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FILM REVIEW

FRAMING AGNES, CHASE JOYNT (DIR.) (2022), CANADA: FAE PICTURES AND LEVEL GROUND

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In the autumn of 1958, Professors Robert J. Stoller and Harold Garfinkel of the University of California (UCLA) were approached by a 19-year-old woman who would mystify medical experts for almost a decade. Tall, slim and of feminine build, 'Agnes' presented Stoller and Garfinkel with the very picture of north-American femininity: 'she had long, fine dark-blond hair, a young face with pretty features, a peaches and cream complexion [...] subtly plucked eyebrows, and no makeup except for lipstick' (Garfinkel 1967: 119). Indeed, at first glance, nothing about Agnes seemed to be at all exceptional. Except for the fact that she had been born with the chromosomes and genital structure of a 'normal' boy and was hoping to receive gender affirming care.

Over the course of the following year, Stoller and Garfinkel conducted a series of case interviews with Agnes, during which she explained that she had 'spontaneously begun to develop breasts' during puberty and that, in spite of being raised as a boy, had always felt herself to be a woman (Schilt 2016: 288). While extensive medical examinations conflicted with Agnes's personal story, Stoller and Garfinkel were convinced that their patient was indeed a 'real woman' and concluded that Agnes was suffering from a rare intersex condition for which she should be given 'treatment'.

After receiving surgery to affirm her gender in 1959, Agnes abruptly stopped visiting the clinic. But, while this caesura might well have marked the end of her relevance to research on so-called sex disorders, her surprising return to UCLA in 1966 set the psychological world reeling afresh. Embedded within a seemingly anodyne anecdote to Stoller about her childhood, Agnes revealed that: 'she had never had a biological defect that had feminized her [...] – she had been taking [her mother's] oestrogen tablets since the age of

twelve' (Garfinkel 1967: 287). Agnes, it appeared, had been gaming the cis-tem the entire time.

That Agnes misled Stoller and Garfinkel in order to receive medical care has made her something of a divisive figure among medical experts and historians. Yet, for many transgender scholars and activists, who have long since known that survival is often predicated on the ability to exist 'between the truth and a lie', Agnes is a hero. The complexity of this dichotomy – a figure who is at once 'trickster and plucky protagonist thriving against the odds' (Sharp 2022: n.pag.) – stands central to Chase Joynt's latest documentary *Framing Agnes* (2022).

Arising from the visits he made to Garfinkel's archive following the sociologist's death in 2011, the inspiration for Joynt's solo directorial debut had been locked away in a filing cabinet almost rusted shut. After years spent cataloguing Garfinkel's files with colleague Kristen Schilt, Joynt 'found' Agnes in 2014 – along with eight other case studies of transgender patients who had visited the UCLA gender clinic during the 1950s and 1960s.

The transcripts that Joynt and Schilt recovered from the cabinet were first given form by the pair in a nineteen-minute short, which was released in 2018. After Joynt secured further funding for the concept, however, *Framing Agnes* swiftly returned to production and premiered in its feature length format in the NEXT section of the Sundance Film Festival in 2022, winning both the Audience and Innovator Awards.

Centred around re-enactments of the recovered transcripts, the documentary features Joynt as Harold Garfinkel, alongside an impressive cast of trans actors and creators including Zackary Drucker as 'Agnes', Jen Richards as 'Barbara', Silas Howard as 'Denny', Max Wolf Valerio as 'Henry', Angelica Ross as 'Georgia' and Stephen Ira as 'Jimmy'.

Opening with a tense interview exchange between Garfinkel and Agnes, Joynt sets the critical tone for the film. By replacing the clinical chair with the couch of the talk show – *The Mike Wallace Interview* (1957–60) to be more precise – Joynt manages guilefully to subvert the pathologizing voice of the medical expert. Shot in black and white, with careful attention to costume and frequent breaks in the fourth wall, the scene promptly draws back the curtain on the artifice of scientific objectivity and presents the viewer with an experimental first take on trans healthcare.

While this first interview acquaints the audience with Agnes, Joynt further introduces five other 'case studies' over the course of the documentary's 75-minute runtime, including the stories of two other trans women – one of whom is a woman of colour – and three trans men. Joynt's commitment to diversifying our knowledge about the past is to be commended and is certainly one of the documentary's greatest contributions to the current festival circuit. And wisely, the documentary does not pretend to 'atone for the sins' of the past through more diverse representation alone. This, Joynt suggests, can only ever be a first step – the next must be to 'shift the terms of engagement'.

This shift takes place in the film mostly with respect to the relationship between 'expert' and 'patient'. In merging the medical interview with the sensationalizing rhetoric of the north-American talk show, Joynt reveals the interview practice as a site of extreme power imbalance and potential trauma. Indeed, throughout the film Joynt remains acutely aware of the violence of the archive and refuses to repeat it in his re-enactments. Broaching potentially triggering material with subtlety and care, the director reverts to

sensationalism only to highlight the mishandlings of the expert, rather than to stir public interest in his protagonists.

This refreshing approach continues in Joynt's assessment of his own position as director. With full-colour reverse shots of the filmmaker and his crew, as well as cutaways of behind-the-scenes action with his cast, Joynt invites the viewer to stay cognizant of the constructed nature of the documentary-form and to remain critical of his historical renderings.

In further breaks with the retro style of the 1950s transcript interviews, the documentary also includes talking heads with Jules Gill-Peterson, a lecturer in transgender history at Johns Hopkins University, and casual out-of-character conversations between the director and his fellow actors. While Gill-Peterson charismatically guides the viewer through a truncated timeline of transgender history and the problems of archival research, Joynt and his cast touch instead upon issues of creating historical (anti)heroes, the tightrope between visibility and vulnerability, and key debates concerning the ethics of trans storytelling.

Such abrupt switches in style have been criticized since the film's release (Warner 2022; Dry 2022). Yet, these staccato shifts highlight most fully Joynt's resistance to reductive readings of historical figures, as well as a desire to demonstrate the complexity of interactions between past and present. Indeed, in his playful staging of the encounters between the actors and their historical counterparts, Joynt arguably visualizes an approach that historian Carolyn Dinshaw has elsewhere described as 'touches across time' (Dinshaw 1999: 12). In an early scene, for instance, the viewer hears recordings of the interviews that took place between Agnes and Garfinkel: Zachary Drucker, who plays Agnes, is seen practising her lines. During this rehearsal, Drucker's voice merges at points with that of Agnes in a kind of uncanny transtemporal fusion. At others, the voices deviate distinctly – with Drucker giving new tone and emphasis to the original trans-script and, in our contemporary sociopolitical climate, also new meaning.

As Dinshaw argues, by harnessing 'ideas of the past [and] relations with the past' it becomes possible for us 'to build selves and communities now and into the future' – a crucial goal in the safeguarding of what are becoming increasingly besieged futurities. And, while Dinshaw writes mostly of the *queer* past, it is clear that her ideas have immediate relevance to Joynt's latest trans-historical project.

The active engagement with the practices of historiography and Joynt's overreliance on academese have faced strong criticism from those who suggest the film 'is more lecture than story' and that the director's approach is 'too meta for its own good' (Dry 2022: n.pag.). Yet, while the film's more pedagogic segments with Gill-Peterson are certainly the product of the ivory tower, and the style shifts often leave little time for viewer respite, these moments equally provide us with vital historical context – and humour! – while never negotiating on the complexity of the past.

Given the film's dedication to rethinking historical practices, it might be worthwhile thinking about Joynt's work in light of the established case study tradition he seeks to critique. Beginning with German psychiatrist Karl Friedrich Otto Westphal's study on 'contrary sexual feeling' in 1864, the case interview very quickly became established 'as a genre of *evidence* in modern medicine' (Oosterhuis 2000: 180, emphasis added). By including what historian Harry Oosterhuis has termed the 'voices of perverts', such case interviews stimulated a shift in thinking about so-called sexual and gendered 'deviance' – patients were no longer simply observed in their behaviours from a distance

but were now questioned extensively about their childhoods, hobbies, daily lives and desires before their responses were mediated by the medical expert and published in a case study.

While it appears markedly little had changed in scientific approaches to gender and sexuality by the time of Garfinkel and Stoller's interviews, Joynt's 'communally-driven excavation' seems to mark another much-needed paradigm shift. By making meta the case study model, *Framing Agnes* – in much a similar way to Lyle Kash's *Death and Bowling* (2021) – places trans people, past and present, proudly at the centre (and periphery) of the narrative.

Yet, although the appropriation of medical and media practices may be a key strength of Joynt's documentary, it could equally be considered one of its pitfalls. Certainly, the thoughts of Audre Lorde (1983) loom large, here: can the master's tools ever really dismantle the master's house? And, Gill-Peterson's timely question about which stories make it into the archive (and under which conditions) remains ultimately unresolved in the documentary: if Joynt and Schilt discovered eight case histories, what happened to the two transcripts that were not depicted on film?

While these are no doubt important considerations for the historical documentation of trans pasts, it is equally certain that Joynt's *Framing Agnes* has much to offer viewers in terms of optimism for the future of trans storytelling.

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