

cinema scope

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Mass Ornaments

Jodie Mack on *The Grand Bizarre*

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS

“For the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home.”—“The Painter of Modern Life,” Charles Baudelaire

I only first met Jodie Mack—one of the most imaginative, hard-working, and all-around best filmmakers in the game, experimental or otherwise—two Septembers ago. It was a Sunday, the day before I turned 31, and the night ended with her leading the entire clientele of a crowded pub in Toronto’s Little Italy to sing me “Happy Birthday” just after midnight. Many of the people there were strangers to her, and in some sense I was, too, which of course didn’t faze her in the least. Mack is, after all, one of contemporary avant-garde cinema’s greatest proponents of fellowship and happiness in the cinema space—bulldozing borders one frame, fabric swatch, paper clipping, and song at a time.

We see this cosmopolitanism throughout her practice; whether we assign the work to the tradition of animation, *anti*-animation, hyper-vertical montage, or the present wave

of abstract film collage (where we also find key figures such as Janie Geiser and Lewis Klahr), Mack's ethics always trend toward foregrounding unity—the mitigation of individualism, annihilating barriers tangible and intangible. Her viewers are rarely quarantined or isolated from the images and fellow audience members sharing the space with them. When *Rad Plaid* (2010) is screened, people in the room are invited to “team up,” so that half the room shouts “Plaid!” when vertical lines appeared on the screen, while the other half shouts “Rad!” at the sight of horizontal lines, establishing a sense of division and an air of competition. But as the film's montage grows increasingly rapid over its duration, any sense of grouping or “taking sides” is eventually obliterated as everyone becomes unified through their simultaneous barks of gibberish. It should have surprised absolutely no one when Mack made a 3D film for prismatic glasses—the three-minute, full-spectrum spectacle *Let Your Light Shine* (2013)—as it was this format (“stereocinema”) that Eisenstein believed would finally abolish the screen as a division between the onscreen “elite” and the masses, allowing the two spaces and classes to feel as though they were one.

It is equally unsurprising, then, that Mack's first feature-length work, the hour-long *The Grand Bizarre*, would forge a notion of integration that seems to be lacing through the entire planet. Set to an original score of eclectic pop-song beats, Mack's opus sees her camera zoom through vista after vista—rural, urban, seaside elsewheres—as pixilated patches of patterned textiles quiver and crawl over the frame. Often either displayed in piles or framed by rear-view mirrors of transportation vehicles, her materials dance spastically before our eyes while her stop-motion technique, which ensures that there are

both constant and discontinuous elements in the frame during a shot, holds the rest of the world in a steady time-lapse: sunlight wiping the land up and down, unseen workers opening and closing their work days. All is collective, and it's a credit to Mack's accomplishment that the viewing experience that *The Grand Bizarre* offers is dynamic enough to contain and present a critique of these processes even while it encourages us to tap our feet along to its rhythms, synched up to operations and tasks that are so labour-intensive that they become compulsive and then addictive.

If we look back to Trinh T. Minh-ha's critique of ethnographic filmmaking—a mode, she argued, that is flawed by its implied division of the “out-there” shown on screen and the “in-here” of the audience looking at it—we begin to see how Mack conjures up a new kind of antidote to the tradition's historical problematics. In giving primacy to things over people, *The Grand Bizarre* mounts a radical, object-oriented ethnography, one that encapsulates our present, capitalist epoch from within, showcasing the life of the mind by presenting the world to us all at once. As cross-cultural assemblages of garments flicker before our eyes in rapid succession, the materials' latent likenesses, common motifs, and tokens amalgamate to become spectacles of our moment in history. Technicolor mandalas explode from tablecloths, skirts, and maps, while lines from geometry textbooks, OS command language, and hieroglyph translations detail the inherent glamour of grammar. Any given object's formal specificity is important insofar as it contributes to the greater image of how we live and move, in the plural tense. Like any well-worn allegory of cinema itself, all meaning, animation, and life of any kind is derived from the multiple.



Cinema Scope: *The Grand Bizarre* is a movie that I think in many ways defies categorization, but part of that is because it has a little bit of everything: it's a musical, it's an ethnographic documentary, it's an animation, etc. Do you think of the movie as belonging to any specific tradition or genre?

Jodie Mack: I'm definitely inspired by musicals and classic Hollywood cinema, though at the same time I was really free while making this movie because I didn't have any templates to follow of what I wanted to do. I wished someone could tell me, "Oh, there's this musical documentary pop-music album about labour that is really great and you should watch it!" to get a sense of what I was thinking. Instead I had to pick and choose from different things. There's a ton of experimental cinema influences, including people who aren't normally thought of as related to me or my work. For example, Peter Hutton.

Scope: I did think of *At Sea* (2007) when you show the stacked, colourful cargo containers.

Mack: That film, and this idea of animated long takes. I couldn't shoot anything longer than 30 seconds because that's the duration of a full wind on the Bolex, and so while I did have a couple of shots that go the full 30, most of the time you have this ultra-compression of time under the illusion of a long take, where you can see the light passing super-quickly. So you have this notion of "durational cinema" from a guy like Hutton that comes into play. I'm working in the opposite extreme of our long-take brothers and sisters out there.

But you asked me about genre, so let me get back to that for a second. I mean, it's in dialogue with travel advertisements, the music video, etc. It's all these languages in one, but it also plays with the idea of the cellular. From the cells on the film strip to the textile patterns, there are all these analogies between the textiles and our physiology, between the textiles and our modes of production. This movie and also *Hoarders Without Borders* deal with objects as specimens, in some sense, and I think they could offer a solid explanation to an alien of what it means to live in our mode of consciousness. They're like data regurgitations or time capsules—portals that reveal some sort of truth.

Scope: The short artist's statement you wrote for the film mentions something to that effect, about how the film "transcribes an experience of alien(nation)(s)," which made me consider the movie as somehow working in the spirit of science fiction. There's something extraterrestrial about the gaze that your camera and editing creates here.

Mack: At the very end of making *The Grand Bizarre* I started to consider science fiction, namely the differences between science fiction and religious doctrine. Somebody mentioned to me St. Thomas Aquinas' ecstatic visions at the end of his life. Also relevant was this idea of an energy—what Federico García Lorca called the *duende*—that is drawn from both the viewers in the cinema and the speed of what's happening on screen. So I almost feel like I was working in the spirit of the church sermon, like I was a cult leader or something.

Scope: Since you talk about religious experience, I wanted to ask about this one shot you include of an escalator rising out of the darkness into this glistening, almost holy sunlight.



Mack: Oh, the "Dorsky shot?"

Scope: I put it down in my notes as the "Dorsky shot" so I'm relieved that you call it that, too!

Mack: I shot it in San Francisco and thought of him while doing so! I was so taken with this talk that Jerome Hiler gave last fall where he talked about medieval churches and stained-glass windows. Apparently, medieval churches only had one source of illumination: just the stained-glass window in the front of the church. So Jerome claims these are basically the first cinemas, because there's movement going on; there's no other source of illumination. It reminds me of Len Lye's way of describing his abstract animations, which he called stained-glass daydreams. But, yeah, I have a few of these connecting shots like this one in the film, which just show various forms of transportation technologies—escalators, boats, stairs—which are about mobility and function to move us through the landscape.

Scope: Landscape seems to be very important in *The Grand Bizarre*. You keep textiles front and centre for almost the entire film; you frame them so that the viewer will also be conscious of the surrounding landscape, geography, and the planet as a whole. The light passes, and we feel the Earth's rotation, as well as the way your editing methodology stays true to the chronology of your production timeline.

Mack: I don't know if other people would consider this a landscape movie, but I think it's worth a shot to try and put it in that category. Some of the time-passing moments are just unavoidable when doing this type of shooting, and it was definitely a new element to invite into my shooting process, not really having so much experience with shooting outside or over extended periods of time. A lot of the different sections of the film are organized around day passing into night, or night into sunrise. And



I really tried to play around with this sense of revolution and the cyclical nature of the work day by putting in, for example, the animated sequences with the globes spinning, the churning of wheels and mechanical devices, things like that. But I think these natural elements became some of the most beautiful qualities of the film. I wanted to give a sense of the “everyplace”—a space where all these things are happening simultaneously.

Scope: How many places did you actually travel to for this project?

Mack: A lot of the production started out for other cinema-related stuff. A few of the earlier shots were done while I was doing workshops, and then about halfway through the production I started going places with shooting in mind, seeking out specific subjects and images. But all in all I filmed it over a period of five years, and I think I shot in about 15 or 16 countries—every continent except Antarctica.

Scope: Antarctica would’ve been cool, but then *The Grand Bizarre* is such a warm movie, in multiple ways. You’re filming in warmer climates, but also what some are calling an emotional warmth: a sense of generosity that your work is often pegged as having. Do you also see your work as having this benevolent, joyful, exuberant attitude?

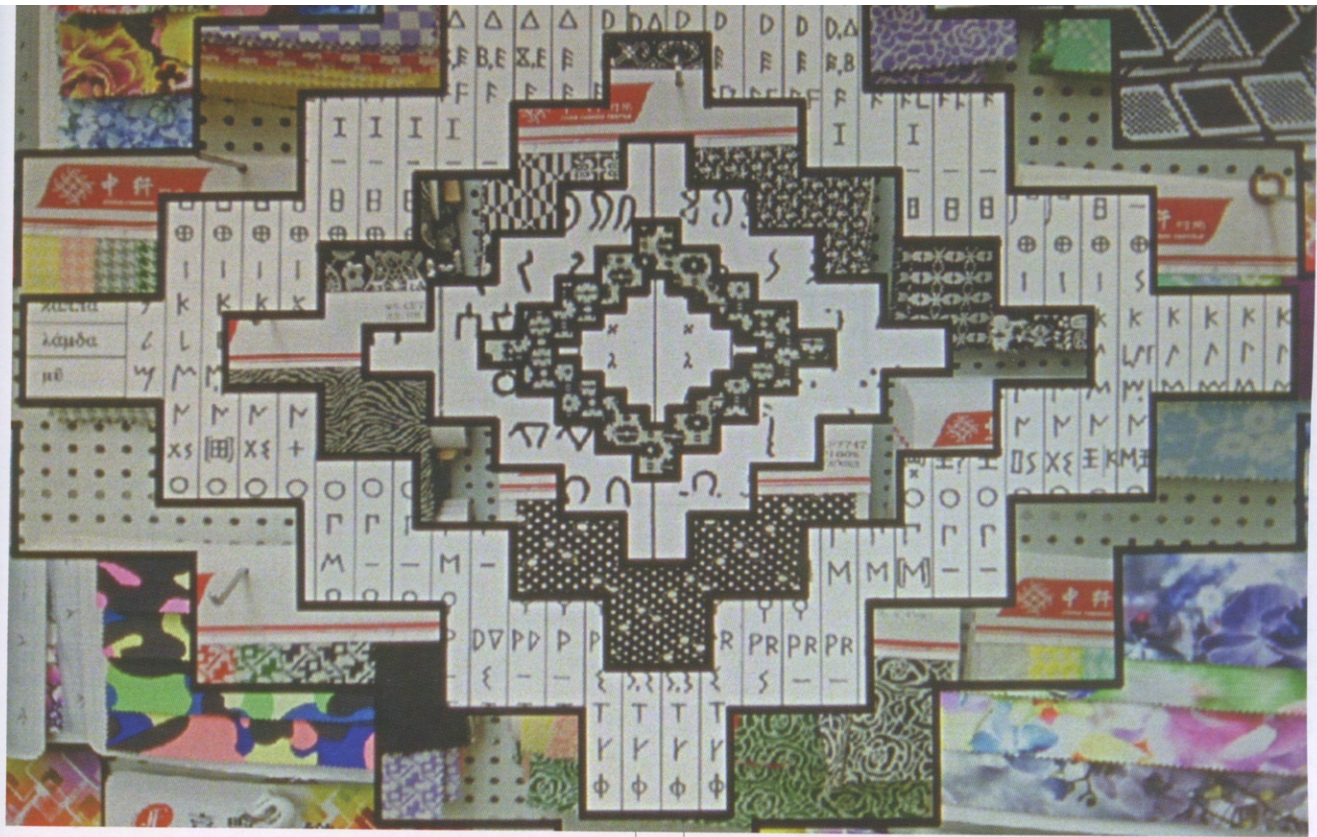
Mack: As far as the question of my work’s “generosity” is concerned, I think that one is gonna keep coming up. I feel several ways about the film, and I think certain parts of it are dazzling and generous. But also many parts of it are about multi-faceted codification. The whole sense of “bedazzlement” could be like the camouflage on boats that masks where it is in the water. Like a lot of my work, this film is a bit deceptive, and it’s got multiple conduits through which you can read it. You can read it on the surface and allow it to be this kind of sensory experience, but it’s

also trying to do a lot of work to make connections between different elements, whether that’s in the language and the rhythms and the patterns and the textiles, or in, for example, the superimpositions of labour and product or labour and movement. Some of the scenes where live-action footage is strobing against my animated footage are the most crucial parts to me.

That all said, the movie *is* warm, to a point where I was like, “Should I start shooting some things in wintry climates?” But there were a few things at hand. One, I was only travelling to shoot it when I wasn’t teaching, so it was really just the summer months that I was able to get some work done; honestly, I kind of like the “what I did with my summer vacation,” *Reading Rainbow* kind of vibe that gives it. Then there’s the fact that a lot of the weavers worked outside in warmer climates, and the farming for the materials that they’d need to make their dyes needs summer climates, so the shooting schedule kind of needed to be that way anyway. That said, to me the movie actually does get somewhat cold when it moves into air-conditioned, institutionalized spaces like the library, or the factory with the computer-made textiles.

Scope: I’m curious about what kind of interactions you had with the workers in the places you visited, if you spent any time interviewing them or learning some of their processes.

Mack: There were definitely different relationships for different types of things, and I went to a lot of different types of places, from visiting family units that dye and weave everything by hand, to embroidery factories that are making Holiday Inn shirts, to huge factories that are screen-printing saris, to textile archives and weaving collectives. But I definitely spent a couple of days to a week with the majority of the people that were doing handmade things, as our relationships were by nature more



intimate; in many cases I was staying with them, so we weren't limited to the constraints of a work day. I saw the dyeing processes, the way they made their threads, the ways they drew out their diagrams, and how they would remember them by heart. I also did a little bit of weaving myself. In the factories I kind of got a good sense of what was going on, but they were so dense I felt like I could've stayed there for much longer.

Scope: And for the materials that you were photographing, were these mostly found, or did you borrow or purchase a lot of them from the people you met?

Mack: I did buy some, and some people's stuff I shot on location. But a lot of the materials you see in the film are cheap knockoffs of things that might look like the real thing. Some of them I just got out of the trash, and they were off-gassing in front of me while I was animating under the camera. Some of them I washed, some of them I needed to iron. The dirtier ones I needed to shake out. Actually that's why I sneezed at the end. It's a real sneeze!

Scope: It's a very funny ending.

Mack: Thanks! I was looking for a way to end the movie for a while, and I finally thought of having a really long section with no music but just the sound of me making the animation, because the sound is so similar to the sound of textiles being produced.

Scope: Oh, it really is. I thought it *was* a sewing machine.

Mack: Right, and that's the thing! It's actually me shooting what you're seeing. There are all these fibres coming out of the fabrics while I'm handling them, so I sneezed quite often when I was animating this one. It's a funny little moment. I didn't want the film to lose its sense of humour when I took out all the lyrics I'd originally recorded for the soundtrack.

Scope: What were the lyrics like?

Mack: Well, there were several different kinds of vocals in that early version of the film. The idea was always to flirt with all the different kinds of vocals that are found in contemporary pop music. And this includes autotune singing, talking, freestyle, and so on. But the songs really read like cheesy essays in time. There was an introduction song, a song about language, one about the economy, one about education. Then there were these more narrative directions I tried, like one where an alter-ego narrator named "Professor Oppressor" would go around haggling with people. She realized that the textiles could talk to her, so she asked them where they came from, and they told her that some people used creation myths to describe their origins while others thought they came from science (and that they had contemporary problems stemming from thousands of years of similar debates). So she saw that these textiles had the same problems that people have! It had this *Creature Comforts* (1989) vibe—that Nick Park movie where he interviews all the animals at the zoo. I went down all sorts of avenues and ultimately I was just like, "Jodie, cut it out!"

Scope: Did you make the music for this film yourself? I know that in the past you've collaborated with other musicians to score your work.

Mack: I made the majority of it. There are 12 songs in the film and I made ten of them. A friend did one of the beats for the library song, and another friend beefed up the instrumentation in the first track. And then there's another part that's a remix of something I made with a song I found on the internet that uses the Skype ringtone. My background is in musical theatre, so musicals have been where my interests in filmmaking lie

for a long time, though I did have visions of making *The Grand Bizarre* silent at some point.

Scope: Completely silent?

Mack: Yeah! But with all of the experiences I had while I was travelling, noticing the homogeneity of pop music, ultimately I felt I needed to take on pop in this one. Every nation is listening to pop music in 4/4. It doesn't matter their musical tradition, it does not matter their history. It's 4/4 on the radio, man, and there's been a lot of writing about the idea of rhythm and how it makes people into better workers. "Whistle while you work." It turns you into a machine.

Technology has a way of reducing the nuance of everything. You have all this music with beautiful patterns that can be so intricate—these beautiful polyrhythmic music cultures, cultures that have microtones, people that do things in all sorts of crazy time signatures, gamelan, tabla, etc.—but then it gets dumbed down into a computer-developed "mm-ch-mm-ch-mm-ch-mm-ch" thing with a basic 4/4 structure. The software for creating images and music is another thing, because they only give you the illusion of creative choice, when it's really just proprietary choices that you have to work with. Like in Photoshop, you only have a certain amount of brushes you can use, or how in GarageBand or Ableton Live there's only a finite number of sounds you can sample unless you're making your own. It feels like, "Ooh, here's a box of toys, let's play with them," when really everything you make with these tools is governed by proprietary software.

Scope: Was this the first time you worked in irregular time signatures?

Mack: I also did for *Dusty Stacks of Mom* (2013), because I had the task of writing lyrics to Pink Floyd's "Money," which was written in 7, and then *Let Your Light Shine* had polyrhythms of 5/8 and 7/8. For *The Grand Bizarre* I wanted to go big so I did the first song in 11, which is very strange, because it's extremely abnormal for a pop song to be in 11—except for OutKast's "Hey Ya!" which emulates an 11/4 signature over four or eight bars or something like that, I can't remember. So that song was in 11, and it had words at one point. Tricky at first, but compound time signatures are all about groupings! "One-two-three-One-two-three-One-two-three-One-two."

Scope: It sounds like the songs were, if not pedagogical, concerned with notions of learning.

Mack: Definitely. For me, the whole experience of making the film was one of accessing different types of knowledge—specifically, an "experienced" knowledge and a "learned" knowledge. It's the difference between these workers making textiles based on their memories and traditions, and someone going to research the different textiles or learning the correct nomenclature to discuss their weaving techniques and their role in the economy, religion, etc. It's about all these ways of accessing knowledge: reading about the world vs. watching a movie about the world vs. looking up different parts of the world on the internet vs. going out to a different place. You start to see parallels between all these forms of knowledge, and how they all relate to

class distinctions: the elite, institutionalized access to knowledge against "poorer" types of knowledge that are only gained through experience; the expensive textiles and the cheap textiles. The whole idea of language itself is a matter of class. You have to be of a certain class to learn language, and you have to be of a certain class to know how to speak and write that language correctly. To practice art. To learn to read and write music. To have the time to play music.

Scope: Do these concerns over class distinctions with regards to knowledge acquisition and language inform your decision to use or not use language? Almost every film I've seen of yours is devoid of language, with *Dusty Stacks of Mom* of course being a major exception.

Mack: The question of whether or not to include words in this movie was a question mark for a really long time. I'd been applying for a bunch of documentary funds, and the language of those applications are all about, "Who are the characters, what is their story arc, how are you gonna tell the story, how are you gonna make all of this clear," and I think this whole time I was struggling with finding the right strategies for implying things. At the end of the day, after going into the vortex of seeing that textiles are related to basically everything in the entire world, I had no single perspective on this, and my experience of it all was like a feedback chamber. All of this information was contradicting everything else. Like, "Hey, it's wrong to outsource your clothing labour to Bangladesh, except these people need the money," or "Tourism is wrong but the people there really need your money," or "Reuse things or waste water to clean them?" It's just an endless feedback chamber of the right and wrong way to look at these things.

Scope: Would you say that the movie functions as a critique or even autocritique with regards to these concerns, where your own participation in this feedback loop becomes questioned and implicated?

Mack: Yeah, the movie is about being trapped within this system where things are super-gross. We're at the point where being vocally critical about such things is redundant or meaningless. For example, the internet and contemporary protest, where we as individuals can share our beliefs all day, but at the same time still invisibly oppress those who are making the phones or the computers. There's always this food chain of oppression going on.

I had a really complicated position on this film, because, yes, of course I'm critical of many parts of this system that I had to engage with to make the film, just as I'm also critical of the system in which this film will screen. We've come to this moment where it's obvious to me that art doesn't really do much, because it's really just this elite playground. I love all things avant-garde, but I *also* love the idea of a world that doesn't need an avant-garde. Just look at who gets called a contemporary textile artist compared to who makes textiles that get shown in a natural history museum as an artifact. *That* is the border between art and craft.