, and how this has shaped their identities and everyday experiences.

When watching these films, I took handwritten notes on a separate piece of paper for each film, writing down anything that came to mind from words they spoke, to aspects of the mise en scene. I repeated this several times, noticing different techniques, tropes and themes on each viewing. After watching all the films that I considered queer several times, I then started on a new piece of paper to write down overlapping themes, tropes and motifs that I identified across Kennedy and Hellett's work. These included for example that they both used mirror reflections, extreme close-up shots which fragmented body parts, shots that evoked voyeurism, narration, cosmetic make-up and both drew on the transformation trope. I began to take screenshots when I felt there were similarities to be made between their work and organised them thematically rather than per filmmaker.

I produced transcripts of the narration of *Just Me; What is Femme Anyway?* and *Sparkle* and made similar organisational decisions based on recurring themes. A key theme that emerged from both *Just Me* and *Sparkle* was the issue of anxiety and worry and so I listened back to these moments and made comparative notes between each. I also made notes about what was happening on screen at those moments, to understand how they each used visual language to illustrate the verbal language. A notable theme used by Hellett that emerged from my analysis was the use of extreme close-up to fragment his body, connoting a particular meaning when used in the context of Hellett speaking of his anxieties and the fragmented worlds of Hellett and Mrs Sparkle.

A key theme I was searching for was the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett interrogated the politics of looking. My cultural position as an academic means I approached my textual analysis understanding the concept of Foucauldian discourse and how surveillance produces knowledge, which in turn produces power and oppression. As highlighted in Chapter One, I was previously also an employee of a SEND college immediately pre-dating this research process, which made me acutely aware as an objective observer of the ways in which disabled people are 'looked' at and how these looks operate as a form of oppression. I was specifically looking for moments in Kennedy and Hellett's films that spoke to this theme of disabled people being the object of an ableist gaze, and especially considering I saw their films for the first time in the context of having recently been present at the meeting of the

student highlighted in Chapter One who was prevented from attending a drag show. I was therefore also looking for moments which acknowledged or challenged a *heteroableist* gaze and directly engaged with queerness in the context of disability. In my interpretation of their films, this emerged through their use of extreme close-up and voyeuristic shots such as over-the-shoulder shots and the use of the peephole trope. The challenge I identified to this gaze was through their use of direct address.

This element of my textual analysis involved engaging with semiotics to interrogate and identify ideological meanings in the films beyond the obvious signifiers that recontextualise learning disability in new queer ways. I approached the semiotic analysis of these films as *floating signifiers*, a term widely attributed to Claude Lévi-Strauss, meaning an empty sign that has no fixed meaning and is open to multiple interpretations depending on one's cultural position. Hall has applied the term *floating signifier* to race, which he described as being more akin to a language than an essential classificatory system. Race, Hall argues, is relational, not essential and cannot be fixed to any secure meaning because it is always in a process of redefinition and rearticulation. Hall discusses race as a floating signifier alongside similar 'classificatory systems of difference which operate in human societies', such as gender, sexuality, class and age.²⁴⁶ In this sense, race, as well as gender and sexuality, age and class, are 'empty signs'; their meaning is not fixed in each concept's 'inner nature' and nor can their meaning be secured because 'it floats in a sea of relational differences'.²⁴⁷ Across time and space, the meaning attributed to these words/concepts changes and they do not mean one essential thing to all people.

I approached the analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's films in a similar way, in that the images they produce, and which I view on a screen, are 'empty signs' because their meaning can never be fixed by one essentialist explanation. Their expression of gender, sexuality and disability (a term missing from Hall's list but equally valid as an empty signifier, as the literature reviewed in section 2.2 of Chapter Two reflected) has no fixed meaning, and the meaning-making of each, and

²⁴⁶ "Race, the Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall." Challenging Media. YouTube. Web. 4 Oct 2006.

²⁴⁷ "Race, the Floating Signifier: Featuring Stuart Hall."

the intersection of all, is dependent on the cultural position of the viewer. Additionally, the floating signifier applies when considering the multiple meanings that can be attributed to aspects of their filmmaking such as mise en scene. What follows in my analysis of their work throughout the rest of this thesis is the meaning I have made from my own immersion in the culture that surrounds their films. As Brennen notes, Siegfried Kracauer, who is credited with developing contemporary textual analysis, maintained that the goal of what he originally referred to as 'qualitative content analysis' was 'to bring out the entire range of potential meanings in texts'.²⁴⁸ My analysis is poststructuralist in that it aims to suggest that where meaning is made, it can and does offer complementary, but occasionally contradictory meanings in some instances. For example, depending on the question I am addressing, I have in some instances found conflicting meaning in Kennedy and Hellett's films. My point is that neither interpretation is 'correct' or 'false', but I suggest *both* are valid interpretations depending on the perspective from which the film is approached.

While I say that my textual analysis is my interpretation from my cultural position, it must be emphasised that my analysis is deeply driven by Kennedy and Hellett's voices through primary and secondary data. Through interview transcripts and drawing on Hellett's chapter "Sparkle and Space", Kennedy and Hellett inform me of the reasons why they made films and what their purpose was, but my analysis is to uncover *how* they use images and discourses of heteroableism to disrupt the norms of identity, cinematography and theories of the gaze and spectatorship. As noted in section 3.1, my research process is iterative, so my textual analysis involved multiple viewings over the last five years that it has taken to complete this research, taking into account their voice to support my analysis after undertaking interviews and reading secondary literature.

I could not consider conducting the interviews until I had completed a detailed analysis of the films to uncover recurring themes to inspire questions, but once I had completed the interviews and secondary research, I undertook further film analysis from which new themes emerged and others evolved. The film analysis and

²⁴⁸ Brennen, "Textual Analysis," 214

interviews therefore became symbiotic, so this combination of methods (textual analysis, interviews and secondary reading), demonstrates the value in participatory research. The most significant example of this iterative approach was my re-reading of all the selected films in the context of amateurism as 'failure', a theme which emerged from an interview with Kennedy, and from Hellett's chapter "Sparkle and Space". This theme did not emerge explicitly in their films, so their input was invaluable to my further analysis, and which formed the entire basis of Chapter Seven.

The limitation of textual analysis, which includes semiotic analysis, is that it is inherently subjective. It is based entirely on my own interpretation, informed by my own cultural knowledge of the floating signifiers which Kennedy and Hellett give visual expression to through film. Although my analysis is driven by Kennedy and Hellett's input from primary and secondary interview data, this is still inherently subjective, and likely viewers other than myself, or Kennedy and Hellett as producers, will have infinite different interpretations or ways to decode meaning depending on their own cultural positions and knowledge. Additionally, textual analysis is limited in that it predominantly focuses on the visual content of the text to construct meaning. As I have outlined above, I have had to rely on contextual biographical information about Kennedy and Hellett in my analyses of their work as neuroqueer. Neurodivergence and queerness are usually invisible, so textual analysis alone cannot allow me to argue the images Kennedy and Hellett produce are neuroqueer. I have addressed this in more detail in Chapter Six in relation to authorship studies and considered verbal language alongside visual language as a narrative tool and reflected on this in Chapter Eight. Nevertheless, I have found textual analysis to be a productive method when combined with other contextual research techniques to uncover the motivations and ideologies which underpin both Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking practices and the wider context in which they were made. The next section speaks to the participatory and inclusive research principles which underpin this research, including the semi-structured interviews and collaborative film. This section also includes an explanation of why I kept a research diary throughout the research process.

3.4: Participatory and inclusive methods

The vast majority of academic research that involves working with people with learning disabilities is undertaken by non-disabled researchers.²⁴⁹ My research does not differ from this paradigm, and I want to discuss my position as a researcher. I am a white British cisgender woman with no known physical or learning disabilities who has been entirely educated at institutions in the UK, meaning my research is approached as an 'outsider' to the UK learning disability filmmaking community. I outline my position here by way of acknowledging my identity and my position as researcher for the benefit of the reader, in the hopes it will better illuminate my approach and any bias I may demonstrate. This is a dynamic I have reflected on continuously throughout this research. From my first meeting with Kennedy at the 2017 Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF), I started to keep a research diary to document my reflections on our meetings and understand how the dynamics of our relationship evolved over the years. This allowed me to be self-reflexive throughout the research process. It was also intended the research diary would allow me to record observations between Kennedy and Hellett but as the co-produced film was not realised in the time frame of this thesis, it was mainly used as a tool for self-reflexivity and to continue to ask myself the question who the research served. It is my understanding that Kennedy and Hellett see the purpose of this research as a means to my writing their work into a formal history of their chosen artistic medium of filmmaking, and additionally as an opportunity to contribute to their respective creative practice through the making of a short film.

All of the theoretical frameworks outlined in Section 3.2 are centred on broad issues of representation and the inherent power representation holds, in its many and multifarious forms. The ethics underpinning such approaches is that of inclusivity and participation and on questioning who has the right, or not, to represent. Hollins notes that in the 1990s, disability studies academics examined how disabled people have historically been excluded from the research process. A new research paradigm emerged known as emancipatory disability research, which 'aims to give disabled people control over the research agenda, seeks to benefit those involved

²⁴⁹ Sheena Rolph and Jan Walmsley, "Oral History and New Orthodoxies: Narrative Accounts in the History of Learning Disability," Ed. Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (third edition). London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

[...] and ensure that outputs are accountable to disabled people'.²⁵⁰ Walmsley and Johnson employ the term 'inclusive research' to include a range of approaches traditionally termed 'participatory', 'action' or 'emancipatory'. They define inclusive research as 'research in which people with learning disabilities are active participants, not only as subjects but also as initiators, doers, writers and disseminators of research'.²⁵¹ They posit that inclusion is 'not just an issue of abstract celebration', but that it is of vast importance.²⁵² On completion of *Not Mythmakers*, Kennedy and myself co-presented the film at an online conference in 2022,²⁵³ embracing this inclusion of the subject as the disseminator.

Oliver argues that research on disability has had little-to-no influence on policy and that it has made no contribution to actually improving the lives of disabled people, a consequence of the process of research becoming 'alienating' in a Marxist sense for both disabled people and for researchers themselves.²⁵⁴ This is true for all research with human participants, but it is particularly an issue when working with people with learning disabilities who are almost always excluded from the academic contexts in which research is undertaken. Oliver suggests the best solution to produce 'unalienated research' is to change the *social* relations of research production'.²⁵⁵

The social relations of research production Oliver refers to are built upon the firm distinction between the researcher and the researched, and upon the belief that researchers possess expert knowledge and skills, therefore it is they who ought to decide upon research topics and agendas.²⁵⁶ This is not to say that social research has no value, Oliver notes, but that traditional social relations of research have

²⁵⁰ Heather Hollins, "Reciprocity, accountability, empowerment: Emancipatory principles and practices in the museum," Ed. Richard Sandell et al, *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 228.

²⁵¹ Walmsley and Johnson, *Inclusive Research with People with Intellectual Disabilities*, 9

²⁵² Walmsley and Johnson, *Inclusive Research with People with Intellectual Disabilities*, 13

²⁵³ Kennedy and Allsopp, "Documenting a DIY intervention into the invisibility of learning-disabled narratives in amateur film archives."

²⁵⁴ J Rowan, "A dialectical paradigm for research," Ed. P Reason and J. Rowan. *Human Inquiry: a sourcebook of new paradigm research*. Chichester: John Wiley, 1981, qtd. in Mike Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?" *Disability, handicap and society* 7.2 (1992), 103

²⁵⁵ Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?," 101

²⁵⁶ Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?," 102

produced distorted accounts of disability experience.²⁵⁷ He posits therefore, that, 'disability research should not be seen as a set of technical, objective procedures carried out by experts but part of the struggle by disabled people to challenge the oppression they currently experience in their daily lives'.²⁵⁸ His solution to this issue is to develop and adopt what he terms an 'emancipatory research paradigm,' which is not merely focused on identifying that power structures and inequalities exist, but is about *challenging* them in productive and meaningful ways to those they oppress.²⁵⁹ In my research I intended to challenge the concept that I, as researcher, possessed some expert knowledge and skills and that I ought to be the one to set the research agenda. I discuss this in more detail below when outlining the approach to the interviews. Oliver argues that the task for emancipatory research is not 'to help the researched to understand themselves better, but to develop its own understanding of the lived experiences of these very subjects'.²⁶⁰ For this reason the interviews were arranged as 'semi-structured' because it was more important to me that the conversation moved organically in the direction that Kennedy thought most significant to discuss. Additionally, I was the most unskilled of the group in terms of making a film and relied on the expertise of Kennedy and Banks to guide the collaborative element.

Pondering on the idealism of emancipatory approaches, Barnes questions if true emancipatory research can be achieved in practice, which he claims is an open question. Simply conducting disability research accords the researcher a status which the disabled subject does not have, and, while the dialectical nature of emancipatory research done properly may go some way to shifting the balance of power between researcher and researched, it does not eradicate it fully. In keeping with all research methods, such an approach is still vulnerable to researcher bias, particularly at the concluding stages of an analysis, which is an issue I address towards the end of this section. There is also crucially the question of who is funding and controlling the research from an institutional standpoint, with more radical techniques deemed unfavourable or troublesome, not to mention more time

²⁵⁷ Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?," 103

²⁵⁸ Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?," 102

²⁵⁹ Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?," 110

²⁶⁰ Oliver, "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production?," 111

consuming and subsequently costly.²⁶¹ Despite this, Barnes acknowledges that 'interactionist methods are generally acknowledged as the most suitable for researching the experience of disability',²⁶² and that qualitative methods are central to an emancipatory paradigm.

Nind (2014) uses 'inclusive research' as a 'deliberately generic term'²⁶³ to include, amongst many others, participatory, emancipatory, user-led and partnership research, 'to reflect a particular turn towards democratization of the research process,²⁶⁴ [...] all of which stem from a reaction to a dominant research tradition and bring a new "orientation" based on mutual respect and co-learning'.²⁶⁵ Inclusive research therefore can be considered that which disrupts the dynamic of the research/researchers and the people who are usually researched. Here it is conceived as 'research *with*, *by* or sometimes *for* them, and in contrast to research *on* them',²⁶⁶ Nind notes. As highlighted in section 3.1, by using inclusive and participatory methods to make a collaborative film, this research reaches beyond my analysis of Kennedy and Hellett's work and interview transcripts as subjects, to involving Kennedy as an active participant in the research by co-producing knowledge *with* them through creativity.

Zarb (2019) distinguishes between emancipatory research and participatory research, the former described as a set of loosely-defined principles rather than a set of rules,²⁶⁷ and the latter as only a 'prerequisite' to emancipatory research.²⁶⁸ He notes that simply increasing participation and involvement will never constitute true emancipatory research until it is disabled people themselves who are in full charge of the research agenda.²⁶⁹ Zarb questions 'what opportunities exist for self-reflection and mutual sharing of experience between researchers and disabled people', and

²⁶¹ Barnes, "Qualitative Research: Valuable or Irrelevant?," *Disability, Handicap & Society* 7.2 (1992), 123

²⁶² Barnes, "Qualitative Research: Valuable or Irrelevant?," 117

²⁶³ Melanie Nind, *What is Inclusive Research?* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, 1

²⁶⁴ Nind, *What is Inclusive Research?*, 1

²⁶⁵ Nind, *What is Inclusive Research?*, 2

²⁶⁶ Nind, *What is Inclusive Research?*, 3

²⁶⁷ Gerry Zarb, "On the Road to Damascus: First Steps towards Changing the Relations of Disability Research Production," *Disability, Handicap & Society* 7.2 (1992), 127

²⁶⁸ Zarb, "On the Road to Damascus," 128

²⁶⁹ Zarb, "On the Road to Damascus," 128

'how can alienated research be transformed', or could research contribute to the empowerment of disabled people?'²⁷⁰ Zarb here illuminates some of the current debates within inclusive and participatory methods, but I believe the incorporation of creative methods into inclusive research can go some way to confronting these issues, whereby participation is not only increased in terms of setting agendas, but in a process of making something that can be interpreted as a mutually-beneficial exchange, such as the collaborative film that contributed to Kennedy's chosen medium and provided more material to inform my analysis.

Fox and Macpherson (2015) use the term 'Inclusive Arts' to describe 'creative collaborations between learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled artists' which supports a 'mutually beneficial two-way creative exchange that enables all the artists involved to learn (and unlearn) from each other'.²⁷¹ This places the non-disabled artist as collaborator and challenges the traditional notion of their role as expert, helper or facilitator. Fox and Macpherson note how they agonised over whether to use the term Inclusive Arts due to its association with inclusion and diversity initiatives which often falls short of its claimed intention,²⁷² but reasoned that their own experience, which forms the basis of their research, is that they have demonstrated how inclusion can be successful and valuable when striving for equality of engagement.²⁷³

My research straddles participatory and inclusive methods in that it seeks to increase the participation of Kennedy in the research agenda. For example, when I emailed my questions ahead of the semi-structured interview, at Kennedy's request, I provided Kennedy with the opportunity to contribute to the list any topics they felt were integral to their practice that I had not mentioned but they thought should be discussed. The research is also inclusive in that there was no expert non-disabled artist involved to 'help' Kennedy complete the collaborative film. I could not provide any technical assistance beyond acquiring the paid services of a subtitle writer when the film was complete, and Banks edited the film as per Kennedy's instruction and

²⁷⁰ Zarb, "On the Road to Damascus," 129

²⁷¹ Alice Fox and Hannah Macpherson, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, 2

²⁷² Fox and Macpherson, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research*, 3

²⁷³ Fox and Macpherson, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research*, 4

time codes, so Kennedy was the driving force behind the film, both conceptually and in terms of content and the edit.

Nind (2014) notes that inclusive methods should consider who benefits from the research, who gets the credit for it, and who can access it.²⁷⁴ This relates to Zarb's claim above that emancipatory research can only be so if the subject of the research has control over the research agenda and identifies the participants. This is a tension I have been grappling with throughout the entire research process when I realised the paradox of trying to complete a sole-authored doctoral thesis, for which I have received funding to complete, that is based on the principles of participation and inclusion. Klocker (2012) has attempted to reconcile the individualism of doctoral theses and the collectivism of participatory research, highlighting how the 'writing up' stage of a PhD reinstates the power dynamics that have actively been challenged during the participatory research, and also how issues arise due to ownership of knowledge which has been produced collectively.²⁷⁵ Klocker conceptualised two separate but overlapping bodies of work which include the joint participatory project and the individual thesis. So as not to lose the collaboration in the individualised writing, she chose to use pronouns such as 'our project' and 'my thesis' which she acknowledges is a minor grammatical issue but one which makes a powerful statement of separation.²⁷⁶ In this thesis I also explicitly refer to *Not Mythmakers* as the collaborative research, and like Klocker, I am able to ensure Kennedy and Hellett's voices are ever-present in the writing through selected excerpts from interview transcripts, either my own or from secondary sources.²⁷⁷ As noted in section 3.3, my textual analysis of their films was also deeply informed by their voices.

Felner (2020) discussed the same tension between doctoral research and participation and offered the advice, as someone who humbly states they 'talked the walk', that it is imperative that scholars critically interrogate how participatory

²⁷⁴ Nind, *What is Inclusive Research?*, 72

²⁷⁵ Natascha Klocker, "Doing Participatory Action Research and Doing a PhD: Words of Encouragement for Prospective Students," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 36.1 (2012), 155

²⁷⁶ Klocker, "Doing Participatory Action Research and Doing a PhD," 155-156

²⁷⁷ Klocker, "Doing Participatory Action Research and Doing a PhD," 155-156

methods can challenge power inequities between academics and marginalized communities which at its core involves examining how the privilege of academics can shape and constrain opportunities for community partners to authentically engage in co-research.²⁷⁸ In my research approach, I realised that not every part of the research was appropriate for participation and that inclusion in every aspect would at best not be particularly beneficial to Kennedy, and at worst be performative and counter-productive, whilst placing unethical expectations upon their labour that University of Brighton ethics guidelines forbid remunerating. For example, Kennedy and Hellett's inclusion in researching and writing the introduction, literature review or even this chapter was not directly related to their practice and was concerned with thinking that pre-dated the actual commencement of the research. Some could say that those chapters constitute the more mechanical part of the research. Instead, the participatory element was carefully designed so that Kennedy's involvement related to and contributed to their practice and generated new knowledge about their work - and actually generated artistic output - and the contexts in which it was made. This, I believe, led to a more meaningful engagement with participation and inclusion that foregrounded the interests of Kennedy. Section 3.6 will discuss the interview and collaborative film process in more depth. The following section pre-empts the collaborative project by outlining the ethical clearance I sought in order to initiate it.

3.5: Ethics application

Following the Matthew and Matthew event in 2016 in which I was first introduced to Kennedy and Hellett's work, and during the application process for doctoral funding for this project between 2016-2017, I 'followed' Kennedy on Instagram (I could not find Hellett at the time). I conversed with Kennedy via private message more generally about their work during this process to gauge if they would likely be open to an invitation to participate. I could not establish for certain how they would respond to the invitation to be part of the research, but I decided to continue with my application regardless and in the worst-case scenario that they wanted no involvement I could make the study entirely textual.

²⁷⁸ Jennifer K. Felner, "'You Get a PhD and We Get a Few Hundred Bucks': Mutual Benefits in Participatory Action Research?," *Health Education & Behavior* 47.4 (2020), np

This research began officially in October 2017 and I met Kennedy in person for the first time one month later at the 2017 Oska Bright Film Festival. Knowing I was required to gain ethical approval before formally inviting them to participate, we again spoke very generally about their work and my interest in it from an academic perspective. After the festival, I had an email exchange with Banks, followed by a coffee meeting in person, where I explained the parameters of the research and requested her to gauge more formally if they would be interested, and if so, requested her support for Kennedy and Hellett during the research process. Both Kennedy and Hellett gave their tentative agreement via Banks.

During the process of gaining ethical approval, I attended a Matthew and Matthew screening in Bristol in 2018 where I met Hellett in person for the first time. By this point Hellett was aware of my interest in his and Kennedy's work, so Banks introduced me as such. I held out my hand to Hellett and asked him if he shook hands, but he looked at me very reservedly, and said he was not sure, in answer to my question. I sensed Hellett was somewhat suspicious of my intentions, so I did not press the matter that day, but Banks later informed me Hellett was happy to proceed with the project. As an intermediary, Banks has been immeasurably helpful as a trusted person at Carousel who is able to confidently understand Kennedy and Hellett's wishes and concerns with regards to the project and their involvement. She has acted as a middleperson during the research process and advocated for Kennedy and Hellett throughout.

I was granted ethical approval in 2018 and was able to formally invite Kennedy and Hellett via Banks to participate. I sent Banks a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) which was composed as part of the ethics application (Appendix Three), along with a consent form (Appendix Four). I shared the (PIS) with Banks prior to submitting the ethics application and she made some suggestions such as using the OpenDyslexic font in 16pt which Hellett found easy to read.

The ethical considerations which underpin the research design included ensuring that Kennedy and Hellett were not coerced into participating in this research due to my research being dependent on both their involvement. I explained that there was no obligation to be involved and that I could still proceed with my

research if they chose not to be involved but that my focus would be shifted to a full textual study. I also emphasised that both could withdraw from the project at any time and that they were not required to give a reason for doing so.

I briefly mentioned in section 3.4 that the majority of disability research is undertaken by people without disabilities. The researcher/researched dynamic of myself and Kennedy and Hellett is an issue I am keenly aware of. I acknowledge the complexities of the work I am doing, not just in terms of the problems of the researcher/researched binary, but also the politics and power dynamics involved. In ethnographic work such as interviews, the researcher is always the intermediary of the research subject and the research audience, a relationship I have reflected on continuously throughout my research. Critical disability studies and decolonial studies in this context have been useful when navigating my position as researcher and allowing the voice of the subjects to be foregrounded. As McCall posits,

The pressing issue then is to overcome the disciplinary boundaries based on the use of different methods in order to embrace multiple approaches to the study of intersectionality. Just because parts of a methodology are more akin to one discipline than to another does not mean that the methodology as a whole is not part of an interdisciplinary program. The overall methodology is feminist and interdisciplinary in orientation, but the methods and specific subject matters will be, to a certain extent, shaped by the disciplines—because of the division of substance that the disciplines support and because particular methods are appropriate to particular subject matters. There is nothing wrong with this; in fact, it is a much more expansive and radical notion of what interdisciplinarity means since it is not limited by default to those disciplines that have methods that travel easily.²⁷⁹

I have ensured throughout this process that the voices of Kennedy and Hellett have been foregrounded as it is their subjective voice that I seek to illuminate. But there are many limitations to this, for example it must be acknowledged that I have

²⁷⁹ McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," 1795-1796

exercised editorial power over what gets included. I have included as much of their views as the word count would allow while maintaining a coherent and structured thesis that addresses my research questions. The fact I could not include all their views is not a dismissal of their voices as unimportant, but a practical consideration of space and context.

I have instead attempted to position the voices of Kennedy and Hellett as the authority by using the themes of their films and their comments from primary and secondary interviews to guide the themes of each chapter. The next section provides more detail of the interview and collaborative film process and discusses the adaptations made to the research design in order to navigate the barriers imposed by the UK national lockdowns of 2020-2021.

3.6: Interviews and making a collaborative film

As articulated in Chapter One, this research was inspired by attending the first Matthew and Matthew event in 2016, so I had already identified Kennedy and Hellett as significant filmmakers at the intersection of queer learning disability. Kennedy and Hellett produce unique artistic work which challenges dominant understandings of both queerness and learning disability as individual identity categories, and offer brand new insights into how the intersection of both are expressed. Despite there now having been three incarnations of the Queer Freedom (QF) strand (2017, 2019, 2022), the other films which have been screened as part of this strand are films *about* or featuring people at the intersection of queer learning disability, rather than *by* them. As far as my research has identified, Kennedy and Hellett appear to be the only filmmakers in Britain producing their own work which makes their filmmaking of significant interest to the broader field of film studies.

The original research design was centred on semi-structured interviews with both Kennedy and Hellett in person in Brighton, as well as the co-production of a collaborative film as conceptualised by Kennedy and Hellett, with technical support by Carousel and the opportunity for me to observe Kennedy and Hellett's working relationship. The funding raised for the film was intended to pay for support from Carousel to make the film, return travel expenses from Glasgow to Brighton for Kennedy, and accommodation for Kennedy in Brighton. As Hellett and Banks are

both based in Brighton, it made economic sense for Kennedy to travel to where the production team had access to Carousel film production equipment. I proposed interviewing Kennedy and Hellett individually for thirty minutes, and then together for one hour regarding their creative response to the collaborative film. After almost two years of negotiations and planning, the interviews were due to begin in Brighton in the spring of 2020.

In March 2020, the UK government announced a nine-week lockdown to manage the rapidly rising infection rates of COVID-19. All non-essential travel was forbidden and the University of Brighton suspended all face-to-face data collection for research students. I maintained regular email contact with Banks throughout the following months, at which point we all believed the lockdown was a temporary measure and that we could resume the data collection over summer 2020. When it became apparent that this was not the case and the lockdown increased from weeks to months, we made the collective decision to meet online to discuss creative alternatives to the project. These new approaches to my fieldwork threw up significant challenges, but also meant that Kennedy and Hellett were able to contribute to the ongoing research design.

Prior to our first virtual meeting, I started to brainstorm alternative approaches with my supervisory team. We wondered if synchronous online communication was a potential barrier, could we consider different approaches collectively whereby Kennedy and Hellett could respond to questions through the medium of film. I decided against suggesting the filmic response to Kennedy and Hellett when casual conversations in our first informal meeting turned to filmmaking timelines and working methods in relation to budget questions; Hellett said they require a lot of assistance to make films and that he did not have the skills to do this alone. Due to social distancing restrictions, Carousel was unable to support Hellett in person during the lockdown, so this idea was unsuitable. I had not envisaged the need to research digital methodologies. The dominant narrative of participatory research is that of enabling, but what happens when I cannot enable my participants in the way the methodologies advise or if things do not go to plan? A global pandemic and national lockdown were both unprecedented and unpredicted. Philosophically I was entering uncharted territory which has been intensively accelerated by COVID-19.

The lockdown presented several challenges to the research design and resulted in complete adaptation and flexibility.

Banks suggested we meet for an informal 'get-to-know-one-another' chat on the virtual meeting platform *Whereby*, which Kennedy and Hellett were familiar with. As a research tool, *Whereby* presented data protection issues for recording future conversations as it is an insecure platform, but it was the participants' choice. This created a tension between institutional ethics policy and participatory principals. I awaited approval of my amended ethics application before meeting Kennedy and Hellett.

We all met for the first time in June 2020. Banks and myself arrived in the *Whereby* meeting room first, followed by Kennedy. Hellett arrived soon after, but experienced technical issues with his camera and could not get it to work and he hung up from the call. Banks called Hellett who was quite upset by the hitches and requested we reschedule the meeting. The use of online platforms such as *Whereby* put tremendous pressure on Hellett, who did not have support on hand at his home, despite Banks being present virtually for support to mimic the face-to-face interview structure plan as much as possible. My ethics application reflected a support plan which I could enact in person if any distress or technical difficulties arose, based on picking up on physical cues and changes in body language. It is difficult to pick up on these subtle social cues in the virtual setting, so my support plan in this regard was redundant and required swift adaptation to the virtual context. If I were in the room with Kennedy and Hellett and any unforeseen issues arose, I could take over the handling of any technology to ease pressure on the participants. I could not do this virtually so was reliant on Banks to contact Hellett ahead of the rescheduled meeting start time to ensure he was comfortable to go ahead with the second attempt.

There is a benefit to online interviews in that they are often conducted in the home environment so participants are typically comfortable in their surroundings, though it should be highlighted that this is not always the case. There is also an invasive element of online interviews in the home, which are sometimes conducted in the intensely personal space of the bedroom, which in any other context would be deeply inappropriate to hold such interactions in that space. This informality of

speaking from a comfortable place in the home has the potential to make for a better interview as the interviewee can walk away from the camera if they want to have a break, lessening the pressure of being in the same physical space together of a face-to-face interview and the social requirement for eye contact.

When we met for the second time as a group, the technical aspects went smoothly and we spoke of mutual interests and current affairs as ice breakers. For the most part, the conversations flowed well, but glitches in WiFi and the inability to judge body language meant there were delays in responses, some short silences and instances where we talked over one another. In total Kennedy, Hellett, Banks and myself had five meetings on *Whereby* between June and September 2020. The first meeting was abandoned, the second and third meetings were informal discussions about our interests and the final two meetings were focussed on Kennedy and Hellett's film concept. Prior to the final meeting, Banks had shared with me a character development document that the three of them had started working on. Unfortunately in early 2021, Banks informed me that due to ongoing pressures related to the pandemic, and for other personal reasons, Hellett had decided to temporarily withdraw from the project. Banks explained that he was still very much interested in making the film but that he needed to take a step back for the foreseeable future.

As an alternative, I suggested the possibility of Kennedy using £1500 of the £4500 funding to make a solo film and established if they were still happy to be interviewed, which they were, on the condition their voice would not be given greater weight than Hellett's. I reassured Kennedy that I still intended to include Hellett's voice, but that it would instead be from secondary sources such as podcasts, recorded interviews online and through articles and his chapter "Sparkle and Space". I also suggested that the chapter I had envisaged would analyse Kennedy and Hellett's working relationship and dynamics could instead become an analysis of the Oska Bright Film Festival and the Queer Freedom strand more generally (Chapter Five). This would mean that the remaining £3000 was available to put towards their joint film, when Hellett was ready to continue with the project, which it was now clear would fall outside the timelines of this thesis.

3.6.1: Participant interviews:

Kennedy and I, with Banks on hand for support, had two meetings over *Zoom*. We originally used *Whereby* on Hellett's request but since he withdrew from the project I suggested *Zoom* to Kennedy as an alternative platform so I could handle the recording. Kennedy had no preference on the platform used so we agreed *Zoom* would be the most suitable option. Kennedy and myself had our cameras on but Banks turned her camera off and was present in the background should she be needed. As mentioned previously, the interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in conversation, but I did offer to pre-submit questions for Kennedy, which they requested two weeks prior to the interview (Appendix Five). Just prior to the first meeting, Banks replied with some amendments from Kennedy in terms of the very slight re-wording of some questions. I explained to Kennedy that they were more conversation starters rather than questions that required specific answers and we could talk about anything else they felt was important about their work that I had not raised in the pre-submitted questions. This was intended to add further context that I had not considered and to provide a space for Kennedy to articulate their opinions on their work and choose how they wanted to describe their filmmaking experiences.

The first interview included a set of general questions about their work and practice and the second interview was dedicated entirely to discussions about the archive. This interview would be used as footage in the collaborative film, so I emailed the *Zoom* recording to Kennedy and Banks as soon as the interview was complete. Throughout each interview I checked in with Kennedy several times if they were happy to continue or if they would like a break.

Recordings of both interviews were sent to Kennedy and Banks after the interviews were complete. They are stored on my password-protected laptop hard drive and backed up on a password-protected external hard drive. The recordings will be deleted ten years after completion of the PhD to allow time for future publication of this research. As there were just two interviews, I transcribed them myself and stored the transcriptions on the same hard drives as the recordings and I will store them for the same amount of time. I highlighted sections of the transcripts that related to themes that emerged from the textual analysis of the films, which formed the basis of my early chapter structure.

3.6.2: Collaborative film

The original intention of the collaborative film was to raise £5000 for Kennedy and Hellett to make a co-production. This was the amount quoted by Banks to provide support and editing assistance throughout. I successfully applied for funding from two COREs at the University of Brighton; the Centre for Transforming Sexuality and Gender (£1,000) and the Centre for Design History (£500). I also secured £3000 from my doctoral funders Design Star, a consortium of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. What materialised instead of the co-production due to Hellett withdrawing from the project was a solo production by Kennedy using £1500 of the raised £4500. The remaining £3000 will be used towards the co-production at a later date.

This film was intended to offer a data collection opportunity, embracing a collaborative approach which doubled up as a pathway to impact for this project. With the input of my research, this project in both forms – my thesis and the film – would have a wider impact on the community Kennedy normally engages with as their audience, whilst also providing an additional audience for the funders.

The collaborative short film, titled *Not Mythmakers*, was envisaged by Kennedy, Banks and myself to include footage that Kennedy had already shot of their Matthew and Matthew Archive (described in Chapter One), footage and audio lifted from the second interview focused on the subject of archives, and Banks agreed to seek Hellett's permission to intersperse the footage with a clip from the first Matthew and Matthew event. The approach to the whole project was very DIY and we made adaptations as we went along. There was no detailed planning process, it all happened very organically, with one decision being made via email after another had already been actioned. Banks sent drafts of the film to Kennedy who then sent back their amendments for editing, then Banks sent me a full final draft. The final version included stock instrumental music in the background. The film was produced in stages, with minimal input from myself beyond providing the recording of the interview and having the final edit subtitled.

Not Mythmakers succeeded in providing further data for film analysis in Chapters Five and Seven. In Chapter Five I analyse the film, which adds visual context and additional detail about the Matthew and Matthew Archive to the interview transcripts, when I interpret Kennedy's archive as a further element of visual activism. In Chapter Seven I analyse the film in the context of amateur approaches and aesthetics. The impact of *Not Mythmakers* is already being seen, with Kennedy and myself co-presenting a screening of the film at the online conference *Invisible & Under-Represented? Disability History, Objects & Heritage* in March 2022.

3.7: Additional research methods

To contextualise my analysis, I also engaged in reading Kennedy's (now defunct) blog for supporting evidence and following their Instagram account for updates on where their films were being screened. A smaller element of my research mainly conducted at the start of the research in 2017-2018 involved an empirical task to search the collections of regional film archives to find other learning-disabled filmmakers, which proved unsuccessful. I also attended various queer arts and learning disability arts events to try and find more filmmakers working at the intersection of queer learning disability which was again unsuccessful. At various stages throughout the research process, I have drawn upon online newspaper and magazine websites which feature interviews and podcasts with Kennedy and Hellett to add further contextual information. The queer takeover of the Disability Arts Online Instagram account by Sandra Alland illuminated several artists working at the intersection of queerness and disability but did not reveal the work of filmmakers other than Kennedy and Hellett.

While not a research method per se, Appendix One contains an accessible summary of each chapter of this thesis as a means of engaging with the research. The inclusion of the accessible summary was inspired by Hargrave's 2015 text *Theatres of Learning Disability* which offered a similar summary after the text's concluding chapter in order that those who cannot access the book proper can still engage with the research. My own summary follows the same principle and is offered for those who are unable to access the academic jargon and sometimes theoretically dense writing required of doctoral level writing. Through the accessible summary, readers can learn of the key themes and arguments that emerged from

this research in accessible bullet point summary sentences with supplementary images to visually illustrate the writing. This summary was guided by UK charity Mencap's guide for accessible writing, *Am I making myself clear?* (2012). The accessible summary is in the OpenDyslexic font in 16pt that Banks advised Hellett finds easy to read and which I used for the PIS. I sent the summary to Banks for feedback and made changes according to her suggestions, one of which was including more images to illustrate the complex themes. As noted in Chapter One, I have queered the traditional structure of the appendices by positioning the accessible summary *before* the academic version in acknowledgement that the prioritised audience of this research is the community of queer learning-disabled people of whom it speaks.

3.8: Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methods and approaches of this thesis. I have outlined my theoretical framework as being informed by feminism, critical race and whiteness studies, disability studies, and queer theory. I have demonstrated how my research straddles both participatory and inclusive methods and involves the combination of film analysis with collaborative film and semi-structured interviews. The next chapter is the first of my four analysis chapters of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking and focuses on the cinematic techniques and aesthetics they have drawn upon to interrogate the politics of looking.

Chapter Four: Theorising the *oppositional stare* in the films of Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett

'I warn you, I refuse to be an object.' - Leonora Carrington²⁸⁰

4.1: Introduction

This chapter answers my first research question: how do the films of Kennedy and Hellett challenge a heteroableist gaze? This chapter undertakes a close reading of Kennedy and Hellett's films to argue that they produce new ways of seeing neuroqueerness (as defined in Chapter Two) and establish a neuroqueer aesthetics. By taking ownership of learning disability representation, I argue Kennedy and Hellett refuse dominant images and narratives of learning disability and the knowledge fictions they produce (outlined in Chapter Two). They demonstrate a critical awareness of how they are seen, both by themselves and by others through cinematic techniques to foreground a neuroqueer gaze. To explore the radical potential of these films to deconstruct the politics of visibility and offer new queer images of learning disability, this chapter employs Honig's refusal method of *inoperativity*, hooks' concepts of *critical spectatorship* and the *oppositional gaze*, and Garland-Thomson's notion of *staring* to demonstrate how Kennedy and Hellett engage in the politics of looking which both challenges a hetero-ableist gaze and invites a neuroqueer gaze.

Synthesising the concepts of inoperativity and critical spectatorship, I posit that Kennedy and Hellett refuse dominant media images of learning disability. They create new images and new narratives through what I term an *oppositional stare*; a concept inspired by hooks' *oppositional gaze* and Garland-Thomson's concept of *staring*. Coined by hooks in the essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators", the oppositional gaze is a way of looking which responds to the refusal of black people's right to look. hooks highlights the practice of white slave owners punishing black slaves for looking at them but also connects this practice to white cinema which has constructed black people as Other. hooks situates her theory in

²⁸⁰ Quote widely attributed to Leonora Carrington

criticism of feminist film theory which she argued was preoccupied with whiteness and left no room for understanding how black females were denied the gaze and the ways in which the black male gaze offered black men the opportunity to look without being punished. The oppositional gaze is a transformative cinematic tool in which black women make black media for other black women; they dare to look back, to see themselves. The oppositional gaze refutes the narratives and representations presented about black people in mainstream cinema and promotes agency for those marginalised by society more broadly to enact a form of cultural agency.

Related to questions of the gaze and who has the right to look, Garland-Thomson in *Staring: How we Look* (2009) explores the various understandings of staring in the context of disability and physical difference. She notes that while gazing exists in the erotic scopophilic realm, for example the sexual objectification of women through the male gaze, staring exists in the pathological scopophilic realm; which provides the foundations of an *ableist gaze* which constructs disabled people as 'other'. Of interest however is Garland-Thomson's counter-reading of the stare, whereby she theorises the act of staring as a way of mastering social interaction.²⁸¹ Here the stare is used by the stared-at person to become the one who stares or looks back. When two people with disabilities stare at one another, a social interaction occurs which allows them to see each other in new, affirming ways. She uses the example of disability self-portraiture as a way in which disabled people control the stare and encourage looking on their own terms.²⁸²

By synthesising hooks' oppositional gaze and Garland-Thomson's stare, I propose the *oppositional stare* as a filmic technique used by Kennedy and Hellett which imagines a neuroqueer gaze. They do this by making neuroqueer images, as neuroqueer artists, for other neuroqueer people as a gesture of affirmation. Through the use of film techniques which interrogate the *heteroableist gaze*; such as the use of voyeurism, direct address and mirror reflections, Kennedy and Hellett simultaneously challenge the heteroableist gaze whilst embracing the neuroqueer

²⁸¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we Look* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 84

²⁸² Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 84

gaze, asking to be looked at, on their own terms, by their own neuroqueer community.

Section 4.2 summarises Honig's first feminist refusal method of inoperativity and articulates its relevance to Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking. Section 4.3 introduces hooks' theories of critical spectatorship and the oppositional stare to further situate Kennedy and Hellett's self-representation as a refusal of a heteroableist gaze which has constructed disability as other. Section 4.4 undertakes a close reading of three films by Kennedy (*What is Femme Anyway?* [2013], *Just Me* [2013], *Enid and Valerie* [2018]) and two films by Hellett (*Sparkle* [2008], *Mrs Sparkle* [2009]) to demonstrate how their use of cinematic techniques such as voyeuristic close-up and over the shoulder shots, direct address and mirror reflections, together with the double motif, interrogate the politics of looking in both the context of agency and inclusion. Section 4.5 analyses these films through the themes of queer narcissism and shame. Section 4.6 outlines my theory of the oppositional stare which synthesises hooks' oppositional gaze with Garland-Thomson's counter-reading of staring as a concept.

In this chapter, questions of visibility and *to-be-looked-at-ness* are considered in the context of the target audience of the films (predominantly these films are screened for other marginalised people), demonstrating a gesture of refusal of dominant learning disability imagery and narrative (inoperativity). Furthermore, these images produced by Kennedy and Hellett challenge the principles and politics of queer theory and crip theory which prioritise mainstream visibility as a form of political voice. Kennedy and Hellett reject this by appearing to make work for themselves and other neuroqueer people through a process of affirmation. This will be explored further in Chapter Five in the context of community-building, but it is also relevant to this chapter when considering who Kennedy and Hellett are asking to be looked at by.

Rather than attempting to conform to or be included in the production of a mainstream disability narrative, they instead transform the image of learning disability into new queer ones, for the benefit of other neuroqueer people. This represents a radical departure from traditional queer and disabled politics of visibility

and offers new ways of understanding queer and learning-disabled ways of self-representing, contributing new understandings to representational politics. My theory of the *oppositional stare* builds on hooks' understanding of how marginal identities can resist dominant oppressive screen representations through the concept and act of looking in combination with Garland-Thomson's understanding of how staring can encourage social interactions to show how these resistances and social interactions can take place on the screen. To borrow a term from Zanele Muholi, Kennedy and Hellett 'flip the ethnographic'²⁸³ tradition of (disability) representation by *asking* to be looked at by other neuroqueer people, becoming the active subject rather than the passive object of representation. This, I argue, establishes a *neuroqueer spectator*, hitherto not acknowledged in film theory or spectatorship studies, through Kennedy and Hellett's creation of a social dialogue of queer learning-disabled image-making.

4.2: Inoperativity

In Chapter Two, I explored why representation matters and recent articulations of neuroqueer and how traditional representations of disability have relied on a form of othering to construct a narrative of disability as in some way lacking. In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Honig draws upon the work of Giorgio Agamben's theory of inoperativity to suggest the ways in which stepping away and distancing oneself from particularly oppressive situations can be an active method of refusal. Where Agamben locates refusal in a passive or leisurely form of inoperativity; a suspension of expected use for a more pleasurable one (and by use this is typically raced and gendered),²⁸⁴ Honig argues for a feminist inoperativity 'on behalf of equality, power and transformation'²⁸⁵ which includes not only the suspension of use, but the *intensification of use*²⁸⁶ (my emphasis).

In Honig's example of the *Bacchae*, the women (bacchantes) of Thebes leave the city, thus suspending their maternal duties by refusing to breastfeed their children. As Honig builds on Agamben's theory of inoperativity, suspension is not

²⁸³ Stephanie Eckardt, "Zanele Muholi Wants Their Stunning Self-Portraits to Teach You How to 'Fight Back,'" *W Magazine*. 9 Jan 2018.

²⁸⁴ Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2021, 4

²⁸⁵ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 15

²⁸⁶ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 16

enough, the bacchantes must intensify their use. Their maternal nursing duties are suspended on leaving the city and their babies behind, but they are then intensified by offering new uses of their bodies in their nursing of wild animals.²⁸⁷ The bacchantes have established the heterotopia of Cithaeron where they practice new ways of living, transgressing all norms and grounding new normativities.²⁸⁸ They 'act wild'²⁸⁹ as Honig describes their actions, by nursing in the 'right' way, but with the 'wrong' object; the wild animals.

I interpret Kennedy and Hellett taking matters of representation into their own hands as an example of Honig's inoperativity. By refusing to accept dominant narratives and images of learning disability and the invisibility of queer learning-disabled images, or by refusing to be the object of outside representation, Kennedy and Hellett suspend their use. By actively creating their own narratives and images, and by becoming the subject of their own representations, they intensify their use. I will discuss this in more in Chapter Five in the context of Nirmal Puwar's 'space invading', but for the purposes of this chapter, their taking on the role of image-maker and subject, rather than object of the image, situates Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as an assertion of their agency and their refusal to be objectified.

At the 2016 Matthew and Matthew Q&A in Brighton, Kennedy explained how they 'feel marginalised in terms of culture. Learning disability culture is invisible even within the LGBTQ community. I feel personally for us (speaking and referring to Hellett) because you don't really hear many stories or narratives around LGBT folks with learning disabilities, particularly within the art world'.²⁹⁰ Hellett responds that he agrees that you do not see 'people with learning disabilities and that are gay at all; I feel quite marginalised in society, and it's difficult for us to get our work out'.²⁹¹ Kennedy also explains that they feel marginalised in terms of history:

there doesn't seem to be much information or research around LGBT learning disability narratives or stories within the arts community in general and that

²⁸⁷ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 104

²⁸⁸ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 22

²⁸⁹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 23

²⁹⁰ Kennedy, "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

²⁹¹ Hellett, "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

makes me feel frustrated. I think that's when we have to start creating our own narratives and stories as LGBT learning disabled folks because we can't wait for the mainstream to do it for us.²⁹²

This demonstrates both a refusal of what is on offer and cultural agency in the sense that they aim to rectify this lack. Hellett believes when a filmmaker has greater control over their art, they are more able to 'own it', to tell their own stories in their own way, which he believes produces work that is 'more real'.²⁹³ Like the black female filmmakers who inspired hooks' theory of the oppositional stare, Hellett is describing this way of taking control of their own narrative, on their own terms. Although Hellett's filmmaking is predominantly centred on Mrs Sparkle, a fictional character he has created, as will be discussed throughout the thesis, Mrs Sparkle acts as a vehicle for Hellett to express himself and offers an insight into his 'more real' lived experience and his alignment with a particular type of queer culture.

Demonstrating Honig's *intensification* of use, Kennedy notes that they 'felt there aren't representations of people like me out there in film, and I was just like "to hell with this, I'm just going to put myself in the frame and see what I can do, just experiment, it doesn't matter whether it goes awry or whether it goes great, you're still going to be putting yourself in the frame regardless"'.²⁹⁴ A key motivation for Kennedy was 'to tell stories that are not told enough', adding that 'trying to search for films by learning-disabled queer filmmakers was really, really hard'. Kennedy questioned 'where the hell are these filmmakers, I can't find anything'. They stumbled upon *John and Michael* (dir. Shira Avni, 2004), a short animation which tells the tale of two gay lovers with Down's syndrome, and then found Hellett's work which they described as 'a beacon of light at the end of the tunnel'. Kennedy noted 'it still left me with a hunger for more [...] I felt like, "is this it, is this all that we have, is there anything to add?" and I felt like we need to get more films out there by queer learning-disabled filmmakers'. Kennedy further-describes the situation as 'sheer frustration' when the search engine gave no results during this research process.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Kennedy, "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

²⁹³ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 164

²⁹⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1

²⁹⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1

Hellett shared this frustration and took matters of representation into his own hands, not just through filmmaking but also through film curation. In 2017, as Lead Programmer of Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF), Hellett launched the Queer Freedom (QF) strand which showcases films by or featuring LGBTQ+ learning disabled people. I will explore this more in Chapter Five in the context of community building, but it is worthy of mention here as it also directly relates to Honig's *intensifying* use through Hellett's going beyond passive suspension to active creation.

In their *inoperativity*, Kennedy and Hellett are asserting their agency in the field of representation and are taking ownership over the narrative of neuroqueerness. As evidenced above in their resentment towards feeling marginalised in matters of representation, and their motivation to take matters into their own hands, they become the author of their own untold and unheard stories, which is a significant political move to both reject othering and to create images of a lived experience that is seldom seen on screen. The next section introduces hook's theory of the oppositional gaze.

4.3: Oppositional gaze

Kennedy and Hellett reject the othering of mainstream media images of learning disability and create new images which reflect their lived experience of queerness. In creating these images, their films confront a heteroableist gaze that has worked to fix learning-disabled people as cisheteronormative two-dimensional objects of representation. This section mobilises bell hooks' concepts of the *critical spectator* and the *oppositional gaze* as a productive model through which to demonstrate how Kennedy and Hellett talk and look back to and reject a dominant media culture.

For hooks, the oppositional gaze represents a confrontation and is a recognition of the power in looking. Before one can assert an oppositional gaze, one must first become a critical spectator and resist dominant ways of looking and knowing.²⁹⁶ In a Foucauldian sense this would involve both recognising the impact of

²⁹⁶ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

being under surveillance (critical spectatorship) and actively looking back out towards the one doing the surveillance; to return the look and disrupt the power dynamic (oppositional gaze). For hooks, to be a critical spectator is for black people to name their oppression, and in the context of her theory, this is black women calling out the white male gaze, the white female gaze and the black male gaze in media representations of black female bodies. In thinking of Kennedy and Hellett as critical spectators, I argue they name and call out the ableism and heteronormative gaze inherent in dominant media representations of learning-disabled bodies, in their refusal of such images and their motivation to self-represent.

hooks argues that being aware of or naming oppression does not automatically mean this awareness corresponds with politicisation, or the development of an oppositional gaze. Oppositionality for hooks is beyond resistance. Critical spectatorship becomes an oppositional gaze in the active doing, transformation and intervention; when one creates 'alternative texts that are not solely reactions'.²⁹⁷ The alternative texts hooks describes are not just positive images in the place of negative images, they are *different* images because they are new and never seen. They do not signify good or bad because they are inherently subjective. For hooks, the alternative text represents the opportunity for the black female body to be seen as beautiful, which has seldom been given screen space. Oppositionality is to 'participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revision, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels'.²⁹⁸ Kennedy and Hellett employ an oppositional gaze when they create brand new, seldom-seen neuroqueer images and narratives which allow the learning-disabled person to be seen in new queer ways. This is not them replacing negative images of learning disability with positive images, as hooks describes above in the context of black femininity, or as Darke describes in the context of disability (see Chapter Two), but they create new and never-seen images, or as hooks phrases it, they create 'alternative texts'.²⁹⁹

Honig's description of a passive and intensified inoperativity is reflected in hooks' theories of critical spectatorship and the oppositional gaze outlined above.

²⁹⁷ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

²⁹⁸ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

²⁹⁹ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

The passivity of hooks' inoperativity is like Agamben's; when one becomes a critical spectator, rejecting the images and refusing to acknowledge them as valid. For both Honig and hooks, the transformation occurs when the inoperativity or criticalness becomes active, agonistic, intensified through creation; by establishing an oppositional gaze. Kennedy and Hellett transform the image and narrative by creating new images and narratives. The next section explores the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett do this through the use of specific cinematic techniques which confront the politics of looking and othering, which, as hooks describes, is a process of contestation, resistance, revision, interrogation and invention.³⁰⁰

4.4: The power dynamics of looking

hooks describes the oppositional gaze as 'representations that challenge stereotypical notions that place' them 'outside the realm of filmic discursive practices'.³⁰¹ For hooks, critical spectators must create the space to construct subjectivity and must acknowledge the importance of mass media, film in particular, 'as a powerful site for critical intervention'.³⁰² Kennedy and Hellett are keenly aware of film as a site of cultural production which informs audiences of disability and have actively taken a stand to intervene in the arena. Kennedy and Hellett's films, as I wish to demonstrate below, problematise the issue of learning disability, queerness and representation by inviting the audience to look and see differently.³⁰³ By drawing on cinematic techniques which evoke the gaze, staring and the power dynamics of looking, one focus of their work becomes about the visibility of neuroqueerness.

What is crucial to their work, I argue, is how Kennedy and Hellett see themselves; that they are displaying their bodies not for the benefit of overturning or subverting a heteroableist gaze, but, to paraphrase hooks, in recognition that 'affirms their subjectivity – that constitutes them as spectators'.³⁰⁴ This relates to discussions later in this chapter about the intended audience of the films, in that the images they produce are made for both themselves and for the benefit of other queer learning-disabled people. They integrate themselves in the process of image-making and

³⁰⁰ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

³⁰¹ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 129

³⁰² Hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

³⁰³ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 130

³⁰⁴ Hooks, *Black Looks*, 130

meaning-making rather than passively accepting what is offered by mass media. The following three sub-sections (4.4.1, 4.4.2 and 4.4.3) discuss the cinematic techniques of voyeuristic shots, direct address and mirror reflections and doubles which Kennedy and Hellett use to interrogate looking relations.

4.4.1: Voyeurism

The trope of voyeurism is fundamental to understandings of spectatorship and looking relations in cinema. As Furstenau notes, 'the cinema comes to be understood essentially as a site for the reproduction of an unsanctioned kind of looking. The cinematic spectator is understood as a kind of *voyeur*'.³⁰⁵ This section explores how Kennedy and Hellett demonstrate an awareness of the spectator as voyeur by using cinematic techniques which expose the voyeuristic nature of looking at learning disability.

Mulvey ([1975] 2010) connects cinematic voyeurism with scopophilia by drawing on Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality* in which he defines scopophilia as that which involves 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze'.³⁰⁶ In her assertion of the male gaze, Mulvey writes in the context of dominant (Classical era Hollywood) cinema and what she describes as the male/active/looking, female/passive/locked-at split'.³⁰⁷ This type of voyeurism is also relevant to queerness and disability in film in that it exposes how ways of understanding difference are constructed through visual tropes (see Chapter Two). When Mulvey writes that 'the spectator's own fascination is revealed as illicit voyeurism',³⁰⁸ this 'fascination' could easily be related to the scopophilia of taking disabled or queer people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling, curious gaze.

Mulvey argues that film represents a 'sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation

³⁰⁵ Marc Furstenau, "Introduction, Film Theory: A History of Debates," Ed. Marc Furstenau, *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 13

³⁰⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Ed. M. Furstenau, *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010. 202

³⁰⁷ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 207

³⁰⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 207

and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy', which allows 'the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world',³⁰⁹ particularly in the cinema where this is enacted in the additional privacy of darkness. Where Mulvey writes in the context of an erotic scopophilia, I interpret Freud's 'curious' scopophilia as a pathological scopophilia, where the cinema allows the non-disabled spectator to stare at the disabled image on screen, in private; the illicit form of looking at disabled people we are told from childhood is wrong. Mulvey differentiates this type of voyeuristic scopophilia from fetishistic scopophilia.³¹⁰ The voyeuristic is based on anxiety, it is controlling and it punishes, it is found in what I would interpret as the ableist gaze and resides in the pathological realm. Fetishistic scopophilia on the other hand is based on reassurance and pleasure, it transforms the image that raises anxiety but renders it satisfying. Mulvey discusses fetishistic scopophilia in the sexual objectification context of the male gaze, but I posit that this type of looking can involve sexuality but not only in the context of erotic desire, but through a queer gaze, a gaze of recognition. This can be seen through Kennedy and Hellett's engagement with themes of queer shame which I discuss more in section 4.5.

One of the ways in which film allows the spectator the illusion of private looking Mulvey notes, is through 'subjective camera'³¹¹ shots and establishing the spectator as the POV. Subjective camera, or POV, shots therefore draw the spectator into position; 'the spectator is absorbed into a voyeuristic situation within the screen scene'.³¹² Kennedy and Hellett use subjective camera shots which draw the spectator into the position of voyeur. The close-up shots position the spectator in their cinematic world, where nothing is seen outside of it, meaning we are forcibly engaged in their subjectivity and understand the importance of their presence. In the opening shots of *Enid and Valerie*, the dark-haired Enid awakens from her sleep and is drawn to her window, which is framed and lit by a spotlight effect giving the impression of a peephole (Fig.4.1). The peephole traditionally serves a dual function in that it positions the female as the object of the viewer's desire whilst also positioning the viewer as complicit in the objectification. This film conjures the

³⁰⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202

³¹⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 386

³¹¹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 206

³¹² Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 206

images Honig describes of the bacchantes bathing on Cithaeron, who realise they are being spied on by Pentheus. Through its themes of spying and illicit looking associated with the peep hole trope, *Enid and Valerie* are the bacchantes bathing unawares.³¹³ Enid and Valerie watch each other and we, the audience, watch them without their knowing (Fig.4.2, 4.3), we are forced to view them illicitly and become complicit in their objectification. There is also an internal voyeurism within the film between Enid and Valerie; Enid initially gazes at Valerie, until Valerie notices and returns her gaze. Enid descends a flight of stairs to join Valerie at the table, where they partake in tea. All the while we are gazing at them both through an apparent peep hole. When we are spotted, like the bacchantes spot Pentheus, their gaze is returned, they know we are watching.



Fig.4.1: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube

³¹³ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*



Fig.4.2: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube



Fig.4.3: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube

The peephole is a much-used metaphor in film to make audiences aware of how the camera constructs the gaze, most explicitly and famously employed in *Peeping Tom* (dir. Powell, 1960). Kaplan notes, the camera and projector 'duplicate

the eye at the keyhole, whose gaze is confined by the keyhole "frame".³¹⁴ In *Enid and Valerie*, the peephole positions the spectator as voyeur, allowing Kennedy to control the spectator's gaze and confine what is and is not exposed, inviting the spectator into the dream world – or subconscious - of Enid, her Cithaeron.

In *Mrs Sparkle*, Hellett controls the gaze in a similar way, but rather than through a peephole as in *Enid and Valerie*, the spectator is positioned as voyeur by peering through a crack in a slightly ajar door (Fig.4.4). The film begins with the spectator watching Hellett walking down a side street. The POV changes and we watch a still unbeknownst Hellett from behind as he is beckoned into the doorway by a silver-gloved arm (Fig.4.5). We remain in position as Hellett walks away from us, towards the door, to the original 'us'. The curiosity of our gaze on Hellett from the door is shifted to Hellett's curiosity of us, as obscured by the door, and he is persuaded to enter into the unknown (Fig.4.6).

The power dynamics of this looking relationship is more akin to Mulvey's understanding of the male gaze wherein the one doing the watching has the greater power. Like Freud's scopophilia, which subjects the object under surveillance to a controlling gaze, Hellett is controlled by the gaze of the voyeur behind the door and acts as per their instruction by entering the building. Mulvey notes the male or dominant gaze 'carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze',³¹⁵ reflecting an awareness of the power imbalance of being the gazee represented by Hellett's 'possession' by the voyeur.

³¹⁴ E.A. Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," Ed. M. Furstenau, *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010, 210

³¹⁵ Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," 210



Fig.4.4: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube



Fig.4.5: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube



Fig.4.6: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

Denzin (1995) interrogates how the voyeur's gaze has been regulated by gender, race and social class, but makes no mention of queerness or disability. For Denzin, 'the voyeur becomes a metaphor for the knowing eye',³¹⁶ stating the voyeur's gaze is the gaze of surveillance and that which unveils the private and makes it public. It is the camera's gaze, and also the gaze which exposes the social and reveals hidden truths.³¹⁷ As Denzin summarises, the voyeur's gaze is the gaze that is inappropriate, the voyeur is often the pervert, as in *Peeping Tom*, the obsessive, paranoid, violent individual. Voyeuristic looking therefore becomes seen as a 'problematic activity'.³¹⁸ Denzin's understanding of voyeurism follows that of Mulvey and the traditional notion of the spectator as masculine and the subject of the gaze as feminine or lacking, but Hellett complicates this discourse in *Mrs Sparkle* by using voyeurism in a more nuanced way and which questions the politics of spectatorship.

³¹⁶ Norman. K. Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur's Gaze*,. London: Sage, 1995, 2

³¹⁷ Denzin, *The Cinematic Society*, 2

³¹⁸ Denzin, *The Cinematic Society*, 3

Mrs Sparkle ends how it begins; with the voyeuristic shot of Hellett being spied on through the crack in the door. In the opening shot, we see only the gloved hand, but in the closing version, we get a glimpse of the voyeur and it is Hellett; watching himself (Fig.4.7). By Hellett taking an assertive control of the gaze on himself, this shot questions Denzin's understanding of voyeurism which dictates that 'only particular types of individuals are given the right to look at others'.³¹⁹ Hellett refuses this dynamic and actively becomes both the gazer and gazed. This is akin to Baudrillard's theory of *deterrence*, which Denzin summarises in a cinematic context as when 'the person gazed upon is the person doing the gazing'.³²⁰ What Hellett has done in this shot is not merely a switching of gazing roles, but a colonising of them; he has knowingly taken over complete control of the looking dynamic by assuming both roles.

Hellett's cinematic deterrence represents a form of *double consciousness*, a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois ([1903] 2016) to describe the ways in which black people experience themselves through both their own experience and the experience of how white people experienced them in post-Slavery USA. This theory has been used generally to explore how oppressed people live in an oppressive world and is used in the context of disability by Titchkosky and Michalko (2012) who note how the perception of them as disabled people contributes to how they perceive themselves, or, 'we experience ourselves through their experience of us'.³²¹ This evokes the argument of Gartner and Joe (1987) that images of disability can themselves be disabling. When we see that we, the voyeur, is actually Hellett, and therefore Hellett is watching himself, the film forcefully exposes this double consciousness, but in an assertive way that refuses the position of experiencing the self through the experience of others; Hellett will experience himself as and through himself only, it his own experience that is prioritised and foregrounded in *Mrs Sparkle*.

³¹⁹ Denzin, *The Cinematic Society*, 1

³²⁰ Denzin, *The Cinematic Society*, 9

³²¹ Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko, "The Body as the Problem of Individuality: A Phenomenological Disability Studies Approach," Ed. D. Goodley et al. *Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 135

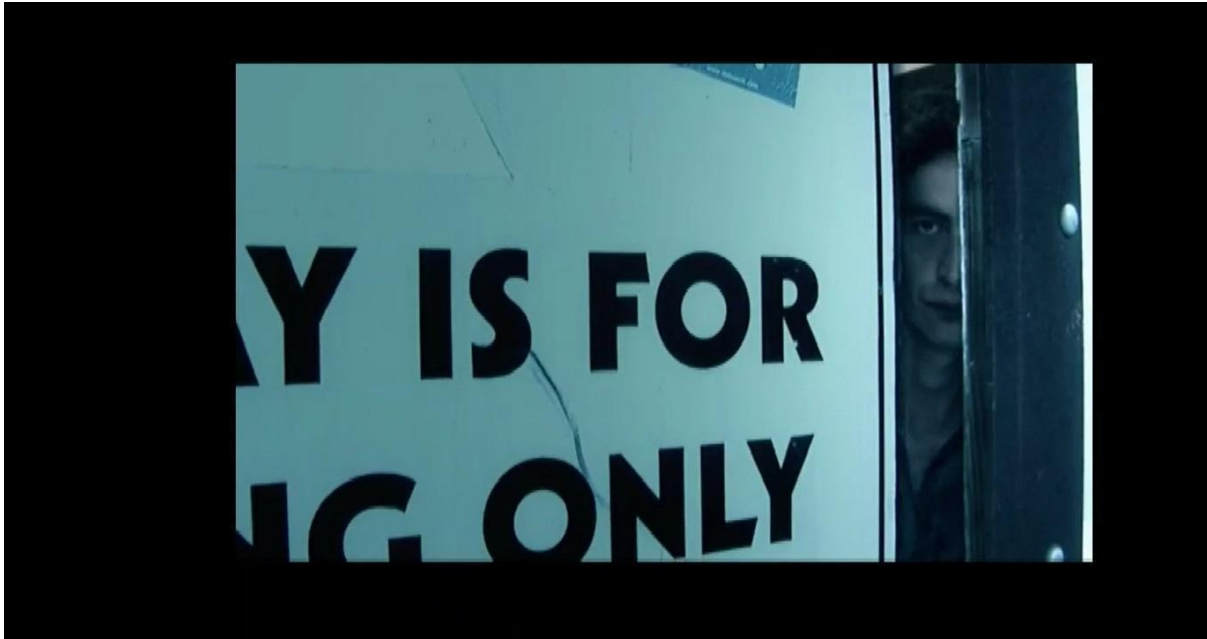


Fig.4.7: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

Both Kennedy and Hellett use close up over-the-shoulder shots (OTS); Hellett in *Mrs Sparkle* and *Sparkle*, and Kennedy in *What is Femme Anyway?*. OTS shots traditionally evoke intimacy or encourage a new perspective. Through OTS, Kennedy and Hellett assert that these films are from their perspective, they are the subjects, not objects, of these films. The first time we see the gloved hand in *Mrs Sparkle*, we are positioned in extremely close proximity to Hellett, as if he could almost feel our breath on the back of his neck (Fig.4.5). In *Sparkle*, Hellett is shown shaving in a mirror reflection during his transformation into Mrs Sparkle and we are positioned extremely close to his person (Fig.4.8). Similarly, in *What is Femme Anyway?* we voyeuristically watch Kennedy applying make-up in a mirror reflection; this time Kennedy's shoulder is not seen, but we are positioned extremely close to their side (Fig.4.9). This image of Kennedy, and likewise of Hellett shaving in Fig.4.8, conjure up what Mulvey describes as 'the perfect to-be-looked-at image'.³²² We are positioned close enough that there is no doubt that the spectator is within the personal space of the object of our gaze, but with the added drama that the object is also gazing at themselves and leaves us the spectator vulnerable to being seen, exposed in our voyeurism, particularly when our presence being reflected in the

³²² Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 207

mirror is at threat. These over-shoulder mirror shots teeter nervously on spoiling the illusion of separation between spectator and subject and reflect a knowing of the precarity and instability of this looking exchange by Kennedy and Hellett. These close-up shots also connote an intimacy between spectator and Kennedy and Hellett and afford a stronger and closer relationship between the observer and observed, an acknowledgement of togetherness (I will return to this theme in section 4.6) and a dismantling of power structures by taking control of the looking relationship and forcing the viewer to look right at them.

There is an added dimension of power imbalance in the mid-to-high angle shot as Kennedy is positioned below us and we observe Kennedy in the act of transformation from above which situates them in a vulnerable position. In our interview, Kennedy acknowledged that filmmaking involves 'expressing a vulnerability' but tells themselves, 'just do the damn thing, just say it out loud and don't let the shame wash over you, just be honest'. This attitude is extremely reminiscent of the iconic line from Audre Lorde's poem "A Litany for Survival": 'and when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid so it is better to speak'.³²³ Lorde captures the vulnerability visually represented in Kennedy's kneeling pose in *What is Femme Anyway?*, and also in Kennedy's film of the same year *Just Me*, when they speak in the narration of regaining their voice through filmmaking; 'I was nervous [...] you're bearing your soul'.³²⁴ Because *Just Me* and *What is Femme Anyway?* are 'quite autobiographical', Kennedy describes how they were 'bricking it a wee bit' when initially filming, adding that 'it was a really nerve-wracking time because I didn't know how the films were going to be received'.³²⁵ In *Talking Back* (2014 [1989]), hooks writes about her own discomfort at sharing 'personal stuff' but asserts that 'confronting the fear of speaking out and, with courage [...] continues to be a vital agenda of all females'.³²⁶ and, I would add, all people who have been in some way silenced. The following section continues with this theme and explores how Kennedy and Hellett use direct

³²³ Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," *Children of the Liberation: Transatlantic Experiences and Perspectives of Black Germans of the Post-War Generation 2* (2020).

³²⁴ *Just Me*, Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013.

³²⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

³²⁶ hooks, *Talking Back*, np

address, or 'break the fourth wall', as a form of regaining a visual voice and *talking back*.³²⁷



Fig 4.8: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube



Fig.4.9: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

³²⁷ hooks, *Talking Back*, np

4.4.2 Breaking the fourth wall

Mulvey notes that the 'voyeuristic-scopophilic look that is a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure can itself be broken down'.³²⁸ She describes three different 'looks' associated with cinema; the camera, the audience and the characters portrayed. The conventions of narrative film deny the existence of the camera and the audience's looks to achieve 'reality, obviousness and truth', and Mulvey argues the first 'blow' to traditional film looking relations is to acknowledge the looking as performed by the camera and the audience. This, Mulvey suggests, 'destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the "invisible guest" (spectator) and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms'.³²⁹ This is a technique, Mulvey notes, used by radical filmmakers to disrupt traditional 'voyeuristic-scopophilic' looks and although she does not explicitly describe it as such, one of the ways she hints this is achieved is through direct address which breaks the film's verisimilitude.³³⁰

Brown (2012) describes direct address as the act of onscreen characters acknowledging the presence of the spectator; 'they seem to look at us'.³³¹ Echoing Mulvey, Brown summarises what is oft-referred to as '1970s Screen Theory' (of which Mulvey would be part of), noting for that generation of psychoanalysis-driven film theorist, 'direct address is a clear challenge to [...] cinema's "voyeuristic phantasies" and separation from its audience'.³³² Brown highlights how Mulvey's contemporary Paul Willemsen posited a fourth look to contribute to Mulvey's three looks model noted above, which is the look of the character to the audience. Brown notes however, that this fourth look differs to the types of looks in Mulvey's model as the person being looked at in the fourth look is an 'imaginary' other.³³³ Brown notes therefore that direct address is typically understood as destroying the illusion of a story, but he favours interpretations of direct address which have the ability to intensify our relationship with films³³⁴ and which account for 'the complex text-viewer relationship encouraged by direct address'.³³⁵

³²⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202

³²⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202

³³⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202

³³¹ Tom Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, x

³³² Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 7

³³³ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 8

³³⁴ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, x

³³⁵ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 8

Building on Willemen's 'imaginary' audience, in his preference of the term 'symbolic' audience, Brown notes Willemen's fourth look 'is symbolic of the film-text or filmmaker's attitude towards the viewer's role'.³³⁶ Relatedly, Brown quotes V.F. Perkins who argues that a film's significance comes just as much from its immediate subject matter as it does its attitude towards its audience.³³⁷ Direct address can therefore 'enable audiences to see the forces of artistic and ideological construction behind the work'.³³⁸

Kennedy and Hellett employ direct address several times in their films, which can be interpreted in several ways. As mentioned in section 4.4.1, the final shots of *Mrs Sparkle* reveal that the silver-gloved figure which beckons Hellett into the darkened ajar doorway is in fact Hellett himself. When the interior Hellett is revealed as the one observing the external Hellett, Hellett directly addresses the camera and appears to be looking straight at us, the spectator (Fig.4.7). In *Enid and Valerie*, Kennedy directs the spinster and witch to look back through the peephole directly at the spectator, smiling, in full acknowledgement of their presence (Fig.4.10). The most explicit use of direct address is in *Just Me* where Kennedy uses extreme close-up direct address for the entirety of the film. Kennedy places various white stickers with handwritten phrases on different parts of their face and upper torso whilst narrating what these phrases mean in the context of Kennedy's life. The word 'MINORITY' is placed on their cheek, and 'GAY' below that. 'LEARNING DIFFICULTIES' is placed on the other cheek and 'CROSS DRESS' under that. 'ABLEISM' is placed on the forehead, then 'OPENLY ANXIOUS' on the chin. 'GENDER' is placed on the heart, and 'PIGEON-HOLED' under 'ABLEISM' on the forehead. 'I DREAM' is placed on the chest (Figs.4.11, 4.12, 4.13). I will explore the meaning of these phrases in more detail in Chapter Six, but for the purposes of this chapter I want to focus on the symbolism of the direct address and how this contributes meaning to the film in the context of what Kennedy is doing on screen.

³³⁶ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 9

³³⁷ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 9

³³⁸ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 10



Fig. 4.10: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube



Fig.4.11: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo



Fig.4.12: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo



Fig.4.13: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

If, as Brown argues, direct address is 'a marker of the filmed object/subject's consent' which is 'presentational rather than "only" representational',³³⁹ I can interpret Kennedy and Hellett's direct address as not just a method of asserting agency in the looking relations of screen representations, but also as 'presentational' in their reference to themes which go beyond the direct subject or content of the films.

Brown notes, Pascal Bonitzer's essay "The Two Looks" (1977, Brown's translation) is 'the most substantial published work on direct address',³⁴⁰ which is divided into two interpretations useful for analysing the type of 'counter-cinema' of which Kennedy and Hellett can be categorised. The first of Bonitzer's looks is 'the hidden look', which is less confrontational and is directed towards the hidden filmmaker, and thus we the spectator supposedly identify with this role. The second, or 'counter-look' describes the exhibitionism of the onscreen person or character who actively invites themselves to be seen by a collective audience. Bonitzer's two looks encourage proximity and confrontation, and both are of interest to this chapter as I argue there is a dual function in Kennedy and Hellett's direct address; their films offer both encouragement of proximity and confrontation, depending on the spectator.

In *Mrs Sparkle* direct address is used when Hellett is revealed as the voyeur observing himself. The direct address is neutral in that no emotion is expressed in his face, so the look is ambiguous. This look could be argued to encourage proximity in that Hellett has let us into his voyeuristic secret, that he has consented to be seen as an observer; letting the spectator know that he is aware of how he is seen by others, thus expressing a vulnerability. Alternatively, Hellett's look can be said to be a counter-look in that it is a confrontation of this awareness. Just as Pentheus is spotted gazing upon the bacchantes, Hellett has spotted us and stopped us in our tracks as the observer. We have interrupted Hellett observing himself. Hellett catches our gaze and holds it, exposing how our observations impact his own observations on himself. Hellett is also a critical spectator by acknowledging the ways in which learning-disabled people are looked at. This relates to the double

³³⁹ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 10

³⁴⁰ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 22

consciousness described in section 4.4.1, but Hellett is letting us know that he is fully aware of the power dynamic.

In *Enid and Valerie* the direct address is more playful; both spinster and witch become aware of being spied upon through the peephole, but their returned gaze is in marked contrast to Hellett's in *Mrs Sparkle* because they are smiling. Again, this is ambiguous as the smiling could be a warm reply to a curious gaze, an invitation for other neuroqueer people to continue looking and join them, or, it could be a smile of ridicule; that they know they are the object of an unwanted or uninvited gaze but in their knowing they have flipped the power dynamic and now become the active agent in their mocking demand that the spectator follow through their gaze and be confronted by the gazee.

In *Just Me*, Kennedy's direct address relates to the narration. Kennedy recounts a story which reflects their life when they speak of the various themes that shape their identity and the impacts which this has had on their life. The narration is explanatory in tone, meaning it is likely worded for the benefit of those uninformed about Kennedy's experiences. In *What is Femme Anyway?* Kennedy speaks more exploratorily, as in a stream of consciousness full of rhetorical questions one would ponder in thought, and the film follows in this style visually in that the spectator voyeuristically observes and is privy to Kennedy's thought process, meaning direct address is not used. Distinctively, the narration of *Just Me* relates to the direct address in that it presupposes an audience, the language is instructional inasmuch as it communicates a story, and the visuals presuppose the audience through the direct address. Who the audience is in this exchange is arbitrary, but I argue the film speaks to several audiences. In *Just Me* Kennedy places labels on their person which cite a history of classification and oppression. By naming their oppression they become critical spectator, they attempt to disarm it and to refuse its further dictates. They question these underlying power structures and by also using direct address, which itself is a technique widely interpreted to expose the underlying power structures which govern looking relationships in cinema, their questions operate on multiple levels. It can be argued the exposing of multiple levels of power in the film speaks to other neuroqueer people who will identify with and relate to Kennedy and their experiences, but it will also speak to those who are not neuroqueer who will

question their own bias and implicitness in these looking relations. Kennedy therefore both encourages proximity of other neuroqueer people who can sympathise, whilst simultaneously confronting the spectatorship of those who have perpetuated or benefited from the power structures being exposed.

Brown notes gestures of direct address can include intimacy, both in the encouraging and intrusion sense, of being '*too intimate*'³⁴¹ (Brown's emphasis) and can be used to assert agency and power.³⁴² Kennedy and Hellett's returned gazes can invite intimacy from other neuroqueer people, but they can also confront objectification. Brown also notes direct address represents knowledge or a coming to consciousness,³⁴³ which Kennedy and Hellett demonstrate by asserting a knowing on their part of how they are seen by others and how this affects how they are seen by themselves. Either way, as Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argue, direct address represents a demand for the viewer (as the object of the look) to enter into a para-social relationship with the on-screen figure,³⁴⁴ whether this be an encouraging or confrontational relationship, or both. This para-social relationship will be discussed in greater depth in section 4.6 in the context of spectatorship and Garland-Thomson's writing on staring.

In their direct address, Kennedy and Hellett 'flip the ethnographic tradition'³⁴⁵ of both the looking relationship of cinema and also of looking at disability more generally, and thus flip the inherent power dynamics by asserting their control over who looks at them and when. In their consent and demand to-be-looked-at through direct address, Kennedy and Hellett move from passive object to active subject, rendering the spectator the passive object who does as Kennedy and Hellett bid. Their direct address is ambiguous and multifaceted and what is expected from it likely depends on the position of the spectator. Either 'we are made to feel obtrusive observers',³⁴⁶ as Brown states, or we identify with Kennedy and Hellett. Whatever our position as spectator, Kennedy and Hellett's direct address 'appeals to our

³⁴¹ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 13

³⁴² Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 13-14

³⁴³ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 14

³⁴⁴ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 122

³⁴⁵ "Zanele Muholi Wants Their Stunning Self-Portraits to Teach You How to "Fight Back"

³⁴⁶ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 29

involvement'.³⁴⁷ The following section explores the use of the mirror in more detail in the context of constructing the ideal self.

4.4.3: Mirror reflections and doubles

Both Kennedy and Hellett employ the use of mirrors and symbolic *doubles* in their films, but through different techniques and to different effects. This section builds on Lacanian mirror theory and Olu Jenzen's concept of *radical narcissism* to further uncover how Kennedy and Hellett navigate the politics of looking through the sophisticated use of symbolic film techniques.

Using the examples of Freudian symbolism in the surrealist cinema of the 1920s and the therapeutic process of talking cures in Hollywood melodramas of the 1940s, Columpar (2002) surmises that psychoanalysis has had a significant impact on the content of film dating back to its earliest years.³⁴⁸ Epistemologically, Jacques Lacan's mirror stage has significantly impacted the way in which film theorists since the 1970s have understood the use of mirror reflections in cinema as constructing or musing on an ideal self. For Lacan (1977), the significance for what he terms the *mirror stage* lies in the 'formation of the *I*'³⁴⁹ or the construction of a sense of self. Between the ages of six to eighteen months, Lacan notes that a child recognises themselves as a whole person in their mirror reflection and for the first time correlates the movements in this reflection as their own. Lacan describes this understanding of the self as 'the transformation that takes place in the subject when he (sic) assumes an image',³⁵⁰ and thus a relationship between a living organism and its understanding of reality has been established.³⁵¹ The fragmented understanding of the body of the neonatal child is now a totality as understood through their mirror reflection; their sense of 'I' or the *ego*.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 24

³⁴⁸ Corinn Columpar, "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30.1-2 (2002): 30

³⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," Trans. Alan Sheridan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, London and New York: Routledge, 1977, 1

³⁵⁰ Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," 2

³⁵¹ Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," 4

³⁵² Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," 4

Mulvey succinctly summarises Lacan's mirror stage as 'the moment when a child recognises its own image in the mirror' as being 'crucial for the constitution of the ego'.³⁵³ Importantly, the child then imagines their 'mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than they experience in their own body',³⁵⁴ thus highlighting the significance of this theory when exploring the concept of an ideal or constructed self. Through the mirror reflection, the subject understands themselves through the fantasy image of the mirror and is an image to which they aspire throughout their lives. The mirror can be symbolic and the reflection to which we aspire need not be a literal reflection of oneself but a reflection of who we want to be, such as those we admire and wish to emulate.

The mirror plays a significant role in *What is Femme Anyway?* and it is the only shot through which we see Kennedy throughout the entirety of the film (Fig.4.9). Kennedy sits or kneels in front of a mirror applying face makeup while their narration ponders the definitions and boundaries of 'femme' and questions what this means for their own gender identity and presentation. Kennedy's reflection is the only part of them that we see, so effectively we only see Kennedy as Kennedy sees themselves in their own mirrored reflection, though from a more voyeuristic position. Unlike in *Just Me*, Kennedy does not acknowledge our presence through direct address, so there is a voyeuristic gaze on our part as spectator. Kennedy has invited this gaze and is encouraging the voyeurism further by giving us access to their innermost thoughts about their gender identity, and while they gaze upon themselves in the mirror while asking such questions, they can be said to be voyeuristic too, similar to Hellett's self-voyeurism in *Mrs Sparkle*.

Hellett uses the mirror briefly in one shot in *Sparkle* (Fig.4.8), but it is a significant shot despite its short duration in that it reflects the moment when Hellett removes their most visible aspect of masculinity; their facial hair. The film closely follows Hellett's transformation into Mrs Sparkle and by removing the facial hair this represents the first step in visibly becoming Mrs Sparkle. As Hellett narrates during this section of the film, 'I think I can identify the difference in the Matthew Hellett

³⁵³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202

³⁵⁴ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202

world which is sometimes a big struggle'.³⁵⁵ Throughout the film, he speaks about how the anxieties he experiences in everyday life are a 'big struggle', but that this is eased when he gets his makeup on and becomes Mrs Sparkle. The film then shows extreme close-up shots of fragmented parts of Hellett in the act of becoming Mrs Sparkle; his nails are painted, and false eyelashes are glued to his eyelids. When Hellett discusses the 'Matthew Hellett' world during the mirror shot, it can be interpreted that he is not only removing his facial hair but that he is removing Hellett and his anxieties, and when he is Mrs Sparkle, he is smiling. This is replicated in *Mrs Sparkle* when Hellett transforms into her and smiles at the end of the film for the first time.

Fitzgerald (2013) has explored the mirror trope in *Mamma Mia!* (dir. Lloyd, 2008), particularly a scene involving a lone mother (Donna)-daughter (Sophie) relationship. Fitzgerald undertakes a feminist reading of this scene in which Donna sings to her own reflection in a mirror, the significant point being that she, the mother is the focus of the scene, not the daughter, as is typical in mother-daughter screen representations. Fitzgerald makes the compelling argument that the mirror allows the mother's, particularly the lone mother's, subjectivity to be foregrounded, which is additionally represented in the context of love and affection, not the 'derogated' female characteristic usually associated with lone mothers and matricide.³⁵⁶ The mirror allows Donna as the lone mother to see herself in a way in which she has not been allowed to be seen before, as valued. The same argument can be made for Kennedy and Hellett's use of the mirror reflection. The mirror does not just reflect Kennedy and Hellett's 'ideal' Lacanian self, it allows them to actually see their own identity reflected back at them for the first time.

The mirror is a trope which has widely been used in cinema and particularly in queer cinema in the context of transgender narratives. J.B. Cole (2022) argues, the 'typical trans mirror scene' in cinema uses the mirror as a medium to represent

³⁵⁵ *Mrs Sparkle*, Dir. Matthew Hellett, 2009

³⁵⁶ Louise Fitzgerald, "What does your mother know? Mamma Mia!'s mediation of lone motherhood," Ed. Louise Fitzgerald and Melanie Williams, *Mamma Mia: The Movie: Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2013, 208

dysphoria and to elicit sympathy in the audience.³⁵⁷ Cole notes that Prosser and Halberstam's scholarship reads the trans mirror as a 'speculative trope in which a mismatched reflection provokes an eerie, uncanny affect'³⁵⁸ and that within that trope, the mirror symbolises a splitting of the trans subject. Cole suggests Halberstam and Prosser prioritise a reading of the trans mirror which involves disidentification and shattering,³⁵⁹ which they argue

ignores both the powerful phenomena that mirrors are able to access as well as the complexity of the trans mirror gaze. Trans ways of looking necessarily re-envision the insufficient reflection to create an alternative that will be survivable. The result is a body that will and must reflect something else, and although the person remains the same, the mirror will ultimately need to produce a slightly different duplicate. This then presents a new trans look, one that takes account of ideas of shattered trans mirror images.³⁶⁰

For Cole, therefore, the *trans mirror scene* is a powerful site of transformation and identification, not shattering and disidentification. As they note, 'taking control of a mirror more actively reflects euphoric transimagined bodily schemas, themselves radical disruptions of a reflective visual field'.³⁶¹ Therefore, in opposition to Prosser and Halberstam's analysis of the mirror as the site of displeasure (voyeuristic), Cole sees the mirror as the site of euphoria (fetishistic) which is Lacanian in that it is not concerned with reflected reality but with the *fantasy* that for Lacan characterises the mirror.

Cole's interpretation of the mirror as the site of 'euphoric transimagined bodily schemas' is a productive model through which to analyse Kennedy and Hellett's use of the mirror. For Kennedy and Hellett, the mirror is not the site of struggle as is the typical convention Cole rejects, but rather the site of transformation which they favour; the point at which Kennedy and Hellett allow us to see them in the act of

³⁵⁷ J.B. Cole, "Changing the reflection: re-visions on the trans mirror scene," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 20.2 (2022): 244

³⁵⁸ Cole, "Changing the reflection: re-visions on the trans mirror scene," 244

³⁵⁹ Cole, "Changing the reflection: re-visions on the trans mirror scene," 249-250

³⁶⁰ Cole, "Changing the reflection: re-visions on the trans mirror scene," 244

³⁶¹ Cole, "Changing the reflection: re-visions on the trans mirror scene," 246

becoming how they want to be seen. Although Hellett discusses his wish to become Mrs Sparkle during his mirror scene, the mirror is not exactly the site of dysmorphia which Cole argues dominates understandings of the trans mirror trope, but the start of the process of becoming. As Mulvey states, the mirror image is 'an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary'.³⁶² Both Kennedy and Hellett are actively taking control of a mirror as Cole describes above, which reflects the radical (visual) disruptions of their identity.

One of the most compelling frames in Hellett's films is the split-second moment in which he uses direct address through the mirror during the process of shaving (Fig.4.14). Here the viewer observes Hellett through three layers or screens; the device screen, the camera lens and the mirror reflection. As a cinematic technique multiple layers of separation from the subject can produce a distancing effect. This use of multiple layering can be a visual metaphor for the multiple othering Hellett experiences as a queer person with learning disabilities. This technique can also be a form of symbolic protection from the voyeurism of the viewer, which is particularly significant when analysed in the context of a transformation process when the subject is in a vulnerable position. The threat of being seen that was suggested in section 4.4.1 has now materialised. Hellett's use of direct address encourages the viewer to consider why we are watching this process.

Taken as a single frame, the look in Hellett's direct address has a threatening overtone to it which poses a challenge to this looking exchange. It is a momentary glance, but it breaks the verisimilitude of the scene. We can no longer be secure in our voyeurism as we have been spotted and the response by Hellett is not one of invitation but of an indication of an awareness of our presence. Their moment of protection has been disturbed and is again evocative of the bacchants on Cithaeron challenging the voyeuristic gaze of Pentheus from the tree. Hellett does not enact physical violence upon the intruder like the bacchants, but the symbolic violence of the threatening glance is fleetingly present.

³⁶² Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 202-203



Fig.4.14: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

Another, more abstract, form of mirroring employed by Kennedy and Hellett is the trope of the double or doppelganger. Hellett speaks of Mrs Sparkle as if she were a different person or, rather as someone Hellett has to 'become' in order to feel right. In *Sparkle* he states that 'it's almost like she lives in another world 'cause she gives herself an inner peace, an inner happiness'.³⁶³ This 'other world' that Hellett describes Mrs Sparkle as inhabiting is represented in *Mrs Sparkle* where Hellett enters the building having followed the silver-gloved arm into the darkness of the ajar door. Taking the stage, Hellett transmogrifies into Mrs Sparkle, now in technicolour indoors where in contrast outdoors he was starkly graded in tonal hues (Fig.4.15). This film is reminiscent of the words spoken by a ball attendant in the film *Paris is Burning* (dir. Livingston, 1990), when he describes entering the ballroom as 'like crossing into the looking glass in Wonderland. You go in there and you feel 100% right being gay, and that's not what it's like in the world'.³⁶⁴ As discussed in the previous two subsections exploring voyeurism and direct address, Hellett watches himself on the street and essentially coaxes himself into this other world where he can become Mrs Sparkle.

³⁶³ *Sparkle*, Dir. Matthew Hellett, 2008

³⁶⁴ *Paris is Burning*, Dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990

The double is a theme also used by Kennedy in *Enid and Valerie*. Whereas Hellett's double in *Mrs Sparkle* is the double of his own person, in *Enid and Valerie*, Kennedy explores the double through the interchangeable identities of the fictional spinster Enid and the witch Valerie. This will be explored in more depth in Chapter Six in the context of subjectivity, but it is worthy of note that the witch and spinster are recurring themes throughout Kennedy's broader artistic practice and are figures with which Kennedy strongly identifies due to their ostracism, solitude and being generally misunderstood people. In the film, Enid awakens and turns on her bedroom light, pictured with black hair and a grey nightshirt. She looks out of her window and sees the red-haired witch Valerie. By the end of the film, Enid awakens in bed with a start and is now the red-haired Valerie but in the grey nightshirt. (Fig 4.16). In the meantime, Enid descends a staircase to join Valerie at a table to drink tea (Fig 4.17). Throughout the narration, the voices of Kennedy and Lizzie Banks (Carousel) state 'she is me, I am her' repeatedly, whilst the figures of Enid and Valerie change so that Enid stands in for Kennedy's voice and Valerie for Banks' voice, then vice versa (Fig 4.18, 4.19). Knowing the affection Kennedy has for the images of the solitary and misunderstood spinster and witch figure, it can be interpreted that Kennedy is reflecting their ideal 'I' through the characters of Enid and Valerie and their interchanging reflects the interchanging identity of the spinster and the witch, representing two passive and active sides of a solitary coin. The following section considers these ways of looking and being seen and the motif of the double within the paradox of queer narcissism and queer shame.



Fig. 4.15: Comparative stills from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

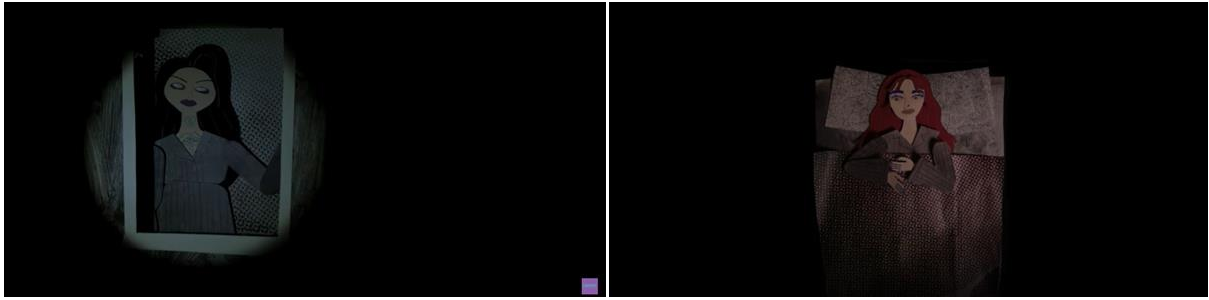


Fig. 4.16: Comparative stills from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube



Fig.4.17: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube



Fig.4.18: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube



Fig.4.19: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube

4.5: Queer narcissism and queer shame

Jenzen (2013) offers a productive example of a queer understanding of narcissism in media which is theorised through the doppelganger motif in the context of lesbian erotic desire. Drawing on the double motif in *Black Swan* (dir. Aronofsky, 2010), Jenzen theorises 'radical narcissism' as being deliberately 'highly self-referencing'³⁶⁵ and as a queer 'political or dissident gesture'.³⁶⁶ Jenzen writes of doubles in a predominantly lesbian context within popular culture, however notes that the double can represent a different version of the self, or a ghost of the past.³⁶⁷

As Jenzen notes, 'the association of homosexuality to narcissism has historically served as a way to reinforce the pathologization of dissident sexuality'³⁶⁸ and she describes the mirror image as the 'most central of symbolisms' of such a narcissism.³⁶⁹ In *Mrs Sparkle* we watch Hellett watching himself, but then we also question if we are Hellett, which is a technique Jenzen notes is also used in *Black Swan* to produce such an effect whereby 'we are not sure which one of the double versions the protagonist is, we do not know what to believe of the whole narrative'.³⁷⁰ It is unclear watching *Mrs Sparkle* which version of Hellett we are watching, if one version represents an interior Hellett, in the world of Mrs Sparkle, and one the external Hellett, or if one Hellett represents us the spectator.

In *What is Femme Anyway?* Kennedy uses the mirror image explicitly and is preoccupied with the self. There is no regard for the observer, or there is no visible knowledge we are watching them. They are absorbed in their make-up application and their own thoughts; when not applying makeup, Kennedy is making movements of the eye which visually indicate an internal pondering of the questions they raise in the narration. Direct address is not used, we watch Kennedy at ease that they either do not know we are there or do not care. This is about them and we are privy to a private moment. Similarly, *Enid and Valerie* represents a private moment or dream of

³⁶⁵ Olu Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles: Radical Narcissism and the Trope of Lesbian Doppelgangers," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 17.3-4 (2013), 344

³⁶⁶ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 345

³⁶⁷ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 357

³⁶⁸ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 347

³⁶⁹ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 352

³⁷⁰ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 352

sororal or queer attraction, whereby Kennedy's witch or spinster fantasy can be played out.

Jenzen draws on the work of Claude Cahun, whom Kennedy has explicitly referenced as an influence³⁷¹ in relation to their collage work, but the similarities between Cahun and Kennedy go beyond the collage in that both use their own bodies in types of highly stylised self-portraiture and both use the mirror trope. Jenzen draws upon the writings of Cahun who utilised what they called 'absolute narcissism' as a political tool, which Jenzen suggests 'carries connotations of radical activism'.³⁷² Cahun describes their absolute narcissism as a 'form of revolt' and 'passive resistance' to the psychoanalytical and medical usage of the term to pathologize, which acts as a direct challenge to its authority and suggests strategies of 'withdrawal and exclusion'.³⁷³

Through their use of the mirror image and 'double', Kennedy and Hellett can be seen to enact a version of what Jenzen terms *radical narcissism* through their withdrawal and exclusion to their own filmmaking world, to the interior of their imaginations where ideal selves and multiple subjectivities can be explored visually through mirror reflection, doubles and fictional characters. Jenzen articulates how narcissism has been mobilised in feminist art to radicalise modes of resistance by disregarding intelligibility and knowing; meaning, rather than subversion, this tactic offers a new or alternative discourse.³⁷⁴ Kuppers (2017) draws upon unintelligibility in the field of disability performance studies, focusing on how performers mobilise unknowability as a political tool to take back control of the narrative and embrace ambiguity. Kuppers states, 'given the stigma of disability stereotypes, they manipulate the ways audiences make meaning in what they see and experience'.³⁷⁵ Kennedy and Hellett manipulate meaning through various cinematic mirroring techniques which foreground the self/selves in arbitrary representations of subjectivity. It is as if they ask the audience to 'see me as I see me'. By using mirror reflections, Kennedy and Hellett encourage the audience's participation by

³⁷¹ "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

³⁷² Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 353

³⁷³ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 353

³⁷⁴ Jenzen, "Revolting Doubles," 360

³⁷⁵ Petra Kuppers, *Theatre and Disability*. London: Palgrave, 2017, 51

suggesting, through the voyeuristic nature of their poses, that they are the object of someone's gaze, advocating in some way the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the disabled person.

Seemingly the antithesis of narcissism, in several shots of the films in which Kennedy and Hellett themselves feature, they are shown with downcast or closed eyes and/or bowed head (Figs.4.20-4.23), which Sedgwick describes as 'the proto-form' of 'shame'. Sedgwick draws on the field of psychology to surmise that 'shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side outside; shame and pride, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove'³⁷⁶ and it is shame that is 'the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion'.³⁷⁷ So in other words, shame is an inherent element of all performances of narcissism and vice versa, the two are inextricably linked. It may seem counter-productive to discuss the concept of shame in a thesis of which the main motivation is to highlight the agency of Kennedy and Hellett as marginalised queer cultural producers, but as Sedgwick argues,

the main reason why the self-application of "queer" by activists has proven so volatile is that there's no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going to succeed in detaching the word from its associations with shame and with the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood.³⁷⁸

The same could be said about the reclamation of the word 'crip' by some disabled people, not that Kennedy or Hellett identify as crip, but the argument can be applied more broadly to those who do. Sedgwick's point is that shame is inherently linked to queerness but crucially Sedgwick points out that this need not be interpreted as repressive,³⁷⁹ but rather that the performance of shame can be 'creative' and 'transformational'.³⁸⁰ This transformation happens, Sedgwick argues, through its

³⁷⁶ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," *GLQ* 1 (1993), 4-5

³⁷⁷ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 8

³⁷⁸ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5

³⁷⁹ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5

³⁸⁰ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5

communicative potential to constitute identity,³⁸¹ which I want to argue can be seen in the films of Kennedy and Hellett. Sedgwick suggests that the aforementioned proto-forms of shame, the downcast eyes or bowed head, 'aims toward a sociability'³⁸² and betrays a 'desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge'.³⁸³ Munt (2007) furthers Sedgwick's notion of shame to suggest it has the power to forge 'queer attachments',³⁸⁴ which relates back to the point I made in section 4.4.1 that shame can be a vehicle for acknowledging a queer gaze, or put another way, Kennedy and Hellett use shame *to* queer the gaze. Here the self-referential is used as a form of refusal on the part of Kennedy and Hellett to participate in film on the conditions set by dominant (ableist heteronormative) culture.



Fig.4.20: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

³⁸¹ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5

³⁸² Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 7

³⁸³ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 5

³⁸⁴ Sally R. Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017



Fig.4.21: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

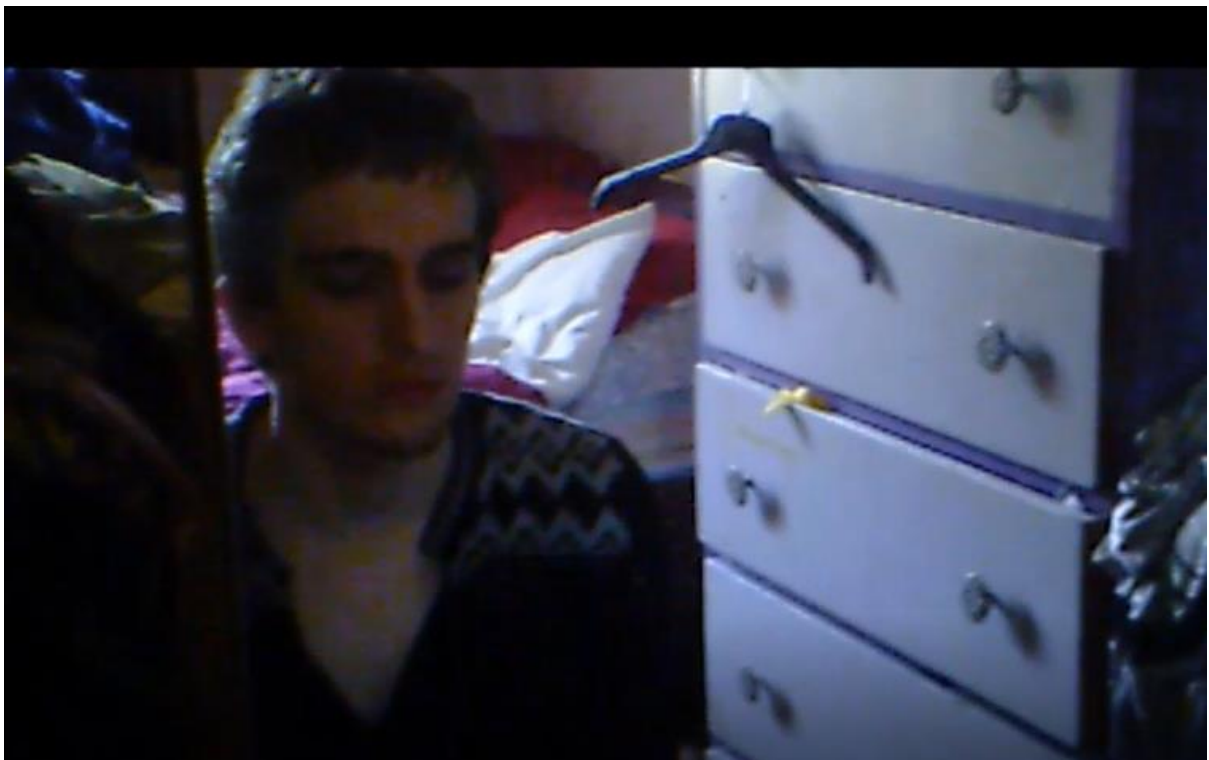


Fig.4.22: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

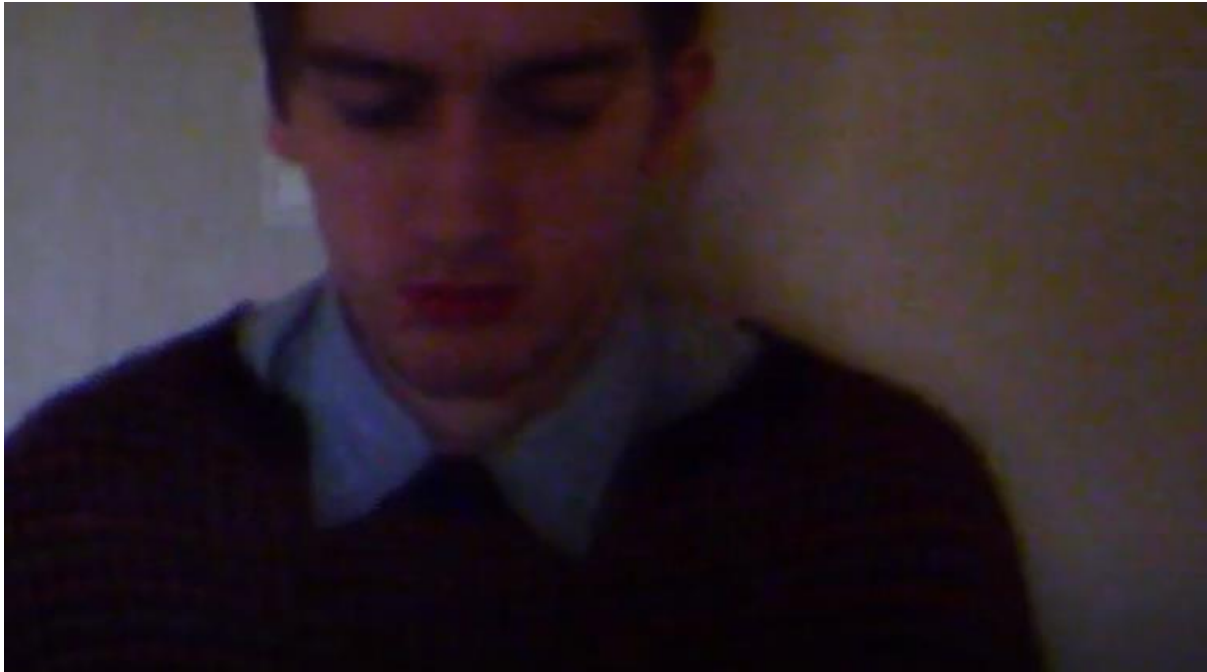


Fig.4.23: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

4.6: Establishing an *oppositional stare*

Through the analysis of several cinematic techniques, I have situated Kennedy and Hellett as participants in a range of looking relations which have created what hooks calls 'alternative texts'³⁸⁵ to contest, interrogate and revise³⁸⁶ the image of neuroqueerness, or put another way, they are operating within the neuroqueer gaze to destabilise traditional understandings of queerness and learning disability. I have argued a fundamental feature of their process of transforming (not subverting) the image of queerness and learning disability is a focus on how Kennedy and Hellett see themselves and the ways in which they have displayed their neuroqueerness which, hooks notes, 'affirms their subjectivity' and 'constitutes them as spectators'.³⁸⁷ This section develops hooks' oppositional gaze and Garland-Thomson's reading of staring to offer the concept of the *oppositional stare*, an interpretation of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking as a refusal method through neuroqueering spectatorship.

³⁸⁵ hooks, *Black Looks*, 128

³⁸⁶ Hooks, *Black Looks* 128

³⁸⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 130

Both Kennedy and Hellett explore their identity through the eyes of themselves, through a neuroqueer gaze, other people and the act of being generally seen. Firstly, the fact they are using film as a medium which is screened at public events shows how their work is intended to be seen by others. Particularly for Kennedy, the films do not appear to have been made for the sake of making them, but for external viewing. *What is Femme Anyway?* was made as an accompaniment to the collage seen at the end of the film for a group exhibition, and as mentioned above, their intention was to put themselves into the 'frame' of representation, as they phrased it; to make an intervention. In terms of the content of the films, themes of visibility are striking. In *Just Me*, the labels Kennedy places upon themselves are related to identity categories either defined or imposed by society. They use direct address, demanding to be looked at, while looking back at the spectator either as challenge or inclusion. In *What is Femme Anyway?* Kennedy uses OTS shots to invite a voyeuristic gaze, but by looking in the mirror, they are also watching themselves. For Kennedy, to be 'femme' is to be seen and complimented by others; 'when someone compliments me on a piece of clothing I'm wearing or possibly takes a liking to what colour of nail polish I've got on'.³⁸⁸

In *Sparkle*, Hellett explains how he can sleep at night knowing he made people smile and giggle, something he describes as a 'privilege'. In *Mrs Sparkle*, Hellett is anonymous and invisible in the grey external world, walking the dismal back streets of Brighton alone, but once inside and as Mrs Sparkle, she is seen, she has an audience and she comes to life, her blank expression transforming into a smile, her slow walk towards the beckoning arm outside becomes a twirl on the stage inside. As the claps and cheers of the audience increase, so do her movements and pleasure. I am seen, therefore I am. When the music stops and the crowd disappears, she looks deflated and slinks offstage as there is no audience to perform for. In *Sparkle*, once fully made up, Hellett waves to an unseen audience, as if on the stage accepting an ovation, imitating gratitude for an imaginary performance and adoration.

³⁸⁸ *What is Femme Anyway?* Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013.

While there are clear parallels to be drawn in relation to the social surveillance that disabled people are subjected to, the psychoanalytical grounding of the gaze as a concept, and its development from scopophilia to a focus on erotic desire and objectification is limited in use when theorising the surveillance disabled people face in media representations. As Schroeder (1998) notes, 'to gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze'.³⁸⁹ The foundations upon which cinematic gaze theory is constructed are centred on how the body being represented is objectified in a fetishistic way. Garland-Thomson has written extensively on the concept of staring, which I argue is a more productive concept to explore when looking at the films of Kennedy and Hellett and which supports my argument that they question the dynamic of superiority and inferiority inherent in traditional gaze theories. Clarke (2014) suggests Garland-Thomson's 'alternative view of staring as a mutual, potentially productive interaction that takes on various meanings when involving living people does not offer much intervention in the analysis of films or photographs, nor does it help us rethink the way we might interact with such images'.³⁹⁰ In the following discussion I challenge Clarke's assertion and suggest that when a film is made and shared with a particular viewer in mind, the stare does become a social exchange.

Garland-Thomson (2009) distinguishes gazing from staring, noting, 'if gazing is the dominant controlling and defining visual relation in patriarchy between male spectators and female objects of their gazes, staring is the visual practice that materialises the disabled in social relations'.³⁹¹ Put another way, Garland-Thomson suggests that if 'feminization prompts the gaze; disability prompts the stare', which connects the ways in which gender and disability are constructed through practices of looking.³⁹² Where gazing produces gendered and gendered-raced objectification, staring will produce disabled objectification. Gazing exists in the 'sexual realm,

³⁸⁹ Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research," Ed. Barbara B. Stern, *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 208

³⁹⁰ Michael T. Clarke, "Disability, Spectatorship, and The Station Agent," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34.1 (2014), np

³⁹¹ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 43

³⁹² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 28

Garland-Thomson argues, as in 'you're mine', whereas staring exists in the 'pathological realm', as in 'what's wrong with you?'³⁹³ This echoes Mulvey's distinction of the fetishistic and voyeuristic scopophilia in Section 4.4.1 and directly relates to the literature discussed in Chapter Two in the context of disability as medical curiosity. This extends to the historical pathologisation of queerness, but it is Garland-Thomson's counter-reading of the 'social relations' of staring that is of interest to this chapter.

Garland-Thomson notes staring has been extensively theorised as an oppressive force, but argues it can also be productive in ways that unsettle our understanding of this type of looking as being rude or voyeuristic. Garland-Thomson does not see the staree as a victim,³⁹⁴ but rather 'recasts starees as subjects, not objects'³⁹⁵ which reveals new perspectives. Staring is defined by Garland-Thomson as 'an ocular response to what we don't expect to see',³⁹⁶ but suggests this does not necessarily mean the response is rude.³⁹⁷ Instead, for Garland-Thomson stares can 'make one a master of social interaction', and she draws particular attention to portraits of people with disabilities as a way in which disabled subjects have the opportunity to deliberately engage and stare down the viewer.³⁹⁸ Kennedy and Hellett's films can be conceptualised as a form of moving portraiture,³⁹⁹ and through their use of direct address, they take the opportunity to engage their viewers. For Garland-Thomson, the struggle for stares is knowing how to look back.⁴⁰⁰ If starers inquire, the staree either flees or locks eyes.⁴⁰¹ Kennedy and Hellett choose the latter, they lock eyes through direct address and become the masters of the cinematic social interaction. The question for Garland-Thomson therefore is not '*should we stare, but how we should stare*' (original emphasis); what she terms an 'ethics of looking'.⁴⁰²

³⁹³ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 32

³⁹⁴ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 10

³⁹⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 11

³⁹⁶ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 3

³⁹⁷ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 185

³⁹⁸ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 84-85

³⁹⁹ Note: The very principles of film rest in the principles of photography and early films were referred to as moving pictures

⁴⁰⁰ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 84

⁴⁰¹ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 3

⁴⁰² Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 185

Garland-Thomson draws on Sontag's (2003) writing on the ethics of looking which argues that the curious and voyeuristic nature of the one looking can only be neutralised when there is sufficient reason to be looking⁴⁰³ and that the looking must be turned into political action⁴⁰⁴ if it is to proceed in the direction of ethical looking. It is therefore not about looking, but what we *do* (my emphasis) once we have looked. The relationship between starrer and staree ought to be in some way collaborative and interventionist. For Garland-Thomson the stare 'catches interest, prompts judgement, encourages scrutiny, creates knowledge',⁴⁰⁵ and it is at this point we are 'recognizing a "newness" that can be transformative'.⁴⁰⁶

The above points relate directly to the films of Kennedy and Hellett when analysed in the context of a target audience. When Kennedy speaks of putting themselves into the frame, it is worth highlighting that they do not say putting themselves 'back' into the frame, they are acknowledging that queer people with learning disabilities were never in the frame to begin with, so their work is interventionist and transformative. This reinforces my earlier point that their films are not subversive because no images of queer learning-disability existed *to* subvert. When I asked Kennedy who they had in mind as an audience when making the films, they responded that 'ideally, my films are best intended for small audiences who are part of certain communities [...] definitely learning disability audiences [...] also marginalised audiences in general. That fits my criteria. I don't feel like my films are for mainstream consumption'.⁴⁰⁷ In his curation of the QF strand for OBFF, Hellett can also be said to prioritise neuro/queer audiences, so also marginalised people. Considering this in the context of the techniques used by Kennedy and Hellett to interrogate and invite looking, their approach to filmmaking can be theorised as a 'relationship between starrer' (neuroqueer audience member) and staree' (neuroqueer filmmaker) which 'ought to be in some way collaborative and interventionist', as Garland-Thomson describes. Their main objective is evidently not to invite the stares of the general public, but the neuroqueer community as a form of mutual recognition and encouragement to join in.

⁴⁰³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003, 75-76

⁴⁰⁴ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 79

⁴⁰⁵ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 187

⁴⁰⁶ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 188

⁴⁰⁷ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

Related to who Kennedy's films are aimed, they described in our interview a disdain for social media, noting they only post about their work if a screening is scheduled, and even then it will just be one post to alert people to the event, not wanting to 'try and shove it down people's throats.'⁴⁰⁸ In general Kennedy doesn't share their work because they explain 'not wanting people to be throwing validation cookies' in their face:

no, you can keep your validation cookies [...] I don't have a certain hunger for validation, if I get it, I get it, if I don't, I don't, I'm not going to lose sleep over it. [...] it's like with social media now, people need their validation fed to them, certain people, it makes me feel uneasy. [...] Mind you, I'd be a horrible influencer, I only have what 274 followers, that will do me!⁴⁰⁹

Despite this clear deliberate lack of social media engagement, Kennedy acknowledges that 'I'm only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle, I'm not a representative or an ambassador for a specific community,'⁴¹⁰ which suggests a desire on their part that other people join in a visual dialogue. This comment also betrays a disavowal of the homogenous nature of language and representation about disability, with Kennedy asserting they are just one person, their experience of queerness and learning disability is not universal and other stories need to be told. This is also apparent in the workshops Hellett holds as part of his work with OBFF (to be discussed in Chapter Five) which encourages and supports other learning-disabled filmmakers to create new images and join the community of filmmakers associated with the festival. In this sense then, the stare which Kennedy and Hellett invite through their films 'catches interest, prompts judgement, encourages scrutiny, creates knowledge'.⁴¹¹ The knowledge they create is the knowledge that Kennedy and Hellett had themselves sought; the knowledge that there were other neuroqueer people out there and that they were not the only ones. 'In this way', Garland-Thomson argues, 'staring becomes a starrer's quest to know and a staree's

⁴⁰⁸ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁴⁰⁹ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁴¹⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁴¹¹ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 187

opportunity to be known'.⁴¹² Garland-Thomson argues that staring is an 'interrogative gesture' which 'begins as an impulse that curiosity can carry forward into engagement'⁴¹³ and a 'circuit of communication and meaning-making'.⁴¹⁴ This engagement and circuit of communication can be understood as the context in which Kennedy and Hellett's films are made and shared, which is predominantly through OBFF, which will be discussed in Chapter Five in the context of community-building.

hooks argues that to see yourself oppositionally is to 'imagine, describe and invent' yourself 'in ways that are liberatory' which in turn challenges and invites 'allies in struggle'⁴¹⁵ to 'dare to look' differently⁴¹⁶ and imagine new ways of being.⁴¹⁷ Like hooks' oppositional black gaze which is demonstrated through the creation of independent black cinema, Kennedy and Hellett have imagined and invented themselves in new liberating ways through their own form of neuroqueer film which invites people to look differently and imagine new ways of being. They demonstrate this oppositionality through asserting their agency; their cinematic staring which presupposes a neuroqueer spectator and pioneers a new type of imagery. Kennedy and Hellett employ what I have termed an *oppositional stare*. This expands upon the notion of the neuroqueer gaze because it does not just acknowledge a neuroqueer spectator, it invites and encourages participation. Garland-Thomson notes that 'knowledge gathering is the most productive aspect of staring in that it can offer an opportunity to recognize one another in new ways',⁴¹⁸ which Kennedy and Hellett encourage and guide through their oppositional and liberatory filmmaking. Through doing so, and through the cinematic techniques analysed above, Kennedy and Hellett establish themselves as, and presuppose an audience of, neuroqueer spectators and potential future filmmakers.

4.7: Conclusion

This chapter has detailed how Kennedy and Hellett draw upon cinematic techniques such as voyeuristic close-up and OTS shots, direct address and mirror reflections, to

⁴¹² Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 15

⁴¹³ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 3

⁴¹⁴ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 3

⁴¹⁵ hooks, *Black Looks*, 4

⁴¹⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 2

⁴¹⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 2

⁴¹⁸ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 15

question the politics of looking and the heteroableist gaze. I have shown how the use of the double motif speaks to a double-consciousness and how themes of queer shame have emerged which both acknowledges a queer gaze and *queers* the gaze. I have proposed the theory of the oppositional stare which imagines a neuroqueer spectator, hitherto not acknowledged in film theory or spectator studies, which encourages the spectator's participation in transforming the narratives of learning disability. This chapter contributes new knowledge to disability representation studies by demonstrating how Kennedy and Hellett refuse dominant images of learning disability and actively take control of the narrative through self-representation, a significantly under-researched aspect of academic discussion. Rather than subvert harmful disabled imagery, Kennedy and Hellett produce brand new queer images of learning disability that have not been seen on screen before and which explicitly engage with the politics of looking within disability contexts outlined in Chapter Two.

Mulvey notes 'the alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind [...] in order to conceive a new language'.⁴¹⁹ If the alternative represents the new images Kennedy and Hellett create and the past they leave behind is mainstream images of learning disability language, what then is the new language they have conceived? Kaplan asked in her 1983 essay "Is the gaze male?", 'is it possible for there to be a female voice, a female discourse?'⁴²⁰ I ask, is it possible for there to be a neuroqueer voice, a neuroqueer discourse? Kaplan notes that 'raising questions is the first step toward establishing a female discourse, or, perhaps, that asking questions is the only discourse available to women as a resistance to patriarchal domination'.⁴²¹ Kaplan notes that psychoanalytic theory in this way can free women from their position of domination because women have not been processed through defined psychic stages, that there is forever an unresolved or incompleteness about her psychic position. Kaplan draws on Mulvey as noting that patriarchal culture is not therefore monolithic, that there are 'gaps' and 'fissures' through which women can ask questions and introduce new ideas which lead to change.⁴²² These gaps and fissures are what hooks would call the 'spaces of

⁴¹⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 201

⁴²⁰ Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," 211

⁴²¹ Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," 217

⁴²² Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," 217

agency' which exist for marginalised people to create new narratives. Kennedy and Hellett's films act as questions of the possibility of a different way of being, where the viewer is engaged in these questions and contributes to their answer and meaning through the building of community and thus a neuroqueer discourse. Kennedy employs this explicitly in *What is Femme Anyway?* when the whole film is centred on the question of what it means to be femme. The following chapter continues with this theme in establishing what a neuroqueer discourse could manifest as by analysing their filmmaking in the context of community building and nurturing.

Chapter Five: Community-building through curation and collecting: Oska Bright Film Festival, Queer Freedom and the Matthew and Matthew Archive

5.1: Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored Honig's refusal method of *inoperativity*, hooks' theories of *critical spectatorship* and the *oppositional gaze*, and Garland-Thomson's re-reading of *staring* to demonstrate how Kennedy and Hellett enact an *oppositional stare*. I argued they do this by refusing dominant images of learning disability and the invisibility of neuroqueer narratives in screen cultures. Kennedy and Hellett confront these issues by 'putting themselves into the frame,' where they explore ways of looking and to-be-looked-at-ness to begin their transformative gesture of refusal through filmmaking. They recontextualise queer aesthetics as the multiple other to establish a neuroqueer aesthetics and invite looking on their own terms by establishing a neuroqueer gaze.

In this chapter I answer my second research question which asks how can the learning disability film festival and archive expand current understandings of queer visual activism by taking into consideration the contexts of production, circulation and preservation of filmmaking? I mobilise Honig's refusal method of *inclination* to suggest that Kennedy and Hellett *incline* toward each other and other neuroqueer people through not only their own filmmaking practice (see Chapter Four), but also through their commitment to building and nurturing community through Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF), Queer Freedom (QF) and the Matthew and Matthew Archive (MMA).

Honig disorients Adriana Cavarero's understanding of the refusal concept of inclination. For Cavarero, inclination is theorised in relation to da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*; the Virgin mother's inclination can be found in her maternal and caring relationship with the child, refusing patriarchal expectation and subordination to motherhood and unpaid care labour.⁴²³ This inclination is practiced

⁴²³ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 46

through care, not demand. Honig interprets Cavarero's inclination as pacifist, and instead calls for an agonistic inclination which locates mutuality not in maternal kinship like Cavarero's inclination, but in the sorority of the bacchantes in Euripides's *Bacchae*.⁴²⁴ When the bacchantes realise they are being watched by Pentheus, they try to attack the voyeur by individually pelting him with stones and using branches of fir trees as javelins. Realising the limitations of their individual strength, they incline towards each other and act in concert to force the tree down upon which Pentheus is hiding; singing, "Come, my maenads, gather round this tree and *all take hold*".⁴²⁵ As Honig described, 'with that, *countless hands* pulled and pushed' (Honig's emphasis)⁴²⁶ to bring the tree down. What could not be achieved at the individual level was executed (literally in the bacchantes' case) at the collective level.

In this chapter I mobilise Honig's method of inclination to demonstrate how Kennedy and Hellett move beyond their individual filmmaking and contribute to the building and nurturing of a neuroqueer filmmaking community through curation and archiving. Section 5.2 introduces the QF strand of OBFF formed by Hellett in 2017 to champion under-represented queer learning-disabled voices. Section 5.3 introduces Kennedy's MMA and their accompanying film *Not Mythmakers* (2022) which marks an intervention into the invisibility and erasure of queer learning-disabled narratives within cultural archives. Both Kennedy and Hellett's interventions were initiated with the consideration of other people in mind; QF provides a platform for queer learning-disabled filmmakers to show their work and have their voices heard, and the MMA acts as a repository of neuroqueer cultural history for the benefit of future generations searching for their community history.

In section 5.4 I posit OBFF and QF as a radical space in which a global queer learning disability filmmaking community's voice has come into existence,⁴²⁷ and has afforded artists such as Kennedy and Hellett, among others, the opportunity to (i) express themes of queer gender and sexuality in a world in which this still carries taboo connotations for people with learning disabilities and (ii) come together in what

⁴²⁴ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 47

⁴²⁵ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 50

⁴²⁶ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 50

⁴²⁷ Nick Couldry, "Alternative Media and Voice," Ed. Chris Atton, *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015, 47

Nirmal Puwar (2004) describes as 'space invading'⁴²⁸ to refuse discourses of vulnerability, which has historically devalued the art of learning disabled people, by placing value upon their own and their community's cultural production. This section takes into consideration hooks' understanding of care, recovery and self-preservation as being evident in the broader work of Kennedy and Hellett.

Section 5.5 draws on hook's concept of *talking back* to theorise QF and the MMA as a practice of mutual affirmation which *talks back*⁴²⁹ to the ableist attitudes of contemporary society towards learning disability art and learning disability sexuality. This section explores the limitations of the feminist rallying slogan 'the personal is political' by highlighting the importance of community and collective identity when working towards social change. While not campaigning for any direct movement or cause, the radical gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's archiving and curation is evident in the community context in which they are fostered.

This chapter contributes to prevailing understandings of queer visual activism by shifting focus from the 'visual' and offering the example of the learning disability film festival and archive as sites in which the refusal or 'activist' gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's work can be found beyond their actual filmmaking;⁴³⁰ namely within the contexts in which it is produced, shared and preserved.

5.2: Building community through curation: Queer Freedom

Hellett's first short film, a spoof cookery session, *Cooking with Matthew* (2006) was entered into the 2007 OBFF and won the 'Best Overall Film' award at OBFF that year. Hellett describes how it felt amazing for him to have a platform to show his first piece of work, and soon after awarding the prize, Carousel invited Hellett to join the OBFF committee.⁴³¹ Hellett has since made a total of six short films with Carousel, receiving a commission from Brighton and Hove City Council for *Unusual Journey* (2007) themed on bus travel, and a surreal portrait of his drag alter ego Mrs Sparkle in *Mrs Sparkle* (2009); the first film to be funded and commissioned by a learning-

⁴²⁸ Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, Oxford: Berg, 2004.

⁴²⁹ hooks, *Talking Back*, np

⁴³⁰ Lewin, *Queer Visual Activism in Contemporary South Africa*

⁴³¹ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 172

disabled filmmaker by South-East Dance.⁴³² Through OBFF, Hellett has been mentored by Emma Smart, programmer of *Flare*; the LGBTQIA+ strand of the British Film Institute (BFI), which Hellett described as a positive experience which paved the way for his promotion to Lead Programmer of OBFF. Without Emma, Hellett explains, he would not know how to balance the themes of submissions or how to assess acceptances and rejections.⁴³³ Hellett has acted as Lead Programmer for three festivals as of 2022, which has equipped him with the knowledge and understanding of the creative process of film festival curation.

Hellett describes the ease and confidence with which he now curates the festival programme; noting 'I don't find it hard choosing which films to include [...] I know in the first five minutes whether something will work or not, if it looks amazing or if it's trash. It's got to grab people and it's about quality, not quantity'.⁴³⁴ This demonstrates a criticalness to Hellett's curation and a consideration of aesthetics when choosing what to include or exclude; a point that will be considered in Chapter Eight more in the context of his position as gatekeeper and thus insider/outsider of the filmmaking community.

It was through Hellett's Lead Programming role at OBFF that he first came into contact with Kennedy, having programmed their film *Just Me* (2013) for the 2015 festival. Until Kennedy became aware of Hellett through this invitation, they did not know any other queer learning-disabled filmmakers.⁴³⁵ This invitation to visit Brighton to screen their film was a 'nerve-wracking' time Kennedy explains, not knowing if they would be awarded the much-needed funding from Creative Scotland to realise the trip (they were). 'I was really, really wanting this, I was wanting it so badly [...] it was like, if I don't get this, I don't think I'm going to be able to handle it, 'cause this is important'.⁴³⁶ Since 2015, Kennedy has made two short films with Carousel; *Enid and Valerie* (2018) and the documentary *Not Mythmakers* (2022).

⁴³² Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 164.

⁴³³ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

⁴³⁴ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 166

⁴³⁵ "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

⁴³⁶ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1.

Inspired by meeting Kennedy, the first queer learning-disabled filmmaker Hellett had also met, he began formulating the idea for the QF strand. Reflecting on the significance of their meeting one another, Hellett felt that Kennedy 'really understands what it's like to be me' and meeting them made Hellett 'realise that we need to give the space to more unheard voices. [...] I don't have that many friends in the gay community', Hellett said, 'and it's important for us to come together, support each other and celebrate the work we do as artists'.⁴³⁷ These comments reflect a sense of community responsibility by Hellett and provide context for his launch of QF.

The first QF in 2017 screened four films, *Versions* (2015) by Kennedy; *John and Michael* (dir. Avni, 2004), a stop-motion animation following the story of two men with Down's syndrome who fall in love; *Life on Two Spectrums* (dir. Sutton, 2017), a documentary following UK Drag Queen Tia Anna who has Asperger's, and who Hellett 'really identified' with as a fellow drag artist,⁴³⁸ and finally *Pili and Me* (dir. Garcia-Sanchez, 2016) which explores themes of family and advocacy. QF has become a permanent feature of OBFF, with the 2019 and 2022 strands showing six and four films respectively. In 2021, in light of social distancing measures, QF took the shape of a virtual Facebook live stream named 'Love Bites' to coincide with Brighton Pride, and showed a selection of films from the 2017 and 2019 festivals. Although not intended for 2022 due to its bi-annual scheduling, a festival in 2022 was held to compensate for the virtual format of the 2021 festival.

Hellett was nervous prior to the first QF, fearing it may be 'too controversial'.⁴³⁹ These fears are not unfounded considering in 2019 Republican US congressional candidate Peter Meijer declined to host the UK Down's syndrome drag troop Drag Syndrome at the arts venue he owns in Grand Rapids, Michigan because he questioned whether the performers could give their 'full and informed consent'.⁴⁴⁰ Referring to their Down's syndrome status, this inability to give consent relates more broadly to the routine labelling of people with learning disabilities as

⁴³⁷ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 165

⁴³⁸ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 166

⁴³⁹ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 166

⁴⁴⁰ Julia Jacobs, "Complaint Filed After Door Closes on Drag Performers With Down Syndrome," *The New York Times*, 5 Sep 2019.

vulnerable, which Garbutt states has led to their being 'excluded in many areas of society'.⁴⁴¹ Meijer's decline to host Drag Syndrome aligns with the issues highlighted in the social model of disability in which disabled people suffer discrimination and exclusion as a result of environmental, institutional and attitudinal barriers.⁴⁴² Davies notes how 'people with disabilities are seen as passive, childlike objects/subjects, unempowered and disempowered. It is not acceptable in the 21st century that disabled people are still treated like innocent children or fragile flowers'.⁴⁴³ Not every member of Drag Syndrome identify as LGBTQ so it is unclear what consent Meijer is specifically alluding to, but it can be presumed it is the association of drag to queer culture. Relatedly, it is noteworthy that not all the films curated for QF express queer love and sexuality, which suggests that the expression of *any* love and sexuality is almost a queer gesture in itself for learning-disabled people, if queer can be interpreted in its broadest meaning as a non-normative way of being.

While not officially part of the QF strand, the feature length film *Sanctuary* (dir. Colin, 2016) was also screened, which dramatises a story of sexual attraction between Larry with Down's syndrome and Sophie with severe epilepsy who hatch a plan with their sympathetic carer to have alone time in a hotel room. As the 2017 OBFF programme blurb asks, 'How do they express a love that dare not speak its name? Are they aware that in Ireland they are about to break the law?'⁴⁴⁴ The law in question refers to Section 5 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 1993 in Ireland which stated, 'A person who has or attempts to have sexual intercourse, or commits or attempts to commit an act of buggery, with a person who is mentally impaired [...] shall be guilty of an offence'.⁴⁴⁵ In February 2017 that law was changed as a result of the work of Inclusion Ireland and other lobbyists, which cited *Sanctuary* as one of the reasons behind that decision.⁴⁴⁶ The law now states that the ability of a person with mental impairment to consensually engage in sexual intercourse is to be considered on an individual basis. *Sanctuary* therefore marks a significant moment in

⁴⁴¹ R. Garbutt, "Past, Present and Future: Exploring the Sexual Identities of People with Learning Difficulties," Ed. S. Hines and Y. Taylor, *Sexualities: Past Reflections, Future Directions*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 298

⁴⁴² Mike Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990.

⁴⁴³ Dominic Davies, "Sharing our Stories, Empowering our Lives: Don't Dis Me," *Sexuality and Disability* 18.3 (2000), 183

⁴⁴⁴ Oska Bright Film Festival programme, 2017

⁴⁴⁵ "Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 1993." *Irish Statute Book* [nd]

⁴⁴⁶ "*Sanctuary* is a new Irish film that has already changed history," *CBC Radio*, 10 May 2017.

the history of visual culture where film has been used to confront pervading stereotypes and assumptions and consequently to affect socio-political change.

Hellett explains how he was shocked on watching *Sanctuary* and was 'proud' to give the film its UK premiere at the 2017 festival. 'People are being too protective', he believes, 'like they don't want to open up that door to sexuality. There's just this sad stereotype that means people who have a learning disability get treated like children. But I have a human right to be me'.⁴⁴⁷ The infantilisation of learning-disabled people was ironically mocked in *Sanctuary* when one character appears shocked to hear of Larry and Sophie's sexual chemistry, stating she always thought of them as 'full of hugs'.⁴⁴⁸

Irony aside, Hellett raises a crucial issue when he notes he has a 'human right to be me', asking, 'why can't we just allow people with learning disabilities to be sexual?'⁴⁴⁹ As summarised in Chapter Two, since the publication of Shakespeare et al (1996), a wealth of literature has emerged exploring the sexual rights of disabled people, with increasing reference to the intersection of disability and queerness. However, as the cast and crew of *Sanctuary* discussed at a Q&A following the screening at OBFF, public opinion and understandings of these issues take longer to change than any legislation or academic publication, so the stigma attached to sexuality in people with learning disabilities will likely remain. This is a cynical position, but a justified one, as evidenced by Meijer's refusal to host Drag Syndrome in 2019 which was embedded in a discourse of vulnerability.

Hellett's idea when formulating QF was 'to champion the voice of every person with learning disabilities', and that he 'didn't want to leave anyone out,' that 'the festival is totally committed to pushing the representation of all learning-disabled people, gay or straight'.⁴⁵⁰ Hellett is clearly motivated by amplifying the voices of queer learning-disabled people through films either by or starring queer people with learning disabilities and believes they are stories 'people everywhere' should see.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁷ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 174-175.

⁴⁴⁸ *Sanctuary*. Dir. Len Collin, 2016.

⁴⁴⁹ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 174.

⁴⁵⁰ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 166.

⁴⁵¹ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 166.

Frohlich (2011) notes how 'a central aim' of LGBTQ activist work has been to increase visibility in society. During the early years of the gay rights movement in the 1970s, gay politics was predominantly concerned with transparency, with being out and visible and being so with pride.⁴⁵² Similarly, the disability rights movement followed in the footsteps of Gay Liberation and used visibility as its main weapon in the fight for rights.⁴⁵³ The 2019 OBFF attracted an audience of 3000 people⁴⁵⁴ and Hellett highlights how 50% of those do not have a learning disability. He believes 'that's a really important statistic for me as it shows we're having a much bigger impact'.⁴⁵⁵ Lizzie Banks (Carousel) noted during a personal conversation that the QF strand is the most requested and popular of the touring OBFF events, which demonstrates how Hellett has tapped into an increasingly crucial conversation. Hellett's motivation for 'pushing the representation' and for 'people everywhere' to see the films is explicitly built upon the foundational principles of the gay and disability rights movements' interest in the politics of visibility. The following section continues with this concern for visibility and outlines the Matthew and Matthew Archive started by Kennedy.

On the topic of visibility, it should be noted that amateur filmmaking is an historically white endeavour, but from my own anecdotal observations from attending the festivals, the films shown at OBFF reflect diverse ethnic and racial on screen representation, though it is unclear to what extent this is reflected in the people who actually make the films or the full staff of Carousel and OBFF as an organisation. Nevertheless, as a platform which was founded on the principles of amplifying marginal voices, OBFF challenge the notion of amateur filmmaking as a predominantly white activity.

⁴⁵² Frohlich, M. G. "Representation and the Politics of Visibility," Ed. N. Vosburg and J. Collins, *Lesbian Realities/Lesbian Fictions in Contemporary Spain*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011, 31

⁴⁵³ C. Thomsen, "The Post-Raciality and Post-Spatiality of Calls for LGBTQ and Disability Visibility," *Hypatia* 30.1 (2015)

⁴⁵⁴ "Archive," *Oska Bright Film Festival* [nd]

⁴⁵⁵ "His first film was made in a group home. His next was screened by Fatboy Slim..." *Dimensions*. [nd]

5.3: Building community through archiving: the Matthew and Matthew Archive and *Not Mythmakers*

One year prior to the launch of QF in 2017, Hellett and Kennedy staged a series of screenings of their work under the banner 'Matthew and Matthew'. The first event in Brighton was featured as part of the 2016 Brighton Photo Biennial, which was my first encounter with their work, and the second and third events were screened in Glasgow and Bristol respectively. Having already started to archive their own work at home since they started filmmaking in 2013, in 2016 Kennedy expanded this personal archive to include ephemera from the Matthew and Matthew events and which Kennedy now refers to as the Matthew and Matthew Archive. Kennedy created the archive to assert both their and Hellett's roles in learning disability arts history and to act as a source of reference and inspiration for future queer learning-disabled people to access their own history. As Kennedy explains in a post on their blog, 'The reason why I felt this was important to me was because there seems to be very little information around archives of learning disabled artists, let alone archives around LGBTQ+ learning disabled artists'.⁴⁵⁶ Kennedy explained they began to think 'hold up, wait a minute here, where are the learning disability cultural archives?',⁴⁵⁷ and has since spoken at length in several blog posts,⁴⁵⁸ a podcast,⁴⁵⁹ a keynote speech at the 2017 QF and in an article for *Disability Arts Online*⁴⁶⁰ about the need for queer learning-disabled stories to be known. Kennedy questions if there are such archives, where are they and why are they not more well known? 'Have our histories gone quiet'. they ask, 'and if so, how can we energise that conversation?'⁴⁶¹ Lewin quotes Griselda Pollock who asserts that 'vast areas of social life, and huge numbers of people hardly exist, according to the archive. The archive is overdetermined by facts of class, race, gender, sexuality and above all power'.⁴⁶² The learning disability cultural producers Kennedy refers to clearly make up these numbers of people that 'hardly exist', but Kennedy refuses this invisibility and erasure.

⁴⁵⁶ "Archiving: What it Means to Me." *Diary of a Solitary Hag*. [nd]. Web. 13 Jun 2020.

<https://diaryofasolitaryhag.tumblr.com/post/165720537418/archiving-what-it-means-to-me>

⁴⁵⁷ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

⁴⁵⁸ *Diary of a Solitary Hag*. [nd].

⁴⁵⁹ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

⁴⁶⁰ "Blog: Oska Bright: "We're here, we're visible" by Matthew Kennedy." *Disability Arts Online*. 18 Mar 2019.

⁴⁶¹ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

⁴⁶² G. Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive*, New York, Routledge, 2007, 12 qtd. in Lewin, *Queer Visual Activism in Contemporary South Africa*, 38

What became the MMA began as a series of conversations at home with Kennedy's mother, who provided Kennedy with a clear plastic storage box which she had emptied of 'tops and t-shirts', of which the box still bears the handwritten sticker (Fig.5.1), as well as the £5 price tag (Fig.5.2). Kennedy's mother 'plopped it right down in front of' them explaining 'it's for your archive, remember the conversation we had?'⁴⁶³

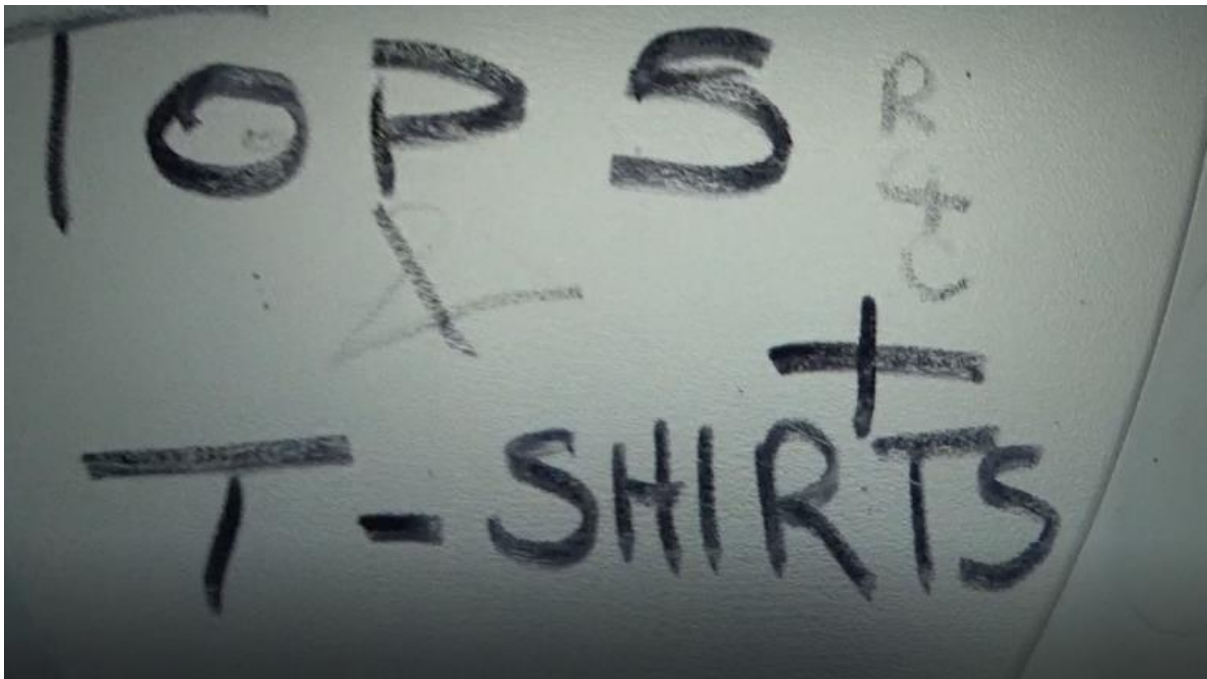


Fig.5.1: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo

⁴⁶³ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2. 26 Aug 2021.



Fig.5.2: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo

Kennedy now had a physical space in which to store the various materials related to their work and the Matthew and Matthew events. As Kennedy explains, ‘I view both Matthew and myself as history-makers, we are the history-makers we’ve been waiting for, kicking the pedestal from under the cultural and ability barriers, allowing us to see ourselves in a history that is valid, on our own terms’.⁴⁶⁴ The cultural and ability barriers to which Kennedy refers are firstly the cultural attitudes towards learning disability art that has resulted in its invisibility in cultural archives. It is likely that it is not the case that learning disability art has been deemed unworthy of collection, because that assumes the archives are aware of its existence. It is more likely, unfortunately, that there is no awareness of its existence, which reflects cultural perceptions that position people with learning disabilities as not able to create; and does not even acknowledge the existence of neuro-queer peoples (to be expanded in Section 5.4). Secondly, accessibility of archives is an issue which Kennedy perceives as exclusive; ‘archives have a bit of an academic context around them [...] not everyone knows what archives are [...] that’s another issue; the accessibility of the language around archives’.⁴⁶⁵ They also note that they believe the

⁴⁶⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁶⁵ “Disability And...Film with Oska Bright”

reason the conversations around learning disability arts archives are not happening is because archives are rooted in academia and academia does not have these particular conversations.⁴⁶⁶ I asked Kennedy who they believe archives are there to serve, to which they responded, 'archives are for everybody' and that 'there shouldn't be this ability or cultural barrier put on to them so that other people can't access them', determining 'who gets to see what' and that access to such archives should not be limited to members of the institutions which hold it. 'You can't be a nobody' and access the majority of archives which tend to be held in university collections, Kennedy explained. I asked Kennedy if they had attempted to access any archives in person, but they explained their feelings towards this was 'what's the point?'⁴⁶⁷

It seems irrelevant how accessible or inaccessible the archives Kennedy may be interested in searching actually are, as the perception is that they are not for people like them so why bother trying. Kennedy explains of stumbling upon the online Heart n Soul⁴⁶⁸ 30th anniversary archive, a learning disability arts organisation Kennedy has worked with in the past, which consists mostly of oral history recordings of artists and their assistants,⁴⁶⁹ but Kennedy can think of no other examples. We spoke of how digital archives can be more accessible to 'nobodies' and Kennedy noted how they had made an attempt to start digitising the MMA for their Tumblr blog, but that their scanner broke which brought the project to a halt.⁴⁷⁰

My own research led me to search the collections of the regional film archives based in the UK to see what films they held in relation to learning disability. Screen Archive South East (SASE) and the Yorkshire Film Archive (YFA) appear to be leading the way when it comes to archiving work *by* artists with learning disabilities, rather than films *about* them which made the majority of what little I did find. SASE holds eighteen films by Carousel and the YFA holds two films by York-based learning disability arts organisation Accessible Arts & Media. Intriguingly around 2017 *Mrs Sparkle* was accepted into the BFI National Collections but I could not locate an entry using their online collections catalogue.

⁴⁶⁶ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

⁴⁶⁷ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁶⁸ London-based Learning Disability Arts Organisation: Heart n Soul [nd]

⁴⁶⁹ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁷⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

The vast majority of the examples I found in archives relied on the hegemonic perspective of disability which involves inspirational stories of disabled people defying odds, or news items such as coverage of the opening of a specialist school. This ‘inspiration’ associated with disability narrative is one covered in more detail in Chapter Two, particularly in relation to the ‘narrative prosthesis’.⁴⁷¹ An example which challenges this hegemonic trope is a series of short films titled *I’m not your Inspiration* by Sandra Alland featuring queer and trans deaf and disabled artists in Scotland in 2014. Additionally this refusal of inspiration is evident in the contemporary hashtag #notyourinspiration, which builds on the heritage of the ‘Piss on Pity’ slogan coined by disability rights activist and musician Johnny Crescendo in 1990. The MMA represents a direct challenge to the hegemonic perspectives of inspirational disability collected in film archives by archiving new queer and artistic disability narratives and aligning with the politics of Alland and Crescendo.

Kennedy explains, ‘the archive is important to me because it’s a vehicle to historicise narratives and stories that rarely get recorded or are even heard. It’s also important to me because I’ve been able to question my history through creating an archive’.⁴⁷² They believe the subject of the archive does not get spoken about enough in the learning disability arts community and Kennedy questions what this means for future generations, asking ‘will they be able to seek out this history of learning disability arts past and present [...] if so, how will they access these archives? Where is our history? How do we find it?’⁴⁷³ Kennedy explains they would ‘like to see the discussion of learning disability arts archives move into the wider community, to not be leaving the conversation small and isolated like what we’re doing here (referring to our interview), not to say it isn’t important but it is a small and isolated conversation we’re having’. Kennedy has mainly been talking about this since 2014 with their mother and Hellett, but hopes the conversation will push through to wider communities to ‘ensure they know we have a history’.⁴⁷⁴ ‘Let’s sift through it’, Kennedy suggests, ‘and see what we can find, ‘cause I feel like a lot of

⁴⁷¹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*

⁴⁷² Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁷³ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁷⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

the times we're left uninformed and left in the dark', noting it should not just be 'intellectuals or academics' who get to make these decisions on what is and is not considered worthy of collection; 'what about the outsiders?' Kennedy asks; 'we could be using some of your power too to further the agenda that we have, or the conversations'.⁴⁷⁵

Anderson (2021) addresses queer approaches to preservation as a form of 'embodied and radical urgency'⁴⁷⁶ in the context of precarious queer archives in contemporary Britain. She employs the phrases 'archival failure', 'conspicuous incompleteness', and a 'collection's blind spots'⁴⁷⁷ to describe the omission, erasure and invisibility of queer narratives in British archive collections, all of which could be applied to the impetus of the MMA and what Kennedy intends the archive to address. As my own research recovered, the vast majority of British film archives can be defined this way by their 'conspicuous incompleteness' of representing queer/learning disabled narratives.

Referring to the loss or deliberate damage of queer histories, Anderson quotes the programme of the 2017 Tate exhibition 'Queer British Art' as being a history of 'dustbins',⁴⁷⁸ and in her 2022 conference paper "An End to Ephemera: Exploring trash and the queer archive", Turner-Kilburn (2022) takes up the 'one man's trash is another man's treasure' turn of phrase to theorise queer ephemera as that which is usually discarded. This is a theme also employed by Shakespeare in his 1994 paper "Cultural Representation of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?," suggesting the history and experiences of queer and/or disabled people as marginal identities are often considered the trash or rejections of cultural institutions who have historically not valued them as worthy of collection/discussion.

Confronting this ignorance by mainstream collections, Kennedy stated 'it's not every day you hear of a learning disability arts archive in a queer context; it's

⁴⁷⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁷⁶ F. Anderson, "Please Help Yourself: Queer Preservation and the Uses of the past," *Third Text* 35.1 (2021): abstract

⁴⁷⁷ Anderson, "Please Help Yourself," 54

⁴⁷⁸ Anderson, "Please Help Yourself," 54

unheard of'.⁴⁷⁹ Kennedy is well-aware of the uniqueness and value of the MMA as an act of taking up space, noting,

I feel like it's taking up space in its own way. It's an outsider archive easing into a history of its own making that is purely DIY. This archive is so far removed from institutional spaces, it's situated in domestic space where it's not falling prey to academia, escaping its power of condescension and inaccessibility. Academia needs to make a way for an alternative approach on how archives are spoken about and how they're accessed, that archives and history belong to learning-disabled artists too, that we deserve to take up space as makers of culture and history.⁴⁸⁰

The archive follows in the footsteps of the Lesbian Herstory Archives started by Joan Nestle in her New York City apartment in the 1970s for similar reasons to Kennedy as the need to intervene to collect an otherwise invisible history. In a more recent context, the MMA also exists in parallel to the Museum of Transology (MoT), curated by British fashion historian EJ Scott 'as a form of curatorial direct action designed to halt the erasure of transcestry';⁴⁸¹ transcestry being a portmanteau of transgender ancestry. Scott established the MoT through the collection of objects and ephemera saved from their own gender-affirming surgery, and in 2014 initiated a community collection programme in Brighton via workshops in queer community spaces to encourage donations of similar objects from members of the UK trans community. The collection became a small-scale exhibition in a local Brighton queer pub and grew from there, seeing exhibitions in the Fashion Gallery Space of London College of Fashion, followed by an exhibition at Brighton Museum.

Kennedy's archive represents a similar DIY attempt at direct action in the erasure of learning disability narratives from cultural archives and holds the potential for future upscaling like the MoT achieved. Kennedy's archive, like Nestle's and Scott's, has started in the home and is part of a lineage of queer DIY curators who acknowledge the power of the archive in not just reflecting history but also shaping it

⁴⁷⁹ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁸⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁸¹ "The Museum's Founder, E-J Scott," *Museum of Transology*. [nd]

through its accessibility to younger generations. 'It feels like the archive is another person in a way', Kennedy explains, 'like I'm taking care of someone, a body [...] not a live breathing body [...] a dormant creature [...] I feed it documents now and then'.⁴⁸² The MMA may not be a biological being but it lives organically in the sense that it exists and has the power to shape the future, that it continues to grow and will outlive Kennedy as its creator.

Writing on the topic of queer archives, Cvetkovich (2003) argues that objects which are normally overlooked are made significant through affect. 'In insisting on the value of apparently marginal or ephemeral materials', Cvetkovich states, 'the collectors of gay and lesbian archives propose that affects - associated with nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy, and trauma - make a document significant'.⁴⁸³ Kennedy demonstrates a clear understanding of how important history is by noting that,

If I didn't document this particular kind of history that is personal to us, how would anyone in our communities know that these events took place? It's nice when the memories of those events are stored in your head as a form of nostalgia or they're being spoken of via word of mouth. Having posters, flyers or programme notes give a real sense that these events did happen [...] If you don't see yourself being represented historically my answer is to create your own history and to document things as best as you can.⁴⁸⁴

Reflecting on the responsibility Kennedy feels towards their community's history, they explained that they 'feel like I have a personal duty to keep voices like Matthew and mine's from being invisible'.⁴⁸⁵ Rather than wait for their and their community's history to be lost to the dustbins of time, Kennedy has shown an awareness of this precarity and put a marker in sand by collecting their own history from the very beginnings of their artistic practice, marking a significant intervention into queer learning-disabled history. The MMA is a space where objects related to Kennedy and

⁴⁸² Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁸³ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 234-244

⁴⁸⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁸⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

Hellett gain their historical significance, and where Kennedy actively attempts to avoid any further erasure of their community's history and cultural contributions.

I asked Kennedy what they intended for the future of the archive, and they explained that at some point they would like to see it tour as an exhibition if only in a small art space in Brighton or Glasgow. At present the archive holds just content related to Kennedy and Hellett, but Kennedy has recently been considering how to open the archive to other artists and organisations. Accessibility is currently an issue with it being in the domestic setting, which Kennedy acknowledges, but at present it is a means to an end in order to protect it. The key question for Kennedy is where it will eventually be housed. They hope in the future there will be more initiatives to collect this type of material, noting when they are 'old and grey' they would like to hand over the archive to an organisation that deals with learning disability arts:

That's the goal [...] I'm like a caretaker of this archive [...] I'm taking care of my history and I'm taking care of other people's history and I feel like I have a duty to take care of it for as long as I can [...] that's the scary part; trying to find a place who would take it on and see it as valid because I don't want to see our history as a mythology, I want to dispel any myth that there's no such thing as a queer learning disability arts archive.⁴⁸⁶

Through the MMA and this extends to QF, Kennedy and Hellett's wider filmmaking practice expands understandings of visual activism by locating the activist gesture in this refusal of invisibility and erasure. They do this through action which responds to an urgent community need.

In a podcast⁴⁸⁷ in 2020, Kennedy mentioned that one day they would like to make a film about the MMA, but they were unsure how to go about it, asking 'how do you make a film using archive materials?'⁴⁸⁸ When Hellett withdrew from this project, it seemed natural that the funding would go towards Kennedy documenting the MMA, and the result was *Not Mythmakers* (2022), a reference to Kennedy's above

⁴⁸⁶ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

⁴⁸⁷ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

⁴⁸⁸ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright"

wish to dispel any 'myth' about queer learning disability archives. By making a film about the MMA, Kennedy has circumvented the inaccessibility of the physical archive by documenting its contents so that other people can at least gain an awareness of its existence and what it contains, and to understand why Kennedy started collecting. The narration of the film is cut from our interview on the subject of the MMA, and is laid over footage of Kennedy showing various objects stored within the plastic storage box. The MMA and *Not Mythmakers* film confronts the 'conspicuous incompleteness'⁴⁸⁹ of queer learning-disabled histories from mainstream arts archives and collections and refuses the notion that their culture is not worthy of collection. The addition of the film speaks to the inaccessibility Kennedy acknowledged was an issue, so the film reflects a further consideration of community need, which Kennedy again responded to.

Developing Puwar's theory of space invading, the following section will theorise QF and the MMA as spaces which afford other people to contribute to, or learn about, a filmmaking culture which has historically excluded neuroqueer voices. I argue that QF and the MMA represent a radical intervention into the erasure and invisibility of neuroqueer narratives in screen cultures and histories within cultural archives. It will be considered where this lack of value placed upon the work of artists with learning disabilities originated in the context of the discourses of vulnerability introduced in section 5.2.

5.4: Refusing discourses of vulnerability

Disability artists are often funded through therapeutic and health agendas which I will explore in greater detail in Chapter Seven in the context of amateurism. But in relation to issues of 'space', Puwar argues artists with learning disabilities carry 'a burden of doubt'⁴⁹⁰ regarding their artistic capabilities to measure up, which results in an infantilisation whereby they are assumed to have 'reduced capacities'.⁴⁹¹ Because artists like Kennedy and Hellett, as cultural producers, have refused this position or status, they exist as 'anomalies in places where they are not the normative figure of

⁴⁸⁹ Anderson, "Please Help Yourself," 54

⁴⁹⁰ Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 59

⁴⁹¹ Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 60

authority', and thus 'their capabilities are viewed suspiciously'.⁴⁹² Puwar notes that although anyone can theoretically enter a space, it is the sense of belonging in that space that is restricted to some. Some people have the presumed right to be there, whilst some are 'trespassers', 'space invaders',⁴⁹³ or 'matter out of place'.⁴⁹⁴ The space in question here is that of mainstream film curation and archiving, and also more generally representation, where Kennedy and Hellett never saw themselves reflected and where the 'normative figure of authority' has historically been the non-disabled controlling the visual narrative of disability. QF has given Kennedy, Hellett and others a platform through which to refuse this 'normative figure of authority', to place themselves as the authority of their own narrative in a radical gesture of self-representation and community gathering. The MMA marks a significant moment in the history of learning disability culture which is being preserved for the benefit of future generations.

Informed by hooks' understanding of care and recovery, it occurred to me that while I did not want to fall into the trap of considering Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking practice in the context of therapy, there was an undoubted element of 'care' or 'recovery' for the self in the process of making and sharing film for them both. In their film *Just Me* (2013) Kennedy speaks of having anxiety and explaining how having a voice as an artist calms that anxiety. The voice is something that Kennedy evokes as something they have had to 'regain', or 'recover' to use hooks' words; suggesting it was taken away at some point. Similarly, Hellett in his film *Sparkle* (2008) speaks of being a worrier and of being anxious, but that when he becomes Mrs Sparkle, the frustrations are gone. Hellett has written of his experiences growing up and attending a Catholic comprehensive school in Brighton where he received little support in core subjects but 'found solace in the art room', the only place he felt able to express himself at that time.⁴⁹⁵ Reflecting on his filmmaking, Hellett explains how his work gives him 'a voice and a chance to tell people who I am'.⁴⁹⁶ He explains his main aim as having 'the right space artistically to express myself', noting 'I was born with this need to express myself, but I didn't

⁴⁹² Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 59

⁴⁹³ Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 8

⁴⁹⁴ Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 43

⁴⁹⁵ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 167-168

⁴⁹⁶ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 161

always have the space to achieve it'.⁴⁹⁷ Reflecting on the early days of Mrs Sparkle, Hellett recalls wanting to dress up in drag as he wanted to forget about his anxieties and worries, to be visually outspoken that 'this is me, this is who I am', which 'felt great'.⁴⁹⁸ If the act of filmmaking is giving Kennedy and Hellett the platform to come to voice, then the platform of OBFF and QF as a place to share that with the wider queer learning disability community affords an act of 'talking back' to the dominant culture, to use hooks' phrase.⁴⁹⁹ Kennedy and Hellett are doing what can be interpreted as a form of 'care' or 'recovery' for the self and for their community, not in a clinical rehabilitative 'recovery' sense, but a philosophical recovery, a recovery of agency and power as radical care for the wider queer learning-disabled community.

Jacques (2020) notes the concept of self-care emerged after the decline in Europe and North America of the principle of dying for an idea or sacrificing one's life in confrontation of a political ideology. Jacques determines how self-care can be considered a 'critical part of long-term radical engagement' and is something that has primarily been done by those from marginalised communities who experience discrimination.⁵⁰⁰ Jacques quotes Audre Lorde who explains that self-care is self-preservation and that in itself 'is an act of political warfare'.⁵⁰¹ This is why Hellett's creation of QF represents such a radical gesture of 'political warfare' because, as queer disabled writer Hale (2021) notes, 'disability' is still considered a political word 'because disabled people still face barriers'.⁵⁰² By making artistic films outside of the therapy or rehabilitative agenda, and by showing them in public contexts such as at OBFF, Kennedy and Hellett refuse the cultural barriers and attitudes which have dominated disability filmmaking as therapeutic.⁵⁰³ Kennedy and Hellett, and the queer learning-disabled filmmakers and performers associated with QF, are deviating from their expected role. But not only do they 'invade space' to draw on

⁴⁹⁷ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 181

⁴⁹⁸ Disability And... Film with Oska Bright

⁴⁹⁹ hooks, *Talking Back*, np

⁵⁰⁰ Juliet Jacques, "Aphorisms on self-care," "Myco TV - Indoor Activism," Mycological Twist. YouTube. 17 Jun 2020.

⁵⁰¹ Audre Lorde qtd. by Jacques, "Aphorisms on self-care"

⁵⁰² Jamie Hale, "Disability and the Politics of Visibility: Jamie Hale," New Writing North, YouTube. 13 Oct 2021

⁵⁰³ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Talking About Talking Back: Afterthoughts on the Making of the Disability Documentary *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*," Ed. Susan Crutchfield and Mary Epstein, *Points of Contact: Disability, Art, and Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003, 201

Puwar, they actively create and construct *new* spaces within which to nurture community.

For hooks, self-care, self-preservation and self-recovery are inextricably linked to the resistance of exploited and oppressed people,⁵⁰⁴ and ultimately their liberation⁵⁰⁵ and revolutionary transformation.⁵⁰⁶ Self-care is a term that has been reclaimed by queer and disabled communities from its bastardisation in neo-liberal capitalist contexts of guilt-free leisure and the purchase of pampering products. For hooks and Lorde, self-care meant looking out for the self and other exploited people in oppressive societies, to work towards a more equitable future and to value one's self/ves when others are not, to imagine new ways of being and seeing oneself and one's community in more affirming ways.

In a radical act of affirmation, and just two months after the Drag Syndrome show being cancelled by Meijer, the 2019 QF screened *Born to Dance with an Extra Chromosome* (dir. Nikolov, 2019), a documentary following Drag Syndrome, followed by a Q&A session with the performers. Going one better at the 2022 event, Drag Syndrome performed live. Hellett consistently and defiantly confronts timely issues and debates related to (queer) sexuality and learning disability through his programming. Vocalising this refusal, he understands that people 'might not like my drag act or my films. They might not understand my learning disability or the fact I'm gay. But I reckon you either like it or you get lost'.⁵⁰⁷

Kennedy describes Hellett as 'a history-maker' due to his creation of QF which has given a platform for Kennedy and other queer learning-disabled filmmakers' narratives 'to be seen and [...] to be valid and allowing them to have some sort of dialogue within the film festival circuit [...] that was a big deal within our community'.⁵⁰⁸ In addition to confronting timely issues and championing the sexual rights of people with learning disabilities through art, Hellett is also building a community through his programming and curation: 'I've learned that the best way to

⁵⁰⁴ hooks, *Talking Back*, Chapter One, np

⁵⁰⁵ hooks, *Talking Back*, Chapter Three, np

⁵⁰⁶ hooks, *Talking Back*, Chapter Five, np

⁵⁰⁷ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 181

⁵⁰⁸ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1

change things is through positive action',⁵⁰⁹ Hellett told the charity Dimensions in 2019. By inviting Kennedy to deliver a keynote speech at the 2017 QF, and by regularly programming Q&As and discussion panels (see. Fig.5.3), Hellett is driving this 'dialogue' Kennedy mentions and allows others within the community to contribute. They refuse their isolation and alienation by talking back to the dominant culture through the medium of film; their voice and their narrative. The next section explores the work of Kennedy and Hellett through the concept of mutual affirmation.



Fig.5.3: Matthew Hallett (L) and Mattie Kennedy (R) during the Queer Freedom Panel at the 2019 Oska Bright Film Festival. Disability Arts Online. 2021

5.5: Community building as mutual affirmation

In *Talking Back* (1989), hooks discussed the limitations of the personal is political, noting the focus on the personal does not acknowledge an 'intersubjectivity' or 'collective reality' in contexts of domination. In our interview, when Kennedy states that they are just 'one piece of the puzzle', and when Hellett curated Kennedy's film *Just Me* in 2015, they both acknowledged the political certainly starts with the

⁵⁰⁹ "His first film was made in a group home. His next was screened by Fatboy Slim..."

personal gesture (of making or programming a film), but it does not end there, it must reach out. For hooks, the 'personal is political' philosophy is just the exclamation that something is oppressive, that one feels a personal oppression. To be critical, to think wider, deeper, as to why the oppression exists, which includes the collective experience and interrogates the structures of domination, which allow the oppression to exist, to talk back to the dominant culture - that is when real transformation happens. Kennedy and Hellett can be seen to gravitate towards each other, to think critically together, to *incline* toward one another to talk back to and refuse their position as isolated artists who are thought to not express non-conforming gender or sexuality.

For Honig, the expected role of women as passive, non-violent and non-confrontational is disoriented in the *Bacchae* and the women reject their maternal duties by leaving their children in the city of Thebes, retreating to their own heterotopia of sorority in the mountain range of Cithaeron. Here they take on a more assertive, violent and confrontational position. Inclination becomes 'generative and caring, violent and murderous'⁵¹⁰ and is a continuation of the challenge to 'sovereign power'⁵¹¹ which keeps things and people (women) in their place (passivity). The point at which new normativities are grounded and old ones unlearned,⁵¹² inclination poses questions and confronts stereotypes and, as Honig has clearly outlined, requires some form of agonism to be powerful.⁵¹³

Inclination is present in OBFF through Hellett's formation of QF and by Kennedy in the MMA and *Not Mythmakers*. Refusing the heteroableist gaze of a society which has worked to isolate and alienate people with learning disabilities, for shutting down expressions of queer gender and sexuality through a discourse of vulnerability, Kennedy and Hellett, as well as the filmmakers associated with QF, represent Honig's agonistic inclination. As Puwar argues, while the ableist gaze fixes learning-disabled and neurodiverse bodies, the ableist gaze is also disoriented by the presence of learning-disabled bodies in a space in which they are not meant to

⁵¹⁰ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 59

⁵¹¹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 58

⁵¹² Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 58

⁵¹³ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 66

be,⁵¹⁴ the broader world of filmmaking, curation and collection. QF is Hellett, Kennedy and their wider neuroqueer community's Cithaeron, it is a space in which lone filmmakers come together and act in concert to enact symbolic violence on the dominant culture, through both the smashing of stereotypes by self-representing and through the refusal of status by the invasion of the medium of film with new narratives. This is the agonism of QF and the MMA's inclination; 'the latent categories and boundaries that tacitly inform who has the right to look, judge and represent start, ever so slightly, to falter',⁵¹⁵ Puwar states. Honig suggests there is an element of metaphorical care and agonism inherent in all inclinational practices. If the above represents the agonism of QF and the MMA, the mutual empowerment⁵¹⁶ of Kennedy and Hellett represents the care.

hooks notes how a 'mirrored recognition' enables the defining of a community's own reality set 'apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination'.⁵¹⁷ This mirrored recognition, hooks suggests, reinforces solidarity, which offers a new potential audience⁵¹⁸ for each other's films where queer learning-disabled subjectivity will be the narrative focus. Mirrored recognition can be envisaged when Kennedy recounts seeing Hellett for the first time; reflecting how they were both sat in the auditorium of the 2015 OBFF watching one of the strands, how Hellett came and sat down beside Kennedy, 'and I think that was it', Kennedy explains, 'we just looked up at each other and we just smiled at each other. We didn't even need to say anything, we just looked at each other and it was like "you know what we see each other"'.⁵¹⁹ This mutual recognition has been key to Kennedy and Hellett's mutual affirmation. Kennedy explains the importance of such mutuality as 'when you're *that* marginalised and there's only two of you that you can see, it's like we need to band around each other, take a hold of each other and just be like, "you know what, I see you, I see you and you see me,"'⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁴ Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 42

⁵¹⁵ Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 46

⁵¹⁶ hooks, *Black Looks*, 130

⁵¹⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 129-130

⁵¹⁸ hooks, *Black Looks*, 129-130

⁵¹⁹ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1.

⁵²⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1.

because being LGBT and learning-disabled is such a specific identity, there's not many spaces for us as artists to carve out or be a part of [...] I feel it is a rare occurrence for LGBT learning-disabled folk to meet in arts spaces. As a community we need to uplift each other and we can't forget that and we need to support each other.⁵²¹

Kennedy's words echo those of the respondent Stuart in *The Sexual Politics of Disability* (Shakespeare et al, 1996) who spoke of the importance of being a member of a group; 'It's a collective thing, it's the fact that disabled people have collectively helped give each other confidence in themselves [...] you draw strength from the culture of being in the disability movement, you draw strength from being allowed to express yourself, both politically, through articles, through art, whatever'.⁵²²

Hellett's radical gesture of mutual affirmation can be seen in his QF curation and Kennedy's can be seen in the MMA and *Not Mythmakers*. Their care can also be seen through their encouragement of others to make films and join the visual dialogue, such as through Carousel's commitment to encouraging participation and developing the skills of learning-disabled artists and through OBFF regularly touring the UK and holding masterclasses and workshops for basic film training.⁵²³ Hellett explains that 'now the films entered into the festival are of a much higher quality',⁵²⁴ as a result of these efforts. In 2011 Hellett received funding to accompany Carousel to deliver a six-week workshop in Adelaide, Australia teaching people with learning disabilities the basics of film. The workshop participants have since set up their own film festival, Sit Down, Shutup and Watch!, delivered by Tutti Arts, demonstrating the impact of their satellite activities on community-building.⁵²⁵

Hellett makes a point of programming films by young people in support of the next generation of filmmakers, to nurture their creativity and develop their filmmaking skills. Seeing as he found his own self-confidence through his recognition for *Cooking With Matthew* by OBFF, he pays this forward by scouting for new talent and

⁵²¹ "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

⁵²² Shakespeare et al, *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, 56

⁵²³ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 165

⁵²⁴ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 165

⁵²⁵ Disability And...Film with Oska Bright

generally flying the OBFF flag to encourage submissions.⁵²⁶ 'I think my work's ground-breaking', Hellett states, 'so I hope it makes it easier for younger people to do what I'm doing. If I can do it, they can too'.⁵²⁷ Hellett's comments evoke the call of queer visual activist Zanele Muholi who has stated the importance of inspiring others to occupy space and 'create without fear of being vilified', and to 'encourage people to use artistic tools such as cameras as weapons to fight back'.⁵²⁸ 'This is why I go on tour with our film festival around the UK and the world', Hellett states; 'we want to screen films that encourage learning-disabled audiences to come to the cinema and show what they can do behind the camera too'.⁵²⁹

Kennedy echoes these sentiments by stating that they and Hellett are 'setting a dialogue that needs to be continued, or that can be continued through other people', praising OBFF as 'setting the standard' for 'championing underheard voices'.⁵³⁰ When I asked Kennedy if their intention is to encourage others, they responded, 'yeah just pick up a camera, don't be afraid, 'cause I think that's what stops people [...] this feeling of being afraid and not succeeding, and I get it to a certain extent but at the same time I'm like just do it, don't hold back'.⁵³¹ In the context of taking up space, Kennedy recalls thinking to themselves before they had ever picked up a video camera, 'but I'm not a filmmaker, I don't know what to do, this isn't my world, it's not the world I'm supposed to be in', but then told themselves 'well it is your world, you make the world that you want to see'.⁵³²

Muholi also confronts the issue of preservation and stresses the importance of teaching people about their history and to reclaim it, which they argue must be achieved through self-representation and taking power.⁵³³ They state that 'not everyone gets the chance to write their story, so I think, if given a chance, we have a responsibility as a community to [make] sure that that narrative is out there, and it's

⁵²⁶ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 166-7

⁵²⁷ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 167

⁵²⁸ Muholi qtd. in Wolifson, Chloe. "Direct gaze: Visual activist Zanele Muholi's mission of visibility." *The Sunday Morning Herald*. 13 Mar 2020.

⁵²⁹ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 176

⁵³⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁵³¹ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁵³² Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁵³³ Muholi qtd. in Wolifson, "Direct Gaze"

accessible'.⁵³⁴ This is precisely what Hellett and Kennedy are doing, Hellett does this through offering a platform for self-representation through QF and Kennedy has taken on the preservation role of teaching people about their history through the MMA and *Not Mythmakers*, ensuring their narrative is out there not just in the present moment, but for future generations. Additionally, Kennedy stressed that not only are they archiving their own history, but they are 'also documenting the histories of arts organisations and artists who I've met and collaborated with - this for me is just as important if not more so, as it documents other learning-disabled artists as well as myself'.⁵³⁵

Hellett also praised Carousel and OBFF, reflecting that he would not be where he is today if not for their creative work who helped him 'try all sorts of different things, from dance to singing and film'.⁵³⁶ Kennedy states how learning disability arts organisations carve out space for people like himself and Hellett and how OBFF in particular is working hard to make space for them as their culture is largely invisible.⁵³⁷ These comments highlight the importance of creative organisations and festivals as not just platforms for exhibiting creative work, but also for the support and encouragement they offer through recognition and the communities and networks they foster. If Cithaeron represents the bacchant's heterotopia in Honig's feminist re-reading of the *Bacchae*, OBFF and QF more specifically can be understood as a neuroqueer heterotopia in which creativity and community are nurtured.

In his positioning of the heterotopia, Foucault defines it as 'a space that is other' which acts as 'the greatest reserve of the imagination'.⁵³⁸ The heterotopia provides a means of movement, migration, escape and adventure and represents the rejection of repression in search of new ways of being. QF can be viewed as a great 'reserve of the imagination' whereby filmmakers can explore 'movement' and 'escapism' and 'dream' of new ways of being; their freedom of expression is here

⁵³⁴ Muholi qtd. in Wolifson, "Direct Gaze"

⁵³⁵ "Archiving: What it Means to Me."

⁵³⁶ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 172

⁵³⁷ "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

⁵³⁸ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," Trans. *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), np

queered. Refusing art-as-therapy in favour of art-as-art, refusing infantilisation in favour of gender and sexual (queer) expression, and refusing invisibility in favour of visibility, QF becomes a space that affords 'other' ways of being, other narratives that have not been seen, 'other' communities flourish which have until then been inhibited. In an age saturated by mass self-publication, film festival spaces like QF allow voices to be heard which can be transformed by the collective process of showing work. What emerges is a community of subjects with a voice, each seeing, listening, speaking, recognising each other, in mutual affirmation.

5.6: Conclusion

This chapter has contributed to existing scholarship on queer visual activism by shifting focus from the 'visual' and offering the example of the learning disability film festival and archive as sites in which the radical or 'activist' gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's work can be found beyond their actual filmmaking; within the contexts in which it is produced, shared and preserved. OBFF and QF are radical spaces which provide a platform for neuroqueer voices which challenges the invisibility of neuroqueer narratives within mainstream screen cultures. The festival also fosters community by bringing neuroqueer filmmakers together and were it not for OBFF, Kennedy and Hellett's paths may not have crossed. The festival champions underrepresented voices and, through Hellett's bold curation of QF, consistently challenges pervading attitudes towards neuroqueerness by platforming films such as *Sanctuary* and hosting acts such as Drag Syndrome. Hellett raises awareness of neuroqueer filmmaking by regularly touring the QF strand and offering workshops to enable the next generation of neuroqueer filmmakers to contribute to the visual dialogue. By hosting Q&A events and inviting keynote speakers, they also encourage a verbal dialogue to engage wider audiences.

The MMA can also be interpreted as a site of visual activism which preserves the cultural heritage of the neuro/queer filmmaking community for the benefit of future generations. Kennedy struggled to find evidence of their community history so made a radical intervention by archiving it then documenting it in the short film *Not Mythmakers*. Unlike traditional contexts for visual activism, Kennedy and Hellett are not trying to raise awareness for acceptance by mainstream society, neither are they campaigning for a direct right, or protesting a specific issue. Their activism can be

found in their 'space invading', where they 'carve out space' as Kennedy says, in which their community can thrive. Their activism can be seen more clearly, but more subtly, in their collective consciousness to their community, seeing it as their responsibility as pioneers of neuroqueer filmmaking to protect and expand this space to ensure the wider community and future generations can flourish.

As Johnston (1973) argues, collective working and skill sharing provide 'the real possibility of examining how cinema works and how we can best interrogate and demystify the workings of ideology.'⁵³⁹ Chapter Six returns to the visual aspect of Kennedy and Hellett's films to explore how they demystify ideologies of gender, sexuality and disability by positioning themselves as performative subjects and further establish a neuroqueer aesthetic. They have challenged mainstream disability representation (Chapter Four) and established community contexts in which to make an intervention into the invisibility of neuroqueer narratives (this chapter). Chapter Six explores what these narratives have to share now that they are 'in the frame'.

⁵³⁹ C. Johnston. "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," Ed. S. MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, np.

Chapter Six: Becoming performative subjects and establishing neuroqueer aesthetics in the films of Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett

6.1: Introduction

This chapter answers my third research question which asks how do Kennedy and Hellett transform the image of learning disability? Chapter Four drew on Honig's first refusal method of inoperativity to show how Kennedy and Hellett refuse dominant images of learning disability and work with particular cinematic techniques in their filmmaking that interrogate the politics of looking. They refuse a heteroableist gaze and imagine a neuroqueer⁵⁴⁰ gaze. They also refuse their position as object of representation and withdraw to the world of filmmaking to start the process of becoming the subject of their own self-representations. Chapter Five drew on Honig's second refusal method of inclination to show how Kennedy and Hellett, once established in their roles as self-representational filmmakers, come together to foster and nurture a community through Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF), Queer Freedom (QF) and the Matthew and Matthew Archive (MMA).

This chapter draws on Honig's third and final refusal method of *fabulation* to show how Kennedy and Hellett transform the image of learning disability by positioning themselves as performative subjects. Refusing homogenous disability imagery, their films foreground new queer ways of seeing learning disability which they achieve through very particular and stylised individuated and subjective experiences.

This chapter also mobilises hooks' theory of *radical subjectivity* which is analogous to Honig's fabulation in that it represents a filling in of gaps of incomplete marginal narratives. I propose that Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking offers a rich example of visual fabulation which fills in the gaps of incomplete disability narratives. By establishing a radical neuroqueer subjectivity they produce a rich visual

⁵⁴⁰ Neuroqueer is here used as the intersection of neurodiversity and queerness, and through critical engagement on the part of Kennedy and Hellett of how this intersection informs identity and shapes experience.

vocabulary of neuroqueer aesthetics. As outlined in Chapter Two, I use 'radical' in Baker's use of the term,⁵⁴¹ as in actively working to change a repressive system that does not serve your individual or community needs. The system in question here is representation. Mainstream representation does not serve Kennedy or Hellett, or their community of learning disabled filmmakers, so through their filmmaking, Kennedy and Hellett actively work to change it by offering more diverse self-representations of learning disability. This is radical because the image becomes transformative, and we see learning disability queerly for the first time.

This chapter is organised into three parts. The following section 6.2 outlines the concurrencies between Honig's refusal method of fabulation and hooks' theory of radical subjectivity. I argue these theories are relevant to the filmmaking of Kennedy and Hellett because I am interpreting their cultural production as a form of fabulation, which allows them to develop a radical neuroqueer subjectivity. Section 6.3 explores the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett establish their radical subjectivities through visual storytelling; by drawing on: (i) the aesthetics of haptic transformation, (ii) the concept of the monstrous-feminine and (iii) monologic narration. To borrow from one of Kennedy's film titles, these different 'versions' of Kennedy and Hellett that are verbally and visually depicted represent the multiplicity of their subjectivities, thus exposing the myth of one dimensionality that learning-disabled people are regularly reduced to in mainstream media representations. Section 6.4 draws on Butler ([1990] 1999; 1993), Sedgwick (1993) and Volcano and Dahl (2008) to interpret the aesthetics analysed in section 6.3 as ways in which Kennedy and Hellett use queer performativity to assert their subjectivities. This section considers how performative radical subjectivity fabulates a neuroqueer aesthetics, which in turn queers learning disability imagery.

This chapter discusses themes of cultural agency and transformation. Building on the ideas of an imagined neuroqueer spectator proposed in Chapter Four, I continue this theme and suggest Kennedy and Hellett's radical neuroqueer subjectivity envisages a neuroqueer futurity. This chapter contributes to recent

⁵⁴¹ Baker qtd. in Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, 1, qtd. in Bhandar and Rafeef, *Revolutionary Feminisms*, np.

conversations at the intersection of queerness and neurodiversity, or what is becoming known as *neuroqueer* literature. These two identity categories have historically not had the space to be combined until the last several years, and as outlined in Chapter Two, the majority of these recent neuroqueer texts do not pay attention to art and aesthetics. My research therefore offers a contribution to an under-researched area of queer/disability visual culture.

To be clear, this chapter does not intend to suggest that Kennedy and Hellett's films communicate any authentic or true versions of the self, rather they act as a vehicle for Kennedy and Hellett to explore a diverse range of subjectivities, and importantly, their films signal that Kennedy and Hellett *can* do this, which represents their refusal gesture. Through their films, Kennedy and Hellett portray subjectivities that are seldom seen on screen, and as such, these new narratives, representations and voices challenge the limitations of ideology or pathology that presume learning-disabled people do not express non-conforming gender or sexuality.

In the following section I offer a definition of Honig's fabulation and hooks' radical subjectivity.

6.2: Fabulation and radical subjectivity

Fabulation is the last crucial step in Honig's *arc of refusal* because it involves the return of the bacchantes to the city of Thebes and the demanding of rights. They return to their point of departure to transform the city and claim equality for women, demonstrating a responsibility for those women left behind. Following their inoperativity of refusing to be the object of disability representation (Chapter Four), and their inclination toward a neuroqueer filmmaking community (Chapter Five), Kennedy and Hellett fabulate their way to becoming the subject of representation by telling new queer visual stories of learning disability. They return to their point of departure, the 'city' of representation, and they transform the image of learning disability out of responsibility for other neuroqueer people who can now imagine a new (queer) way of seeing disability is possible.

Honig's fabulation is inspired by Hartman's (2019) use of fabulation as a method of refusal or 'counter-narrating'.⁵⁴² Hartman is concerned with the erasure of black life from archives/history and 'takes what the archive has to offer and fabulates the rest'.⁵⁴³ Essentially, Hartman combines scholarship and literary imagination to tell the stories of black girls and women in New York and Philadelphia in the early twentieth century, offering a counter-narrative to the institutional records which represents the only record of these people's lives.⁵⁴⁴ This is a literary method employed more recently by Jacques (2021) who writes fictional short stories inspired by found material and real-life events in a similar motivation to Hartman to liberate gender-non-conforming and transgender people from 'stale police records and sensationalist news headlines'.⁵⁴⁵ Hartman 'rescues' her wayward subjects 'from careless cruel obscurity by individuating them'.⁵⁴⁶ As Honig describes, Hartman's fabulation refuses the authority of the archive, contests its moral judgements, and defies the positivism in which it has historically been wrapped'.⁵⁴⁷ Fabulation therefore 'claims a right to the archives',⁵⁴⁸ or history, on behalf of a more complete future, rather than a distorted past.⁵⁴⁹ Kennedy and Hellett can be said to be rescuing learning disability from the 'careless cruel obscurity' of homogenous imagery by producing counter narratives, by 'individuating' them through their performative subjectivity. Additionally, like Hartman, Kennedy's motivation to start the MMA was one of refusing historical erasure. Hartman fabulates stories based on historical people, but Kennedy collects their own stories as an act of preservation.

Honig relates Hartman's fabulation to the *Bacchae* by interpreting the 'archive' or 'history' as the authoritative City of Thebes. Agave, as revolutionary leader of the bacchants, returns to Thebes not for recognition but for transformation.⁵⁵⁰ She returns to boast of the accomplishments of the bacchants who refused their subordinated roles and practiced new ways of being (inoperativity, Chapter Four) collectively in the heterotopia of Cithaeron (inclination, Chapter Five). Agave has

⁵⁴² Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 72

⁵⁴³ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 73

⁵⁴⁴ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 75

⁵⁴⁵ Juliet Jacques, *Variations*, London: Influx Press, 2021, back cover copy

⁵⁴⁶ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 73

⁵⁴⁷ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 73

⁵⁴⁸ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 74-74

⁵⁴⁹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 75

⁵⁵⁰ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 91

returned to tell the tale of their triumph and to challenge the authority of Thebes (the city/archive) to incorporate these new ways of being into everyday life.⁵⁵¹

hooks offers her own version of fabulation in her writings on radical black subjectivity, which acts as a counter-perspective that she argues resists subordination and can subvert dominant narratives. hooks questions how 'the dominated, the oppressed, the exploited' make themselves subject,⁵⁵² noting how 'opposition is not enough [...] In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become - to make oneself anew', to create a story of the real or imagined self.⁵⁵³ So, as outlined in Chapter Four, to become a critical spectator and employ an oppositional gaze is not enough; one must reinvent oneself in new, affirming ways. This process of reinvention emerges when one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life and as one then 'invents new, alternative habits of being',⁵⁵⁴ just as the bacchantes reinvented themselves on Cithaeron. Kennedy and Hellett's reinvention emerges from their understanding of how the structures of domination (heteroableist representation) work in their own life and their engagement in the practice of neuroqueering occurs when they refuse these structures to produce 'alternative habits of being' through film.

hooks is predominantly concerned with the intersection of race and gender and critiques a male black subjectivity which does not take gender into consideration. For hooks, this 'becoming' can be constructed through personal accounts such as autobiography or through fiction and poetry, which aligns with Honig (and Hartman's) examples of fabulation; they tell a counter-story. Broadly, hooks offers 'the realm of cultural production' as the transformative site in which a radical black subjectivity can be constructed,⁵⁵⁵ because 'art remains that site of imaginative possibility where "anything goes", particularly if one is not seeking to create a hot commodity for the marketplace'.⁵⁵⁶ hooks is therefore suggesting that the most radical subjectivity will emerge from cultural producers located at the

⁵⁵¹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 79

⁵⁵² bell hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (second edition), London and New York: Routledge, 2014, 15

⁵⁵³ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 15

⁵⁵⁴ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 15

⁵⁵⁵ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 18

⁵⁵⁶ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 18

margins, by those who 'believe in solidarity and are working to make spaces' that reflects their own culture and identity⁵⁵⁷ (I will consider these margins more in Chapter Seven in the context of amateurism). Like Hartman's fabulation which resists positivism, hooks' radical subjectivity resists essentialist understandings of a single black female experience that all black women can relate to, and instead calls for representation of a diverse and varied understanding of the black female experience.⁵⁵⁸ A radical subjectivity, for hooks, is one that does not assume there is one single experience,⁵⁵⁹ but rather to embrace 'complex subjects who embody multiple locations',⁵⁶⁰ and those which 'give expression to multiple aspects' of one's identity.⁵⁶¹

In Honig's conception of fabulation, she explains that the 'archive' or 'city' can also be read as a figure for a political community and notes the city and the archive is a stand-in for structures of power, representation, and authority.⁵⁶² In the absence of neuroqueer narratives in the figurative 'city' of mainstream representation, or the 'archive' of historical and contemporary queer/disability culture and historical cultural repositories, Kennedy and Hellett are fabulating their own stories to fill in the gaps and contest the erasures of their own history. Their films offer a counter-narrative of learning disability and queerness which resists dominant narratives and offers new, radical queer ways of being which go against the grain of what is expected of learning-disabled bodies. They do this by refusing the notion that there is a single queer learning-disabled experience, and instead offer plural perspectives which embraces the 'complex subjects who embody multiple locations'⁵⁶³ of which hooks writes.

As the *Bacchae* plays out, there is a discrepancy over the versions of events that took place on Cithaeron; those of the marginalised bacchantes and those of the official patriarchs of Thebes. However, as Honig highlights, the point is that the actions of the bacchantes are open to plural perspectives and the play therefore

⁵⁵⁷ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 19

⁵⁵⁸ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 20

⁵⁵⁹ hooks, *Black Looks*, 47

⁵⁶⁰ hooks, *Black Looks*, 51

⁵⁶¹ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 22

⁵⁶² Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 1

⁵⁶³ hooks, *Black Looks*, 51

'presses us to think of fabulation as a [...] contest over meaning', particularly a contest of official accounts.⁵⁶⁴ This echoes Hartman's fabulation which contests official archival accounts of her wayward women by offering fabulated counter-perspectives. Kennedy and Hellett can be seen as those cultural producers at the margins who offer these contests of official accounts, and they challenge the status quo through the neuroqueer images they produce. It must be emphasised that this is not subversion, Kennedy and Hellett cannot subvert images of queer learning disability because they do not exist. They offer *brand new images* that challenge existing norms and the 'archive's' understanding of what a learning-disabled experience is. To quote hooks, the following section explores the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett 'give expression to multiple aspects' of their identity⁵⁶⁵ in the development of a radical neuroqueer subjectivity.

6.3: Fabulating a radical neuroqueer subjectivity through queer aesthetics

As hooks asserts, 'only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless'.⁵⁶⁶ Kennedy and Hellett are the main protagonists in their films. Hellett has created the character of Mrs Sparkle through which to explore a queer identity and Kennedy imports herself into all their films, either through their physical appearance on screen, their voice as narrator, their voice in the guise of a fictional character, or, a combination of all these methods.

This section undertakes a close reading of three films by Kennedy (*What is Femme Anyway?* [2013], *Just Me* [2013], *Enid and Valerie* [2018]) and two films by Hellett (*Sparkle* [2008], *Mrs Sparkle* [2009]) to discuss the ways in which they draw on queer aesthetics and motifs to assert multiple subjectivities. Section 6.3.1 discusses the aesthetics of haptic transformation, section 6.3.2 analyses their films through the concept of the monstrous-feminine, and section 6.3.3 explores their use of monologic narration.

⁵⁶⁴ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 84

⁵⁶⁵ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 22

⁵⁶⁶ hooks, *Talking Back*, Chapter Three, np

6.3.1: Haptic transformation

This section will draw on Marks' (2000) theory of *haptic visuality* and Laine's essay "Cinema as Second Skin" (2006) to consider the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett draw upon themes of identity politics and the cultural markers of queerness and femininity to establish a radical neuroqueer subjectivity. When hooks speaks in section 6.2 of 'becoming',⁵⁶⁷ she alludes to what I claim is the process through which Kennedy and Hellett reinvent themselves through film by drawing on aesthetics of transformation. When hooks adds that this invention takes place whilst understanding how structures of power work in one's own life,⁵⁶⁸ it will be highlighted how Kennedy and Hellett explore discourses of gender, sexuality and disability through the queer transformation motif.

Kuhn and Westwell (2012) define haptic visuality, or 'embodied spectatorship', as 'a sense of physical touching or being touched engendered by an organization of the film image in which its material presence is foregrounded and which evokes close engagement with surface detail and texture'. They explain that this 'mode of engagement' can invite the viewer to 'become immersed in, or pulled into, the images on the screen and the sensations they produce'.⁵⁶⁹ This section will highlight the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett use haptic visuality to invite the viewer to become immersed in the images they produce, predominantly through the use of extreme close-up of skin and textiles-on-skin which foregrounds 'surface detail and texture' in their films. Kuhn and Westwell state that haptic visuality suggests 'a more all-encompassing, visceral, emotional, sensuous, form of cinematic engagement than that proposed by a mode of film spectatorship defined exclusively in terms of vision',⁵⁷⁰ meaning it is a productive lens through which to analyse the subjectivity Kennedy and Hellett exhibit in their films and support my argument in section 6.4 that their subjectivity is a mode of cinematic engagement that invites sensual immersion and imagines a neuroqueer futurity.

⁵⁶⁷ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 15

⁵⁶⁸ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 15

⁵⁶⁹ Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, "Haptic Visuality," *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (first edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, np.

⁵⁷⁰ Kuhn and Westwell, "Haptic Visuality", np.

The main protagonist in Hellett's filmmaking is his alter ego Mrs Sparkle. Specifically, Hellett is concerned with representing his transformation *into* Mrs Sparkle, or his 'becoming' of her. In *Sparkle*, Hellett is first shown in an extreme close-up of his right hand and arm (Fig.6.1, 6.2). Establishing Hellett's masculinity, the arm has noticeable hair and the hand shows him wearing a 'pinky' ring, a 'floating signifier' (see Chapter Three) which holds historical gay⁵⁷¹ and lesbian⁵⁷² connotations. The next shot reflects Hellett shaving in front of a mirror where he removes his facial hair, the most immediate and conspicuous cultural marker of his masculinity (Fig: 6.3). Using extreme closeup, Hellett's body is then fragmented in various shots to draw the viewer in to notice the surface details which are integral to Hellett's becoming Mrs Sparkle (Fig. 6.4). We are invited to scrutinise his toilette and watch as an obscured assistant applies false eyelashes, lipstick and nail polish to his body. We do not see Mrs Sparkle as a whole until she is complete, and the camera zooms out for her big reveal, smiling and donning a large wig (Fig: 6.5).



Fig.6.1: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

⁵⁷¹ "Word of the Gay: "Pinky Ring,"" *QueersUnited*, 24 Oct 2008.

⁵⁷² Katrina Rolley, *The lesbian dandy: the role of dress and appearance in the construction of lesbian identities, Britain 1978-39*, Middlesex University, 1995, Masters thesis, 179-180



Fig.6.2: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube



Fig. 6.3: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube



Fig.6.4: Comparative stills from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube depicting extreme-close up shots which have fragmented the body



Fig. 6.5: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

The transformation happens more suddenly in *Mrs Sparkle* when Hellett transmogrifies in the blink of an eye, seemingly taking himself by surprise to be cloaked in a forest green satin evening gown and crowned with an oversized pantomime dame-esque wig (Fig. 6.6). Again, extreme close-up is used in *Mrs Sparkle* to fragment Hellett's body to pull the viewer's attention to specific parts of

Mrs Sparkle, this time her clothing and the sensual pleasure she seemingly derives from exploring the fabrics (Fig. 6.7 and 6.8). We are shown Hellett using his hands to tactilely explore the silver evening gloves and the texture of the dress against his stomach (to be explored in more detail towards the end of this section).

One of Mulvey's ([1975] 2010) concerns was about the fragmentation of the female body on screen as contributing to fetishization and the denial of wholeness by the male gaze,⁵⁷³ however Brown suggests that cinematic use of fragmentation can make us aware of 'someone's choice of what to play to give an account of the action'.⁵⁷⁴ Where Mulvey's interpretation denies any agency on the part of the body being fragmented, and arguably rightly so, in relation to her specific research context of a male-dominated classic Hollywood cinema, Brown's interpretation is more useful to Hellett's use of the technique as providing insight into what 'action' or detail is significant in his visual narrative and which he intends to pull the viewer into experiencing haptically.

By drawing explicit attention to cultural markers of masculinity (arm and facial hair) and femininity (make-up and evening wear), Hellett is foregrounding these features, objects or rituals as being intrinsic to his becoming Mrs Sparkle. It is important that Hellett first establishes his masculinity in both films, which gives more emotive power to his transformation to femininity. By experiencing the transformation in extreme close-up in *Sparkle*, it is as if we are experiencing it there with him through the intimacy of our proximity to his skin, and potentially we are the fragmented, obscured assistant applying his make-up and wig. This evokes a significant sense of touch from the viewer and invites our visceral engagement in his transformation. Similarly in *Mrs Sparkle*, the extreme close-up of Hellett's sensual exploration of the textiles of Mrs Sparkle's evening gloves and gown engage the viewer to consider how they would feel on their own body. Pidduck (2009) has discussed fragmentation in film as a queer aesthetic which provides a visual form for queer's 'preoccupation with disruptions and discontinuities',⁵⁷⁵ and which 'facilitates

⁵⁷³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

⁵⁷⁴ Brown, *Breaking the Fourth Wall*, 34

⁵⁷⁵ Julianne Pidduck, "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence," *GLQ* 15.3 (2009), 460

powerful and unusual accounts'⁵⁷⁶ that can 'make strange' the 'familiar'.⁵⁷⁷ Hellett's use of fragmentation aligns with queer aims of challenging concepts of normalcy by making strange for the viewer what is familiar to Hellett – queer learning disability - which has the effect of disrupting and queering dominant understandings of learning disability. Simultaneously, the intimacy of the fragmentation, through extreme close-up, invites the viewer to make familiar the strange – we become familiarised with Hellett/Mrs Sparkle.



Fig. 6.6: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

⁵⁷⁶ Pidduck, "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence," 463

⁵⁷⁷ Pidduck, "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence," 464



Fig. 6.7: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

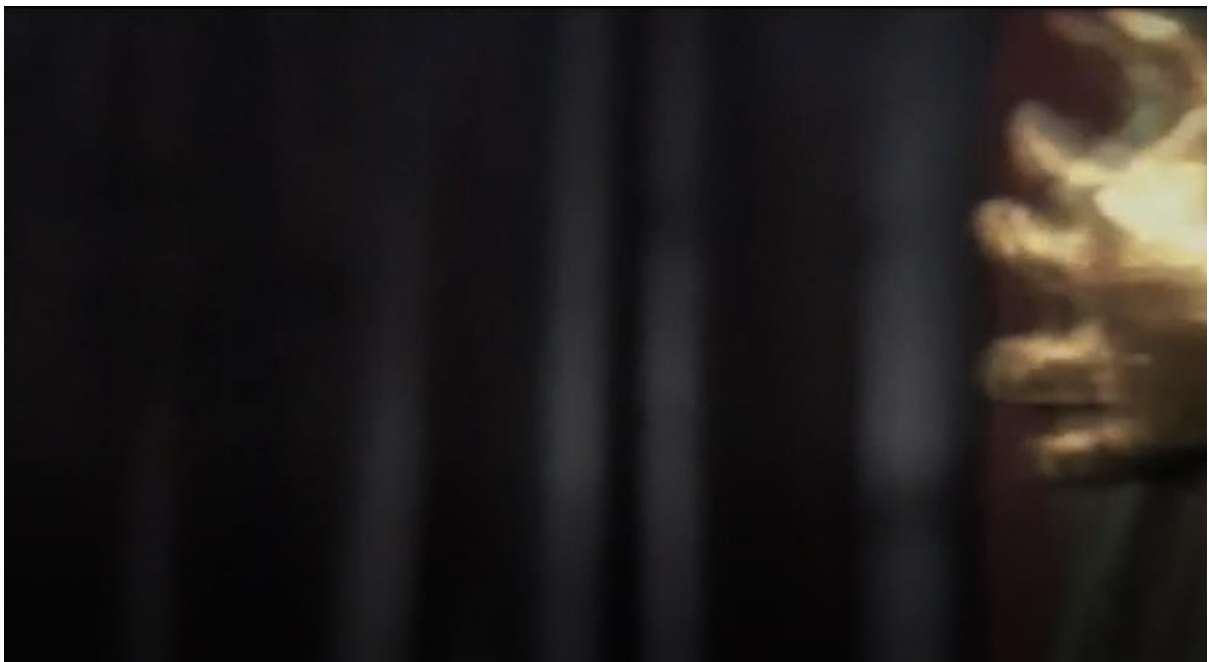


Fig. 6.8: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube, depicting Mrs Sparkle caressing her stomach covered by a satin dress with lame gloved arms.

Make-up is also a significant theme used by Kennedy in *What is Femme Anyway?*, and while not drawing on extreme close-up to foreground fragmentary detail like Hellett, Kennedy also focuses on the act of transformation in their narrated exploration of what 'femme' means to them. Wearing a plunge neckline blouse and sat in a passive kneeling position, Kennedy applies eye shadow and lipstick in front of a vanity mirror, behind which is an unmade bed, and to the side, a chest of drawers with a discarded coat hanger perched on one drawer handle (Fig.6.9). The main source of lighting in the film appears to be natural daylight pouring in through the invisible window. Everything about this scene is suggestive of Kennedy dressing as part of an everyday ritual. The crumpled bed clothes suggests Kennedy has recently awoken, the coat hanger indicates they have just dressed, and the feminine kneeling position depicts Kennedy proceeding to apply their make-up; thus using the cultural markers of femininity of eyeshadow and lipstick to become more feminine, whilst questioning what that actually means. If the lighting were unnatural and positioned overhead, this would connote Kennedy was dressing at evening time and would signify a different version of femininity that is presented in the film, which in this case connotes an everyday femininity, not occasional. This film therefore allows the viewer to observe an everyday queer ritual of transformation.

In Chapter Four I discussed Kennedy and Hellett's use of the mirror trope, and it is worthy of mention again how they both chose this as the site in which to undertake their transformation into increased femininity. Singer (2006) positions the 'activity in the mirror' as enacting 'an inside/outside process of transformation',⁵⁷⁸ which could signify the interior mind and exterior body, or the interior of their lived experience and the exterior of the viewer observing it. Thinking about Hellett's use of the bathroom mirror in *Sparkle* more specifically, Singer theorises the bathroom mirror as particularly significant; as 'a privileged, often private site/sight for "making up" a gendered identity'.⁵⁷⁹ The mirror is used by Kennedy and Hellett as both a site of agency and a generous invitation to a private and intimate moment of rearticulation of the gendered body.

⁵⁷⁸ T. Benjamin Singer, "From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations: The Ethics of (Re) Viewing Non-normative Body Images," Ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Studies Reader*, London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006, 612

⁵⁷⁹ Singer, "From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations," 612



Fig. 6.9: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

A significant moment in the development of Hellett's onscreen subjectivity during the transformation into Mrs Sparkle occurs towards the end of *Mrs Sparkle*. Having entered the doorway into the dreamworld of the theatre space, Mrs Sparkle adjusts to her new way of being, dances on stage, and generally revels in the attentions of the cheering and applauding audience. As the cheers of the audience increase, so does Mrs Sparkle's apparent joy in her exhibitionism. The camera zooms in to pay particular attention to her silver lamé evening-gloved arms which begin to gently caress her own body in tentative exploration of her new feminine attire. She first caresses her arms (Fig. 6.7), then turns her attention to caressing her satin evening-gowned stomach (Fig. 6.8). This moment of haptic visuality represents a particularly intimate moment where the viewer is encouraged to vicariously experience the sensual pleasure that Hellett experiences when exploring how the textiles feel against Mrs Sparkle's skin. This performance and eroticism of indulging in luxury, and the attention paid to cultural markers of femininity such as the evening gloves, is evocative of classic Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s in which these objects and rituals of indulgence were used in similar performances of femininity.

Marks asserts that 'haptic images [...] invite the viewer to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way',⁵⁸⁰ and that 'an understanding of the embodied experience of cinema is especially important for representing cultural experiences that are unavailable to vision'.⁵⁸¹ Hellett, as Mrs Sparkle, is here experiencing an embodied moment of exploration and revelry that is 'unavailable to vision'. By understanding this scene through a haptic visual lens, this 'form of cinematic representation based on the sense of touch'⁵⁸² allows Hellett to engage the viewer in their haptic pleasure and queer joy. This suggests a knowing on the part of Hellett that to touch is to feel, and to feel is to know, and so the experience of watching Hellett's touch becomes an extended experience of touching on the part of the viewer. Marks notes that film offers haptic images, but that haptic visuality 'emphasizes the viewer's *inclination* to perceive them'⁵⁸³ (my emphasis). In this way, Hellett's use of haptic visuality can be seen as a further form of Honig's inclination (Chapter Two) whereby Hellett *inclines* to the imagined viewer through the medium of film by inviting their embodied engagement with their revelry. Hellett, through his touching, invites a look and engagement with the textures that he feels, and the pleasure and joy derived from it, and we share this joy through our haptic visuality. This is not to suggest that we are supposed to identify with Hellett at a psychoanalytical level, (we may), but rather that we become entwined in a 'bodily relationship between the viewer and the image'⁵⁸⁴ which results in a very intimate moment between Hellett/Mrs Sparkle and the viewer.

Tarja Laine continues with this theme in her essay "Cinema as Second Skin" (2006) and offers the notion of 'skin as a medium of intersubjective connection'⁵⁸⁵ which locates the spectator as both touched and touching.⁵⁸⁶ Laine notes how hearing and sight are considered 'public senses', whereas touch, along with taste and smell, are more related to the personal and subjective due to their proximity to

⁵⁸⁰ Laura U. Marks, "Index," Ed. Laura U. Marks and Dana Polan, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham; Duke University Press, 2000, 2

⁵⁸¹ Marks, "Index," 22

⁵⁸² Marks, "Index," 138

⁵⁸³ Marks, "Index," 162

⁵⁸⁴ Marks, "Index," 164

⁵⁸⁵ Tarja Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin: Under the Membrane of Horror Film," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 4.2 (2006), 95

⁵⁸⁶ Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 93

both objects and body.⁵⁸⁷ Laine elaborates that ‘touch ruptures individual boundaries’,⁵⁸⁸ suggesting that we may see through our eyes, but it is through our skin (touch) that we perceive.⁵⁸⁹ This echoes Marks’ claim above regarding haptic visuality producing knowledge. This knowledge is produced through Laine’s concept of cinema as a second skin in that we experience touch through emotion; we often ‘feel emotion on the skin’, such as anger making us hot, fear making us cold, or excitement causing goosebumps.⁵⁹⁰ Laine draws on the Latin root of ‘emotion’ as ‘emovere’, meaning to ‘move outward’, and this outwardness is experienced as touch, meaning emotion and touch are reciprocal.⁵⁹¹ So this would suggest that Kennedy, through the close-up experience of our watching them apply make-up, and Hellett, through their shaving, make-up application and sensual enjoyment of textiles against their skin, are encouraging an emotional response from the viewer by their own imagining of the touch that Kennedy and Hellett experience on screen. In order to experience hapticity, the viewer must have something in their own memory to draw from, so I put forth the argument that through their use of haptic visuality and preoccupation with the skin, Kennedy and Hellett are engaging a very particular viewer; a neuroqueer one who can have an embodied reaction to what they are seeing on screen. They use skin and the touching of skin as ‘a medium of intersubjective connection’.⁵⁹² When Hellett has lipstick applied by the obscured assistant (Fig.6.10), the viewer who has experienced this can *feel* what is happening and a psychological reaction is triggered from memory.

⁵⁸⁷ Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 94

⁵⁸⁸ Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 94

⁵⁸⁹ Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 98

⁵⁹⁰ Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 101

⁵⁹¹ Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 101

⁵⁹² Laine, "Cinema as Second Skin," 95



Fig.6.10: comparative stills from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

This section has demonstrated how haptic transformation is used by Kennedy and Hellett as a neuroqueer aesthetic, becoming a layer of performativity that establishes their radical subjectivity and queers the image of learning disability. The next section analyses Kennedy and Hellett's becoming performative subjects through Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection and Creed's (1993, 2022) concept of the monstrous-feminine.

6.3.2: The monstrous-feminine

In complete contrast to the film's title, *Sparkle* begins as particularly unnerving, evoking the bleak surrealism of the oeuvre of David Lynch. The out-of-focus, monochrome visuals jar against the droning background score and there is a distance to Hellett's narration which makes the majority of the film feel nightmarish. Throughout, a bell rings continuously in the background which produces an unsettling cinematic atmosphere. Transformation scenes in cinema are often romanticised, symbolic of liberation or empowerment, and aim for an idealised beauty, but there is something threatening about the transformation scene in *Sparkle*. Due to the out-of-focus and extreme close-up shots which fragment the body, it is often difficult to know which parts of the body we are looking at, and those we do see are disjointed and sometimes confrontational (Fig.6.11).



Fig.6.11: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

When Hellett shaves in the mirror, his mouth is fleetingly positioned in a contorted way (Fig.6.12), at one point baring his teeth (Fig.6.13). When Hellett's lipstick is applied, it is shown from an extreme close-up (Fig.6.10), which as I discussed above elicits an embodied haptic response, but there is also something uncomfortable about it in the close proximity and heavily contrasted monochrome palette which accentuates the white bared teeth and highlights the pursed lips. The high contrast is what also makes the shaving scene of Fig.6.12 and Fig.6.13 so disturbing when viewed in isolation, such as the white shaving cream which frames the black void of Hellett's wide-open mouth, which itself accentuates the whiteness of his bared teeth. Not only is the whiteness of the teeth accentuated through this stark use of monochromatic contrast, but Hellett's actual whiteness, the whiteness of his skin, is further amplified (Fig.6.12 and 6.13) which evokes a mood of the monstrous. This performative scene is not beautiful or romanticised, it is unsettling.

As the visual transformation plays out, Hellett describes knowing the difference between the Matthew Hellett world and the Mrs Sparkle world. Mrs

Sparkle lives in a different world, she brings him an inner peace. In the Matthew Hellett world, he has worries and anxieties,⁵⁹³ reflected in the disjointed and incongruous cinematography. When the transformation is complete, the camera zooms out and we see Mrs Sparkle as a whole person, as opposed to the fragmented Hellett. Whereas Hellett was out-of-focus, Mrs Sparkle is shot in soft-focus. The threatening and disturbing Hellett has become a softer, smiling Mrs Sparkle (Fig.6.5). The camera angle points up to look at Mrs Sparkle which at last gives her more presence, as opposed to the fragmented shots of Hellett which do not reflect him as a whole person and only foreground specific (distorted) parts of his body. In giving Mrs Sparkle more presence as a whole, the abject body presented prior to the transformation is rejected.

Abjection is predominantly discussed in terms of female and black bodies, but here the abject is neither a female or a black body, it is a neuroqueer one. Kristeva describes the abject as that which 'beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out',⁵⁹⁴ the abject and abjection are 'safeguards'⁵⁹⁵ which protect us from symbolic harm. The abject is our physiological and psychological response to that which horrifies us, such as rotten food, biological human waste (spit, blood, faeces) and the corpse. Abjection protects us from these violations to our sense of self through vomiting, retching, gagging and tears. It is to cry, 'I want none of that'.⁵⁹⁶ Importantly, abjection is constructed through physical and metaphysical thresholds; the border of skin protects the internal body from external filth, but the body also acts as the border between inside and outside by expelling internal human waste. The living body is the border which protects us from death. Kristeva explains that it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order' and that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' - it is the 'in-between, the ambiguous'.⁵⁹⁷ Kristeva asserts that the 'abject has only one quality of the object - that of being opposed to I'.⁵⁹⁸ Hellett evokes the abject ego in *Sparkle* through the monstrous aesthetics of the contorted mouth, bared teeth and distorted

⁵⁹³ *Sparkle*, Dir. Matthew Hellett, 2008

⁵⁹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 2

⁵⁹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of horror*, 2

⁵⁹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of horror*, 3

⁵⁹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of horror*, 4

⁵⁹⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of horror*, 1

fragmented body parts, which connotes confrontation, aggression and disembodiment. These images inspire unease and they unsettle.

Abjection is the theoretical foundation of Creed's (1993) conception of the *monstrous-feminine* which she coined as a lens through which to theorise the ways in which women are constructed as monsters in patriarchal culture and in popular cinema. Discussing classical mythology, Creed notes the body of myths 'was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female', such as the sirens who lured sailors to watery deaths or Medusa who turned men to stone.⁵⁹⁹ Highlighting that in almost all critical writing on the horror genre in film, women are always conceptualised as victims,⁶⁰⁰ Creed identifies that little has been written about the genre in the context of woman as monster.⁶⁰¹ Drawing on horror films that explore themes of menstruation, motherhood and vagina dentata as abjection, Creed argues these texts expose the misogynistic attitudes towards women which underpin the majority of popular horror cinematic representations of woman as monster throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Hellett appears to evoke the monstrous-feminine in *Sparkle* and it is a concept that can also be applied to *Mrs Sparkle* through Hellett's use of an exaggerated caricature of woman through drag. In the last decade there has emerged a sub-genre of drag that represents the opposite of the glamorous or prettified performance of femininity that is associated with the 'fishy'⁶⁰² drag of the present, which is characterised in likeness to a cisgender woman. The abject drag that opposes this fishy drag evokes the monstrous-feminine through excessive expression of features. Lips and eyes are not just enlarged through make-up, they are hyper-enlarged in a grotesque way. Hellett's drag aligns more with this queer celebration of excess through Mrs Sparkle's excessive eye make-up, hyper-large false eyelashes and over-sized wig (Fig.6.6).

⁵⁹⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, 2

⁶⁰⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 6

⁶⁰¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 1

⁶⁰² Ashley Clarke, "The Problem with Feminism in RuPaul's Drag Race," Huffington Post, 14 May 2014.



Fig.6.12: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube



Fig.6.13: Still from *Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2008. YouTube

Kennedy's use of the spinster and witch figures in *Enid and Valerie* also appears to evoke the monstrous-feminine. The witch or spinster is a recurring motif throughout Kennedy's practice and is something we discussed during our first interview. After the publication of *Enid and Valerie*, I noted Kennedy's social media and blog handles had evolved from 'diaryofalostperson' (inspired by the 1929 film

Diary of a Lost Girl starring Louise Brooks) to variations on 'diaryofaspinsterwitch', and finally to 'diaryofasolitaryhag'. I asked Kennedy about their fascination with these figures and what they represented, to which they responded that they are predominantly drawn to these lonely feminine figures through literature and Celtic mythology, citing novels such as the queer classic *Two Serious Ladies* (Bowles, 1943), *Lolly Willowes* (Townsend Warner, 1926), *Excellent Women* (Pym, 1952) and *The Lady in the Little Fox Fur* (Leduc, 1965) as particular inspirations; all of which depict women living solitary and sometimes esoteric lives. A further inspiration for Kennedy is the figure of Cailleac, or The Hag of Beara, in Celtic mythology, who Kennedy describes as 'a sort of divine hag', 'weather goddess of winter', 'usually dressed in plaid and antlers with rusty teeth'. Kennedy views such spinsters and hags as misunderstood archetypes to whom they can relate:

I know what that feels like to be misunderstood as a learning-disabled person and also to be misunderstood as queer, and to be villainised in some way as well. Because let's be honest, the queer community's been villainised since the beginning of time, so there is a part of me that relates to hags and spinsters in that way. It's like we're never really respected, and we're never really seen, and usually if we are seen, there's usually some vilification involved, or like they're a nobody [...] and this nobody-ness I really thrive from.⁶⁰³

Kennedy here articulates a connection to the hags and spinster archetypes of literature through their demonisation, which they explain they can relate as a queer learning-disabled person. Kennedy describes their Instagram handle 'diaryofasolitaryhag' as being 'part of my elusiveness', noting their avatar is a collage made several years ago which they feel complements the username (Fig.6.14). In this image Kennedy is pictured wearing a conical black hat and is layered with images of a large, hooked nose and wart-covered chin, all common visual signifiers of witches in Western popular culture.

⁶⁰³ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1



Fig. 6.14: Collage used as a social media avatar. Mattie Kennedy. Instagram. 2022.

Creed (1993) describes the witch figure as 'incontestably' belonging to woman'⁶⁰⁴ and as 'a familiar female monster [...] invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts', whom historically and mythologically 'inspired both awe and dread'.⁶⁰⁵ The witch represents Kristeva's abjection through her perceived disruption of order and disrespect of social rules. In tracing the history of changing attitudes towards the witch, Creed notes that in earlier centuries the witch was thought of as a healer, but through Christianity, she became associated with the devil, displaying sexual deviancy by having sexual intercourse with him and generally doing his bidding, crossing the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural in the process. The witch who was once approached for her healing

⁶⁰⁴ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 73

⁶⁰⁵ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 73

abilities was now criminalised and invariably executed (c/f the *Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486).⁶⁰⁶

In *Enid and Valerie*, it could be argued Kennedy draws on the abject history of the witch as the vilified other, but they also reorient the witch Creed describes as ugly by making the spinster and witch in the film young and beautiful, and possibly queer (Fig.6.15). The representation of the witch in *Enid and Valerie* aligns with the 1960s reclamation of the witch figure by feminist activist groups associated with the women's liberation movement such as W.I.T.C.H., originally the acronym for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (Fig.6.16), formed in 1968, disbanded in 1970, but resurrected in 2016 in the US in protest of then-President Trump's immigration policies (Fig.6.17). Jones (2021) notes 'witchcraft is having a bit of a renaissance' and that 'Gen Z and Millennial women, queer-identifying people, and people of color are reclaiming practices of magic, Indigenous spirituality, and occult wellness practices'.⁶⁰⁷ All incarnations of W.I.T.C.H. drew on the motif of the conical hat so heavily associated with the popular Western image of the witch, and *Enid and Valerie* wear the (i)conical hat in the film, at one point using it as a loving cup⁶⁰⁸ which they ritualistically pass between each other during a tea ceremony, evoking the witch-as-healer motif (Fig.6.18).

Lubrich (2015) traces the historical and symbolic significance of the pointed conical hat, which from the twelfth to seventeenth century served as a distinguishing sign for German-speaking Jewish people in the regions of the Roman Empire.⁶⁰⁹ Lubrich interprets the hat as a 'paradigmatic case of stigma semiotics'⁶¹⁰ which developed into a 'malicious sign symbolizing not just Jewish otherness but also treachery and crime in general'. Noting the tradition of depicting pointed hats on evil-doers lasted into the seventeenth century,⁶¹¹ Lubrich adds that this was also often

⁶⁰⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 81

⁶⁰⁷ Marian Jones, "Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell: What to Know," *Teen Vogue*. 28 Oct 2021.

⁶⁰⁸ "Loving Cup," *Merriam-Webster* [nd] – defined as 'a large ornamental drinking vessel with two or more handles' <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loving%20cup>

⁶⁰⁹ Naomi Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat: Iterations of the Medieval Jewish Pointed Cap," *Jewish History* 29.3-4 (2015), 203

⁶¹⁰ Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat," 205

⁶¹¹ Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat," 231

used as punishment for men and women engaging in non-Christian activity.⁶¹² Lubrich explains the use of the conical hat extended to popular narratives, with the Brothers Grimm describing the hats as being worn by 'unreliable, tricky people' in medieval fairytales.⁶¹³ Connecting the othering of Jewish people to the othering of disability, Lubrich outlines the moment from the fourteenth century onwards when Dwarves began to be depicted with conical hats due to their association with trickery and deception. These characteristics were also attributed to Jewish people and the depiction of dwarves wearing the hat coincided with anti-Jewish rhetoric.⁶¹⁴ Lubrich details the association of the conical hat to an 'othered' and demonised identity as dating back several centuries, so it is unsurprising the figure of the witch that would come to be depicted wearing such a marker of stigma, especially considering it was used to punish 'non-Christian activity' for which, Creed argues above, was often accused, punished and executed.



Fig.6.15: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube

⁶¹²Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat," 231-232

⁶¹³ Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat," 231-233

⁶¹⁴ Lubrich, "The Wandering Hat," 238



Fig.6.16: WITCH hexing Wall Street, October 31, 1968, New York. Courtesy of Bev Grant. <https://jwa.org/podcasts/canwetalk/witch-in-action>



Fig.6.17: WITCH Oregon, Us, 2016. <https://www.topic.com/witches-brew>



Fig.6.18: Still from *Enid and Valerie*. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. YouTube

Such identifications with spinsters, witches and hags drawn upon in Kennedy's written, spoken and visual language align their subjectivity with a particular cultural and historical repertoire of the 'other', radical feminism and queer culture which has reclaimed the (specifically Western European version⁶¹⁵ of the) witch motif, marking a significant moment in the development of their radical subjectivity. As Ahmed (2017) notes, 'citations can be feminist bricks,' 'the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings'.⁶¹⁶ The isolated, solitary, and misunderstood nature of these characters is seemingly embraced by Kennedy as their feminist bricks in the construction of their own radical neuroqueer subjectivity, and a way of making it visible.

Kennedy and Hellett do not draw on the beautiful, passive femininity of Mulvey's (1975) male gaze (see Chapter Four), but instead appear to evoke Creed's monstrous-feminine through their use of grotesque imagery and evocations of the

⁶¹⁵ Julian Goodare, "Modern Western Images of Witches," in Darren Oldridge (ed) *The Witchcraft Reader*, 3rd Edition, Abingdon: Routledge, 2019.

⁶¹⁶ Sara Ahmed. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, 16

abject female. Kennedy and Hellett do this through self-representation, which differs to Creed's monstrous-feminine which is the object of a representation. Kennedy and Hellett thus reclaim the monstrous-feminine through a queer celebration of the abject.

Creed (1993) situates her concept of the monstrous-feminine in horror film in relation to Kristeva's abjection which attempts to separate the human from non-human and the fully-constituted subject from the partially-formed subject.⁶¹⁷ This can be applied to the imagery of the fragmented Hellett in *Sparkle* as the partially-formed subject, as separated from the fully-constituted 'whole' Mrs Sparkle. This concept of abjection as separating the human from non-human is also analogous to the antisemitic and ableist gaze which Lubrich alludes to in the depiction of the conical hat on Jewish people and dwarves as a marker of their perceived devious characteristics, branding them as though animals. The conical hat extended to more recent depictions of the witch as a signifier of similar devious characteristics as beholder of magical powers, which represents her as supernatural, or non-human.

To reiterate, Creed notes classical mythology 'was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female',⁶¹⁸ and similarly Garland-Thomson (1996) notes that disabled people since antiquity have been represented as 'monsters' and 'freaks'.⁶¹⁹ Like the concept of the monstrous-feminine which is 'constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology' and is mediated through a narrative of 'difference as monstrous',⁶²⁰ the abjection of disability is constructed through ideologies of compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006) and able-mindedness (Kafer, 2013), just as the abjection of queerness is constructed through compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, [1980] 2003). Both disability and queerness have been mediated through a discourse of 'difference as monstrous' and both have historically been pathologized, and queerness has additionally been criminalised. There is an aesthetic dimension to the narrative of 'difference as monstrous' in a disability context because the othering is not just related to the functionality of a disabled body

⁶¹⁷ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 8

⁶¹⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 2

⁶¹⁹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body*, New York: New York University Press, 1996, 1

⁶²⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 2

which compulsory able-bodiedness speaks to, but it is also about how the body *looks* and if it is seen as conforming to an anatomical norm. The queer embracing of the monstrous and the freak addresses the cultural dimensions of the othering of disability, and it also poses a critique of which bodies are considered desirable, not just in an erotic sense, but in a social one too.

I want to now consider the monstrous-feminine and how it can be contextualised as a neuroqueer aesthetic. Creed uses the term monstrous-feminine rather than monstrous-female, because, she states, 'as with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality' and so the monstrous-feminine 'emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity'.⁶²¹ By focusing on the gender-ambiguous word 'feminine,' it is possible to recontextualise the concept in disabled and trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming contexts. Discussing the intersection of disability and sexuality, Shildrick (2009) describes a 'dangerous discourse' as,

any coming together of disability with either or both subjectivity or sexuality, where the perceived danger may lie equally in two related directions. In the first place there is a disruption of the perceived stability of normative expectations, and in the second a testing of the doxa that has directed disability politics primarily to the reform of an evidently harmful external social structure. [...] The issues of both subjectivity and sexuality, however, go right to the heart of what it is to be a self at all. They are productive of anxiety precisely because they displace normative and shared assumptions about the correspondence between bodily markers and the status of the self. And insofar as they generate demands, not so much for reform, as for a transformation in the meaning of selfhood for every one of us, they threaten the very basis of a comfortably taken-for-granted personal and social existence. In short, the interweaving of disability, subjectivity, and sexuality constitutes a dangerous mix. And it is all the more so for being both discursive and substantive.⁶²²

⁶²¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 3

⁶²² Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, 5-6

Shildrick raises important connections between the anxieties raised when disability and sexuality is combined, anxieties which relate to a discussion I raised in Chapter Two of the myth of the hypersexuality of learning-disabled people. This relates to Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine who is defined through her sexuality, often which is imbued with historical religious notions of 'sexual immorality and perversion', all of which are central to the construction of the monstrous.⁶²³ These are all notions which have historically been applied to queer people too. Additionally, fears of the monstrous-feminine have predominantly been theorised through a psychoanalytical lens of castration anxiety, but I want to now consider this anxiety through the anxiety Shildrick raises in relation to disability, the anxiety of 'normative expectations',⁶²⁴ but also to consider it through queerness. I conceptualise a neuroqueer monstrous-feminine through the fear of (one form of) disability and queerness as an instability of a heteroableist norm. When Davis (1995) speaks of the 'temporarily able',⁶²⁵ and Butler ([1990] 1999) describes gender as a 'free-floating artifice',⁶²⁶ this establishes a neuroqueer anxiety which constructs a neuroqueer monstrous-feminine, or a *monstrous-neuroqueer*. The excessive and comical drag of Mrs Sparkle represents this 'free-floating artifice' of gender.

Kristeva's abjection is theorised through the threat of crossing physical and metaphorical borders. As Creed explains, 'a border is central to the construction of the monstrous [...] that which crosses or threatens the "border" is abject',⁶²⁷ and this border is symbolic of the separation between order and chaos.⁶²⁸ Borders can be more abstract however, and here I am thinking of the unstable borders of femininity and masculinity that Butler ([1990] 1999) speaks of, or of the unstable borders of ability and disability that Davis (1995) alludes to, and how people such as Kennedy and Hellett who transgress (both) these borders may incite anxiety,⁶²⁹ resulting in the vilification of which Kennedy speaks. Both Kristeva (1982) and Douglas ([1966]

⁶²³ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 9

⁶²⁴ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, 5-6

⁶²⁵ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, xv

⁶²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (tenth anniversary edition), London and New York: Routledge, (1990) 1999, 9

⁶²⁷ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 9-10

⁶²⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 10

⁶²⁹ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, 6

2002) theorise the danger of transgressing these borders and the exclusion that is enforced as a consequence of these transgressions from normative expectations. Queer and disabled people have been excluded from almost all aspects of social and political life at some point throughout history and as noted above have been pathologised and criminalised as a form of containment. Kennedy and Hellett transgress both borders and offer the first visual representations of this transgression. They refuse these histories of pathologisation and criminalisation, of punishment and containment. They appear to reclaim the perceived monstrous of disability and queerness through their use of the monstrous-feminine, recontextualised through film as a radical neuroqueer aesthetic.

Creed (1993) asserts that just because the monstrous-feminine is constructed as active rather than passive, this does not automatically constitute her as feminist or liberated because she 'speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire of female subjectivity'.⁶³⁰ Creed (1993) focuses on women-as-object in her original conception of the monstrous-feminine, but she addresses this in her 2022 text *The Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* in the self-representations of what she calls the 'feminist new wave cinema' which has emerged over the first two decades of the twenty first century. These films speak more to woman-as-subject and are films directed mainly by and at women and tell stories about women, usually in revolt against patriarchal violence and values.⁶³¹ She opens her introductory chapter with a quote by Julia Ducournau which reads, 'Monstrosity, for me, is always positive. It's about debunking all the normative ways of society and life'.⁶³²

Once again, Creed draws on Kristeva, but this time it is her writing on revolt that inspires the monstrous feminine, in which Kristeva states abjection is 'eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages'.⁶³³ Creed has reconceptualised the monstrous-feminine for the twenty first century in the socio-political context of Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the rise of transphobia as a tool which disrupts patriarchal and authoritarian order by

⁶³⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine*, 7

⁶³¹ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-feminine*, 2

⁶³² Julia Ducournau qtd in Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-feminine*, 1

⁶³³ Kristeva, *Powers of horror*, 45

disrupting its language and values. Creed describes how most feminist new wave films 'utilise horror as an aesthetic form to convey the reality—often the surreality—of the human struggle',⁶³⁴ so here the abject in the films Creed analyses becomes patriarchy. This form of abjection can be seen through Kennedy's film *Just Me* when they place white stickers upon their body with different words that have been used to label and categorise them, such as 'learning difficulties' (Fig.6.19) and 'ableism' (Fig.6.20). In this film, the abject is not queerness or disability like in *Sparkle* or *Enid and Valerie*, but *society* is the abject, the monstrous, which has shaped Kennedy's perception of the self through pathological categorisation, but which they refuse through the film's narration.

When thinking of the rearticulation of the monstrous-feminine as a neuroqueer aesthetic, a contradiction has emerged. While Kennedy and Hellett's queerness can be made visible, what does this mean for their 'invisible' neurodivergence? How can learning disability be worn on or by the body the way queerness can through gender performativity? This has exposed the limitations of textual analysis and requires engagement with Kennedy and Hellett's performance of verbal as well as visual language in the construction of a neuroqueer aesthetic. Barthes (1977) in his analysis of the relationship between text and image uses the term 'anchorage' to describe text that fixes potentially arbitrary meaning. For example, a greeting card with an illustration of a cake could signify several types of celebration, but when accompanied with the words 'happy birthday', the text anchors the meaning of the image. I want to pose the argument that the verbal and written language used in Kennedy and Hellett's films, and the context we know of their biographies as filmmakers, acts as anchorage whereby we understand these images as neuroqueer and which relates to the concept of authorship or auteur theory.

Doty defines authorship as 'traditional and revisionist critical work that was initially concerned with questions about directors and how central they might be in controlling or otherwise influencing the form and meanings of cultural texts',⁶³⁵ which

⁶³⁴ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-feminine*, 3

⁶³⁵ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 18

they note is theoretically still 'contested ground'.⁶³⁶ Noting how in queer culture it is common recent practice to consider the sexual orientation of cultural producers to create a queer history to make it more visible, Doty's study is concerned with the consideration of how 'ideas and information about directors [...] have been, are, and might be significant in queer cultural readings of individual texts and bodies of work'.⁶³⁷ Importantly, Doty explains that 'since queerness is not usually visible in the ways gender is understood to be, biographical information about directors (and stars, writers, etc.) [...] often becomes crucial to examining queer authorship,⁶³⁸ what Warner may call a 'tactics of visibility.'⁶³⁹ Here I extend this to include considerations of information about Kennedy and Hellett as filmmakers as being significant to *neuroqueer* readings of their films as texts because learning disability is usually invisible and requires further information to allow such a reading.

Silverman (1988) traces the contested ground that Doty refers to in detail and locates Barthes' 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" as a critical point in such discussions. In his essay, Barthes declares the death of the author by arguing that to impose an author on a text in fact limits the potential meaning/s that can be extracted from it because we have to understand said text in relation to the author and the time in which it was produced. This, Barthes argues, is impossible as we can only extract meaning based on our own position in the time in which we read it. Essentially, we have to move away from the idea that the author determines the meaning of a text,⁶⁴⁰ or what Wong calls 'audience as author'.⁶⁴¹ As Silverman summarises Barthes' argument, he 'attempts to deoriginate writing by severing its connection to the voice'.⁶⁴²

Silverman rejects this argument and believes authorship plays a crucial discursive role in the representation of feminine and marginal identities. In her study,

⁶³⁶ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 19

⁶³⁷ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 24

⁶³⁸ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 26

⁶³⁹ Warner, "Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet," 13

⁶⁴⁰ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 190

⁶⁴¹ Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong, "Grassroots authors: Collectivity and construction in community video", David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (eds), *Authorship and Film*, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, 224

⁶⁴² Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 190

she set out 'to determine the conditions under which the author has lived on as a discursive category since his biographical demise in 1968' and to 'carve out a theoretical space from which it might be possible to hear the female voice speaking [...] as the point at which an authorial subject is constructed'.⁶⁴³ Silverman discusses Barthes' essay in the context of gender and notes that 'although Barthes never definitively says so, the author he seeks to annihilate occupies a definitively male position.'⁶⁴⁴ Silverman draws on Barthes later work *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) where she posits that he now seeks not the author's demise but his rearticulation in a new guise, where the masculine author existed outside the text, the now feminine author exists as a 'figure' within the text as the 'materiality of the writing' or the body of the text.⁶⁴⁵ As Silverman explains, 'Barthes dramatizes the demise of the traditional (male) author, and the production of a feminine singing voice [...] is remade in the image of woman, but whereby the female author constructs herself as a speaking subject'.⁶⁴⁶ This is reminiscent of Creed's (2022) reconceptualisation of the monstrous-feminine as noted above where 'woman-as-subject' emerges through the 'rejection and *reconstruction* of languages' (my emphasis).

Silverman's rearticulation of Barthes' ideas is contextualised through authorship as female discourse in feminist and political cinema and the avant-garde; as the space where a resistant and oppositional agency can take shape.⁶⁴⁷ Silverman speaks of 'the necessity of thinking "authorship" and "subjectivity" in close relation to each other,'⁶⁴⁸ which brings me back to the theme of this chapter, subjectivity. Neuroqueer authorship emerges through subjectivity and vis a vis, and this is augmented through information about Kennedy and Hellett as filmmakers and their verbal language. This emerges as feminine discourse which relates to the voice, to speaking'.⁶⁴⁹ As Silverman describes, 'authorship might be inscribed not merely through the camera, or such an obviously reflexive diegetic indicator as the look, but through those forms of identification and textual organization which are generally assumed to be "secondary," and which hinge upon a variety of

⁶⁴³ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 187-188

⁶⁴⁴ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 191

⁶⁴⁵ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 190

⁶⁴⁶ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 224-225

⁶⁴⁷ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 187

⁶⁴⁸ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 202

⁶⁴⁹ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 207

characterological and narrative devices'.⁶⁵⁰ These narrative devices which are considered secondary to the image in my argument that Kennedy and Hellett produce neuroqueer images is their monologic narration, which is the focus of the following section, a verbal narrative tool used by Kennedy and Hellett to anchor meaning to the visual. When Barthes announced the death of the author, and as Silverman described it above as being severed from voice, the voice is here reclaimed as discourse, and it is noteworthy that the voice played a significant role in Kristeva and Hélène Cixous' feminist politics of gender identity.

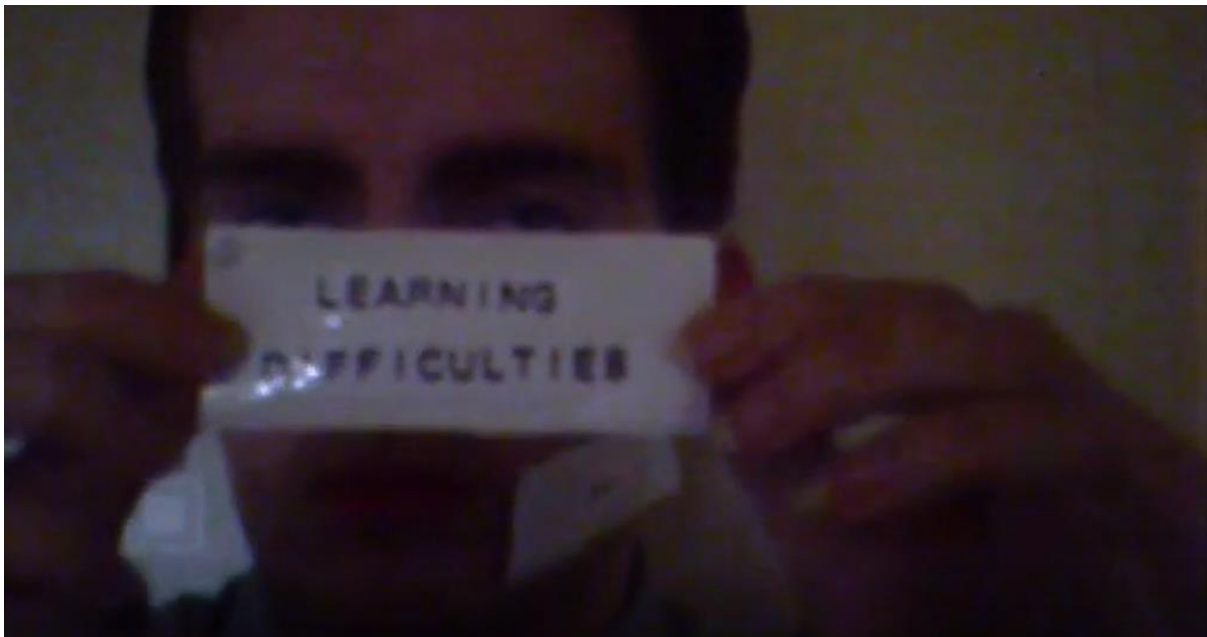


Fig. 6.19: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

⁶⁵⁰ Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 207



Fig. 6.20: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

6.3.3: Monologic narration

In *Just Me*, Kennedy uses narration to add further contextualisation to the visuals whereby they hold up small white rectangular stickers with handwritten words that relate to different aspects of their identity. The film begins with Kennedy stating, 'I guess you could say that I myself represent a minority', followed by, 'the fact that I'm gay and have learning difficulties has shaped the very core of my being and how I deal with life on a day-to-day basis'.⁶⁵¹ Corresponding to the narration, Kennedy holds up specific words and places them upon their body, such as 'learning difficulties' and 'ableism' (Fig.6.19, Fig.6.20). Here Kennedy has stated from the start that they consider themselves to be marginalised in society and how their sexuality and learning difficulties significantly impacts their day-to-day lived experience, though they do not expand on how. They reflect on dressing up as Doris Day in *Calamity Jane* (Dir. Butler, 1953) around the age of seven or eight years, but position themselves as speaking as a then-twenty-two year old 'who likes to cross dress on the odd occasions'. Kennedy here asserts that a queer expression of gender was present from early childhood and continues to be significant to their gender identity. Kennedy

⁶⁵¹ *Just Me*, Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013.

also notes that 'gender and identity are important themes to me as a means of expressing myself', and gender is a recurring and dominant theme throughout their visual practice as a whole, but most explicitly in *What is Femme Anyway?* made in the same year as, and just prior to, *Just Me*.

In *What is Femme Anyway?* Kennedy sits in a kneeling position applying makeup in a bedroom vanity mirror. While constructing a physically feminine self through cosmetics, they use monologic narration to question the potentialities and limitations of *femme* as an identity category and muse over what *femme* means to them. The film starts with Kennedy asking, 'what is femme, anyway?' Immediately Kennedy is questioning what this word means, though it is also unclear if this is just a question, or a response. The addition of the word 'anyway' adds a confrontational or dismissive dimension to the question, as if it is a defensive response to an external statement, which also makes the question sound somewhat rhetorical. This suggests Kennedy has been pondering an identification with 'femme' but is also working through the slipperiness and arbitrariness of the word as a concept by questioning its boundaries and limitations.

Kennedy continues to ask, 'do people have their own definitions of what femme is?', which presupposes an imagined audience and encourages them to enter into Kennedy's dialogue, urging the viewer to question their own understandings of what *femme* means to them. The term 'femme' is not widely used outside queer culture, so this imagined audience is arguably a queer one, which is supported by discussions outlined in Chapter Four where Kennedy explains they intend for their films to be viewed by other queer people. Kennedy expands on their question by explaining their own position, that they 'don't really have a concrete definition of what femme is, but maybe being femme for me is when someone compliments me on a piece of clothing I'm wearing or possibly takes a liking to what colour of nail polish I've got on'.⁶⁵² Here Kennedy lets the viewer know that they are not entirely sure themselves of the word but are keen to explore different interpretations. This refuses a monolithic expression of 'femme' in the same way their and Hellett's films in general challenge the monolithic expression of queerness and learning disability. Kennedy's

⁶⁵² *What is Femme Anyway?* Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013.

example that their interpretation of 'femme' is related to compliments from others on clothing and makeup suggests that their association of femme relates to a feminine material culture. However Kennedy also asks, 'Is being femme all about taking pride in your appearance?,' and so they question their own understanding. This is bolstered when Kennedy states, 'I think cosmetics should be unisex'. This suggests if cosmetics were unisex, there would be no need for such labels as femme, and so Kennedy pre-empts their next questions which asks, 'Can I be fluid with my gender and still be femme? Is femme androgynous? Can femininity and masculinity be merged together, or should they be kept separate?' Kennedy appears to comment on the limitations of gender labels and signals a preference of fluidity and not wanting to subscribe to a particular gender model. Kennedy clearly seeks to understand, name, challenge and escape the limitations of binary gender labels.

Munroe Bergdorf traces the origins of the term femme and its relationship to femmephobia. 'Femme' originally connoted young women and came from French influence via writers such as Lord Byron in 1814 who is credited by the Oxford English Dictionary as one of the first English uses. The next significant use and first in a queer context is in the novel *A Scarlet Pansy* (Scully, 1932) which reads, 'which do you prefer, femmes, or the others?,' the others being the butch counterpart to the feminine in the novel. As a term, the word femme in lesbian lore is different from a gay man being femme or a transfeminine person and is as much an expression of desire as gender, within a lesbian economy of desire. Femme is used contemporaneously in the queer community as both a noun and an adjective,⁶⁵³ and is increasingly used by non-binary, gender-nonconforming people on the feminine end of the gender expression spectrum. This seemingly relates to Kennedy's use of the word femme, particularly when aligning their understanding with a more androgynous or 'merging' of gender identities as they describe in the film.

In an interview with *Directors Notes* in 2018, Kennedy reflected on making *What Is Femme Anyway?*, their first film:

⁶⁵³ Munroe Bergdorf, "Munroe Bergdorf Explains the History of the Word 'Femme' | InQueery | them," them, YouTube, 19 Jul 2018.

I still have a soft spot for it". Kennedy explained, 'I don't know what drove me to make the decision, I just felt like it was a subject that needed to be talked about. That it was important for me to talk about what Femme identity means to me as a queer person. To be able to question things without fear or shame.'⁶⁵⁴

The shame Kennedy refers to adds another layer of meaning to their exploration of the word femme, but it also speaks as a critique of femmephobia within LGBT culture which marginalises feminine presenting people in both heterosexual and LGBT circles. This femmephobia is deep-rooted and carries historical connotations of being considered less attractive than, and lacking the social and cultural status of, more masculine presenting queer people, as well as the inability to 'pass' as straight. This context of shame also contributes further meaning to the shame discussed in Chapter Four which established it as a neuroqueer aesthetic.

Hoskin (2017) argues for the inclusion of femmephobia in intersectional analyses and provides a theoretical framework for feminist theorists and researchers studying oppression.⁶⁵⁵ Hoskin differentiates between 'ascribed' femmephobia which is informed by historical misogyny, and perceived femmephobia which is a consequence of ascribed femmephobia which results in oppressive and exclusionary displays based on a perceived femininity or femme identity in a person.⁶⁵⁶ Hoskin explains how femmephobia is a key concept that is missing or overlooked in studies on oppression,⁶⁵⁷ and describes how 'femme' is 'a critical analytic', which requires researchers to highlight the multiplicity of femininities through an intersectional lens.⁶⁵⁸

In *What Is Femme Anyway?*, Kennedy seems to use the term femme as a 'critical analytic', rather than simply ascribing it to their own identity, they are taking

⁶⁵⁴ "LGBTQ+ Learning Disabled Artist Matthew Kennedy Shares His Exploration of Identity Through Film," *Directors Notes*, [nd]. Web. 22 Aug 2022. <https://directorsnotes.com/2018/11/21/matthew-kennedy/>

⁶⁵⁵ R.A. Hoskin, "Femme theory: Refocusing the intersectional lens," *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* 38.1 (2017), 96

⁶⁵⁶ Hoskin, "Femme Theory," 102

⁶⁵⁷ Hoskin, "Femme Theory," 105

⁶⁵⁸ Hoskin, "Femme Theory," 105

the time to work through the intricacies of what it actually means, at a general and individuated level, and they also express interest in knowing what other people think. Through their practice of filmmaking, Kennedy and Hellett both contribute to the 'multiplicity of femininities' Hoskin describes, which this research approaches through an intersectional lens incorporating disability and queerness.

Although Kennedy and Hellett foreground issues of gender in their work, they touch on matters of disability and the barriers they face as a result. In *Just Me* Kennedy outlines how their mother was told by doctors when Kennedy was a baby that they would 'probably never be able to read or write', but that Kennedy 'defied those odds by graduating at college' and has since 'tried to question ableist ideals by questioning my own ability'.⁶⁵⁹ This statement suggests that Kennedy began to refuse the position assigned to them as an infant, questioning the societal structures by first questioning themselves. This is reminiscent of Kafer (2013) who recalls a doctor suggesting her goals of graduate school were 'misguided' or 'out of reach' due to her disabilities incurred as a result of a fire.⁶⁶⁰ 'Of fortune cookies and tarot cards they have no need', Kafer states regarding the prognosis of her doctor, 'My future is written on my body'.⁶⁶¹ Kennedy seemingly experienced a similar medical dismissal, but rather than take for granted what the medical professional asserted before they had fully developed, Kennedy refused its authority and intended to discover for themselves what their own abilities were; they would be the fabulator of their own story.

Intrinsic to this discovery of ability has been Kennedy's reclamation of their own 'voice', something they explain they have only regained 'in the last year or two'.⁶⁶² They explain that they 'just woke up one day and said to myself "to hell with it, my life is changing, I refuse to be pigeon-holed on the basis of my sexuality or my learning difficulties"'. Despite this refusal to be labelled or 'pigeon-holed', Kennedy does explain how they feel that 'anxiety is a horrible thing, but then again so is alienation'. They describe themselves as 'an openly anxious person', highlighting how 'having a voice in a way calms my anxiety, especially in terms of being an artist'.

⁶⁵⁹ *Just Me*, Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013.

⁶⁶⁰ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 1

⁶⁶¹ Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 1

⁶⁶² *Just Me*, Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013

This comment refuses the stereotypical 'stoic' or resilient disabled person in popular cultural representations who are the narrative prosthesis⁶⁶³ in stories of triumph and inspiration.

In a similar context to Kennedy in *Just Me*, Hellett explores this theme in *Sparkle*. The monologic narration centres on Hellett enlightening the viewer on who Mrs Sparkle is and what she means to Hellett and the impact she has on his life. The film begins with Hellett asserting, 'after all this time I think I deserve a bit of happiness for myself', and that he would 'like to have a happy and fulfilling life [...] a nice sense of happiness all around me, buzzing everywhere'. Hellett differentiates between the Mrs Sparkle world and the 'Matthew Hellett world' of 'silly little trivial anxieties', which is 'sometimes a big struggle really because I've always been such a sort of worrier'.⁶⁶⁴ Just as having a voice calms Kennedy's anxieties, Mrs Sparkle has the same impact on Hellett's anxieties. He states, 'and then I get my make up [...] it's like an imaginary friend. It feels almost like I'm acting like a famous person and I don't have to worry about anything anymore [...] it feels like there's no more frustrations or anxieties because they've all gone [...] it feels fabulous'.⁶⁶⁵ He describes looking and feeling 'fantastic' as Mrs Sparkle, who 'gives herself an inner peace and inner happiness', the type of which Hellett states he is searching for at the start of the film.⁶⁶⁶ There is a clear correlation here between Kennedy and Hellett's 'anxieties' and their having a voice or mode of expression, which their filmmaking allows and which focuses heavily on the theme of gender. Film would seem to provide them both with the tools or 'voice' to use Kennedy's word to express their identities. Particularly thinking about gender, Hellett describes how Mrs Sparkle 'comes from the heart', and it is noteworthy that Kennedy places the sticker with the word 'gender' on their left breast (Fig. 6.21), suggesting gender is a theme close to their heart or their gender expression speaks from the heart.

⁶⁶³ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*,

⁶⁶⁴ *Sparkle*, Dir. Matthew Hellett, 2008

⁶⁶⁵ *Sparkle*, Dir. Matthew Hellett, 2008

⁶⁶⁶ *Sparkle*, Dir. Matthew Hellett, 2008

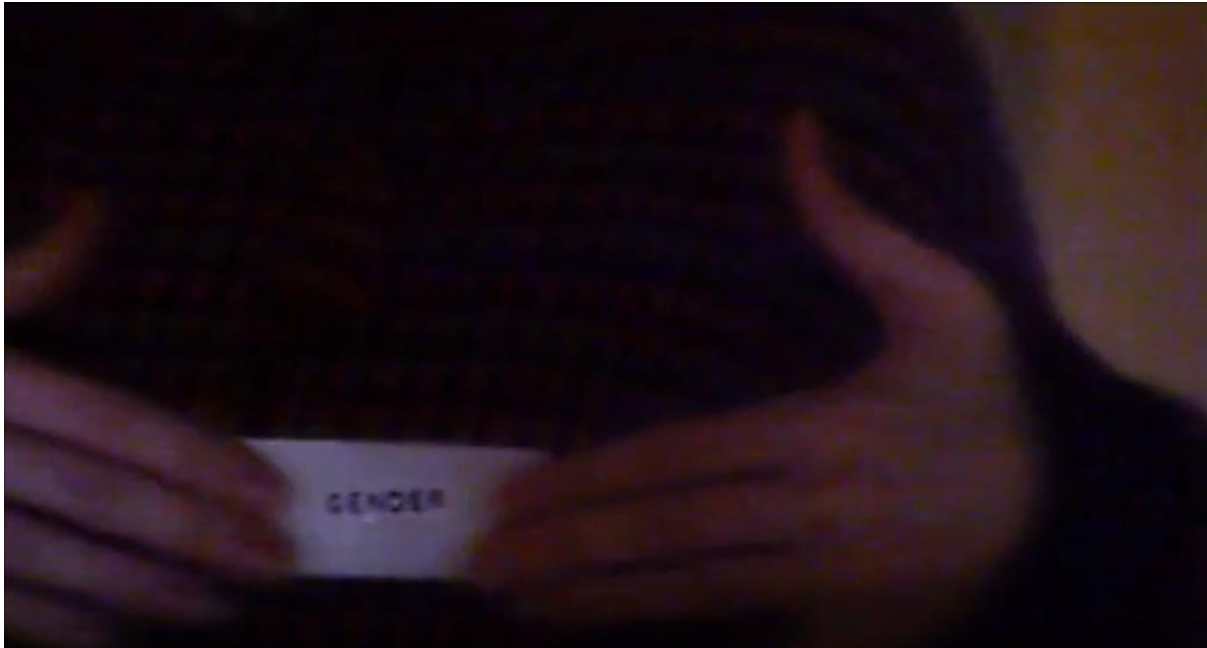


Fig. 6.21: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

In her conception of the notion of a radical subjectivity, hooks asserts that the sharing of personal information, knowledge, actions, triumphs and insights is critical to its development.⁶⁶⁷ hooks elaborates:

Willingness to share openly one's personal experience ensures that one will not be made into a deified icon. When black females learn about my life, they also learn about the mistakes I make, the contradictions. They come to know my limitations as well as my strengths. They cannot dehumanize me by placing me on a pedestal. Sharing the contradictions of our lives, we help each other learn how to grapple with contradictions as part of the process of becoming a critical thinker, a radical subject.⁶⁶⁸

hooks therefore calls for allowing oneself to be vulnerable, and while not wanting to interpret Kennedy and Hellett's sharing their anxieties as 'mistakes', in hooks' words, their sharing of this deeply personal information *does* allow the viewer to come to know about their 'limitations'. This displays a vulnerability to Kennedy and Hellett

⁶⁶⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 56

⁶⁶⁸ hooks, *Black Looks*, 56

related to their queerness and learning disability which contributes to their development of a radical neuroqueer subjectivity. In her essay “Understanding Patriarchy” (2004), hooks posits that ‘if men are to reclaim the essential goodness of male being, if they are to regain the space of openheartedness and emotional expressiveness that is the foundation of well-being, we must envision alternatives to patriarchal masculinity’.⁶⁶⁹ Hellett’s openly speaking of their worries can arguably address hooks’ assertion. His vulnerability represents a masculinity which Silverman would describe as being ‘deviant’⁶⁷⁰ to a phallic standard,⁶⁷¹ a masculinity which opens onto the ‘domain of femininity’⁶⁷² and represents a ‘tacit challenge [...] to conventional male subjectivity’.⁶⁷³ This aligns to Silverman’s arguments posed in section 3.3.2 in which the ‘author’ is reimagined when the masculine makes way for the feminine.

Like hooks, Kennedy has also spoken of not wanting to be put on a ‘pedestal’,⁶⁷⁴ and by showing this vulnerability they are not the ‘inspirational’ disabled person of popular disability imagery or a spokesperson for the learning disability community, but are instead represented as a complex, three-dimensional person with both flaws and potentials. Koivunen et al (2018) note that recently, queer disability studies and crip theory have revised traditional understandings of vulnerability⁶⁷⁵ to theorise it as a critique of what McRuer terms ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ in his writings on crip theory.⁶⁷⁶ In queer contexts, Cvetkovich has theorised vulnerability in the context of trauma, but notes how vulnerability can also be seen as ‘openness’⁶⁷⁷ and as encouraging ‘belonging’,⁶⁷⁸ which she notes is ‘fundamental to political organizing’⁶⁷⁹ and can therefore take on a positive meaning.⁶⁸⁰ Koivunen et al summarise that a ‘critical theory notion of vulnerability

⁶⁶⁹ bell hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy”, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Atria Books, 2004, 33

⁶⁷⁰ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, New York and London: Routledge, 1992, 2

⁶⁷¹ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 1

⁶⁷² Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 3

⁶⁷³ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 2

⁶⁷⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1

⁶⁷⁵ Koivunen et al, “Vulnerability as a political language,” 9

⁶⁷⁶ McRuer, *Crip Theory*

⁶⁷⁷ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 58

⁶⁷⁸ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 203

⁶⁷⁹ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 203

⁶⁸⁰ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 58

concretises in investigations of media engagement as a form of political agency and a site of citizenship, or becoming intelligible as a subject',⁶⁸¹ which aligns more closely with hooks' call for sharing personal knowledge through cultural production as radical practice, and can be explicitly applied to Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking.

For Honig, to be truly radical, the fabulator in her feminist theory of refusal must go from the 'heterotopia to the city'. In other words, the refuser must make the private public 'for the benefit of those who were left behind', to demand a new way of being and to show people that there are other ways to exist. hooks states the very same conditions are necessary for subjectivity to be radical; that they must cross the boundary from private to public, to reach other people.⁶⁸² hooks draws on Angela Davis's autobiographical writing which emphasised the need to work collectively for social change and critiqued self-focused work to emphasise the value of solidarity. While Kennedy and Hellett's work is self-focused and personal, it is also inherently collective as it presupposes a neuroqueer spectator (see Chapter Four) and is shown in public spaces aimed at marginalised groups (see Chapter Five). 'Radical subjectivity cannot happen in isolation' hooks notes, and she suggests this is done by reading about other people who have claimed radical subjectivity. Learning about people is a 'necessary part' of self-actualisation,⁶⁸³ hooks asserts.

In an interview for *Director's Notes*, Kennedy explains their initial mindset when setting out to make films,

When I left college I was having a difficult time trying to navigate and articulate my own gender expression. I think this is where the filmmaking aspect comes in, the feeling of personal isolation with talking and questioning myself over and over again wasn't helping. That's when I decided to hell with it, I need to document my own personal questionings of expression and identity through film. Also making a film around me being queer and learning disabled was really important to document. There's very little documentation when it comes LGBTQ+ learning disability representation in film in terms of

⁶⁸¹ Koivunen et al, "Vulnerability as a political language," 11

⁶⁸² hooks, *Black Looks*, 48

⁶⁸³ hooks, *Black Looks*, 56

research. This frustrated me. I felt like I had to take what I was feeling into my own hands, that I had the power to put myself in the frame and to be unashamed about what I was saying. I think filmmaking helped me better understand myself.⁶⁸⁴

This demonstrates the need of Kennedy to involve others in the conversation, if only as an audience, to instigate an engagement with someone else, when questioning the self over and over was going nowhere. They decided to reach out; the private had to become public in order for it to make any sense, and thus betrays an understanding that Kennedy, as an individual, saw themselves as part of a wider community.

hooks asks us not to 'wrongly assume that strength in unity can only exist if difference is suppressed and shared experience is highlighted'.⁶⁸⁵ Kennedy seems to be well aware of this when they stated in their keynote at the 2017 QF that they are only 'one piece of the puzzle'.⁶⁸⁶ Their subjectivity as represented/constructed on screen is very different to Hellett's, which rejects any essentialist or positivist understanding of neuroqueerness, and although their films are deeply personal, they also speak more broadly of structures of authority such as gender politics and ableism, and the effects of both at the individual level.

As hooks reflects, although accounts of black women who did construct radical subjectivity, such as Angela Davis and Shirley Chisholm, highlight their struggle to flourish, their claim to subjectivity also inspired hooks to 'maintain courage'.⁶⁸⁷ It is highly probable that Kennedy and Hellett's claim to radical subjectivity will encourage other neuroqueer people to explore their own, if not already but in the future. Like Agave in Honig's reading of the *Bacchae* who attempts to reconceptualise a new Thebes, Kennedy and Hellett constitute a current or future audience. hooks argues that,

⁶⁸⁴ "LGBTQ+ Learning Disabled Artist Matthew Kennedy Shares His Exploration of Identity Through Film."

⁶⁸⁵ hooks, *Black Looks*, 51

⁶⁸⁶ Mattie Kennedy Keynote speech presented at Oskaa Bright Film Festival, 2017.

⁶⁸⁷ hooks, *Black Looks*, 54

Fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming our right to subjectivity is the insistence that we must determine how we will be and not rely on colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy. We are not looking to that Other for recognition. We are recognizing ourselves and willingly making contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner.⁶⁸⁸

The above quote by hooks relates directly to the main points I want to make in Chapter Eight to conclude this thesis about Kennedy and Hellett challenging traditional queer and disability politics of visibility by being predominantly interested in reaching and engaging with other marginalised people. This idea hooks raises of 'willingly making contact' relates to the arguments I raised in Chapter Four about Kennedy and Hellett imagining a *neuroqueer spectator*, and which I now want to briefly return to in the context of their development of a radical neuroqueer subjectivity through film to theorise their practice as imagining a *neuroqueer futurity*.

Muñoz (2009) offers the concept of queer futurity as 'posing a critique function that fuels a critical and potentially transformative political imagination'.⁶⁸⁹ Queer futurity critiques the present. Muñoz states that 'queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer [...] the future is queerness's domain'.⁶⁹⁰ If the present is the 'here and now', then queerness is the 'then and there' Muñoz posits.⁶⁹¹ Drawing on the concept of the 'concrete utopia' Muñoz suggests this represents 'the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many'.⁶⁹² Without wanting to attribute the word 'oddball' to Kennedy, their solitary claim in *Just Me* of, 'I dream of being in a space where I'm full of joy and feel liberated without having to fear people's ignorance',⁶⁹³ seems to exemplify Muñoz's statement of being part of an emergent group of neuroqueer filmmakers. Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, as well as their film curation and archiving, is therefore that which 'promises a futurity,

⁶⁸⁸ hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," 22

⁶⁸⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3

⁶⁹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1

⁶⁹¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1

⁶⁹² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 3

⁶⁹³ *Just Me*, Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2013

something that is not quite here'.⁶⁹⁴ This is most explicit in Kennedy's latest film *Not Mythmakers* (2022), made as part of this research, which documents the Matthew and Matthew Archive (MMA) for the posterity of future generations. Unlike Kennedy and Hellett, who spent the majority of their lives until meeting each other thinking they were the only queer learning disabled people to exist, the MMA exists precisely as an intervention in the erasure of neuroqueer narratives, and *Not Mythmakers* documents the archive to widen the reach of knowledge of its existence. Within the archive is held the stories and fabulations of Kennedy and Hellett's neuroqueer subjectivities for the benefit of other neuroqueer people to bear witness; subjectivities which refuse and challenge the dominant versions of screen cultures which have ignored the existence of neuroqueer identities.

6.4: Neuroqueer Performativity

Central to Kennedy and Hellett's construction of a radical neuroqueer subjectivity is the concept of *performativity*, popularised by Butler in the context of gender from 1990 onwards. This section will utilise Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990; 1993) and Sedgwick's essay "Queer Performativity" (1993) to theorise Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, including haptic transformation, the monstrous-feminine and monologic narration, as performative neuroqueerness.

Heavily inspired by Foucauldian discourse theory, in their foundation text *Gender Trouble* ([1990] 1999), Butler argues that sex and gender, and by extension sexual orientation, are not inherently natural distinctions within Western culture, but are culturally-imposed categories which require repetition and reinforcement by cultural laws in order to maintain their authority. Butler posits their theory of gender performativity which suggests that through a series of repetitive (gendered) everyday behaviours, utterances, dress codes and gestures – performatives - a cultural understanding of masculine and feminine is established and enacted which works to maintain the false understanding that female bodies equate to femininity and male bodies to masculinity. Gender performativity is built on the ideas in Foucault's text *Discipline and Punish* ([1975] 2020) which uses the example of the panopticon in prison contexts to demonstrate how prisoners police themselves based on the belief

⁶⁹⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 7

they are being observed by an authoritative other, which he extends as a metaphor for how bodies are self-regulated by everyday social rules, or 'discourse'.⁶⁹⁵ Butler takes up Foucault's argument and applies it to their theory of gender performativity which they argue works in the same way in that we readily and actively impose rigid gender restrictions on each other and ourselves based on what we believe society expects from certain bodies.

Butler's intention was not just to observe how this cultural gendered regulation operates but how it can be resisted, offering drag as an example of gender transgression through conscious acts. Because drag was the only example Butler offered in *Gender Trouble* of how gender performativity can be subverted, many scholars interpreted this as the *only* example, rather than *one* example. One such scholar who identified this misunderstanding was Sedgwick who noted in the essay "Queer Performativity" (1993) in response to Butler's 'unique centrality of drag performance,' that 'there is a lot to value in all this. But as a reader I do find that the magnetism exerted on me by the notion of performativity emanates from some different places than these-also queer ones'.⁶⁹⁶ Sedgwick sees in Butler's theory of performativity the carrying of 'the authority of two quite different discourses', one of theatre and performance, but also the speech-act theory and deconstruction. So when Sedgwick talks of queer performativity, she talks of 'complex speech acts' such as 'coming out', for activist and artistic work around the AIDS crisis and also for the 'representational placarded body of *demonstration* (original emphasis)'.⁶⁹⁷ So although there is a political element to gender transgression through drag, Sedgwick interprets Butler's theory as also relating to queer uses of *the body* which engage with explicit queer politics and issues such as queer visibility and the AIDS crisis.

Expanding on their theory, and responding to Sedgwick, in the 1993 text *Bodies that Matter*, Butler describes those whose bodies are not regulated by cisheteronormative discourse as existing within the 'zone of uninhabitability,' i.e. a domain of exclusion (for gender norms), but also the domain of *becoming* or what

⁶⁹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin, (1975) 2020

⁶⁹⁶ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 1

⁶⁹⁷ Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 2

Butler terms 'materialization'.⁶⁹⁸ Materialization cites and co-opts gender laws but rearticulates the law's power to destabilise its effect.⁶⁹⁹ Queerness is an example of a reworking or reiteration of discourse, where the laws of gender and sexuality are engaged with but rearticulated to disarm power and produce new effects. Here, queer performativity directly relates to Honig's refusal method of fabulation in that the zone of uninhabitability produces the environment for the refusal of authority and the construction of new narratives. It also echoes hooks' theory of radical subjectivity through its citation of governing and oppressive discourse, but used in such a way as to reinvent and become. Queer performativity therefore represents a form of subjective fabulation.

Kennedy and Hellett cite multiple discourses when fabulating their neuroqueer subjectivities. Most obviously this is done by Hellett through their drag alter ego Mrs Sparkle, the foundational example offered by Butler to illustrate their theory of gender performativity. Drag works theatrically and abjectly to expose the artifice of gender binaries and by drawing on a particular type of drag, Hellett aligns himself with a specific type of white British gay culture exemplified by drag queens such as Lily Savage of the second half of the twentieth century, or more contemporary abject drag queens who evoke the monstrous-feminine. Much has been written on the subculture of drag and its political intent and possibility (Hillman, 2011; Tornado 2021), so it is not my intention to rehearse this here, but worthy of mention is Butler's description of drag as a 'site of ambivalence' which reflects the situation of being 'implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes'.⁷⁰⁰ By Hellett engaging with the dualism of a gender binary through a swift transition from masculine to feminine, he also resists such a dualism by exposing its slipperiness. Of interest to the remainder of this chapter is the more subtle ways in which Hellett and Kennedy act *performatively* to engage with discourses of gender and/or disability when constructing their onscreen subjectivities.

Related to his drag persona, Hellett's queer performativity can be seen in the abject shots of fragmented body parts during his transformation into Mrs Sparkle in

⁶⁹⁸ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3

⁶⁹⁹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 15

⁷⁰⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 125

Sparkle. This is also evident in the closeup shots of specific cultural markers of femininity such as false eyelashes, fingernail polish, lipstick and costume jewellery, and the application of them which encourages a haptic engagement with the viewer. When Mrs Sparkle is fully made up, she waves to an invisible or imagined adoring crowd. Again, in *Mrs Sparkle*, she comes to life when she is cheered by her crowd, her awkward sideways sways and shuffle give way to joyous twirls as she becomes more confident in her newly-transformed self. The more Mrs Sparkle is inhabited the more animated Hellett becomes. Most strikingly is the way in which Mrs Sparkle haptically caresses her body, indulging in the sensual pleasures of the textiles. Through discreet but powerful physical gestures, Hellett enacts a queer performativity which engages with gender discourse but in a rearticulated way that allows Hellett's subjectivity to *become*. Hellett transforms *with* the transformation of the image of learning disability.

Kennedy engages with gender discourse more directly in *What is Femme Anyway?* when they also rely on cultural markers of femininity such as eye make-up and lipstick as part of their queer transformation in front of the mirror. Like Hellett's self-caress, Kennedy's queer performativity can be found in the subtle gesture of kneeling in front of the mirror, a highly feminised pose with connotations of passivity. It would be simplistic to suppose Kennedy is drawing upon feminine tropes, such as make-up and passivity, exposed by second wave feminism as tools of patriarchal control, in an assimilative move, but that is not what appears to be happening here. These gestures take on different meanings when enacted by a queer learning-disabled person. Kennedy questions stereotypes of 'femme' in their monologic narration while applying lipstick, so rather than use lipstick and feminine pose to succumb to these stereotypes, they instead use them as tools to challenge the very understanding of what it means to be femme, in the queer context of their own body.

Butler states that 'the ideal that is mirrored depends on that very mirroring to be sustained as an ideal'⁷⁰¹ if it were to be a contributing factor to one's becoming. Although Kennedy clearly seems to be enjoying this private moment of constructing the self through make-up, by questioning the very limitations and possibilities of

⁷⁰¹ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 14

femme, they are questioning the very idealness of femme. So rather than mirroring a femme ideal, they are working with it to find something more suitable for their own identity. In this process of materialization, which Butler describes as a process of citing the law, but to 'reproduce it differently',⁷⁰² Kennedy is using femininity to rearticulate its power. Kennedy's use of 'femme' in the film directly relates to their questioning the arbitrariness of the term and aligns with their unwillingness to subscribe to a label that connotes a specific way of presenting or expressing oneself, and they search for an identity which is inclusive, diverse and open to change.

It is notable that Kennedy is using the film to muse over the meaning of 'femme' and not 'femininity' in their monologic narration. 'Femininity' would be described by Butler as a citation of a norm or an ideal which has a complex history,⁷⁰³ reminiscent of hooks' 'metaphysical dualism' noted above, but 'femme' has queer contexts so positions Kennedy immediately in a queer dialogue. Ulrika Dahl has written extensively on femme in a lesbian context but I want to consider it in a neuroqueer context. Dahl describes femme as that which 'does not passively wait to come alive through a (male) gaze',⁷⁰⁴ but 'never sits still' and 'is always in relation'.⁷⁰⁵ Dahl quotes Jami Weinstein who argues that femme is a genre rather than a gender⁷⁰⁶ and describes femme as being 'more than a visible declaration of identity' which can also be found in gesture, posture and a gaze.⁷⁰⁷ So femme as queer performativity is here enacted by Kennedy in their gesture of applying make-up and in their passive posture. Kennedy and Hellett represent very different queer femininities, which illustrates Dahl's point that femme is always 'in a state of becoming, emerging from the stories we tell, the artifacts and technologies we employ, the desiring bodies we live, from our citation practices and the representations we make'.⁷⁰⁸ Kennedy and Hellett's femme subjectivities contribute to the expansive understanding of the 'genre' by working at the intersection of queer learning disability, and by offering plural perspectives of such.

⁷⁰² Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 15

⁷⁰³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 232

⁷⁰⁴ Ulrika Dahl in Del Lagrace Volcano and Ulrika Dahl. *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2008, 18

⁷⁰⁵ Dahl, *Femmes of Power*, 20

⁷⁰⁶ Jami Weinstein qtd. in Dahl, *Femmes of Power*, 24

⁷⁰⁷ Dahl, *Femmes of Power*, 23

⁷⁰⁸ Dahl, *Femmes of Power*, 25

It is complex to tease out the nuances of a neuroqueer perspective in the films of Kennedy and Hellett because thematically they predominantly focus on gender rather than disability. The 'neuro' performativity can be seen in *Mrs Sparkle* in the subtle ways Hellett juxtaposes the greyscale 'real' world of Hellett in the street with the technicolour 'dream' world of Mrs Sparkle in the theatre space. This relates more broadly to societal issues in which people with learning disabilities are disproportionately affected by isolation and loneliness.⁷⁰⁹ When Hellett walks the streets, he is alone, but when he is Mrs Sparkle, he has a cheering crowd. Here the outside world is the object. Similarly in *Sparkle*, when narrating his anxieties in the 'Matthew Hellett world', which he describes as a 'struggle', this is later juxtaposed with Hellett speaking of Mrs Sparkle as the one who makes him feel 'fabulous' and that it brings him comfort knowing he has entertained people. Mrs Sparkle therefore acts as the gateway for Hellett's connection with others. Through audiovisual juxtaposition of the Hellett/Sparkle worlds, Hellett powerfully, but subtly, works at this intersection of neuroqueer performativity.

Kennedy's 'neuro' performativity also subtly links in with their gender performativity in the film *Just Me* when placing labels upon their body. Butler and hooks argue that to act performatively, and to construct a radical subjectivity respectively one must work with and within the oppressive forces they oppose, but reinterpret them to rearticulate and reinvent. Kennedy does this expertly in *Just Me* by implicating themselves in the very system of labelling that society has imposed on them to expose the inherent oppression, which disarms its power and rearticulates the meaning. The words included on the labels Kennedy sticks on their body include 'MINORITY', 'GAY', 'LEARNING DIFFICULTIES', 'CROSS DRESS', 'ABLEISM', 'OPENLY ANXIOUS', 'GENDER', 'PIGEON HOLED' and 'I DREAM.' Some labels relate to identificatory words that have either been imposed on Kennedy, such as 'LEARNING DIFFICULTIES', 'CROSS DRESS', 'GAY' and 'PIGEON HOLED', however others such as 'I Dream' are more personal. 'ABLEISM' could represent a direct confrontation to the oppressive force they are challenging in this film and 'I

⁷⁰⁹ "People with learning disabilities disproportionately affected by loneliness," *Learning Disability Today*, 9 Dec 2019

DREAM' may represent a Muñozian futurity in which such labels do not exist. This film is very Foucauldian in that by Kennedy placing these words upon their body in a confrontationally performative way, they are challenging the historical discourse of each label to question the authority such 'knowledge' about Kennedy each category wields.⁷¹⁰ They place the words 'LEARNING DIFFICULTIES' on their body, a category imposed from birth, to seemingly question medical authority and to confront it with achievements which 'defied those odds' such as graduating from college. Even 'GAY', which for many is an embraced identity category, is still, Foucault argues, a loaded discourse with a complex history of pathologisation and categorisation,⁷¹¹ and as discussed in Chapter Four, imbricated in notions of shame. Already discussed is the performative moment in which Kennedy places 'GENDER' upon the left breast which may connote gender expression as emanating from the heart, which echoes Butler ([1990] 1999) who speaks of gender and the soul,⁷¹² but in an intersectional moment of performativity, Kennedy places the label 'PIGEON HOLED' over their eyes (Fig.6.13). This is symbolic of how queer people and people with learning disabilities, and those that live at the intersection of both, are often viewed one dimensionally and are and have been subjected to significant stereotyping. By placing this label over the eyes, the so-called window to the soul, it is as if Kennedy is communicating that to pigeon-hole someone is to not 'see' them, fully, as a whole person.

The extreme close-up shot of this film is suggestive that when you place so many labels on a person (Fig.6.22), this is all you can see. Before the film ends, the camera zooms out and we see Kennedy as more of a whole person rather than as merely a reflection of and reduction to these different labels (Fig:6.23), yet still they are covered in them. This is a motif employed by Hellett in *Sparkle* where extreme close-up and poor focus at times make it difficult to know which body part we are looking at, but when the camera zooms out and the focus is sharper, we 'see' Mrs Sparkle for the first time as a whole person.

⁷¹⁰ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*

⁷¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin, (1976) 2020

⁷¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 184



Fig. 6.22 Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

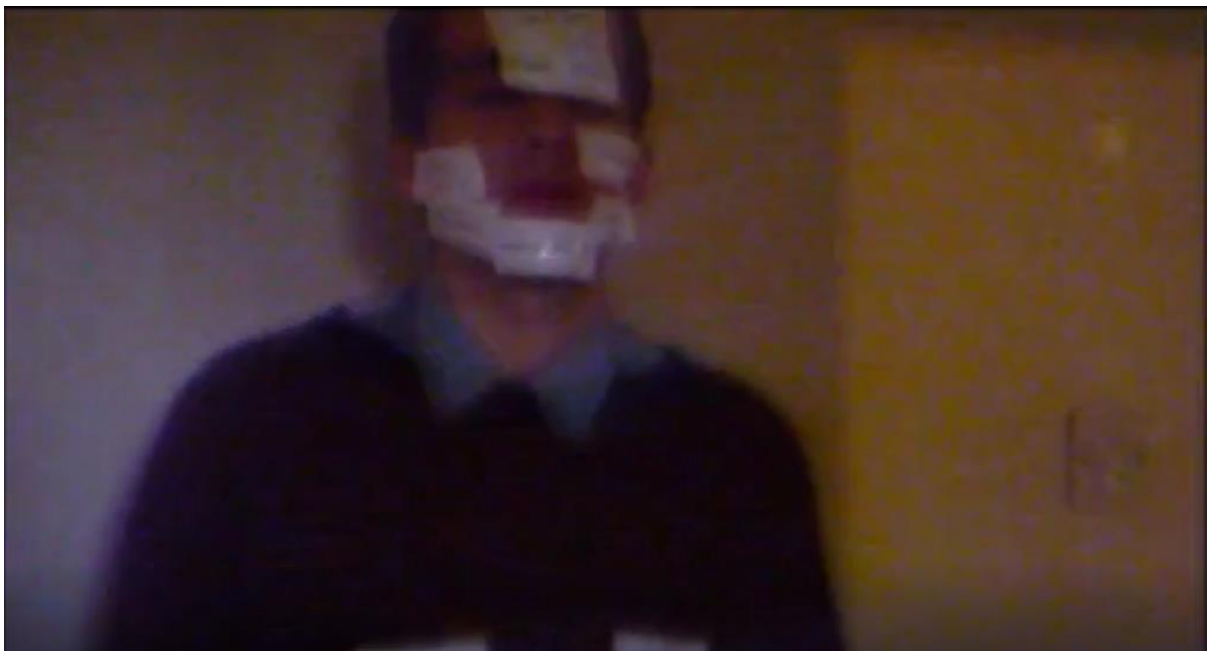


Fig. 6.23: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

Although Butler writes about performativity in the context of sex, gender and sexuality, the theory is applicable to disability *and* the intersection of queerness, particularly in relation to *Just Me* film. Butler argues 'to be *implicated* in the relations

of power, indeed, enabled by the relations of power that the “I” opposes is not, as a consequence, to be reducible to their existing forms’.⁷¹³ So although Kennedy is here creating images which implicate them in the relations of power they oppose (ableism, sexuality, gender, anxiety, being pigeon-holed etc.), they are not reducible to them because they rearticulate them in new ways which challenge and confront. Butler argues that repetition of the ‘terms by which one experiences violation’⁷¹⁴ can risk injury, but also that this repetition can actually ‘work the mobilizing power of injury’ to ‘offer a paradoxical condition whereby a certain agency [...] is derived from the *impossibility of choice*’.⁷¹⁵ Some of these labels have been imposed and some have been reclaimed, but Kennedy is here showing that no matter their own opinion on each identity category, they will be labelled as such by others either way. The choice therefore is ‘impossible’, as Butler phrases it, but there is agency performatively enacted here by using these labels to effectively name and shame, in order to disarm the injury they are able to inflict. Again, this speaks to Sedgwick’s work on shame as detailed in Chapter Four, that Kennedy effectively wears the shameful labels imposed upon them, but by doing so actually shames the society which imposed this, a performative visualisation of the abjection of society I proposed in section 6.3.2. This relates to hooks’ concept of critical spectatorship in that Kennedy is identifying the oppressive power relation, but they are also fabulating a radical subjectivity through neuroqueer performativity to reinvent, become and make oneself anew.

6.5: Conclusion

This chapter answered my third research question which asks how neuroqueer aesthetics are established by Kennedy and Hellett in their becoming performative subjects to transform the image of learning disability. I have demonstrated how Kennedy and Hellett refuse the one-dimensional images of learning disability in mainstream representation by offering new queer ways of seeing and thinking about queerness and learning disability, two identity categories which have not had the space to be combined until recently and particularly on screen until now. By applying hooks’ theory of radical black subjectivity and Honig’s refusal method of fabulation, I

⁷¹³ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 123

⁷¹⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 123

⁷¹⁵ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 124

have argued their films offer the first examples of what a neuroqueer subjectivity looks like which transforms the image of learning disability.

By using queered aesthetics such as transformation, Kennedy and Hellett challenge the notion of normalcy and clarity of perspective. This shows that you cannot 'know' what the neuroqueer experience is without engaging with individuated and multiple examples of subjectivity. By drawing on queer aesthetics of the abject and monstrous-feminine, Kennedy and Hellett expand the concept to become neuroqueer by evoking the historical stereotypical disability imagery outlined in Chapter Two of the monstrous or freak, which is extended to the historical othering of queerness. I have outlined how femininity, queerness *and* disability can be seen as abject and monstrous, but how Kennedy and Hellett can be seen to claim it as agency by aligning their subjectivities with the power that comes with female figures associated with the monstrous such as spinsters, witches and hags and illuminate the overlaps with disability experience. These are not beautiful images of femininity that Kennedy and Hellett create, but they are arresting ones and they speak to the multiple other and the power that is inherent in disarming its symbolic violence by mirroring it back to the camera which created it. The images Kennedy and Hellett create transform the mainstream image of learning disability from the passive and inspirational to the active and confrontational. They use what I called monological narration to question discourses of gender and disability through the performativity of cultural markers of femininity and the literal use of labels to challenge their authority. This performativity asserts Kennedy and Hellett as subjects and establishes their right *to* become subjects.

I have teased out the paradox of a neuroqueer image where the neuro – or learning disability – is inherently invisible. I have drawn on issues of authorship to offer a resolution that emphasises the need to take into account verbal language and biographical information as contributing to the neuro in the neuroqueer images Kennedy and Hellett produce. Wong asserts that 'exploring issues of authorship' within alternative cinema is 'imperative to create a counterpoint with discussions

emergent from mainstream media,⁷¹⁶ a 'tricky and interesting'⁷¹⁷ undertaking as Doty describes it, but an essential one nonetheless.

⁷¹⁶ Wong, "Grassroots authors", 214

⁷¹⁷ Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, 38

Chapter Seven: Expressing and valuing neuroqueer failure through the amateur filmmaking of Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett

Films will soon be made as easily as written poems, and almost as cheaply. They will be made everywhere and by everybody. The empires of professionalism and big budgets are crumbling. – Jonas Mekas⁷¹⁸

7.1: Introduction

The previous chapter discussed Kennedy and Hellett's establishment of a neuroqueer aesthetics to position themselves as performative subjects. The images they create in film transform the image of learning disability and offer new queer narratives and perspectives. Drawing on hooks, it was demonstrated how this kind of transformative action is most often affected at the margins. Being a minority within a minority, Kennedy and Hellett are routinely relegated to the margins of various contexts; their learning disability minoritises them within queer contexts and their queerness minoritises them within learning disability contexts. In non-queer and non-disability contexts, they are thus doubly-othered. Kennedy and Hellett therefore operate at various margins, which this chapter theorises through the lens of amateurism (see Chapter Two). This chapter answers my fourth and final research question which asks, what are the radical affordances of amateurism as an approach to queer learning disability filmmaking?

To the best of my knowledge, Kennedy and Hellett do not make films for monetary gain so, drawing on the literature of amateurism in film reviewed in Chapter Two, can therefore be said to be working within Maya Deren's 'amator' (for love). Their films are the type that are rarely recognised in traditional film histories and represent Zimmerman's underside of commercial film.⁷¹⁹ Kennedy and Hellett's films are located in the everyday, not necessarily only in terms of content, but in the contexts in which they are made. In Kennedy's case this is predominantly the domestic setting, in Hellett's it is a combination of the home and with arts

⁷¹⁸ Jonas Mekas qtd. in Fox, "Rethinking the Amateur," 9

⁷¹⁹ Zimmermann, *Reel Families*, x

organisation Carousel. Drawing on Chalfen's (1982) definitions of amateurism which are centred both on levels of technical skills and use of accessible equipment, and also that the imagery relates to the personal or private sphere, Kennedy and Hellett are engaging in amateur practices by using affordable technology to depict their personal subjectivities. I can more confidently draw on the term amateur for their work when considering Craven's (2009) distinction between the casual amateur and serious amateur, which he relates to access to free time and disposable income, but more specifically mobilising Tepperman's 'advanced amateur'⁷²⁰ which seems most pertinent to Kennedy and Hellett. They both treat amateur filmmaking as a serious artistic pursuit to produce personal, artistic, experimental, and documentary-style filmmaking. They also, like the advanced amateur, undertake pre- and post-production work on their films, as opposed to publishing one-take, unedited filming of the more casual home filmmaker, intended for limited viewing. As analysed in Chapters Four and Six, Kennedy and Hellett have also developed a sophisticated visual vocabulary, and as detailed in Chapter Five, are associated with Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF) and other relevant filmmaking organisations and competitions. All of the above situates Kennedy and Hellett within the realm of amateurism, which they embrace as it allows them to 'fail'. In this chapter I will discuss Kennedy and Hellett's approach to filmmaking as artists.

Borrowing W.E.B. Du Bois' term, Honig describes the *Bacchae* as a text which documents a 'splendid failure'.⁷²¹ The bacchantes refused their maternal objectification (inoperativity), retired to the heterotopia of Cithaeron to rehearse new ways of being (inclination) and returned to Thebes to enact these new subjectivities (fabulation). Their intention was transformation, but things did not work out as expected and ultimately the bacchantes were exiled from the city of Thebes; banished for their actions. As Honig describes it, 'the polis is unprepared to sing the bacchantes' praises'.⁷²² The *Bacchae* is considered a tragedy, but Honig questions whose tragedy is it actually? Traditional interpretations of the story would argue that it is the tragedy of Pentheus who pays with his life, or the bacchantes who pay with exile, and additionally in Agave's case, with the death of her son. Honig offers a

⁷²⁰ Tepperman, "Color Unlimited. Amateur Color Cinema in the 1930s", np

⁷²¹ W.E.B. Du Bois qtd. in Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 5

⁷²² Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 94

counter interpretation of the *Bacchae*, suggesting it is in fact a tragedy of the city that is not ready for the transformative rights the bacchant's claim on their return. Effectively, it is their loss.⁷²³

In contrast to Chapters Four, Five and Six, this analysis chapter does not mobilise Honig's feminist theory of refusal explicitly, but instead takes this idea of a 'splendid failure' as its point of departure. As Honig describes, although the bacchant's presentation of a possible new way of life 'first nurtured outside the city is extinguished', the 'memory of it remains'.⁷²⁴ It is not my intention to speculate on the real-world impact that Kennedy and Hellett's films, and *Queer Freedom* (QF), have had or are having, which at present would be an impossible task to confirm with any certainty. Negative attitudes towards performers such as *Drag Syndrome* both in the US⁷²⁵ (see Chapter Five) and UK⁷²⁶ (see Chapter One), and also the reaction of a passer-by to the Brighton 'Sex Protest' staged by *Stay Up Late*⁷²⁷ (see Chapter One) would suggest there is still some way to go when safeguarding the rights of people at the intersection of queerness and learning disability.

Honig's mentioning of a 'memory' that 'remains' is evocative of the concept I proposed in Chapter Six of a neuroqueer futurity. Honig even argues that although the bacchant's were exiled, their attempt 'may even seed a *future*'⁷²⁸ (my emphasis). Although 'the effort may fail', the return to the city 'is fundamental to a feminist theory of refusal that aims to transform the city, not abandon it'.⁷²⁹ Kennedy and Hellett did not passively give up on the representations they were offered, they actively worked to transform it/'the city'. Honig notes 'the city [...] is a figure for political community [...] an actual city [...] a state [...] a town, a village or a neighbourhood',⁷³⁰ but I want to consider the city more spatially as a field or medium. Through their creative output, Kennedy and Hellett, and QF and the Matthew and Matthew Archive (MMA), are refusing to abandon or lose hope in the possibility that new queer ways of seeing

⁷²³ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 9

⁷²⁴ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 5

⁷²⁵ Jacobs, "Complaint Filed After Door Closes on Drag Performers With Down Syndrome."

⁷²⁶ "Drag queens and kings with Down's syndrome - BBC Stories."

⁷²⁷ Richards, "A manifesto for an ordinary life"

⁷²⁸ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 5

⁷²⁹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 1

⁷³⁰ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 1

learning disability can exist, they propose a neuroqueer futurity, just as the bacchants proposed their own futurity. Kennedy and Hellett may remain at the margins, and thus their reach may be limited, but their work is fundamental to the construction of this new form of self-representation.

Speaking of the *Bacchae*, Honig states that fabulation (or a counter-narrative) 'refuses and interrupts the values of the archive on behalf of the world as it might be',⁷³¹ and it can also be argued that the images created by Kennedy and Hellett, and those platformed by QF, do the same by offering a way of seeing the world as it might be. The MMA literally interrupts the value of the archive by refusing the dictates that learning disability art does not exist and is unworthy of preservation or collection. The visible neuroqueer world they have created is not the world that exists in a mainstream context, but maybe it could.

In her study of failure and performance, Bailes (2011) suggests that the word 'amateur' summons two distinct sets of values; the horizon of what *would* be achieved and that which *is* achieved - 'without both there is no amateurism'.⁷³² Related to Honig's point above about the return to city at least leaving a memory of what could be, amateurism is foundationally built on the idea that it offers a *suggestion* or *possibility*, something that strives, but never quite reaches, or in other words, a type of failure. This failure does not have to be something negative, it can be, as Halberstam argues, queer, or it can be 'splendid' to use Honig's word. Amateurism can also be generative, offering futurity and (Muñozian) hope. If we can consider amateurism in its disruption of normative/professional/mainstream values as abject, it is 'eminently productive'⁷³³ as Kristeva would say.

Section 7.2 draws on primary data collected in an interview with Kennedy and secondary information from Hellett's chapter "Sparkle and Space" to show how each filmmaker situates their own practice within the realm of amateurism. Using the word 'failure' spoken by Kennedy as a further point of departure, this section also relates

⁷³¹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 107

⁷³² Sara J. Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011, 93

⁷³³ Kristeva, *Powers of horror*, 45

amateurism to queer failure and theorises this in the context of DIY filmmaking. Section 7.3 demonstrates the ways in which amateurism is imposed on Kennedy and Hellett in the context of therapeutic attitudes towards disability art and limited access to funding. Section 7.4 highlights the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett embrace the practice and aesthetics of amateurism to assert their agency in filmmaking and to express queer failure through DIY filmmaking techniques as neuroqueer aesthetics. Section 7.5 reflects on the making of *Not Mythmakers* in the context of this enforced and embraced amateurism. It will be shown how social distancing measures resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic forced Kennedy, Lizzie Banks (Carousel) and myself to navigate remote approaches to making the film, whilst embracing all the amateur techniques and technologies available to us to realise the project in the spirit of DIY.

This chapter will conclude by mobilising Ranciere's work on the relationship between aesthetics and political intent to argue how the refusal gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's films can also be found in the amateur and neuroqueer aesthetic of the films. In Chapter Five I argued that Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, curation and archiving practice can be understood as a form of queer visual activism. The majority of literature dealing with visual activism focuses on the content or message of the visual, rather than the aesthetic. This chapter contributes knowledge to the field of amateur film studies by showing that the amateur is not either something enforced upon the untrained filmmaker, or embraced by the trained filmmaker who deliberately untrains for artistic freedom, but that it can be both. Typically, amateur film studies follows the trajectory that people move from amateur to professional or from professional to amateur. Kennedy and Hellett begin at amateur and stay there. There is an extent of polish to the finish of their films as they receive more funding, but their approach remains DIY and they appear to show no intention of pursuing professionalisation. This chapter also contributes further evidence to support my claim that Kennedy and Hellett establish a neuroqueer aesthetics and offers the first theorisation of queer failure in the context of amateur film.

7.2: Ascribing amateurism and embracing failure

The literature reviewed in Chapter One highlighted how debates within amateur film studies are predominantly focused on the distinction between amateurism and

professionalism. I offered the concept of a third type of filmmaker that straddles both sides of the divide by embracing collaborative working practices between both amateur and professional filmmakers. Before I apply this concept to Kennedy and Hellett in section 7.6, I first want to understand how Kennedy and Hellett understand their own practice within the realm of amateurism.

Unfortunately I was unable to ask Hellett directly how he felt about the term amateur but I spoke at length with Kennedy about their views on the word during an interview. Kennedy stated that the word amateur 'suits me just fine [...] I like the term [...] there's no expectations [...] being an amateur you're making your way out of nothingness [...] and trying to make something, no matter what the cost'.⁷³⁴ This quotation is reminiscent of the popular African American expression 'making a way out of no way', meaning to do something that seems impossible or to forge a path from scratch. For Kennedy, amateurism is freeing, or a relief from pressure and expectation and it represents an opportunity for them to make something from 'nothing', when opportunities to be involved in filmmaking are extremely limited (to be expanded upon in the following section).

Kennedy commented that even within the arts community, they find there is a 'constant striving for professionalism' or 'sheer perfection' which they state they 'don't have any of that'. 'I am professional as a person,' Kennedy explains, 'I work well with people, but as a filmmaker, my filmmaking skills are amateur'.⁷³⁵ I will return to these 'filmmaking skills' in the following section, but this relates back to what Kennedy noted above about making something no matter what the cost, that just making something is more important than striving for that something to be polished. It is evocative of Chalfen's point that the technical sophistication of amateur filmmaking is less significant than the use of imagery.⁷³⁶ As Kennedy joked when reflecting on their early films, 'they were really, really amateurish. Not that I'm being mean towards myself, but a ten-year-old could have made those - a highly artistic ten-year-old - but it was about that outsider-ness and just picking up a camcorder

⁷³⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷³⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷³⁶ Chalfen, "Home Movies as Cultural Documents," 127

and seeing what you can do'.⁷³⁷ So for Kennedy the intent behind the image and the artistic expression is also more significant than the finish. Fox notes how the amateur format therefore 'provides a point of engagement' whereby private images can become 'a matter of public discourse' which extends the means of image production to those typically excluded from representational practices and meaning-making.⁷³⁸

Kennedy quotes Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector who, when asked in an interview when did she become a 'professional writer', rebuffed the question, insisting she was an amateur and she intended to remain so - she writes when she wants to write, whereas a professional must write all the time.⁷³⁹ This echoes Kennedy's point that amateurism is free from expectation and pressure to perform. 'If Clarice bloody Lispector can see herself as an amateur', Kennedy states, 'then you know what, maybe I can see myself as one too and not feel any shame over it [...] I started from the ground up so why would I feel any shame in the first place?'⁷⁴⁰ They again use the word shame when explaining how 'being an amateur gives me permission to fail and to not feel ashamed about it'.⁷⁴¹ I have considered the concept of shame in queer contexts in Chapters Four and Six, but shame here seems to relate to traditional understandings of amateurism and its status as being somehow lesser or subpar in quality. Although Kennedy has clearly embraced the freedom of amateurism, this use of the word shame suggests there is still a lingering residue of its status as somehow inferior to its 'professional' counterpart, or the 'apologetic ring' of amateurism of which Deren speaks.⁷⁴²

Of interest is Kennedy's association of the word 'fail' to the context of amateurism, and it is notable that Hellett has also used this word when discussing over-protective attitudes towards people with learning disabilities in the context of making art; 'We haven't been allowed to "fail" or sometimes even to "have a go"'.⁷⁴³ While not explicitly referring to engaging in amateur creativity, this note about wanting to at least 'have a go' would suggest this is a wish to make the first steps

⁷³⁷ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷³⁸ Fox, "Rethinking the Amateur," 13

⁷³⁹ Mattie Kennedy paraphrasing Clarice Lispector, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁴⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁴¹ Kennedy interview 1s

⁷⁴² Deren, "Amateur vs Professional."

⁷⁴³ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 178

towards something, a testing ground for experimentation. We can think of this as an amateur approach in its distance from the professional or expert who is beyond the point of 'having a go' and would be considered to have a certain level of proficiency. In our interview Kennedy discussed the concept failure in more detail,

I come from a completely DIY perspective so why would I feel ashamed of failure [...] being an amateur is all about embracing that failure [...] you're still an artist [...] there may be some glimmers of success; take them on as well, but don't push out the failure. [...] I don't put expectations on myself [...] I don't set a bar [...] it's not a competition for me.⁷⁴⁴

Failure is ultimately a subjective gauge which is dependent upon any one person's definition of success. For some success could be monetary gain, for others it could be the esteem of their peers. Based on comments made about who they intend their films to be for, as discussed in previous chapters, I noted that it appears as though Kennedy wants to stay firmly within the realm of the amateur. Kennedy responded by rhetorically asking why would they want to enter, say, Hollywood anyway?: 'As soon as you enter that space, there's expectations immediately, and I don't want that [...] I find it quite repulsive [...] I want to stay in my own little lane and be left the hell alone'.⁷⁴⁵ Kennedy explicitly refers to the pressures that come with professional film standards and commercial success and inadvertently alludes to Deren's promotion of amateurism as freeing from such expectation and creative restraint.⁷⁴⁶ Stalp and Winge (2017) explored DIY handcrafters who work with fibres and textiles to examine the importance of 'failure' to their practice and how it fits into the creative process. This also links to the wider 'appeal' of a crafted 'object' in that the more amateur it appears, the more authentic and relatable it is perceived to be.⁷⁴⁷ Kennedy's amateurism allows them to be left alone, to be in their 'own little lane' like the 'lone worker'⁷⁴⁸ who does not work with profit in mind, as described by Shand.

⁷⁴⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁴⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁴⁶ Deren, "Amateur vs Professional."

⁷⁴⁷ Luoma-aho et al, "Primed Authenticity," 352

⁷⁴⁸ Shand, "Introduction," 1

Bailes states ‘the figure of the amateur [...] is always already bound up with the notion of failure’ in the sense that for many people, amateur means ‘doing something badly whilst trying to do it well’.⁷⁴⁹ She highlights how ‘increasingly a discourse of failure in art practice’ has mapped a countercultural route for alternative critical articulation which challenges this conventional way of seeing amateurism, and instead theorises failure as ‘inclusive’ because ‘one of its most radical properties is that it operates through a principle of difference rather than sameness’.⁷⁵⁰ If success is poised, rational and articulate, failure is ‘messier,’ ‘undisciplined’ and ‘seeks to redefine’.⁷⁵¹ Bailes writes in the context of theatre performance but she notes that essentially all artists and artistic representations are failures because they always inevitably fail to accurately reflect what they intend.⁷⁵² Ultimately Bailes suggests all constructed images are just failed representations.

If the amateur is always already bound up with the notion of failure, then what of the queer learning-disabled amateur creative? In his extensive theorisation of queer failure, Halberstam notes that ‘failing is something queers do and have always done’⁷⁵³ in that they are failed cisheteronormative people from the perspective of cisheteronormative society. If queer people fail at compulsory cisheterosexuality, can it also be said that disabled people fail at compulsory able-bodiedness?⁷⁵⁴ Hargrave suggests that ‘many of our cultural definitions of professional are tied up with the term performance, a “pro”’, which itself is connected to ideas such as a dependable and reliable or seasoned performance/performer. Such terms, Hargrave notes are in stark contrast to *Encarta World’s* definition of disability which describes it as someone ‘incapable of performing or functioning’ along with a widespread ‘ideological system that perpetuates the notion of learning disabled persons as inherently unproductive’.⁷⁵⁵ From this position then, the learning-disabled performer becomes an oxymoron because they are apparently incapable of performing, meaning, presumably, any attempt to do so would result in failure.

⁷⁴⁹ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 93

⁷⁵⁰ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 2

⁷⁵¹ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 2

⁷⁵² Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 12

⁷⁵³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011,3

⁷⁵⁴ McRuer, *Crip Theory*

⁷⁵⁵ Matt Hargrave, *Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad, or Plain Ugly?* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 218

In queer studies, failure applies to a refusal of heteronormativity in that it represents nonconformity, it is anticapitalist and embraces non-reproductive lifestyles. For Halberstam, queer failure applies to those who ‘continue to search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer market’.⁷⁵⁶ This is also the basis for crip theory but interestingly this economic distinction Halberstam raises relates to debates above over the amateur/professional divide. Halberstam only uses the word amateur once in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), but the connection between amateurism and failure is clear: if the successful or professional (filmmaker) is one that thrives within the structures of the liberal consumer market, then the failure, or amateur (filmmaker), is the one that operates outside these structures.

Adapted from the work of Stuart Hall, Halberstam draws on what he terms *low theory*, which ‘tries to locate all the inbetween spaces’ that resist hegemony. Failure is a way of looking for alternatives, and low theory acknowledges that alternatives belong in the ‘realm of critique and refusal’,⁷⁵⁷ a realm which has been analysed extensively in the previous three chapters in relation to the filmmaking of Kennedy and Hellett, as read with Honig. Drawing on Gramsci’s ‘counterhegemony’, Halberstam theorises failure as ‘the production and circulation of another competing set of ideas’ and notes that the ‘literature on hegemony has attributed so much power to it that it has seemed impossible to imagine counterhegemonic options’.⁷⁵⁸ Queer failure can thus be interpreted as the site of agency, where marginal identities offer new ways of being like the ones Kennedy and Hellett offer through film, and just as the bacchantes offered on Cithaeron. Like the counter-narrative produced through fabulation analysed in Chapter Six, their films operate as counterhegemonic ideas about the queer subjectivities of learning-disabled people.

Both Bailes⁷⁵⁹ and Halberstam also make use of the term ‘undisciplined’ to argue that the realm of failure operates outside traditional zones of knowledge.⁷⁶⁰ Failure is undisciplined not in the sense of being chaotic, but in the Foucauldian

⁷⁵⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2

⁷⁵⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2

⁷⁵⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 17

⁷⁵⁹ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 54.

⁷⁶⁰ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 18

approach, as in there is no set discipline to which its manifestation can be attributed. Failure represents 'local practices'⁷⁶¹ or a 'hidden history'⁷⁶² which may not be as profitable as more official, disciplined forms of knowledge, but instead offers 'ways of being and knowing that stand outside of conventional understandings of success'.⁷⁶³ For Halberstam, following Foucault, failure is to escape the 'punishing norms that discipline behaviour'.⁷⁶⁴ Rather than taking too much care to try to pin down a specific understanding of the type of amateurism I see Kennedy and Hellett as working within, I want to think of amateurism more broadly as a way of thinking which allows the freedom to fail and to operate outside of profit-making.

'Queer failure is an 'oppositional tool'⁷⁶⁵ to begin a process of 'undoing' and 'unbecoming',⁷⁶⁶ Halberstam notes. The process of rethinking queer politics involves 'embracing the incoherent'⁷⁶⁷ or 'unintelligibility' which for Halberstam offers an escape.⁷⁶⁸ Bailes calls this the site of the 'indeterminate'⁷⁶⁹ and relatedly, disability performance studies scholar Koppers (2017) offers the concept of 'unknowability' as a political tool to work with ambiguity'⁷⁷⁰ (discussed in Chapter Four in the context of queer doubles). For Halberstam, a theory of queer failure calls for other modes of engagement and for 'more questions and fewer answers'.⁷⁷¹ Kennedy and Hellett's films have certainly raised more questions than answers, but the tensions and paradoxes of both content and technique in their work that I have teased out in the previous three chapters can be understood as type of failure itself, the viewer is ultimately left indeterminate. 'Under certain circumstances,' Halberstam notes, failing [...] may in fact offer more creative, cooperative [...] ways of being'⁷⁷² and 'different rewards'.⁷⁷³ These rewards can be new ways of seeing learning-disabled people who have traditionally been represented on screen as two-dimensional characters

⁷⁶¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 9

⁷⁶² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88

⁷⁶³ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2

⁷⁶⁴ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3

⁷⁶⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88

⁷⁶⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 4

⁷⁶⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 148

⁷⁶⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 10

⁷⁶⁹ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 2

⁷⁷⁰ Koppers, *Theatre and Disability*, 51

⁷⁷¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 10

⁷⁷² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3

⁷⁷³ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3

used metaphorically to further plotlines, but which now are represented in new queer and unintelligible ways, foregrounding their ‘psychic complexity’, to quote Ruti (2017).⁷⁷⁴

The most striking paradox for someone like myself looking in to Kennedy and Hellett’s filmmaking community is the apparent tension Kennedy raises between wanting to on the one hand put themselves in the frame to make an intervention into learning disability representation, and on the other hand the idea that they are a ‘nobody’. Kennedy asserted in our interview that they do not want to ‘have to set an example’ or to ‘be the exception’ because ‘I don’t see myself as a prestigious filmmaker, I don’t see myself as a somebody, I see myself as a nobody, I’m an outsider’.⁷⁷⁵ They believe that being an amateur and being an outsider goes hand-in-hand.⁷⁷⁶ The tension Kennedy raises is suggestive of the common assertion that disabled people are simultaneously invisible in that they are reduced to ubiquitous imagery, and hyper-visible in that they are conspicuous by their differing from the norm. Kennedy refuses either by embracing this position of nobody or outsider.

As part of his queer theory of failure, Halberstam confronts this process of opting out, or ‘unbeing’, by drawing on the work of novelist Jamaica Kincaid who writes colonised subjects who literally refuse their role as colonised ‘by refusing to be anything at all’.⁷⁷⁷ Ruti explores the concept of queer opting out in more detail and notes that while this refusal has always been a significant trope within queer theory, the twenty-first century has seen an escalation of this opting out which has caused a divide between those activists who aim for full social inclusion and those who see such efforts as normalisation and a ‘betrayal of queer politics’.⁷⁷⁸ I will return to this subject in Chapter Eight in the context of the politics of visibility, but for the purposes of this chapter I will now focus on Ruti’s understanding of queer opting-out in relation to Kennedy’s comments above, which is underpinned by this concept of queer negativity, of which queer failure is a large aspect. Queer negativity stands in

⁷⁷⁴ Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects*, Columbia University Press, 2017, 8

⁷⁷⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁷⁶ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁷⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 131

⁷⁷⁸ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 1

opposition to positivity, achievement, success and the idea that things will get better. Instead, queer negativity focuses on accounts of self-destruction, failure, melancholia, loneliness, isolation and shame etc.⁷⁷⁹ Ruti notes that queer theory's stance of negativity 'offers a resounding No!' to 'the sugarcoating and depoliticization of life, including queer life'.⁷⁸⁰ However, they offer a compelling critique of Halberstam's queer failure which Ruti describes as generating,

discomfort insofar as it gives the impression of being articulated from the perspective of someone who has already succeeded. I suspect that, unlike Halberstam—whose academic reputation has merely been solidified by the rapid entry of *The Queer Art of Failure* into the queer theoretical canon—those who have been severely marginalized are unlikely to experience their failures as anything other than failures and even more unlikely to be interested in further failure in the name of radical politics; those who have genuinely failed in relation to our society's dominant happiness scripts are unlikely to experience their failure as a sexy political stance. My sense is that the vast majority of those who "fail"—underperform in school, cannot secure employment, work at jobs that no one associates with success, or cut themselves in a desperate effort to bypass dominant beauty ideals, for instance—do so not out of choice but because they, precisely, feel like they do not have a choice. As a consequence, Halberstam's argument raises serious questions about who can afford to "opt out" in the ways that he advocates.⁷⁸¹ [...] From this point of view, the valorization of failure results in depoliticization: if failure is just as good—nay, better—than success, then there does not seem to be much point to agitating for social change of any kind.⁷⁸²

I have quoted Ruti at length as they raise significant points about the pitfalls of glamorising failure as total subversion which completely ignores the material realities for those whom failure is not an artistic choice but an inevitability. This relates to

⁷⁷⁹ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 2

⁷⁸⁰ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 3

⁷⁸¹ Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 35-36

⁷⁸² Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 37

Zimmerman's discussions on amateur filmmaking and the complexities of social and economic factors which contribute to its distinction from professional filmmaking and thus requiring analysis beyond (but inclusive of) the aesthetic. Ruti's quote above is helpful when thinking about the crux of the tension I have teased out from Kennedy's status as a nobody filmmaker. In section 7.4 I challenge Ruti by showing how Kennedy and Hellett do not appear to be 'uninterested in further failure', as Ruti suggests, but actually welcome it due to the freedoms and experimentation it allows.

The following section will detail how failure is also something which is enforced upon both Kennedy and Hellett for various political and economic reasons. Kennedy and Hellett are not the type of avant-garde or experimental filmmaker with formal training who 'unlearn' their mastery in the pursuit of ultimate creativity, they are operating within restrictive modes of production which have created barriers to their attaining any mastery at all and their avant-garde approach is precisely because of their outsider status. Kennedy and Hellett never had the choice to opt into amateurism - like Kennedy noted, they are making their way *out* of nothingness.

7.3: Amateurism imposed:

Building on the subject of queer failure outlined in the previous section, this section will outline the ways in which filmmakers with learning disabilities are effectively forced into amateurism, as opposed to experimental filmmakers who co-opt it as an aesthetic or radical strategy. Writer Kenny Fries notes that 'the first thing a disabled culture is based on is access',⁷⁸³ and Irish disabled artist Mary Duffy believes 'disabled people very often don't get the opportunity to talk back [...] you're not supposed to talk back'.⁷⁸⁴ Just as Kennedy discussed in the previous chapter that they are 'just one piece of the puzzle', Jackson (2013) notes that 'for every story that sees the light of day, untold others remain in the shadows'.⁷⁸⁵

Carousel describe how funding cuts to UK support services have resulted in people with learning disabilities 'facing greater isolation and alienation than ever

⁷⁸³ "Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back." David Mitchell. YouTube. Web. 28 Aug 2013.

⁷⁸⁴ "Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back"

⁷⁸⁵ Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt* (second edition) 3.3, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013, np

before,' demonstrating a wish on their part to make an intervention to bring learning disabled creatives together.⁷⁸⁶ In *Just Me* (2013) Kennedy speaks of such 'alienation' and similarly reflects in one of our interviews how they had all but given up hope of getting a 'foot through' in the filmmaking world in 2015, having not long received the crushing blow that the one learning disability arts organisation in Glasgow had had its funding pulled, mid-project. This lack of access to funding raises questions over the value of learning disability creativity and relates to the infantilisation of learning-disabled people, and particularly so in mainstream art circuits. It also relates more broadly to the intersectional issue of class and how filmmakers such as Kennedy face barriers related to socio-economical differences, themselves linked to regional differences, which prevent them making their work and engaging with their community. This differs to Hellett's experience of living in Brighton which boasts a multitude of learning disability arts organisations. This adds nuance to intersectional understandings of Kennedy and Hellett as white filmmakers and brings to light how regional - and the resulting socio-economic - differences equate to vastly different experiences of being filmmakers.

Disability artists are often funded through therapeutic and health agendas which Hadley (2014) argues ignores the experimental, artistic and political possibilities of their work. This is a view echoed by Hargrave who regards 'the relationship between art and therapy as highly contentious, since it has, in the case of learning-disabled people, conflated the creative drive with sickness and reinforced a view of such persons as inherently in need of rehabilitation'.⁷⁸⁷ Mitchell and Snyder note how disabilities have historically been narrated as individual and private concerns which have been 'banished to the closets or attics of houses or institutions'⁷⁸⁸ and they assert that the danger of such a narrative of disability has resulted in the isolation of people with disabilities from public view outside of a medical discourse. Reflecting on the obstacles they themselves faced when trying to complete their own short film (*VITAL SIGNS: Crip Culture Talks Back*, 1998), Mitchell and Snyder explain finding themselves in a catch-22 scenario when securing funding to complete the film; the subject matter was considered not rehabilitative or

⁷⁸⁶ "About Us," *Carousel*, [nd]

⁷⁸⁷ Hargrave, *Theatres of Learning Disability*, 35

⁷⁸⁸ Mitchell and Snyder, "Talking About Talking Back," 203

practically applicable to the lives of disabled people by disability funders, and, likewise, filmmaking and arts funders did not recognise disability subjects as in line with the goals of experimental filmmaking of the time.⁷⁸⁹

In an interview with Kennedy, I asked their opinion on the assumption that learning disability art is always in some way ‘therapeutic,’ to which they responded, ‘it’s the way it’s framed [...] it’s an isolated term for specific communities, like the learning disability community or just the disabled community in general, I don’t like it [...] it smacks of condescension to me [...] We’re allowed to express ourselves without having those terms pinned on us’⁷⁹⁰ Hellett takes a similar position and recounts being questioned on his filmmaking at a conference where he was directly asked if he worked on arts projects for therapy. ‘This attitude makes me so angry’, Hellett states, ‘It’s not therapy – it’s art [...] People think that if we “do art,” it’s at a day centre and it’s something to keep ourselves busy with or it’s some sort of healing or wellbeing treatment. I think it’s stereotyping again’⁷⁹¹ Hellett wanted to change this,

Maybe our work isn’t seen as good quality because we’re often given opportunities under venues’ “education” or “outreach” programmes. We’re not engaged as “quality” or “professional” artists. Lots of learning disability arts organisations are known for putting on very high-quality projects. But there are hardly any named, individual learning-disabled artists who have a reputation under their own names.⁷⁹²

Access to funding is one barrier to learning disabled people engaging in filmmaking, but training and technological proficiency is another. Fox suggests that the increase of desktop editing suites makes filmmaking accessible to amateurs for the first time and that the difference between amateur and professional is only a matter of hard drive space.⁷⁹³ While theoretically correct that accessible technology has democratised filmmaking to an extent, Fox’s comments do not take into

⁷⁸⁹ Mitchell and Snyder, “Talking About Talking Back,” 214

⁷⁹⁰ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁹¹ Hellett, “Sparkle and Space,” 178

⁷⁹² Hellett, “Sparkle and Space,” 178

⁷⁹³ Fox, “Rethinking the Amateur,” 14

consideration the fact that people require training or basic levels of computer literacy in order to make the most of such technological advancements, not to mention the funds required to purchase them. Such limited access to funding and skills development operates as part of an ableist discourse which sets the parameters of inclusion and designates the space in which artists with learning disabilities can engage; namely the amateur, or not-professional.

Both Kennedy and Hellett have received no formal training in filmmaking. Kennedy graduated college with a radio production qualification which equipped them with audio editing skills. Making the best use of what was available to them at the time, their first two films *What is Femme Anyway?* and *Just Me* were shot in one take with camera operation being undertaken by Kennedy's twin brother, under their direction. The only post-production work undertaken was done on 'a really crappy version of Windows Movie Maker' which came as a free 'basic starter version' on their Netbook.⁷⁹⁴ Using audio software they had trained on in college, Kennedy was able to layer the narration over the one-take visuals. Aside from Hellett's first film *Cooking With Matthew*, which was made with technical assistance from a support worker, all his films have been made with technical support by Carousel. When it came to making *Not Mythmakers* as a remote collaborative project between Kennedy, Banks and myself, Kennedy relied on Banks to edit together the separate video files we both sent her.

Halberstam notes that 'training of any kind [...] is a way of refusing a kind of Benjaminian relation to knowing, a stroll down unchartered streets in the "wrong" direction'.⁷⁹⁵ Training is therefore about knowing the set path and sticking to it, but Halberstam notes 'the goal is to lose one's way'.⁷⁹⁶ Drawing on Foucault, he argues we actually have to *untrain* ourselves (my emphasis) in order to understand and experience different ways of knowing.⁷⁹⁷ This general comment by Halberstam can be applied more specifically when considering experimental filmmakers like Derek Jarman and Maya Deren who have deliberately untrained their minds and embraced

⁷⁹⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.

⁷⁹⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 6

⁷⁹⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 6

⁷⁹⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 11

amateur practices in a refusal of convention. Bailes' research into amateurism, though in a theatrical context, is based entirely on this type of *untrained*, deliberately amateur performer.⁷⁹⁸ Hargrave calls these 'professional amateurs' and distinguishes them from the 'amateur professional' performers of his own research into learning disability theatre.⁷⁹⁹ As Halberstam suggests, the 'refusal of mastery' is a type of amateur failure,⁸⁰⁰ or 'a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline as a form of critique'.⁸⁰¹ This refusal of mastery can be seen in Kennedy and Hellett's films through their embracing of the amateur technologies and approaches to filmmaking available to them and the resulting lo-fi aesthetics of the films. But unlike experimental filmmakers such as Jarman and Deren, their refusal of mastery is not a process of unlearning.

Ruti has interpreted Halberstam's comments as a glorification of not bothering to learn in the first place, but Halberstam's intention I believe was related to a refusal to be bound by convention or acknowledgement of a canon. Neither Halberstam nor Ruti account for people for whom this is not a choice. Ruti acknowledges the privilege in Halberstam's writing, and also acknowledges the issue of choice in the sense that some people do not have the choice *not* to learn, such as immigrants seeking work in a country whose language is not their own. Kennedy and Hellett's positions are different in that they are making art with the means that are available to them. Their lack of training is not a choice to unlearn or a deliberate aesthetic consideration, but a material reality which they are working around and within, but it appears to represent a refusal all the same.

While not wanting to dismiss the material barriers which contribute to marginalisation of filmmakers such as Kennedy and Hellett, the main aim of this research project is to highlight the agency and ingenuity Kennedy and Hellett demonstrate through their practice as both filmmakers and curator/archivist in *spite* of such barriers. The following section shows how, despite the limitations detailed above, Kennedy and Hellett make their way 'out of nothingness' by drawing upon

⁷⁹⁸ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*.

⁷⁹⁹ Hargrave, *Theatres of Learning Disability*, 220

⁸⁰⁰ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 11

⁸⁰¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88

amateur techniques, approaches and aesthetics to represent their radical neuroqueer subjectivities.

7.4: Amateurism embraced: “DIY or die”

Reflecting on making their first films, Kennedy recalls feeling unwilling to wait around until someone offered them a professional camera or they found the means to access one. ‘I’m getting off my butt and getting down to Toys R Us and getting myself a twenty quid camcorder’⁸⁰² Kennedy recounted, using the last of their funds after graduating from college. They opted for a hot pink, ‘plastic’⁸⁰³ Vivitar digital video camera from the children’s toy chain in c.2013 and used it to make their first two films, *What is Femme Anyway?* and *Just Me*. Fig.7.1 shows Kennedy holding their camera, which is now held in the MMA as a relic of their filmmaking history. When I asked why they used the word ‘toy’ to describe the camera, Kennedy explained, ‘maybe that’s a term that I’ve attached to it myself [...] it doesn’t look like a camcorder that a professional filmmaker uses, it’s so tiny, the size of it, and that’s probably why I call it a toy camcorder [...] it’s a camcorder that a five or six year old could use. The quality on it is not good, hence why it was so cheap’.⁸⁰⁴

Kennedy describes having to take ‘alternative avenues’ due to limited funds, which they explain is ‘another issue for marginalised people, particularly learning-disabled filmmakers who [...] don’t have the finances, mainly because they come from working class backgrounds and that being a massive, massive barrier’. Kennedy spoke about the lack of learning disability arts organisations in Scotland, as compared to England, and spoke of how they are trying to get by with what they can access, ‘using the tools that we give ourselves to make something’. Rather than thinking ‘I don’t have a state-of-the-art camcorder, or I don’t have the right set-up, I don’t have the contacts, I don’t have the backing’, they instead approach the situation with the rhetorical attitude of ‘who cares? I certainly don’t [...] you just have to persevere’.⁸⁰⁵

⁸⁰² “Matthew and Matthew in Conversation.”

⁸⁰³ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1.

⁸⁰⁴ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1

⁸⁰⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1



Fig.7.1: Photograph of Kennedy holding their 'toy camera.' *Instagram*. 2016

Kennedy's use of a 'toy' camera is evocative of US artist Sadie Benning whose short films shot in their teenage bedroom were made on what Fox describes as 'the most amateur of technologies',⁸⁰⁶ a Fisher-Price PXL-2000 which records to an audiocassette format known as Pixelvision, characterised by its low-resolution, black-and-white and grainy effect.⁸⁰⁷ The similarities of Kennedy to Benning also extend to the amateur approach to the filmmaking process, with both lacking in any formal editing training, meaning Benning edited the films within the camera itself due to lack of an editing deck.⁸⁰⁸ The aesthetic similarities of their work is also striking, with both drawing upon queer gender and sexuality as themes underpinning their autobiographical films, shot in the domestic space with the use of handwriting and cut-and-paste aesthetics (Fig.7.2). Both use extreme close-up shots (Fig.7.3) which I explored in both Chapters Four and Six as a queer aesthetic that challenges normalcy and a well-adjusted perspective as a socially constructed concept. The low

⁸⁰⁶ Fox, "Rethinking the Amateur," 12

⁸⁰⁷ Claire Fox and Nicole Martin, "Preserving Pixelvision: Image Vulnerability and the Early Video Works of Sadie Benning," *Feminist Media Histories* 7.1 (2021), 40

⁸⁰⁸ Fox and Martin, "Preserving Pixelvision," 43

resolution of Benning and Kennedy's (early) films also challenges this concept and what is also considered 'good' or 'bad' 'quality' film. In terms of content, similarities can also be drawn. Kennedy used their first two films as a means to explore their gender identity and ableism, and Fox and Martin note how 'Benning was coming to terms with the harsh realities of the world around them and searched for a way to connect and communicate with others', which they did through the exploration of the racism they had witnessed in their neighbourhood.⁸⁰⁹ I asked Kennedy if they had been inspired by Benning's work, but they were unaware of Benning until a fellow artist pointed out the similarities some years after the making of Kennedy's first films. Fox and Martin describe Benning as having 'created a visual language to express their internal feelings and observations', which 'in doing so, they built a bridge to queer community, attracted new audiences for video art, and elevated Pixelvision from a toy media format to an art form'.⁸¹⁰ Kennedy has also achieved their own visual language which the rest of this chapter will analyse in more detail and as highlighted in Chapter Five, has built a bridge to a *neuroqueer* community through their association with QF.

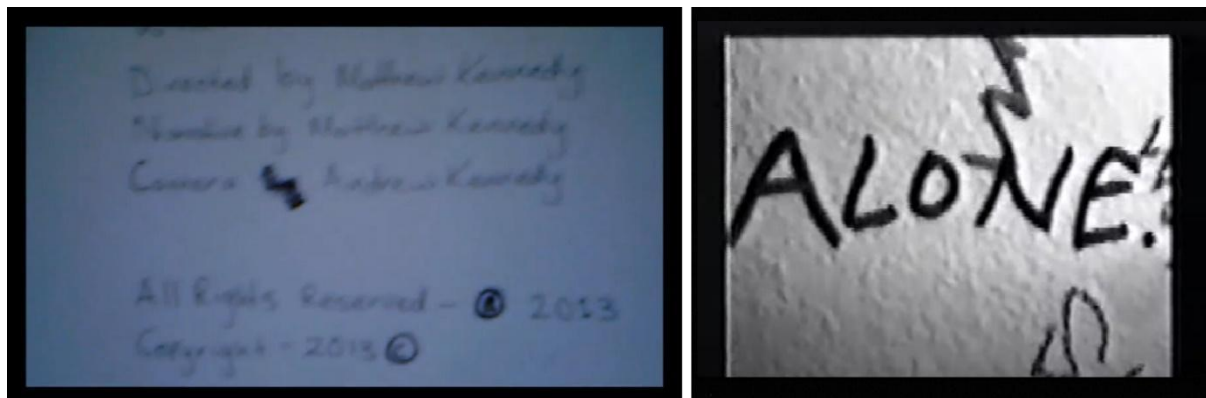


Fig.7.2: Comparative screenshots. Left: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo. Right: Still from *A Place Called Lovely*, Sadie Benning. 1991. YouTube

⁸⁰⁹ Fox and Martin, "Preserving Pixelvision," 49

⁸¹⁰ Fox and Martin, "Preserving Pixelvision," 41



Fig.7.3: Comparative screenshots. Left: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo. Right: Still from *If Every Girl Had a Diary*. Sadie Benning. 1990. Smithsonian American Art Museum

When Hellett moved into his own flat in 2006, like Kennedy (and Benning), he also made his first film in the domestic space. Having mentioned to his support worker that he wanted to do something creative, they decided to make a spoof cookery film called *Cooking With Matthew*. With technical and storyboarding assistance from the support worker, Hellett developed the film which led him to become involved with Carousel.⁸¹¹ I was unable to ascertain the type of camera Hellett used for this film, but the quality of the image (Fig.7.4), while clearer than Kennedy's, but while also better-lit which would automatically produce a clearer image, would suggest that it was also an inexpensive camera accessible to a modest budget.

⁸¹¹ Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 171



Fig.7.4: Still from *Cooking with Matthew*. Matthew Hellett. 2006. YouTube

Hellett explains that he had no previous experience of making a film and no expression of art or drama through school or college. Recounting a college Christmas play where he dressed up 'like a blinking shepherd', Hellett asked himself, 'is this your best art form for the whole twelve bloody months?'⁸¹² Kennedy reflected a similar position, going to 'special needs schools' where there weren't really any facilities and an attitude of 'we don't do that or we don't have that sort of thing', which Kennedy noted 'can be quite discouraging sometimes'.⁸¹³ Koppers notes how as much of the mainstream has historically been inaccessible to many disabled people, either due to physical, sensory or economic barriers, or barriers in the social imagination which do not conceive as disabled people as citizens, much of disability artistic expression happens on the margins or edges, either in solo performances and in 'off-beat spaces'.⁸¹⁴ Reflecting on this alternative approach to filmmaking, which relates more broadly to matters of access discussed in the previous section, Kennedy notes, that 'coming from a working class background, hardly having any money, you have to grab what you have to grab, work with what you have', thereby

⁸¹² "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright."

⁸¹³ "Disability And...Film with Oska Bright."

⁸¹⁴ Koppers, *Theatre and Disability*, 49

making the most of these 'alternative avenues' due to financial constraints.⁸¹⁵ Kennedy was not prepared to let a lack of training or equipment prevent them from expressing their creative impulses, and asserted an attitude of 'get off your backside and do it yourself, don't wait for anybody. "DIY or die," they say'.⁸¹⁶ Zimmermann explains that amateur filmmaking 'poses a threat to more dominant visualities' because it is multiple and heteroglossic and because it 'forms a significant site of cultural struggle over who has power to create media and to enter into representation'.⁸¹⁷ This argument of taking matters of representation into hand has been explored in various ways throughout the previous three chapters, but broadly speaking, Kennedy and Hellett mobilise amateurism to refuse the exclusion of learning-disabled people from representational practices.

Like the impossible task of trying to define amateurism, Atkinson (2006) recounts similar issues when attempting to define DIY,⁸¹⁸ but describes it as the 'antithesis' of 'professional' design and as 'a more democratic design process of self-driven, self-directed amateur design and production activity'.⁸¹⁹ Like amateurism then, DIY is defined by what it is not, and it again relates to its distance from the professional realm. Additionally, Atkinson also focuses on the DIY/professional distinction as being an economic one: 'DIY has arguably acted as a leveller of class, overcoming the social stigma of manual labour out of sheer necessity, and permitting the working classes to engage in leisure activities from which they were previously excluded'.⁸²⁰ Echoing Hargrave's model of the amateur professional and professional amateur, Atkinson notes how DIY is carried out for either personal fulfilment or by necessity',⁸²¹ and, echoing Deren, notes that whether through need or desire, DIY allows designers to 'express a more individual aesthetic unbounded by the strictures of mass-production and passive consumption'.⁸²² The parallels between amateurism

⁸¹⁵ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1.

⁸¹⁶ Kennedy, "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation."

⁸¹⁷ Patricia R. Zimmermann, "Morphing History into Histories: From Amateur Film to the Archive to the Future," Ed. Karen L. Ishizuk and Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2008, 277

⁸¹⁸ Paul Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," *Journal of Design History* 19.1 (2006): 1-2.

⁸¹⁹ Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," 1.

⁸²⁰ Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," 1.

⁸²¹ Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," 2.

⁸²² Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," 1.

and DIY are clear, but the main overlap is the idea of both being somehow democratising due to increasingly accessible technologies.

Atkinson distinguishes DIY into four categories, and it is his concept of 'pro-active DIY' which is of relevance to Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking. Contrasting reactive DIY which responds to a need (such as repairs etc.), pro-active DIY is characterised by significant self-direction and creative design input and involves the skilled manipulation of materials and tools.⁸²³ Pro-active DIY also bears a relationship to the creation and maintenance of self-identity whereby 'the creative elements' of DIY, 'enhance people's notion of themselves as an agent of design rather than merely a passive consumer'.⁸²⁴ Rather than passively 'consuming' profitable images of learning disability produced for mass-markets, Kennedy and Hellett *pro-actively* 'fabulate' (Chapter Six) images related to their self-identity which establishes them as 'agents' of film design.

DIY therefore is anticapitalist by nature and refuses the mass-produced in favour of the small-scale. Kennedy and Hellett not only refuse the images produced for mass-consumption, but they also refuse the barriers to funding and training that capitalism dictates. As discussed in Chapter Four regarding the target audience of Kennedy's films, they have no intention to appeal to a mainstream audience but deliberately target marginalised people. Bailes and Halberstam have both discussed failure in the context of anticapitalism, with Bailes noting how failure 'undermines the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology's preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed or win',⁸²⁵ and Halberstam stating 'failure's byways are all the spaces in between the super highways of capital'.⁸²⁶ Bailes theorises failure as Marxism, exposing how capitalism (or dominant images) robs the world of other possibilities (i.e. DIY images).⁸²⁷ As Zimmerman (2008) notes, amateur films 'mobilize an active historical process of reimagining and reinvention' which 'transforms history'⁸²⁸ and

⁸²³ Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," 3.

⁸²⁴ Atkinson, "Do it Yourself: Democracy and Design," 7.

⁸²⁵ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 2

⁸²⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 19

⁸²⁷ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 36

⁸²⁸ Patricia R. Zimmermann, "Morphing History into Histories: From Amateur Film to the Archive to the Future," Ed. Karen L. Ishizuk and Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2008, 275

thus has the power to reconstitute such dominant, capitalist images. For Zimmerman, amateur film is 'more than a democratic technology reclaiming marginalized identities',⁸²⁹ it 'expands and complicates film history' by creating images which 'challenge sameness'.⁸³⁰ Kennedy and Hellett use amateur film as a medium in which to challenge dominant ubiquitous images of learning disability and thus queer and reconstitute visual representations of learning disability.

Bailes and Halberstam also both discuss failure in the context of punk, and it is punk which forms a significant element of amateur and DIY aesthetics and attitudes. Sklar (2018) writes in the context of fashion noting that punk apparel was 'self-made or pieced together through bricolage',⁸³¹ but this concept extends more widely to punk as a philosophy, rather than just a pioneering subcultural moment in the second half of the 1970s. Hebdige ([1979] 2002) applies Levi-Strauss' anthropological concept of bricolage to subcultural style as an appropriation of what is to hand to create a different meaning from the original or intended.⁸³² Hebdige uses 1970s punk as his exemplar of bricolage⁸³³ in its appropriation of objects such as for example safety pins as earrings to 'disrupt and reorganize meaning'⁸³⁴ in new anarchic ways. We can see bricolage in Kennedy's use of the 'toy' camera appropriated for artistic means. Both Kennedy and Hellett's films are self-made and pieced together, generally using what is to hand to reorganise the meaning of learning disability imagery.

Bailes describes punk more broadly as 'an example of political, artistic, and social resistance' which 'redrew the systems and criteria that had previously sought to reify good and bad form'.⁸³⁵ For Bailes, punk seeks 'an alternative way of ascribing meaning and value'⁸³⁶ which is 'antithetical to established mainstream

⁸²⁹ Zimmerman, "Morphing History into Histories," 275

⁸³⁰ Zimmerman, "Morphing History into Histories," 276

⁸³¹ Monica Sklar, "Punk Style," *Subcultural Style*, London, New York, New Delhi, Oxford and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, np

⁸³² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style*, London and New York, Routledge, (1979) 2002, 103-104

⁸³³ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 106

⁸³⁴ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 106

⁸³⁵ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 49

⁸³⁶ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 50

values' and aspires 'to different kinds of mastery and technique'.⁸³⁷ For Halberstam, punk politics are a crucial part of a 'queer aesthetic' due to its inherent negativity.⁸³⁸ Punk works with failure and critiques mass culture.⁸³⁹ Marcus (1989) also describes punk in negative tones by using words such as 'ugliness' and 'error'.⁸⁴⁰ Writing in the context of punk, Halberstam argues that 'if we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange in order to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate'.⁸⁴¹ Halberstam is not literally speaking of murder but the agonism in his choice of words is evocative of the agonism Honig calls for in her feminist theory of refusal, using the murder of Pentheus as her own calling 'to fuck shit up' to use Halberstam's words. Through the amateur approaches of DIY and punk, a neuroqueer aesthetics emerges in Kennedy and Hellett's work which embraces and values queer failure. The following subsections explore the various ways in which these neuroqueer aesthetics can be identified.

7.4.1: Lo-fi

The foremost striking aesthetic of Kennedy and Hellett's early film production is its lo-fi quality. Lo-fi, short for 'low fidelity', originated as a musical term and refers to musical recordings which are considered to be what Vallee (2014) describes as 'below the standard quality of a mainstream professional recording',⁸⁴² and which is either due to 'deficient equipment, scarce funds, or aesthetic choice'. Lo-fi music production is characterised by 'grainy crackles' and 'background noise' which has been interpreted by Vallee as conveying 'a sense of intimacy, authenticity, and candor'.⁸⁴³ This echoes Fox's point that 'trembling camera movements and breathing focus [...] render a subjectivity' in amateur filmmaking.⁸⁴⁴ Vallee notes that since the 1980s, the term lo-fi has been used to describe 'a loosely defined genre involving

⁸³⁷ Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, 51

⁸³⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 96

⁸³⁹ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, 70

⁸⁴⁰ Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*, 70

⁸⁴¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 110

⁸⁴² Mickey Vallee, "Lo-fi," *Grove Music Online*, 3 Sep. 2014

⁸⁴³ Vallee, "Lo-fi"

⁸⁴⁴ Fox, "Rethinking the Amateur," 8

artists making such DIY music recorded with cheap technology (often cassette players), supplying an alternative to the polished and perceived pretensions of the mainstream music industry'.⁸⁴⁵ Spencer (2008) has used the term lo-fi to map a DIY ethic which spans sci-fi zines of the 1930s to the self-publishing of the Beats of the 1950s through the punk scene of the 1970s.⁸⁴⁶

Technically, both Kennedy and Hellett started their filmmaking practice from a lo-fi position. Using inexpensive filming equipment in the home environment, they both made use of what was to hand. Kennedy shot *What is Femme Anyway?* and *Just Me* in one take due to a lack of skill in video editing. In Hellett's first film *Cooking with Matthew* (Fig.7.5), the quality is flat and the sound is distanced. The digital overlaid title text and transition effects are basic and of the type available in standard free home-editing suite software. In *What is Femme Anyway?* (Fig.7.6) And *Just Me* (Fig.7.7), Kennedy has circumvented a lack of video-editing skill by using handwritten and printed text respectively rather than overlaying digital credits. The camera purchased at Toys R Us has produced grainy, pixilated images which render the credit text mostly illegible.

Kennedy explained their decision to include narration on both *What is Femme Anyway?* and *Just Me* as being based on the quality of the images produced by the pink camera:

given the fact I was using quite a cheap camcorder that produced quite a scratchy effect visually, I felt like I needed narrative to go with it, as I thought without any narrative the film might not transcend very well because of the quality of the visuals themselves.⁸⁴⁷

For Kennedy, the narratives gave a 'boost' to the films which they felt were too low quality to stand alone as moving image. Drawing on the radio production skills they had attained in college, they utilised the 'tools' that were to hand to ensure they could communicate fully what they intended.

⁸⁴⁵ Vallee, "Lo-fi"

⁸⁴⁶ Amy Spencer, *DIY: the rise of lo-fi culture*, London: Marion Boyars, 2008.

⁸⁴⁷ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 1.



Fig.7.5: Comparative stills from *Cooking with Matthew*. Matthew Hellett. 2006. YouTube

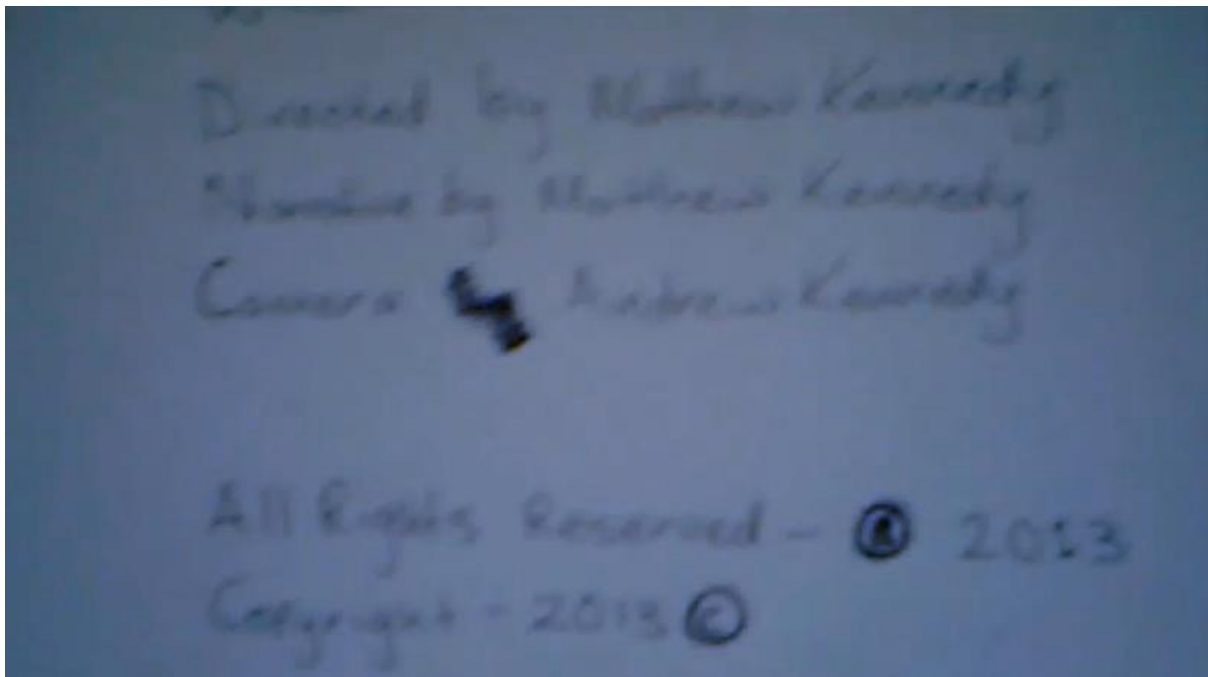


Fig.7.6: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo



Fig.7.7: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

7.4.2: Handwriting and cut-n-paste

One of the most conspicuous punk and DIY motifs is that of the cut-and-paste aesthetic. Triggs (2006) traces the relationship between DIY and cut-n-paste as originating in the fan magazines of the 1930s, but highlights the subculture of punk as the point where the 'homemade, A4, stapled and photocopied fanzines of the late 1970s fostered the 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) production techniques of cut-n-paste letterforms, photocopied and collaged images, hand-scrawled and typewritten texts, to create a recognizable graphic design aesthetic'.⁸⁴⁸ These fanzines, which employed a specific lo-fi cut-n-paste technique, created a distinctive visual style which embraced the cheap, handmade to critique mass-production whilst also appropriating and subverting it for the subculture's own means. *Sniffin' Glue* (Mark Perry, 1976–1977) is widely acknowledged by the punk community as the UK's first punk DIY fanzine,⁸⁴⁹ but it is *Spare Rib* (1972-93) that is often cited as the most

⁸⁴⁸ Teal Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," *Journal of Design History* 19.1 (2006), 69

⁸⁴⁹ Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," 69

impactful of the DIY magazines of the 1970s on feminist and queer aesthetics and politics. Described by the British Library as being ‘an active part of the emerging Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 20th century’, *Spare Rib* ‘challenged the stereotyping and exploitation of women, while supporting collective, realistic solutions to the hurdles women faced’.⁸⁵⁰ While somewhat more technically advanced than the hand-drawn *Sniffin’ Glue* aesthetics (Fig.7.8), early *Spare Rib* issues mobilised the lo-fi cut-n-paste aesthetic of the punk fanzine (Fig.7.9).

The influence of this 1970s punk/feminist cut-n-paste aesthetic can clearly be seen in Kennedy’s design choice of using handwritten and printed credits (Figs.7.6 and 7.7), but the influence can also be seen in the DIY title card of *What is Femme Anyway?* (Fig.7.10) which has the film title handwritten in black capital letters on a plain piece of white A4 paper, accompanied by four lipstick traces, which possibly references the cover of punk band New York Dolls’ self-titled debut album from 1977 (Fig.7.11). Triggs quotes American writer and academic Stephen Duncombe as describing fanzines as ‘little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design’ where the producers ‘privilege the ethic of DIY [...] make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you’.⁸⁵¹ The title card of *Femme* could itself be a fanzine cover, but the overall film can be interpreted as a filmic fanzine, with Kennedy providing a ‘publication’ of a very particularised ‘ranting’ on the definitions and limitations of ‘femme’, both in general and for them personally, whilst drawing on cut-n-paste and hand-drawn aesthetics in the spirit of punk DIY.

⁸⁵⁰ “Spare Rib,” *British Library*, [nd]

⁸⁵¹ S. Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, New York: Verso, 1997, 1-2 qtd. in Triggs, “Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic,” 69

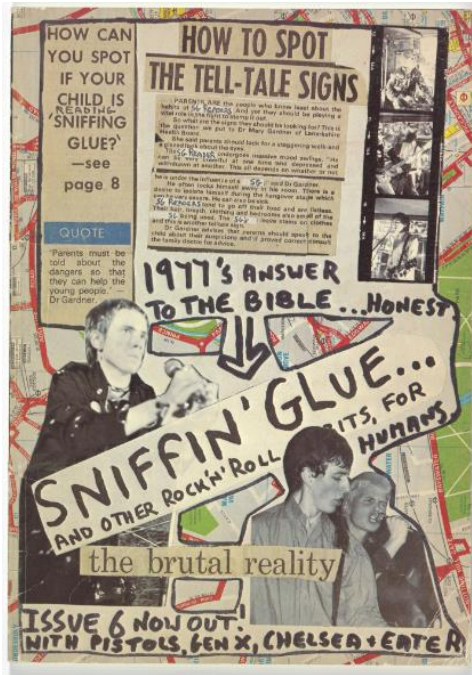


Fig.7.8: Mark Perry. Sniffin' Glue Punk Fanzine Compilation. 1978. MoMA

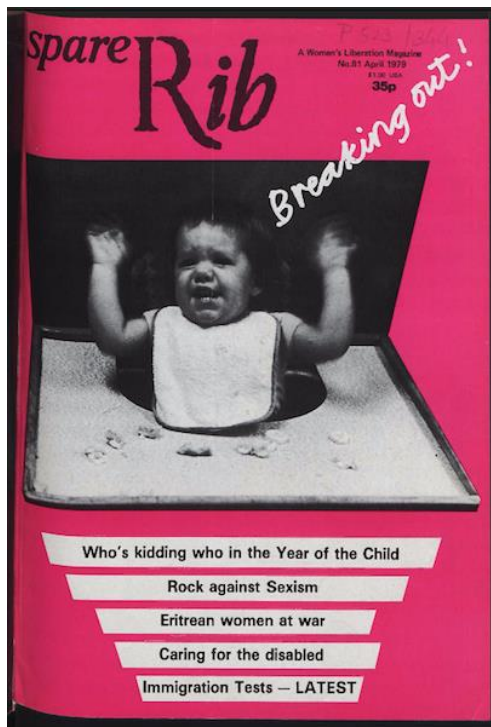


Fig.7.9: Cover of *Spare Rib*. April 1979. Journal Archives

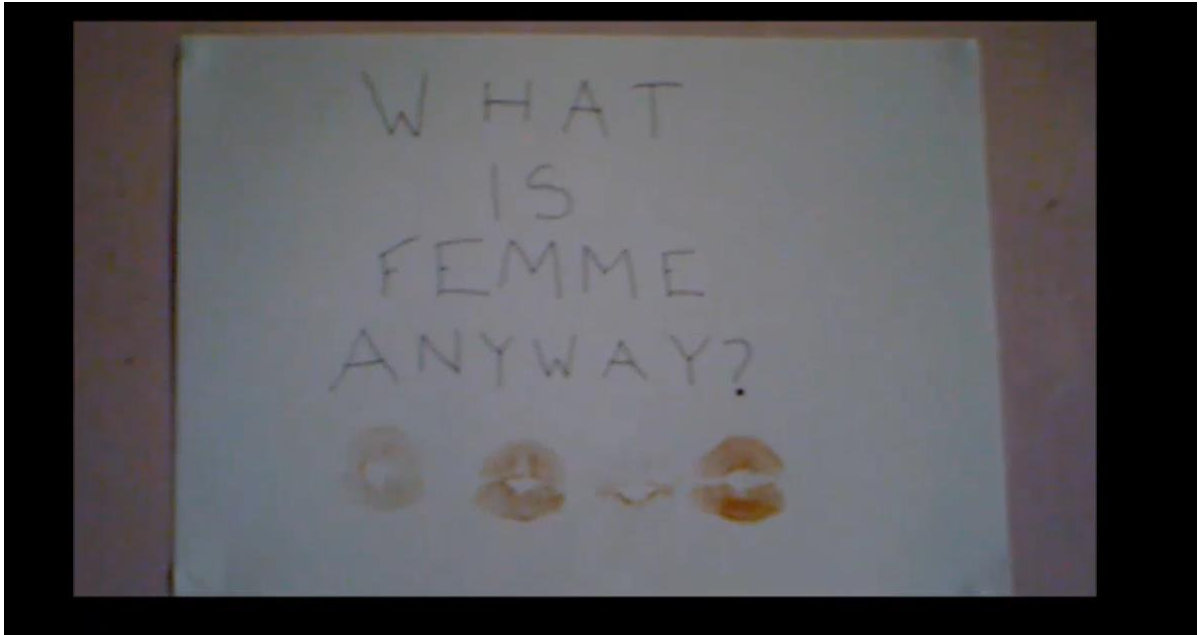


Fig.7.10: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo



Fig.7.11: New York Dolls album cover. 1977

7.4.3: Collage

An extension, or rather an appendage, of the 'cut-and-paste genre'⁸⁵² is the collage, which was a significant technique used by fanzine makers of the 1970s, but was first used artistically in the early twentieth century,⁸⁵³ exemplified by its use by the Dada movement. Halberstam described collage as 'another realm of aesthetic production' that is part of an 'unbeing'.⁸⁵⁴ Collage is that which 'references the spaces inbetween and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original'.⁸⁵⁵ For this reason, Halberstam suggests collage 'seems feminist and queer', noting it has been used by many female and queer artists for transformation, 'not through a positive production of the image but through a negative destruction of it'.⁸⁵⁶ This relates back to discussions of fragmentation in Chapters Four and Six, and again fragmentation as collage is here theorised as queer due to its practice of undoing.

Kennedy was foremost a visual artist working in the medium of collage and it was a single collage which prompted their filmmaking practice. Fig.7.12 shows the collage Kennedy showed at a group exhibition in Glasgow in 2013, and it was this that prompted them to make *What is Femme Anyway?* The film features the collage, and the film was shown alongside the collage at the exhibition, meaning the two are symbiotically connected. The photomontage depicts Kennedy fragmented with various facial features such as oversized lips laid over their face, flanked by the word 'Femme' on each side of the central photograph.

In using the fragmented human form, particularly in the case of *What is Femme Anyway?* to question issues of gender, this collage evokes the work of early twentieth century queer artists Hannah Höch (Fig.7.13) and Claude Chauln (Fig.7.14). Höch spliced together photographs and photographic reproductions cut from popular magazines of the 1930s to explore themes of identity, androgyny and shifting gender roles.⁸⁵⁷ Chauln, with their shaved head and indeterminate gender

⁸⁵² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 136

⁸⁵³ "Collage," *Tate*, [nd]

⁸⁵⁴ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 36

⁸⁵⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 136

⁸⁵⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 136

⁸⁵⁷ "Hannah Höch," *MoMa*, [nd]

presentation used their likeness through photography and photomontage to challenge the concept of a static or binary gender.⁸⁵⁸ Kennedy has cited Höch and Cahun as direct influences, and their influence can be seen in Kennedy's work. More explicitly Kennedy spoke of British artist Linder Stirling as an influence.

Described by *The Guardian* as an 'art-punk pioneer',⁸⁵⁹ Linder was associated with the Manchester punk scene of the 1970s and became known for her feminist collages made from photographic reproductions from *Playboy* and women's lifestyle magazines to expose the gender myths behind the concept of glamour. The aesthetic influence of Linder on Kennedy's collage from *What is Femme Anyway?* can be seen in her untitled photomontage from 1977 (Fig.7.15) in which she uses cut out oversized eyes and lipstick-ed lips to accentuate the artifice of the cultural markers of femininity to critique ascribed gender understandings. Additionally, Linder has included contoured bodywear, the intimate space of the bedroom and the domestic appliance of the vacuum cleaner to augment her critique on traditional gender roles. Significantly Linder also uses the image of the camera which evokes themes of the male gaze and women-as-object to-be-looked-at. Kennedy also explores all these themes in *What is Femme Anyway?* by questioning what it means to be femme, if femme and androgyny can co-exist, themes of being looked at and complimented on physical appearance, and they also make use of the bedroom and make-up as cultural markers of femininity. By exploring this through the medium of film, using voyeuristic shot angles, *What is Femme Anyway?* also aligns with Linder's use of the camera to explore themes of to-be-looked-at-ness.

Perhaps the most abstract use of collage by Kennedy is in their second film *Just Me*, whereby they cut and paste words onto sticky labels which are then placed upon their own body. Here the body acts as the canvas for a physical collage which questions the identity labels which society has placed upon Kennedy (Fig.7.16). This film marks a departure from traditional understandings of photomontage and videomontage by using film as a medium to capture a photographic likeness of a body that becomes a collage in and of itself.

⁸⁵⁸ "Claude Cahun," *MoMa* [nd]

⁸⁵⁹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Linder Sterling: 'I have a library of every perversion on the planet,'" *Guardian*, 7 Oct 2015.

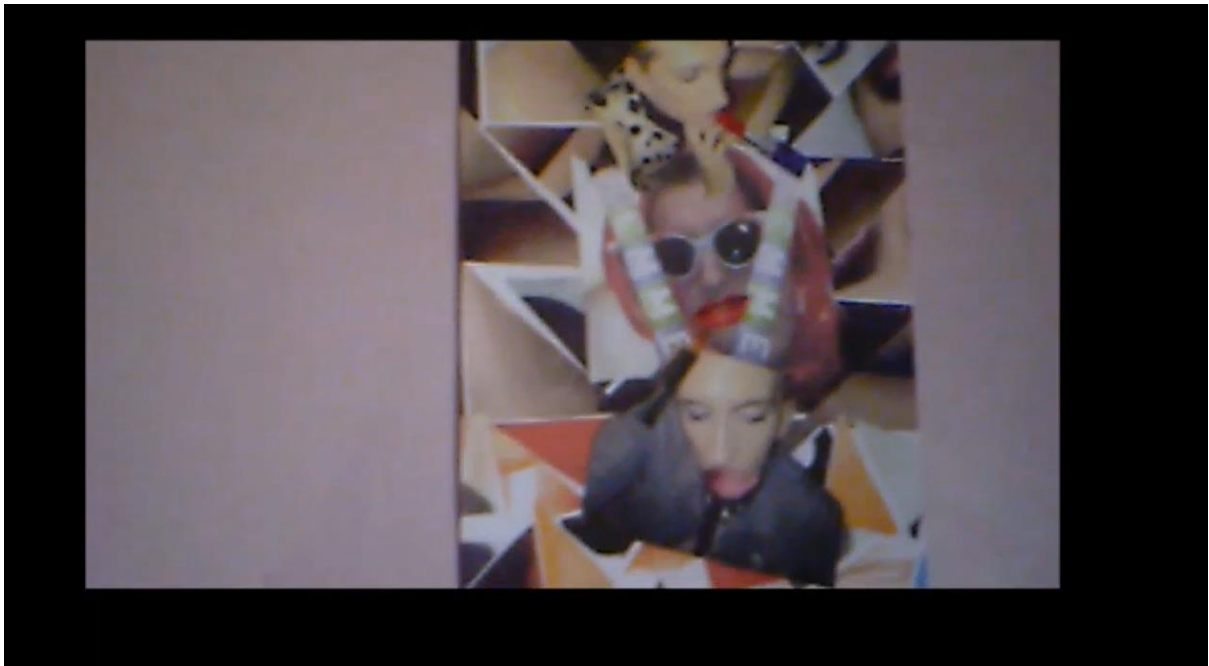


Fig.7.12: Still from *What is Femme Anyway?* Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo



Fig.7.13: Hannah Höch. *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum* (Indische Tänzerin: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum). 1930. MoMA



Fig.7.14: Claude Cahun. Image of photomontage illustration from 'Aveux non Avenus' (Disavowed Confessions). Photograph, 1930 (photographed), 2004 (printed). V&A



Fig.7.15: *Untitled*, photomontage. Linder Sterling. 1977. *The Guardian*.



Fig.7.16: Still from *Just Me*. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Vimeo

By using the DIY aesthetics of punk, Kennedy is drawing on the heritage of what Triggs terms a 'graphic language of resistance.'⁸⁶⁰ By this, Triggs means that language - as a system of representation through which meaning is conveyed, and in a graphic context where signs stand in for concepts⁸⁶¹ - can be resistant to a dominant culture through freedom from constraint. By refusing the authority of dominant ways of doing, either fine art or film production, and by experimenting with amateur and DIY ways of working that do not rely on dominant modes of production, their rules and authority are disregarded.⁸⁶² Triggs notes how 'graphic language is a visual system incorporating not only image-based symbols but also a typographic language. The way in which graphic language is depicted will add value to its intended meaning'.⁸⁶³ Whether out of choice or necessity, Kennedy's use of cut-n-paste/collage graphic language lends itself to 'additional interpretive potential'⁸⁶⁴ and

⁸⁶⁰ Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," 72

⁸⁶¹ Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," 72

⁸⁶² Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," 73

⁸⁶³ Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," 73

⁸⁶⁴ Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," 73

which aligns their practice with a queer punk feminist heritage of DIY cultural production of resistance to dominant visual culture.

7.4.4: Working with family and friends

Renan (1967) has outlined the key characteristics of underground cinema, one of which being the use of friends instead of trained actors,⁸⁶⁵ a practice Zimmermann also attributed to amateur film.⁸⁶⁶ This is also a practice employed by queer independent filmmaker John Waters, whose pool of recurring cast and crew known as The Dreamlanders is almost as well-known as the films themselves. Similarly Jarman often cast his peers associated with the 1970s British punk scene in his films, such as Pamela Rooke (also known as Jordan Mooney), Adam Ant and Toyah Wilcox in *Jubilee* (1978).

This is a form of amateurism also present in the work of Kennedy and Hellett. To date, all of Hellett's films, with the exception of *Cooking with Matthew*, have been made with some involvement or support from Carousel. Even *Cooking with Matthew* was entered into the Oska Bright Film Festival which spring-boarded his career with the organisation. In *Mrs Sparkle*, Hellett dances on stage in front of an audience of nine people (Fig.7.17), all of whom are fellow artists associated with Carousel. Returning the favour, Hellett appeared as a more severe version of Mrs Sparkle in Carousel-affiliated psychedelic rock band Sabien Gator's video *Creatures of the Revolution* (Fig.7.18). In *Enid and Valerie*, Banks was cast as the second voice alongside Kennedy. Kennedy also describes how they had to 'twist' their twin brother's arm to operate their camera for *What is Femme Anyway?* and *Just Me*, to which they agreed and scheduled filming around their full-time working hours.⁸⁶⁷ This represents another example of Kennedy and Hellett using what is on hand in order to realise their films, calling in help from friends, family, peers and support workers.

This section has explored the various ways in which Kennedy and Hellett have amateurism imposed upon their practice, but also the ways in which they have

⁸⁶⁵ Sheldon Renan, *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*, New York: Dutton, 1967, 46-51 qtd. in Zimmermann, "The Amateur, the Avant-Garde, and Ideologies of Art," *Journal of Film and Video* 38.3/4 (1986), 67

⁸⁶⁶ Zimmermann, "The Amateur, the Avant-Garde, and Ideologies of Art." 67

⁸⁶⁷ Mattie Kennedy, Personal Interview 1

embraced it as a means of expressing a DIY and punk philosophy and valuing queer failure. The following section considers enforced and embraced amateurism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the making of a lockdown film by Kennedy, Banks and myself.

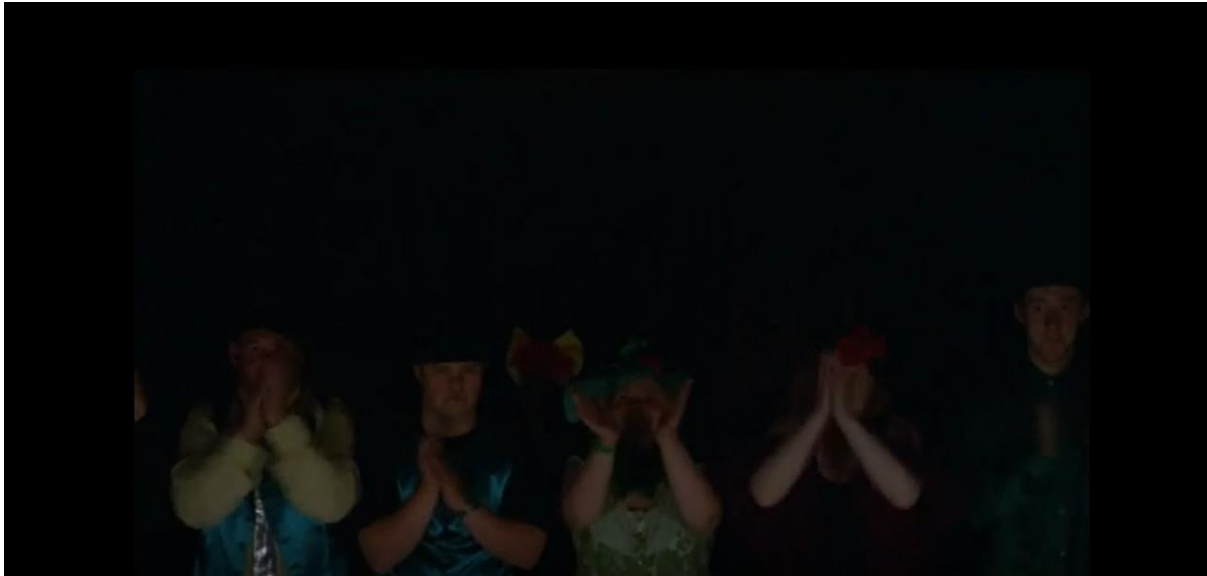


Fig. 7.17: Still from *Mrs Sparkle*. Matthew Hellett. 2009. YouTube

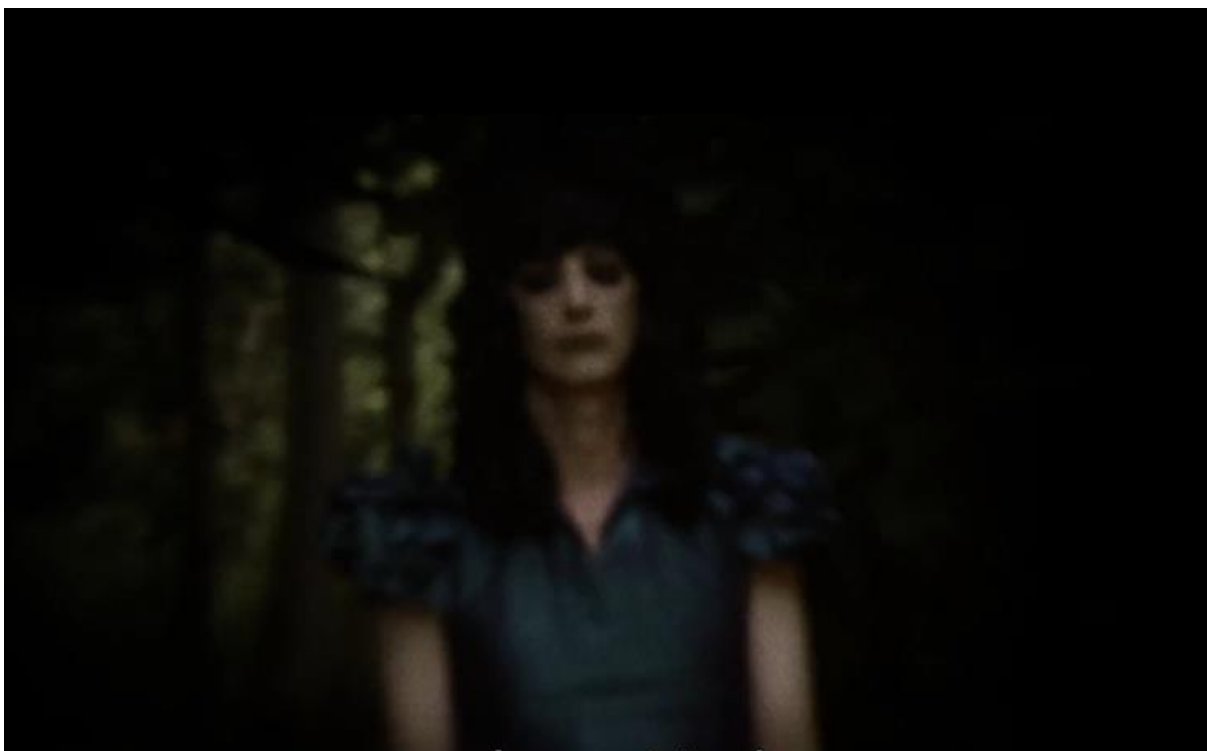


Fig.7.18: Still from *Creatures of the Revolution*. "CREATURES OF THE REVOLUTION | CREATIVE MINDS | CANVAS." Canvas. 2016. YouTube.

The next section describes the making of the collaborative film *Not Mythmakers* (2022) made as part of this research and which offers a unique example of a film made remotely over lockdown. Kennedy embraced the amateurism that was forced upon them due to restrictions imposed as a result of the global pandemic.

7.5: Making a lockdown film: *Not Mythmakers*

As detailed in Chapter Three, the main methodological approach to this research project was through a participatory framework. Restrictions imposed by the global pandemic significantly limited the extent to which the original participatory film project could be realised. Hellett withdrew from the project altogether and face-to-face data collection was suspended by the University of Brighton. On the condition that Hellett's voice was still included in the thesis, which I have been able to do so through various secondary sources, Kennedy agreed to continue with the participatory film as planned, albeit on a reduced and remote scale. The project required we as a group accepted the amateurism that would be imposed upon the film project due to the necessity to work virtually and remotely between Glasgow (Kennedy), Brighton (Banks) and Newcastle upon Tyne (Allsopp). *Not Mythmakers* represents an embracing of video-conferencing technology, which became increasingly prevalent in everyday life during the pandemic, and a return to Kennedy's DIY approaches to filmmaking by embracing the amateur techniques and aesthetics of their early films to make use with what was at hand in their home.

Using £1500 of the £4500 raised for the collaborative film between Kennedy and Hellett, what materialised is a six-minute short film which presents a unique record of remote filmmaking under a pandemic lockdown, incorporating virtual conversations and digital collaboration. The transformative energy of this film lies in the relationship between the content and the aesthetic; where DIY ideologies of inclusion and recognition merge with DIY technical filmmaking principals and collaboration.

The archive is a key interest of Kennedy's (see Chapter Five) and was used as a point of departure for *Not Mythmakers*. Knowing how important the subject was to Kennedy, gleaned from our initial conversations, from reading their blog, hearing their keynote speech at the QF launch in 2017 and from listening to the Disability

And...Film with Oska Bright podcast (2020), it was decided this could form the basis of the participatory film. Kennedy and myself decided to structure the interviews accordingly, so that the first interview covered all general questions, then the second interview could be dedicated entirely to the subject of the archive. Discussions between Kennedy, Banks and myself then concluded that Kennedy would use the Zoom video recording of the second interview to incorporate into the film. Following the interview, I emailed the audio-visual recording to Kennedy who produced time stamps for Banks to use alongside footage Kennedy shot at home of the objects in the MMA. The time stamps Kennedy produced are based on what they felt was the most important part of our discussion and the sound bites that they wanted to be included in the film.

As noted in section 7.3, Kennedy is not trained in film editing software, so was reliant on Banks to edit the film together. Based on the footage Kennedy recorded, and the timestamps from the interview footage that I recorded from Zoom, Banks edited together a draft which she emailed back to Kennedy for feedback. After gaining permission from Hellett, Banks also included footage from the Brighton and Glasgow Matthew and Matthew events in 2016 and 2017 respectively. When the final draft was signed off by Kennedy, they and Banks embraced accessible amateur effects by overlaying the visuals with stock instrumental music. I then acquired the paid services of a freelancer to add subtitles to the final version, which Kennedy then uploaded to their Vimeo channel.

Kennedy's footage of the archive is shot on a handheld camera which gives a shaky effect and sees a return to their DIY motif of filming paper. The opening shot features an A4 Matthew and Matthew event poster protected by a plastic punched filing pocket which has been partially covered with a diagonal cut-out of typed and printed questions and statements, blurred when zoomed out (Fig.7.19), but more legible when Kennedy zooms in on and narrates each question individually (Fig.7.20). Kennedy has used the event poster and the printed questions which have been cut and pasted onto the diagonal strip of paper as a visual collage to illustrate the narration. The proceeding shot is filmed from a first-person perspective and shows Kennedy's hand opening and sorting through the storage box. Throughout, Kennedy narrates the contents of the box (Fig.7.21) as including photographs,

posters, flyers, Q&A notes, collage designs and templates, as well as the pink 'toy' camera. Referencing the closing shots of *What is Femme Anyway?* and *Just Me*, Kennedy returns to the motif of filming paper stuck to a wall in *Not Mythmakers* by showcasing a selection of the printed archive material (Fig.7.22). The film then cuts to the credits which this time are digitally produced by Banks and feature the logos of Carousel and the funders.

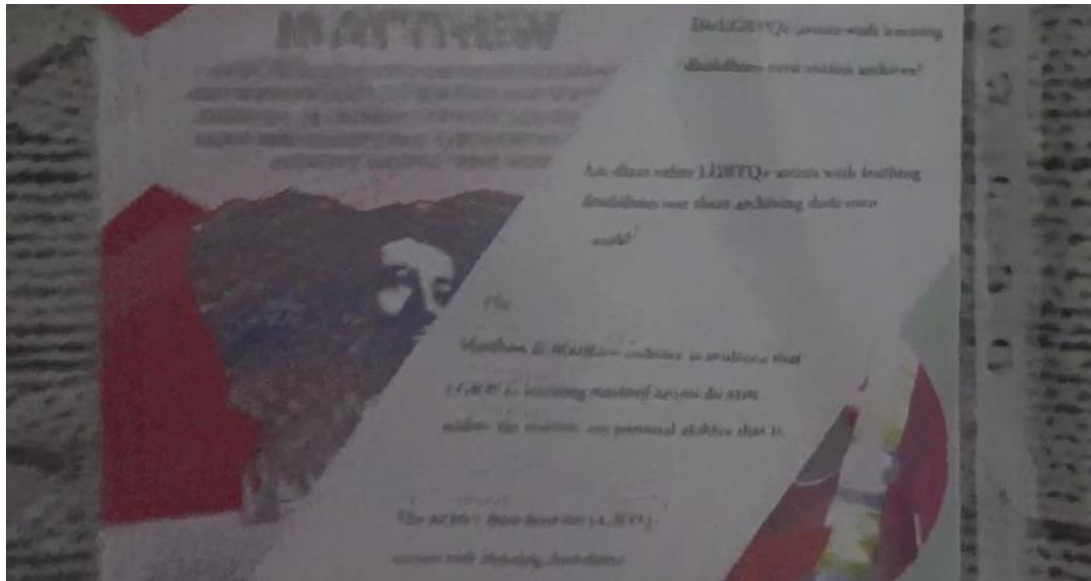


Fig.7.19: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo

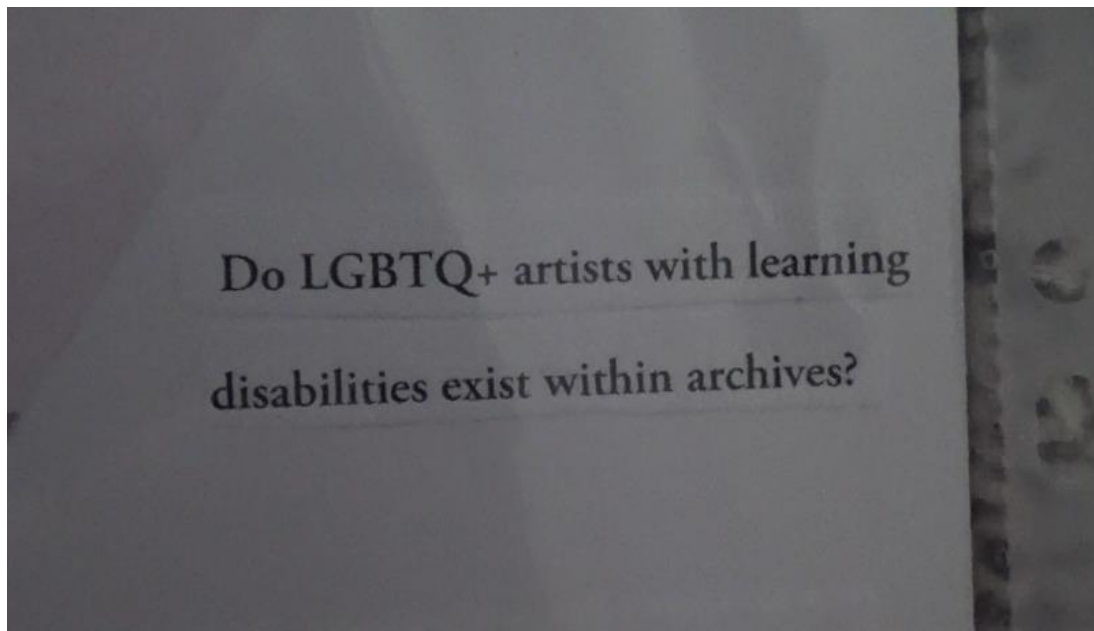


Fig.7.20: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo

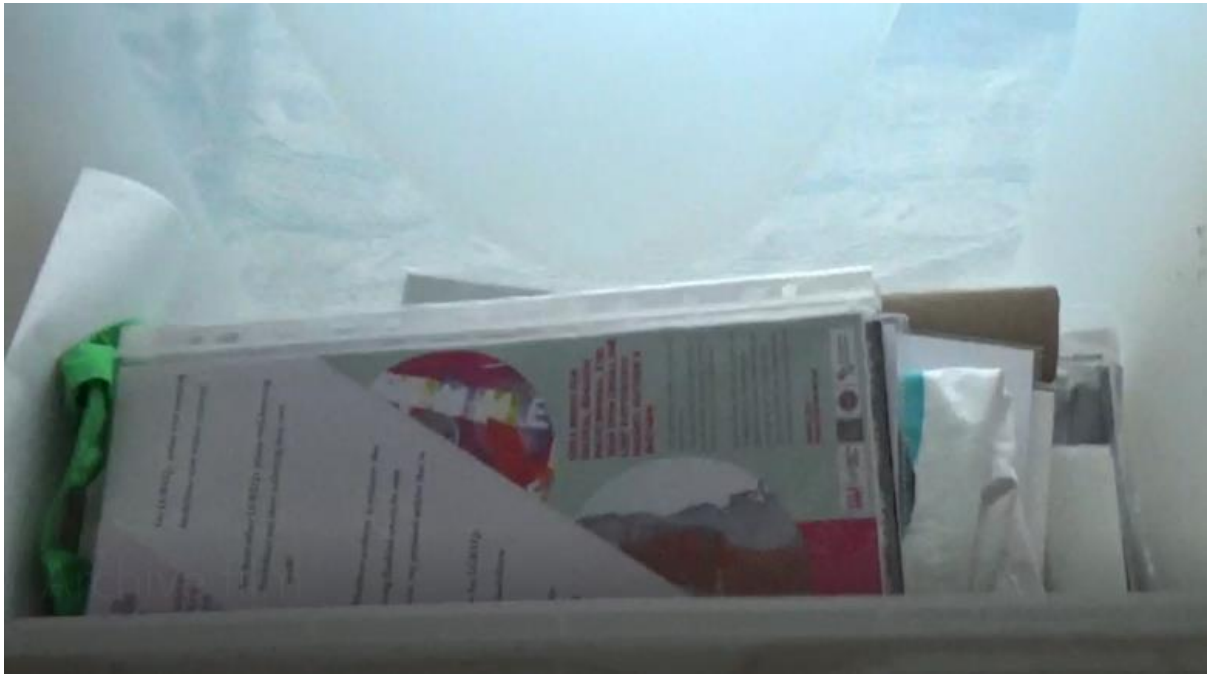


Fig.7.21: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo



Fig.7.22: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo

Aesthetically, this film treads new territory in its use of Zoom video call footage which is interspersed between the above-described shots of the archive material, bringing new (literal) understandings to Fox and Macpherson's term 'aesthetics of exchange' which they coined in the context of inclusive arts practice.⁸⁶⁸ Considerations of film aesthetics that would typically involve carefully-selected background, lighting, sound effects or camera angles have been left to the necessities of technology and privacy. Sat in front of a bare white wall, Kennedy explained during the first interview that they were using their mother's bedroom due to it being the preferred space to ensure quiet in a busy family home during lockdown (Fig.7.23). Lit by the natural afternoon late August summer light through the bedroom window, Kennedy apologised for any background noise as their neighbour was mowing their lawn at the time of our interview. Although not visible in the footage chosen for this film, Kennedy's pet cat provided several short cameos during the interviews; a familiar and endearing image to anyone who has sat in on virtual meetings since March 2020. The close-up, low angle shot of the Zoom footage was dictated by both the available positioning of Kennedy's webcam on their laptop and the height of the desk and chair upon which the laptop and they themselves sat. The clarity of image was dependent upon the quality of the webcam and wi-fi connection, which 'lagged' at various points. The majority of the conversation was spontaneous and reflective as I typically asked follow-up questions to the pre-set questions sent ahead of the interview depending on Kennedy's responses, meaning this film is predominantly unscripted.

⁸⁶⁸ Fox and Macpherson, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research*, 80



Fig.7.23: Still from *Not Mythmakers*. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Vimeo, detailing use of Zoom footage

In 2020, marketing agency WPP published an article on their website entitled “Distancing – the impact on video: Transitioning to lo-fi video production across industries.” This article analyses the impact of COVID-19 on video production, explaining

We’re seeing it in television, OTT programming and advertising: cell phones and webcams replacing professional equipment, personal spaces standing in for studios, and entertainers becoming their own production assistants. Polished video is on hiatus, and in its place is a rugged and hopefully authentic pastiche. [...] Unscripted daytime and late-night television sets now have more in common with a conference call than a studio backlot or network headquarters. [...] Tom Hanks hosted the first coronavirus-era edition of *Saturday Night Live*, delivering the customary monologue while standing in his kitchen rather than on a soundstage in 30 Rockefeller Plaza. Kate McKinnon stepped into character in a homemade Ruth Bader Ginsburg costume in front

of a hand-drawn backdrop while making use of household items for props. Post-production editing was pointedly unsophisticated, but funny.⁸⁶⁹

The article describes the surge in lo-fi, DIY, homemade video produced during the pandemic, but reflected the fact that while these professionals-on-hiatus get to dabble in amateurism as 'funny' 'pastiche', they also gain an insight into the realities of marginalised communities and their access to filmmaking which for them is not always intentionally pastiche but is a DIY approach to working with what you have. When lockdown is over and the pastiche is no longer funny, the professionals will return to their studios, meanwhile people like Kennedy continue to embrace the amateurism that was and is a reality before and beyond the pandemic. *Not Mythmakers* was made in the same context as the examples of video production described by the WPP article, but this was not new territory for Kennedy, who returned to the DIY techniques and aesthetics of their early films to produce a unique record of navigating imposed and embraced amateurism as a celebration of queer failure.

7.6: Conclusion

This chapter answered my final research question which asked to what extent does amateurism afford a neuroqueer aesthetics which embraces and values failure? I have demonstrated how Kennedy and Hellett position their work within amateurism and how they both interpret the concept of failure as freedom. I argued that amateurism is something both imposed upon and embraced by Kennedy and Hellett because it affords this space for failure. What emerges from their amateur filmmaking is a new neuroqueer aesthetics which uses amateur and queer aesthetics but contributes new meaning to both when analysed in the conditions under which they were made. The use of inexpensive cameras and editing technology (or lack thereof), handwritten and cut-n-paste props in place of digital effects and use of friends and family as crew/extras draws on the anti-capitalist aesthetics and approaches of punk and queer feminist art but adds a further layer of meaning when it is considered these have been necessitated through a lack of access to funding or training and a devaluation of learning disability art. The failure

⁸⁶⁹ Rebecca Riordon, "Distancing: the impact on video," WPP. 26 May 2020

they embrace is rooted in queerness but their multiple-otherness contributes new understandings of queer failure when the perceived failure of learning disability as able to produce valued art is introduced. So not only do Kennedy and Hellett 'fail' at heteronormativity, they also 'fail' at having productive bodies, as Hargrave posited in Section 7.2.

I do not want to apply Hargrave's distinction between the professional amateur and amateur professional to Kennedy and Hellett because I think it is reductive to their particular circumstances. While Kennedy has a clear intention to avoid any move into the realm of the professional, Hellett is potentially more open to the idea through the training programmes and skills-building workshops offered by OBFF, of which he is heavily involved in delivering. Of interest is the 'third' type of amateur that Hargrave proposes, who 'engages in a *working relationship* with the technical aspects of advanced or professional practice'.⁸⁷⁰ Hargrave is referring to the work of amateur artists in collaboration with those conventionally considered professional, to varying degrees. This can clearly be seen in Kennedy's development from their early solo films to *Enid and Valerie*, where they increasingly engage in a diversity of aesthetic, experimenting with animation and collaboration with other artists and arts organisations.

Similarly in Hellett's work with Carousel and training programmes offered as part of his role with OBFF there is a shift towards skills development. While there is apparently no intention to become professional, there is clear intent to *develop* their practice both in terms of quality and technique, which they do within a *working relationship* with organisations such as Carousel. Drawing on John Roberts, Hargrave suggests this type of amateur then becomes a new type of artist, one that he argues 'erodes the distinction between artists and non-artists, a sort of 'third' type 'whose presence complicates the stability of the symmetrical, and places identity in doubt'.⁸⁷¹ Applying this model to film offers a contribution to amateur film studies by shifting focus away from the division between amateur and professional to instead understand the ways in which each co-exist and collaborate to create a third type of

⁸⁷⁰ Hargrave, *Theatres of Learning Disability*, 229

⁸⁷¹ Hargrave, *Theatres of Learning Disability*, 229

filmmaker which straddles the two and embraces DIY techniques and aesthetics but also strives for a degree of honing. Additionally, this chapter has demonstrated that the amateur is not either something enforced upon the untrained filmmaker, or embraced by the trained filmmaker who deliberately untrains for artistic freedom, but that it can be both.

While Kennedy and Hellett readily embrace the freedom of (queer) failure that comes with amateurism, they are not so individual-minded to lose their sense of the agitation for social change, which Ruti fears comes with deliberate failure or opting out. Kennedy and Hellett may have retreated to their heterotopia of filmmaking to practice new ways of being in and for themselves, but they are both aware of their responsibility to other queer learning-disabled people and to future generations of filmmakers to show different ways of being do exist. Section 7.5 explored the making of *Not Mythmakers* as a remote collaborative DIY project during the COVID-19 pandemic, a film which represents an exemplar of this social responsibility felt by Kennedy. Their MMA is showcased in film form to raise awareness of its existence for the benefit of others. As Ruti notes, 'a politics of negativity devoid of any clear political or ethical vision' does not give 'much of a sense of what *should* exist'⁸⁷² (original emphasis). Kennedy and Hellett are apparently fully aware of what *should* exist and have done what they felt necessary to make an intervention, both in their respective filmmaking, but also through Kennedy's archive and Hellett's formation of QF, all of which they have approached from the position of amateur in what Chris Clavin describes a 'dedication to a DIY approach to self-sufficiency'.⁸⁷³ Their amateurism may allow them the freedom to fail, but their work in no way fails the queer learning disability community of which they are foundational agents.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière draws on Aristotle who 'states that a citizen is someone who has a part in the act of governing and being governed' and that a 'speaking being [...] is a political being'.⁸⁷⁴ In other words, Rancière argues that politics revolves around that which is seen and those who speak, which he

⁸⁷² Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out*, 38

⁸⁷³ Chris Clavin of Plan-It X Records qtd. in Kevin Dunn, "'If It Ain't Cheap, It Ain't Punk': Walter Benjamin's Progressive Cultural Production and DIY Punk Record Labels," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24.2 (2012): 232

⁸⁷⁴ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7

summarises as ‘aesthetic practices’ as the form of visibility this politics takes.⁸⁷⁵

Using the term politics lightly, I want to conclude by arguing that Kennedy and Hellett’s amateurism allows them the ability to speak and to be seen, which makes them active in the matters (or politics) of representation.

Rancière states that artistic practices are interventions into “ways of doing and making”.⁸⁷⁶ This chapter has analysed the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett have drawn upon the approaches and aesthetics of amateurism as an intervention into the ‘doing and making’ of dominant images of learning disability. This has been achieved in the content of the images that they produce, which I have analysed in the previous three chapters. This chapter has explored how Kennedy and Hellett intervene in the making of dominant images of learning disability by embracing the tools available to them and a DIY ethos to also disrupt what Rancière describes as the relationships which maintain forms of visibility,⁸⁷⁷ such as mainstream structures of representation. By using accessible camera technologies and what they have around them, their amateur approach to work produces an amateur aesthetic which demonstrates how amateur filmmakers can use the camera as what queer visual artist Zanele Muholi describes as a ‘weapon’ to ‘fight back’⁸⁷⁸ in matters of representation. The final chapter will reflect on this thesis as a whole and summarise the key overlapping themes which have emerged from all previous chapters. I will conclude by arguing that Kennedy and Hellett’s filmmaking, curation and archiving challenges traditional understandings of queer and disability politics.

⁸⁷⁵ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8

⁸⁷⁶ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8

⁸⁷⁷ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 8

⁸⁷⁸ "Zanele Muholi Wants Their Stunning Self-Portraits to Teach You How to "Fight Back"

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1: Introduction

This thesis is about amateur filmmaking and how it allows us to see learning disability in new queer ways. More specifically this thesis is about two significant queer learning-disabled filmmakers in the UK; Mattie Kennedy and Matthew Hellett, and about how their films represent a form of neuroqueer⁸⁷⁹ refusal. I was motivated to undertake this research after attending a Matthew and Matthew screening and leaving wondering two things, firstly why, as a Bachelor's and Master's graduate of Art and Design History programmes, particularly in a liberal city such as Brighton and Hove, had I never come across the visual or material culture of not only queer learning-disabled people, but even disabled people more broadly, and secondly, why had I never seen learning disability represented queerly before. I undertook a mining process to see what examples did exist within art and design history of queer disabled makers and uncovered significant literature which engages with the work of queer/disabled people but realised there was still a significant gap in the histories of visual culture and queer/*learning* disability. I believed Kennedy and Hellett's films posed a significant challenge to this erasure, and I felt motivated to highlight their work and the transformative visual narratives they were producing. It is as Mitchell and Snyder note, paraphrasing Japanese writer Kenzaburō Ōe, that we don't fully understand a culture or society until we understand the perspective of its disabled people.⁸⁸⁰

In Chapter Two I reviewed the literature of four bodies of knowledge that I felt spoke to the work of Kennedy and Hellett and where I saw their films, and my research, were making an intervention and contribution respectively. Foremost this was the broader field of disability representation studies, and specifically scholarship on the history of disability screen representations. Secondly, the field of queer visual activism was relevant because I detected subtle gestures of activism in their work, not in the traditional sense of banner waving or campaigning for specific rights, but in the quiet gestures of refusal that characterised seemingly every element of their

⁸⁷⁹ 'Neuroqueer' used as a term which speaks to the intersection of learning disability (or more broadly neurodivergence) and queerness

⁸⁸⁰ Kenzaburō Ōe paraphrased by Mitchell and Snyder, "Talking About Talking Back," 206

filmmaking. Thirdly the intersection of queerness and learning disability was significant as Kennedy and Hellett exist at this intersection. I was particularly interested in the emergence of neuroqueerness and how this term could be used productively when analysing the presence of this intersection in their films. Finally, the field of amateur film studies was of interest because I interpreted their films as such, though I needed to more formally insert their work into that field of study by providing as detailed a definition as possible. It materialised that in practice this is very difficult to achieve with any authority, but I believe I provided a strong argument for its use, later supported by Kennedy's own thoughts on the term. The distinct overlaps which connect these bodies of knowledge is that of representation; both the lack and the creation of. My research spills over and into all of these disciplines and contributes new perspectives to each.

Using Bonnie's Honig's feminist theory of refusal (2021) as a framework I was able to map the refusal gesture in several key areas: (i) Kennedy and Hellett's refusal of mainstream disability representations and the challenge to the hetero-ableist gaze which perpetuates exclusion and othering, (ii) in the gesture of fostering and nurturing community in a social context which has historically isolated people with learning disabilities, (iii) their transformation of the image of learning disability to see it in new queer ways through becoming performative subjects, (iv) by embracing the amateurism which is imposed upon them and establishing a neuroqueer aesthetics to reflect the nuances of intersecting marginal identities.

This chapter summarises the key themes which emerged from this thesis and the opportunities for further research. Section 8.3 articulates my key contributions to knowledge and proposes Kennedy and Hellett have established a set of neuroqueer aesthetics. This enriches knowledge on queer aesthetics by arguing the addition of learning disability contexts to their use adds more nuanced layers of meaning by considering them from the position of the multiple other. Section 8.4 summarises the main theme which emerged from Chapters Four-Seven which is that Kennedy and Hellett's film and filmmaking practice problematise traditional understandings of the politics of queer and disability visibility and inclusion by refusing to seek validation or acceptance from mainstream audiences. What became clear is that Kennedy and Hellett make their films first and foremost for themselves and other queer and/or

learning-disabled people and deliberately seek the freedom and space to nurture the community they are building.

This research provides the first detailed study into the cultural production of people at the intersection of queer learning disability and which pays attention to not just the content of their work – in this case films - but also the motivations of their making, the community contexts in which they are made and shared, the cinematic techniques used, the amateur approaches to their production and the emergent neuroqueer aesthetics. This thesis offers a critical intervention into amateur film studies specifically and disability representation studies more broadly. Additionally, this research broadens the scope of what constitutes queer visual activism by attributing it to amateur filmmaking, and it offers new insights into the emerging field of neuroqueer studies by illuminating how such subjectivities are represented on screen. This research offers the first attempt to consider disability representation studies in an intersectional context and which tentatively deals with the issue of race through a discourse of absence. The films of Kennedy and Hellett refuse the erasure – either deliberate or accidental – of neuroqueer representation and provide evidence of neuroqueer self-representation. To quote Kennedy speaking about herself and Hellett, ‘we’re not a myth, we’re making this history right here, right now’.⁸⁸¹

The next section offers a general reflection on the research process and my position as researcher. I speak to some of the methodological tensions discussed in Chapter Three around the paradox of working participatorily to produce a sole-authored thesis and the limitations of textual analysis in my arguing for a neuroqueer aesthetics. My main stance is that, as Kennedy states, they and Hellett are the ones making the history, therefore I see myself as someone who is documenting it.

8.2: General reflections

In Chapter Three I outlined my position as researcher and articulated the ethical implications of someone, like myself, who is not categorised as disabled researching subjects who are. I questioned my motivations for undertaking the research and

⁸⁸¹ *Not Mythmakers*, Dir. Mattie Kennedy, 2022

reflected on them throughout the five years that it took to complete this thesis. I came to see myself as someone who is documenting the work of two artists I consider to be making significant contributions to visual culture, and as an historian of the field, I felt a compulsion to write their work into some kind of 'official' history from my platform within a university. It could be argued that Kennedy and Hellett do not necessarily want to be written into official histories, particularly considering my arguments in Section 8.4 which posit their work challenges the politics of visibility. As Holliday and Hassard note, 'perhaps there are those who would choose not to have their bodies rendered visible, and thus brought into discourse'.⁸⁸² I spoke with Kennedy about this in our second interview centred on the archive, noting my research found no reference to queer artists with learning disabilities. They responded that,

they need to be put in a history somewhere. I don't care if it's the dominant history or if it's an alternative history [...] I would like it to see some form of appearance in the dominant history books, but I don't think that's going to happen. As long as it's some form of alternative history then I'm okay with that.⁸⁸³

This comment by Kennedy reveals a wish for there to be some historicization of their and their community's work and we have also spoken more generally about potentially co-authoring a zine or something in a different format, but the point is it will be accessible to people with learning disabilities, both in terms of literal accessibility that is not behind a pay wall, and that the language is accessible to general readers.

In Chapter Three I noted the importance of foregrounding the voice of the person whose experience is being sought in research. I hope I have made the space throughout this thesis to adequately ensure the presence and value of Kennedy and Hellett's voice and to allow that to guide my analysis and interpretation of their work and insights. As per the participatory research ethics outlined in Chapter Three, I

⁸⁸² Ruth Holliday and John Hassard, *Contested Bodies*, London: Routledge, 2001, 4

⁸⁸³ Mattie Kennedy, Personal interview 2.

have approached this research as participatorily as I saw appropriate. A guiding principle of participatory research is that it be mutually beneficial.⁸⁸⁴ I included and foregrounded Kennedy and Hellett's contribution where relevant but did not think it appropriate to include them in every aspect of the research. For example, expecting them to contribute to the research of the literature review and methodology sections, a very time-consuming task, I believed would put unethical expectations upon their labour that I could not remunerate due to restrictions imposed by the University of Brighton Ethics Board. Rather, I prioritised their involvement in areas that directly interacted with their work, and especially with Kennedy during the production of *Not Mythmakers*.

This research did not materialise as ideally as I had first imagined when I proposed the idea to Kennedy and Hellett, mainly due to impositions resulting from the global pandemic which moved all our interactions online. Interviews felt less personal than they would have done had we had the physical presence and conversation may have flowed differently had wi-fi connections not lagged or cut out altogether mid-discussion. Certainly, Hellett could have been more involved and the co-production of Kennedy and Hellett's film could have materialised within the time frame of the project as planned. Looking forward, the funding is still waiting for this film to be made, so I see this thesis as the spring-board of an ongoing collaborative relationship between Kennedy, Hellett and Oska Bright Film Festival (OBFF), particularly as we have casually discussed plans for various iterations of publications of this research.

In Chapter Six I was unable to resolve the contradiction of my arguing for a neuroqueer aesthetics when the 'neuro' is inherently invisible. I drew on authorship studies to offer a resolution which takes into account verbal language, context and biographical information of cultural producers when considering marginal voices. This has been a key element to my overall aim of this research which posits that considerations of the context of the making and sharing of the films and the makers of the films is as intrinsic to the activist gesture as the actual content of the films. The next section summarises the key contributions to knowledge made by this research.

⁸⁸⁴ Zarb, "On the Road to Damascus," 129

8.3: Contribution to knowledge

Chapters Four, Six and Seven demonstrated how Kennedy and Hellett neurodiversify queer aesthetics to establish their own visual language of neuroqueer aesthetics. Kennedy and Hellett draw upon aesthetics with their own queer connotations such as close-up shots, direct address, mirror scenes and motifs of the double and shame which expand upon their queer meanings when used in the context of a neuroqueer identity. I argued their use of multi-layered framing and mirror shots works symbolically to represent the multiple othering they experience as minorities within minorities. I suggested the use of doubles alludes to a resistant double-consciousness by showing that they will see themselves through their own lived experience, not mainstream representations, and crucially, that they *can* see themselves. The use of direct address and voyeuristic shots both demand that the viewer question why they are looking, whilst inviting the looks of other neuroqueer people, depending on the viewer position.

By using queer aesthetics such as the transformation motif and fragmentation and distortion, Kennedy and Hellett challenge the notion of normalcy and clarity of perspective to show that you cannot 'know' what the neuroqueer experience is without engaging with individuated and multiple examples of subjectivity. By producing imagery which appears to draw on the abject and monstrous-feminine, Kennedy and Hellett expand the concept to become neuroqueer by evoking the historical stereotypical disability imagery of the monstrous or freak which exposes the historical denigration of queer people and people with learning disabilities. They show how both femininity, queerness *and* disability is seen as abject and grotesque, but they claim it as agency by aligning their subjectivities with the power that comes with female figures associated with the monstrous such as spinsters, witches and hags, whilst illuminating the overlaps with disability experience. I argued Kennedy and Hellett use what I called monological narration, itself a type of queer aesthetic, to question discourses of gender and disability through the performativity of cultural markers of femininity and the literal use of labels to challenge their authority. Chapter Six also demonstrated how Kennedy and Hellett use these neuroqueer aesthetics as performative subjects to transform the image of learning disability. This is significant because it represents two intersecting identity categories that have not had the chance to be combined until very recently and I have argued their films offer the first

examples of what a neuroqueer subjectivity *looks* like. This performativity asserts Kennedy and Hellett as subjects and establishes their right *to* become subjects.

Chapter Four contributed to a more nuanced understanding of hooks' oppositional gaze by reframing it through Garland-Thomson's writing on staring to offer the theory of the oppositional stare. This expands on hooks' theory which allows black female spectators to see *themselves* in new affirming ways through the transformative image of black women on screen, but by drawing on the communicative potential of the stare, the oppositional stare of Kennedy and Hellett imagines a more social interaction through the use of direct address and cinematic techniques which invite the neuroqueer gaze. It is as Kennedy stated in the context of meeting Hellett for the first time, 'I see you, and you see me'.⁸⁸⁵

Chapter Five contributed to traditional understandings of queer visual activism by shifting focus from the 'visual' and offering the example of the learning disability film festival and archive as sites in which the refusal or 'activist' gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's work can be found beyond their actual filmmaking; within the contexts in which it is produced, shared and preserved. OBFF and Queer Freedom (QF) are radical spaces which provide a platform for neuroqueer voices which challenges the invisibility of neuroqueer narratives within mainstream screen cultures. The festival also fosters community by bringing neuroqueer filmmakers together and were it not for OBFF, Kennedy and Hellett's paths may not have crossed. The festival champions underrepresented voices and through Hellett's bold curation of QF consistently challenges pervading attitudes towards neuroqueerness. Kennedy's archive ensures this history is preserved for the benefit of future neuroqueer artists. Kennedy and Hellett's activism can be found in their 'space invading', where they 'carve out space' to borrow Kennedy's phrase in which their community can thrive. Their activism can be seen more clearly, but more subtly, in their collective consciousness to their community, seeing it as their responsibility as pioneers of neuroqueer filmmaking to protect and expand this space to ensure the wider community and future generations can flourish.

⁸⁸⁵ "Matthew and Matthew in Conversation"

Chapter Seven contributes knowledge to amateur film studies by introducing and expanding upon discourses of queer failure to argue Kennedy and Hellett embrace the amateurism imposed upon them by an ableist society that does not value learning disability art outside the art-as-therapy agenda. Kennedy and Hellett position their work within amateurism and both interpret the concept of failure as freedom. If queer failure represents the failure of heteronormativity, I argued a neuroqueer failure represents the failure of both heteronormativity and the productive body in capitalist society. This failure is navigated through amateur filmmaking and what emerges is a further contribution to a neuroqueer aesthetics. The use of amateur film technologies, DIY props in place of digital effects, and use of friends and family as crew/extras draws on the anti-capitalist aesthetics and approaches of punk and queer feminist art but adds another layer of meaning when it is considered these have been necessitated through a lack of access to funding or training and a devaluation of learning disability art. The failure they embrace is rooted in queerness but their multiple-otherness contributes new understandings of queer failure when the perceived failure of learning disability artists is their supposed inability to produce art which is considered of value. This research offers the first theorisation of queer failure to the field of amateur film studies.

Typically amateur film studies follow the trajectory that people deliberately move from amateur to professional or from professional to amateur. Chapter Seven further contributes knowledge to the field of amateur film studies by showing how Kennedy and Hellett complicate this notion by embracing the imposed amateurism and refusing to strive for professionalism and wish to remain at the margins.

Finally, *Not Mythmakers*, a film made by Kennedy as part of this research, offers a unique example of a collaborative film made remotely during a global pandemic which embraces the aesthetics of digital video conference software and encapsulates the spirit of DIY. The following section summarises the ways in which Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, curation and collecting challenge traditional understandings of the politics of queer and disability visibility and inclusion.

8.4: Visibility and inclusion

Price (2022) describes 'radical visibility' as

an approach to LGBT and disabled acceptance that emphasizes and celebrates that which is usually obscured. It lays claim to words that have been used to dehumanize our communities – queer, cripple, mad – and wears them defiantly, as a source of pride. Radical visibility presents tools such as canes and prostheses as enviable fashion accessories. It renders our differences cool.⁸⁸⁶

This approach to visibility has been intrinsic to queer and disability rights campaigning. This refusal to be rendered invisible and excluded, relegated to the margins or ostracised from society was characterised by the philosophy of both movements of being out and proud. Since the start of Gay Liberation, the call to arms has been to take to the streets, to be as visible as possible, exemplified by Queer Nation's slogan 'We're here. We're queer. Get used to it'. The popular disability rights mantra 'nothing about us without us' is a demand for inclusion and the movement drew on tactics of visibility such as sit-ins, protests and marches to draw attention to disability rights. Wong (2020) aims to make visible the first-hand experiences of contemporary disabled people. Noting how they had witnessed people throughout their life being encouraged to mask their visible differences, Price calls for this radical visibility of autism by undertaking what they call 'unmasking', the act of visibly embracing neurodiversity and refusing to pass or hide difference. The philosophy behind radical visibility is the rejection of assimilation and the refusal to accept the concept of normalcy within society. Radical visibility is ultimately a demand for inclusion.

Shildrick (2009) argues that 'theorists and activists alike – however they identify personally – are often deeply invested in a characteristically western conception of the world as grounded in binary opposites that seem to speak unproblematically to a socio-politics of having or not-having, and to inclusion or exclusion'.⁸⁸⁷ I believe Kennedy and Hellett's work complicates this notion of visibility and inclusion in their conspicuous lack of demand for mainstream inclusion, and in

⁸⁸⁶ Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing our Hidden Neurodiversity*, London: Monoray, 2022, 183

⁸⁸⁷ Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*, 6

Kennedy's case the outright rejection of it. Kennedy explained that their films are intended for marginal identities and were not produced with mainstream audiences in mind (Chapter Four). Their intention was clear from our interviews that they are only concerned with furthering visibility within their own community, to let other queer and/or learning-disabled people know that they exist and to encourage them to pick up the camera and make their own versions of self-representation. Frustrated at their own inability to find queer learning disability history, Kennedy started the Matthew and Matthew Archive (MMA) for the benefit of future generations of neuroqueer people so that they would not encounter the same frustrations. The archive is not an educational resource to raise awareness of their and Hellett's existence to mainstream society, it is a repository for neuroqueer people to find their *own* history.

It is unfortunate that I was unable to discuss these themes with Hellett who appears to feel differently to Kennedy and is pleased that an almost equal audience of learning-disabled and non-learning disabled attend OBFF (Chapter Five). This complicates my argument that Kennedy and Hellett challenge traditional politics of visibility, but it does not cancel them, because what is clear is that Hellett's curation of QF was not for the educational benefit of mainstream society, or even a call for inclusion and approval, but as a way of providing a platform for these marginal voices to be heard, for the benefit of each other. That non-learning-disabled attend and enjoy the festival is a bonus, but they are the secondary audience, and the films that are shown, as well as Hellett's, were not made or presented with these people in mind, they foremost serve the primary audience of learning-disabled people. These themes only emerged in my thinking towards the very end of this research process and so I could not discuss them directly with Kennedy either, therefore this is a theme that requires further attention at a later date and is one I intend to pursue.

I have drawn on the critical race theory of bell hooks throughout this research because I see the radical gesture of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking, curation and collecting as being in their search for visibility within their own community only, as a gesture of affirmation. This rejects assimilation but it also rejects the principle that there is a norm to be included in. To want to be included is to accept this norm and often with inclusion this is within a context that is conditional on certain adherences and rules of engagement. Chapter Seven explored this in the context of queer opting

out, demonstrating how Kennedy and Hellett refuse the dictates of a filmmaking standard and work with what they have because the point of making the film is more important than it adhering to a particular standard. The refusal gesture here lies not only at the ideological levels as we have seen in the approaches to and aesthetics of amateur filmmaking, but at the ontological level.

My research has paved the way for a neuroqueer theory of film which is informed by Honig's arc of refusal. This emerging theory acknowledges how neuroqueer people 'talk back' to a culture that has historically worked to silence and ostracise them at multiple levels, or to make their intersectional identity exhibitiv, where filmmakers like Kennedy and Hellett instead claim the experiential.⁸⁸⁸ The oppositional stare has been formed by Kennedy and Hellett in opposition to the hetero-ableist gaze, but which goes beyond challenging it. The oppositional stare refuses it altogether, it looks beyond or straight through it and focuses its attention on the neuroqueer community beyond.⁸⁸⁹

Curiously, Price Tweeted on 31st March 2022, one month before the publication of *Unmasking Autism*, that 'visibility is not liberation. it's being a pinned butterfly'.⁸⁹⁰ They are speaking more in the context of coming out as trans in the workplace and how this is not always the appropriate thing for people to do, but their point seems to contradict the ones asserted in *Unmasking Autism* about radical visibility. Smilges (2019) has critiqued visibility within similar contexts of the complexities of who can and cannot be out. They offer the term 'queer rhetorical silence', whereby a queer person's claim to queerness can exist within both silence and speech, offering the example of the anonymous avatar of a Grindr profile as navigating both queer speech and silence simultaneously. Smilges and Price's points align with those of Holliday and Hassard (2003) who assert that 'making visible the previously invisible is no simple matter: visibility may mean exposure, may mean spoiled identity'.⁸⁹¹ This is suggestive of a self-preservation or care for the self and community that I see present in Kennedy and Hellett's work and which I

⁸⁸⁸ hooks, *Black Looks*, 131

⁸⁸⁹ hooks, *Black Looks*, 126

⁸⁹⁰ Devon Price, *Twitter*, 31 Mar 2022

⁸⁹¹ Holliday and Hassard, *Contested Bodies*, 4

highlighted in Chapter Five. Hellett stated that people who do not like what he does with QF can 'get lost', as it is not for them anyway presumably.⁸⁹² This evokes Salah's (2021) point that trans genre literature ought not to 'pander' to a non-trans readership.⁸⁹³ As Kennedy explained, and I paraphrase, when a group of people are *that* marginalised, they have to look out for one another as a community and focus on protecting and valuing those people within it as a priority. The political gesture can be found in their making films which speaks to a primary audience that have in-group knowledge, and that part of the refusal is to for Kennedy and Hellett to self-represent their complicated selves knowing that the audience will pick up on those dissonances, rather than cater to a heteroableist gaze that attempts to make their neuroqueer identities understandable to a secondary audience. Having said that, I do not want to imply that secondary audiences cannot understand the neuroqueer experiences they see on screen through Kennedy and Hellett's films, and those of producers and performers associated with QF.

QF allows neuroqueer filmmakers the space to be without the pressure of campaigning for rights or calling for inclusion. Price notes how 'almost every person with a mental illness or disability has been crushed under the weight of neurotypical expectations, and has repeatedly tried and failed to earn acceptance by playing the rules of a game that was designed to harm us'.⁸⁹⁴ As I argued in Chapter Five, rather than 'invade space', as is more in line with traditional queer and disability politics, they instead opt out of the game (a further celebration of queer failure) and 'create space' which is where their radical gesture lies. This is significantly important when you consider the context that people with learning disabilities have historically been segregated and isolated from opportunities to do something on this scale. Kennedy and Hellett operate within both speech and silence,⁸⁹⁵ inclusion and exclusion and visibility and invisibility, all on their own terms and on the condition that it is of benefit to their wider community.

⁸⁹² Hellett, "Sparkle and Space," 181

⁸⁹³ T. Salah, "Transgender and Transgenre Writing," Ed. J. Miller, *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 186

⁸⁹⁴ Price, *Unmasking Autism*, 12

⁸⁹⁵ J. Logan Smilges, "White Squares to Black Boxes: Grindr, Queerness, Rhetorical Silence," *Rhetoric Review* 38.1 (2019)

The paradox that has emerged throughout this research is that, even within the space of OBFF and QF, Hellett has taken on the role of gatekeeper as Lead Programmer for the festival, and similarly Kennedy as curator of the MMA archive. In their rejection of one type of inclusion, they have created their own rules of engagement which hold power over what films are chosen for the festival or what ephemera is chosen for collection in the archive. This is not intended as a criticism of their curation or collection, which I have made clear is revolutionary in its execution - but more of an observation of how models of inclusion and exclusion can be replicated even at the grassroots level. Membership to any community, short of anarchism, relies on a certain level of structure.

8.5: Next steps

From this research has emerged several areas for further study. The articulation of neuroqueer aesthetics requires further attention and contextualisation by artists beyond Kennedy and Hellett. To understand how this intersection is represented in different racial and global contexts would contribute more nuanced knowledge to the arguments posed in this thesis. As reviewed in detail in Chapter Two, the majority of accounts at the intersection of neuroqueerness is through written texts, often autobiographical, self-help or within a medical discourse. Further research into how this intersection is represented through different forms of artistic practice will contribute a different perspective to the field and will also expand the field of visual and material culture studies.

The performance of Drag Syndrome elicits further study as an example of neuroqueer visual activism. As a group they have experienced direct negativity as a result of their work, so their performance challenges current negative attitudes and challenges discourses of vulnerability. As discussed in Chapter One, issues of whiteness are limited in discussions of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking throughout this research, which signals the need for future research to explicitly engage with the additional intersection of race to offer a more nuanced perspective of neuroqueerness. Relatedly, it was announced via Drag Syndrome's Instagram in October 2022 that 'Lady Francesca made history as the world's first black drag

queen superstar with Down syndrome (sic) celebrating Black History Month',⁸⁹⁶ and so Lady Francesca is an artist that produces unique visual expressions of neuroqueerness from their perspective as a black drag queen.

Research into the impacts of OBFF's touring efforts would be useful to gauge how successful they have been at building community through filmmaking. The final element of Kennedy and Hellett's filmmaking is missing from this thesis, and that is the reception of these films by the community to which they are aimed, to understand the political economy of their films and the impact they have on community building and encouraging involvement. This would make a significant contribution to the field of film festival studies, a field whose apparatus Damiens (2020) highlights does not adequately apply to the vast majority of festivals: 'its theoretical and methodological tools, devised for international festivals, do not necessarily account for smaller events'.⁸⁹⁷ Damiens notes that scholars are therefore calling for the critical examination of 'other' film festivals,⁸⁹⁸ which is a description that could easily be applied to OBFF.

The politics of animation that surround Kennedy's filmmaking is not addressed in this research, but the potential of animation to disrupt or reinforce arguments within the field of animation studies would benefit from future research. Aforementioned discussions around authorship and the limitations of textual analysis highlighted in Chapters Three and Six also provide opportunity for future research, particularly in conversation with the forthcoming edited volume *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method* (Mills and Sanchez, 2023). Recovering authorship as a neuroqueer aesthetic can resolve tensions and contradictions in trying to articulate attempts to make visible the invisible.

At present it would seem the work of Kennedy and Hellett, and OBFF, remains at the margins of the film world. Honig notes that exile is 'usually read as a tragic, lamentable fate with no future' but another way of reading this is that it could

⁸⁹⁶ Drag Syndrome. "Lady Francesca made history as the world's first black drag queen superstar with Down syndrome celebrating Black History Month 2022." Instagram. @dragsyndrome. 24 Oct 2022.

⁸⁹⁷ Antoine Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 23

⁸⁹⁸ Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals*, 23

be a fracturing of space to allow 'something new, if not yet possible'.⁸⁹⁹ OBFF and QF is a space in which neuroqueer people have the space to do something new, even if the wider world is not quite ready for it. The cancellation of the Drag Syndrome show in Michigan did not negatively impact upon Drag Syndrome, in fact it proved useful in highlighting the continuing infantilisation of neuroqueer people and provided them with supportive publicity. As the saying goes, there is no such thing as bad press, and their cancelled show was immediately snapped up by another venue and they are now booked all over the world.

8.6: Final thought

The neuroqueer refusal of Kennedy and Hellett, and extended to Drag Syndrome, works in the minor. Manning (2016) posits the major as 'a structural tendency that organizes itself according to predetermined definitions of value. The minor is a force that courses through it, unmooring its structural integrity, problematizing its normative standards'.⁹⁰⁰ This thesis has posed an argument for neuroqueer refusal through the medium of amateur film, itself a minor form in relation to its major professional film counterpart. Neuroqueer refusal problematizes normativity but it also problematizes queerness and learning disability. By analysing Kennedy and Hellett's work at the intersection of both already complex identity categories, it has been possible to see neuroqueerness as 'rhythmically inventing its own pulse'⁹⁰¹ and initiating 'subtle shifts'⁹⁰² to quote Manning, where 'new forms of existence' are represented which activate 'new forms of perception'.⁹⁰³ These new forms of existence are the transformative images of learning disability Kennedy and Hellett have created, the new forms of perception are the new queer ways we can see learning disability. Neuroqueerness can be seen in the 'minor' gesture through the invention of a neuroqueer aesthetics, a language that can 'speak in the interstices of major tongues'⁹⁰⁴ to create 'sites of dissidence'.⁹⁰⁵ While these new images and aesthetics Kennedy and Hellett have produced are anything but 'subtle', their

⁸⁹⁹ Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, 89

⁹⁰⁰ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 1

⁹⁰¹ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2

⁹⁰² Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 1

⁹⁰³ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2

⁹⁰⁴ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2

⁹⁰⁵ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2

subtlety lies in their community context, in opposition to a radical visibility, through a targeted visibility of a neuroqueer community.

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Appendix Two: Kennedy and Hellett Filmography

Mattie Kennedy

What is Femme Anyway? Dir. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Camera by Andrew Kennedy . Available at Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/user22823704>

Just Me. Dir. Mattie Kennedy. 2013. Camera by Andrew Kennedy. Available at Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/user22823704>

Versions. Dir. Mattie Kennedy. 2015. Music by Teadora. Made in collaboration with Project Ability! Available at Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/user22823704>

Enid and Valerie. Dir. Mattie Kennedy. 2018. Animation by Vitoria Bas. Made in collaboration with CANVAS and Carousel. Available at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGCXLsv91eI>

Not Mythmakers. Dir. Mattie Kennedy. 2022. Produced by Carousel. Supported by Lizzie Banks. Music by Bensound. Funded by the Centre for Design History and the Centre for Trasforming Sexuality and Gender at the University of Brighton and Design Star Centre for Doctoral Training Available at Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/user22823704>

Matthew Hellett

Cooking with Matthew. Dir. Matthew Hellett. 2006. Available at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAQV3y3Hc3o>

Unusual Journey. Dir. Matthew Hellett. 2007. Commissioned by Brighton and Hove City Council. Produced by Carousel. Available at YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6L3O6Lnctbc>

Sparkle. Dir. Matthew Hellett. 2008. Produced by Carousel. Available at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znIzyQtvLHs>

Mrs Sparkle. Dir. Matthew Hellett. 2009. Commissioned by South East Dance. Produced by Carousel. Available at YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkZoaYfkB1A&t=182s>

Appendix Three: Participant Information Sheet



University of Brighton

Participation Information Sheet

Title of Study

Exploring learning disability amateur filmmaking as
transformative community practice.

Introduction - what is the purpose of the study?

My name is Jenna Allsopp and I am a PhD student at
the University of Brighton.

I am originally from Newcastle upon Tyne but I
moved to Brighton in 2007 as I fell in love with the
city. I lived there for 11 years and now live back in
Newcastle to be closer to my family. I love music
and used to DJ at different pubs and clubs around
Brighton.

One of my main passions in life is watching films. I am very interested in how film can change perceptions and challenge stereotypes.

I am particularly interested in film making by people whose voices are not normally heard. I am very interested in your work as it is one of very few examples where film is being used to claim space as a person who identifies as both LGBTQ and as having a learning disability.

I believe you and Matthew Hellett are two of the only people to be doing this work in the UK and I think it is important that attention is brought to your work.

Invitation

I would like to invite you to take part in my research into less known film makers. I would like to interview you about your work and how you see

yourself as an LGBTQ artist working within the disability film making community.

I have secured £4500 of funding which can be used so that you can make a short film, either by yourself or with Matthew Hellett, in response to our conversations about your work, or both.

Do I have to take part? What will happen to me if I take part?

You do not have to take part in this study, it is completely voluntary.

If you do decide to take part but then change your mind at a later date, you are allowed to withdraw from the study at any point and you do not have to give me a reason for doing so.

I will ask to interview you about your work which will take roughly one hour. Someone from Oskia Bright will be present to support you during this process.

During the interviews on Zoom, I will record the video and audio on my laptop. This will then be stored securely.

Will I be paid for taking part?

I am unable to pay you for your time but all expenses such as travel, accommodation and equipment hire (if necessary) will be covered in the research budget.

Will my taking part in the study/project be kept confidential?

As I am discussing your work as an artist who shows your work in public, you will not be anonymous in the study.

What are the potential benefits of taking part?

- your professional development in film making
- the opportunity to discuss your work with people from different backgrounds such as members of

the community and people who study at and work at universities

- the opportunity for you to continue to create work in your chosen media
- potential opportunities to co-publish research with Jenna
- the opportunity for community outreach projects such as a film screening, mini film festival, a conference, Q&A event, an exhibition etc.
- to create awareness of your work but more importantly to raise awareness of the issues raised and dealt with in the work. They will be accessible to a new and wider audience that might not usually have access to your work

What are the potential disadvantages or risks of taking part?

- The main risk involved in this research study is you feeling uncomfortable talking about being an artist with a learning disability who also identifies as LBGTQ.
- I will not be asking questions related to your private life so I will not be seeking highly personal information.

- I will ensure you have the opportunity to read all the questions before the day of the interview. You can change or delete any questions you do not want to answer.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. You do not have to give a reason for withdrawing and there will be no consequences if you do.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The results of the research will make up the final thesis of my PhD. A thesis is a very long essay about my research. Small sections of the research might one day be published in online journals and might be presented at conferences. You can be given copies of all these if you would like to see them.

I would like to work with you to publish the research in different types of media in order that it can be accessible to as many people as possible.

You will be offered the opportunity to read the final PhD thesis, if you would like to.

Who is organising and funding the research?

Jenna Allsopp is undertaking this research as a PhD student at the University of Brighton and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

What if I have a question or concern?

You are free to email Jenna or a person not related to the research at the contact details below.

Researcher:

Jenna Allsopp

Email: redacted _____

Independent contact at the University of Brighton:

you can contact this person if you want to speak to someone other than Jenna about the research for

whatever reason:

Tim Parkinson, Ethics Integrity and Due Diligence

Email: redacted

This study has been approved by the University of Brighton's Tier 2 ethics panel

For more information, please see the University of Brighton's Research and Privacy Notice:

[https://staff.brighton.ac.uk/ease/ro/CREC Published Documents/Privacy Notice Research May 2018.pdf](https://staff.brighton.ac.uk/ease/ro/CREC%20Published%20Documents/Privacy%20Notice%20Research%20May%202018.pdf)

Appendix Four: Participant consent form



University of Brighton

Participant Consent Form

**Working Title of Project:
Exploring learning disability
amateur filmmaking as
transformative community
practice.**

Name of Researcher: Jenna Allsopp

	Yes	No
I have read and understood the participant information sheet for this study		

<p>I have had the opportunity to ask questions</p>		
<p>Jenna has explained the purpose of the study and how it will be carried out</p>		
<p>I know I will be asked to take part in two interviews with Jenna. Someone from Oska Bright will be present at all times to offer support.</p>		
<p>Jenna has explained that she can complete her research regardless of my involvement so there is no obligation for me to take part if I do not want to.</p>		
<p>I understand this is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time. I do not have to give a reason for withdrawing and there will be no consequences as a result.</p>		

I agree to Jenna using information from interviews collected to that point, should I withdraw from the project		
I understand how the information will be collected and used. I understand any confidential information will be seen only by Jenna and her supervision team.		
I understand Jenna will retain the information collected from interviews for up to 10 years (2028)		
I consent to being audio and video recorded or photographed. I consent to Jenna using the information from the audio recordings in future publications such as the final thesis and academic journal articles, displays in exhibitions and/or online publications		
I agree to take part in the above study.		

Please sign overleaf

Please sign below:

.....
.....

Preferred name of Participant, Date, Signature

.....
.....

Name of Researcher, Date, Signature

.....
.....

Name of witness, Date, Signature

Appendix Five: Questions/topics to discuss in Kennedy interviews:

Interview 1

- 1) How do you feel about the term 'amateur' in relation to your filmmaking, considering for a lot of people the word 'amateur' holds negative connotations such as something that is lower quality or unaccomplished? More positive interpretations of the word include film historian Patricia Zimmerman who describes amateur filmmaking as 'a visual practice emerging out of dispersed, localized, and often minoritized cultures, not a practice imposed on them' and argues amateur film tells 'stories by and for those who have been denied a history. Amateur film has been described as permitting us to see the unseen. You have mentioned Maya Deren before and she was a big promoter of embracing amateur status and wrote an essay on the subject called "amateur vs professional". She drew attention to the origins of the word amateur coming from the Latin for love 'amator' which means it is something done for love not money. Is amateur a word that you are comfortable being applied to your work or not? Do you have a different word that you feel best describes your artistic practice or genre/style?

- 2) I think the subject of representation is important when thinking about your work, so I would like to hear your opinions on if you feel there is a lack of queer learning-disabled representation and your motivation to self-represent by appearing in your own films. How do you want to be represented or 'seen' by others? This comes across very strongly in *What is Femme Anyway* and *Just Me* where you use mirror reflections and extreme close ups, particularly when you literally stick labels to your face and body.

- 3) In one of our chats, you and Matthew spoke about the TV show *Derek* and the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and how their representation of learning disability was quite offensive. Can we speak a bit more about your thoughts on this and also if you have any other examples of media representations that have bothered you?

- 4) Why did you choose film as your preferred artistic medium, over painting for example? What is it about film as a medium that you find best allows you to communicate your art?
- 5) What was your motivations for making the films and who are they intended for? Who do you want to watch them? I have noticed you do not 'push' the films online like some artists do who are always posting about their work on Facebook and Instagram and trying to attract more followers, gain more likes. This makes me think the films were not intended for a mass audience but I may be wrong? Do you see yourself as part of an internet culture?
- 6) You have spoken often about taking up space, can we speak in more detail about the concept of space, so filmmaking in itself as a space to experiment, Oska Bright as a space for building community and sharing works/ideas, but also wider ideas of space and the space you want to take up. Maybe we could talk about your blog as a space to share your thoughts.
- 7) The idea of art created by people with learning difficulties and disabilities has always been dismissed as 'therapy' and therefore in my opinion not been given the critical attention it deserves in the art world. But in *Just Me* you say that having a voice calms your anxiety, and I suppose by making films, you are giving yourself that voice? So my question is, do you think there is a bit of therapy involved in ALL art, not just by those with learning difficulties? And is any part of your filmmaking process an act of self-care would you say?
- 8) You are very drawn to the image of the witch, the spinster, the hag, what is it about these images and types of women that appeal to you and what do they represent to you?
- 9) If we could talk a little about terminology, I know we spoke briefly about your ambivalence towards the word 'radical' and your preference of 'advocacy' over 'activism', but if we could return to your thoughts on that very briefly. I don't know

if you aware of the word 'crip' that has been reclaimed by the disability community in the spirit that 'queer' was, but I wonder if you had an opinion on that word as it holds nasty historical connotations.

10) Some quite straight forward questions about your toy camera such as how much it cost and how easy it was to work with, any previous film training you have ever had.

11) What made you experiment with animation with *Versions* and *Enid and Valerie*? You employ the use of collage a few times, do you see filmmaking as a type of collage too?

Interview 2

12) And finally, it would be great to have a discussion about the archive!

- a. We can discuss 'what is an archive?' as a broad question
- b. what archives are you aware of or have you tried to access?
- c. why is the archive so important to you?
- d. We can discuss who gets to chose what goes in the archive and what gets left out
- e. your Matthew and Matthew archive, what is in it, why did you start it, what do you want to happen to it?
- f. is this archive also a form of taking up space in history?
- g. who do you want to be able to access your archive?
- h. Anything else you would like to discuss regarding any aspect of archiving or history