

Mike Hoolboom

IMITATIONS OF LIFE

Works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intention of their authors. — Italo Calvino

What matter who's speaking, someone said, what matter who's speaking? — Samuel Beckett

Fringe filmmaker Mike Hoolboom (b. 1959) has gained acclaim on the international art-film circuit for works that explore themes of desire, memory, and history within the medium of film.¹ In creating, dissecting, and reconstructing existing films, he explores ways they have shaped the unconscious feelings and thought processes of people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The artifice that goes into constructing his montages reminds viewers that films are not really about life, but about its imitation, in a medium that is often mistaken for reality because it perpetuates so many of the same illusions.

Hoolboom's films often speak of the human vulnerability and the jagged continuity of love in the face of society's destructive forces. Created in 2003, *Imitations of Life* is an elegy for the twentieth century and its memory, history, mass psychoses, and delusional visions for the future.² This ten-chapter opus combines Hoolboom's own footage with segments excised from the vast body of existing films—scientific, documentary, musical, mainstream entertainment, or science fiction.



The three chapters of *Imitations of Life* on view in this exhibition include *Portrait*, a fictional narrative that uses footage from the pioneer moviemakers the Lumière Brothers to explore the use of film during its not-so-innocent childhood as an instrument of colonization and control, a prophecy of things to come in the twentieth century. The second chapter, *In My Car*, tells of a young boy who is

sent off to live in the family car. The boy is challenged to a street race by the devil who gains power by absorbing the boy's emotions. Only when remembering his older brother's death in a fiery car accident and being overcome by the need to mourn is the boy able to conquer the devil. But for all his deceit, the devil envisioned by Hoolboom is a force that inspires creativity, whose death is therefore a "tragedy for the imagination."



Still from *Imitations of Life*

The longest of the ten chapters, also titled *Imitations of Life*, contemplates the passage of humanity from conception through stages of socialization, technological advances, war, mass psychoses, and new artificial life. The film moves from a consideration of memory and history toward a vision of science fiction as the repository of our collective aspirations and concerns about the future. Science fiction in books and movies has often addressed the problems of the present by projecting them into the future. In the 1950s, Neil Shute's *On the Beach* captured the apocalyptic dread inaugurated by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During the 1960s, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) symbolized the division between the dominant culture—its worship of technology and emphasis on conformity—and the counterculture, which stressed mysticism, individualism, and humanistic values.³

A much earlier example of science fiction, Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927) has a cameo in *Imitations of Life*. *Metropolis* shows exploited workers in the year 2026 whose rebellion results in a convulsive societal calamity that signifies the inherent destructiveness of pure capitalism. While *Metropolis* is itself a caricature of complex social relations, Hoolboom finds in it and other examples of science fiction contemporary pertinence:

Over and over we are shown, in these glimpses of the shape of things to come, the cruelty of spectacle; mutant science and atomic anxieties, all prelude to The End. This final curtain is linked to globalization... a centralization of industrial power and industrial pictures, mass produced and widely distributed. The world bank and the world image bank work towards the same end.⁴

Other footage in *Imitations of Life* shows extraordinary nighttime views of the 1942 battle of El Alamein, marked not by death and destruction, but by flashes of cannon fire—the battle as an exchange of light. These scenes are followed by footage of a torchlight parade, in which thousands march through nighttime streets, evoking the mob going after Dracula as well as the German population

unleashed on Kristallnacht, the night when the systematic destruction of Jewish property began in earnest. For Hoolboom, light is not a sign of awakened consciousness, but an agent of control and a trigger of mass hypnosis, the most potent vehicles of which today are the screens of movies, televisions, and computers.⁵

Intertwined throughout these fragments are representations of the human body, which Hoolboom imagines as being impermanent or unstable. The narrator says: "In the future ... Our bodies will grow transparent. We will enter each other like walking through a door, until at last we come to an end of the picture world, a world where we are also pictures."⁶ Common motifs in science fiction, depictions of bodily transformation often symbolize passages from a physical to a mental state, or from human feeling to the emotionlessness of a robot.

The ephemerality of the body has particular resonance in Hoolboom's life; he was diagnosed with AIDS in 1989, and has since lived with the ebbs and flows of the disease while watching many friends suffer and die. "AIDS," he says, "changed the place I look out from, shifted it just a little, so that I could see people dying, even as they were standing there talking to me. I could see the small time we had left before the end, the quick bloom and hope before lying down for the last time."⁷

This terrible vision, when memories of the past and knowledge of the future come together, provides the undercurrent of *Imitations of Life*. When the artist speculates about the individual body as a metaphor for the world's body, he sends tremors of doubt, not about the future or the past, but the tenuous here and now that stands outside the filmic myth of the culture.

Mark Scala, *Chief Curator*

- Notes
- 1 See Tibor and Noémi, "Imitations of Life: an interview with Mike Hoolboom," <http://www.nimk.nl/en/nieuws>, November 28, 2005.
 - 2 *Imitations of Life*'s ten parts include: *In the Future* (3:00), *Jack* (15:00), *Last Thoughts* (7:00), *Portrait* (4:00), *Secret* (2:00), *In My Car* (5:00), *The Game* (5:30), *Scaling* (5:00), *Imitations of Life* (21:00), and *Rain* (3:30).
 - 3 See Paul Brians, "Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction," <http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/nuclear/1chap.htm>.
 - 4 Tibor and Noémi.
 - 5 Hoolboom, conversation with author, August 7, 2008.
 - 6 From *Imitations of Life*, 2003.
 - 7 Tibor and Noémi.

Checklist of the Exhibition

Imitations of Life, 2003

Video, 21:00

Courtesy of the artist



In My Car, 2003

Video, 5:00

Courtesy of the artist



Portrait, 2003

Video, 4:00

Courtesy of the artist



For additional information,
see mikehoolboom.com.



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Photo credits,
top to bottom:

1–3: Still from *Imitations of Life*

4: Still from *Portrait*

5: Still from *In My Car*

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