

Rachel Maclean (b.1987)

Feed Me 2015



Key facts:

- **Medium:** Digital video, colour and sound
- **Duration:** 1 hour
- **Collection:** Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, National Galleries of Scotland
- Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella and Hayward Touring for British Art Show 8. Supported by Arts Council England and Creative Scotland

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: Maclean's longest and most ambitious film to date, and the first to feature her own script, Feed Me is a satire of contemporary capitalism. As the only actor or model in her work, in Feed Me the artist disguises herself as a cast of unstable stereotypes – from child popstar wannabe, to media entrepreneur to lecherous CEO – who directly address the audience within a series of lavish and/or repellent animated environments. Transforming herself through heavy make-

up and elaborate costumes, she puts on a parade of performances that explore the media and television's commercialisation of childhood, and a corresponding tendency towards infantile behaviour in adulthood.

Across her moving-image practice, Maclean's subject is *'power, in all its nationalistic might and glory, as it snakes from the political to the economic'* (Gronlund, 2016). At the heart of this film, as the dominant behemoth in its dystopian world, is Smile Inc., a wicked toy manufacturer and multi-media broadcaster that controls Feed Me's dilapidated society. From their glitzy mansion Smile Inc.'s senior management flog an infantilised ideal of happiness to an oppressed populace that lives in contrastingly dreary and squalid conditions drained of colour.

For all of the characters that Maclean inhabits, emotional experience has been simplified. Polarised into positive 'like' or negative 'don't like', emotions are communicated by finger-swiping one of two corresponding face emojis on a digital screen. Within this collapsed society, these binaries constitute the complete range of emotion available. Certain phrases are re-used neurotically throughout the film, as shallow affirmations of a one-dimensional positivity ('I'm too happy!', 'Cute!' and '110%!') or negativity ('50%').

Beyond their digital apparitions on the ever-present touchscreens, smiley or sad faces cover the dichotomous world of Feed Me: from the small yellow stress balls that come free with every toy sold by Smile Inc. (but also function more sinisterly as surveillance devices), to the huge orb rotating atop the manufacturer's HQ (a glittering wedding cake of a tower, decorated with giant hearts and engaged Classical columns), to the crudely scrawled frowns in the dirty subterranean layer of the Wolf-Man. Dressed in a fluffy, pastel-coloured bear suit replete with multiple smiley faces, this pathetic character knocks back 'Smilaxofrane' tablets with milk from a bottle and nurses a gurgling HappyChat Baby doll before bursting into his desperate song, much like a character in a Disney film.

This blurring of adulthood and childhood is one of the central themes of the film: Maclean *'mines the confusion over what is "appropriate" for adults and what is used to socialise children to show an overlap between them'* (Gronlund, 2016). In one X Factor-styled scene, a wide-eyed prepubescent contestant with pig tails sings a sultry, lounge jazz version of 'If You're Happy and You Know It'. 'You sing like you're old, very old,' responds the talent show judge, whereas elsewhere in the film adults dress like children and teenage gangs suck menacingly on babies' dummies.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Rachel Maclean's work invokes many sources, both historical and contemporary, with characters and scenarios developing from a variety of reference points. Primary among these are mass-media tropes: reality TV, talent shows such as *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent*, satirical comedy shows like *The League of Gentlemen* and *Spitting Image*, advertising, internet memes and Disney-style singalongs. Maclean cites children's television shows such as the BBC's *Teletubbies* and *The Night Garden* as an initial inspiration for Feed Me: *'I'm thinking particularly about children's television [...] which produces visions of a multi-coloured, rural paradise where everything is lovely and all moral transgressions are quickly recognised and resolved'* (Maclean). Alongside popular culture, Maclean's array of inspiration includes fairy tales. In Feed Me, as in her other works, she quotes liberally from Disney's version of fairy tales to construct her own intensely coloured fantasy.

At Edinburgh School of Art (from where she graduated in 2009), Maclean became interested in more established artists who use themselves within their work, but *'as grotesque or comic masquerade rather than in a confessional sense'* (Maclean). American artist Cindy Sherman, who 'performs' herself acting out other female personas in her photographs, is one example. The moving-image work of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist can also be paralleled with that of Maclean, both in terms of its

performative aspect – the artist appears in many of her own videos – and the way in which Rist’s visceral, earthy, vibrantly coloured projections posit a hallucinogenic technological sublime. The counter-worlds created in the films and videos of American artist Paul McCarthy, whose performative practice also explores themes of bodily excess and social malfunction, are another touchstone for Maclean.

Maclean also reaches further back into (art) history, namely by delving into the very British tradition of satire. Her razor-sharp critiques of the world can be understood as 21st-century updates of 18th-century satires by William Hogarth or Thomas Rowlandson, both of whose work she looked at as a student. James Gillray, the father of the political cartoon whose scathing caricatures use vicious satire and scatological humour, is another influence.

Before making Feed Me, Maclean had just been to China; she explains how some aspects of the landscape ‘*emerge out of the experience of visiting uniquely dense cities like Shanghai and Chongqing*’ (Maclean).

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The film-making process in Maclean’s self-described ‘*maximal*’ practice is laborious, with a long time spent both preparing for shoots and working on the visual effects afterwards. As with her earlier videos, after story-boarding her ideas for Feed Me Maclean then employed green-screen technology, computer animation, extensive post-production and electronic music to produce a stylised cinematic experience for her viewers. She had discovered green-screen backdrops as a means to create her garish, near-psychedelic artificial visions while studying drawing and painting at Edinburgh College of Art (where she first started making videos).

A continuation of her previous interest in ideas of collage in the form of cut paper, painting and sculpture, green-screen technology involves shooting a figure in front of a green backdrop with the help of crews, and then cutting and pasting the figure onto a digital backdrop that is created after the shoot. With this technique, film is not limited to things existing in reality; instead, Maclean can create the fantastical, multi-layered environments that define her practice. With the sudden shifts in character, voice, tone and setting, a collage-like aesthetic is nevertheless retained, an effect that has been compared to “‘*channel hopping*’ through a bizarre spectrum of alternately dream-like and nightmarish, seductive and repulsive TV shows’ (Langley, 2016).

While the delirious confection of digital images applies a glossy surface to the film, Maclean also combines these computer-generated effects with older theatrical tricks – heavy make-up, costumes and prosthetics – to create a thinly veiled pretence. For example, to inhabit one adult character, a bespectacled Scottish granny, Maclean wears a green-tinged prosthetic mask to create a monstrously wrinkled look.

In Maclean’s previous videos, the dialogue or narrative was not scripted; rather, she employed a bricolage technique, assembling her ‘script’ from snippets of found audio. Lolcats (2012), for instance, inspired by the internet meme of the same name, collages together foreign cinema and promo interviews with the singer Katy Perry in order to explore past and present manifestations of cat worship. Feed Me was commissioned in part by Film and Video Umbrella and Hayward Touring, with support from Arts England and Creative Scotland, thus for the first time Maclean was able to feature her own script and hire voice actors. Once recorded, the scripted text is then lip-synched by Maclean in front of the green screen.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Critical writing on Feed Me interprets the film as a darkly humorous satire of consumerism and corporate power in the contemporary era – a *'parable of the pleasures and perils of excess'* (Steven Bode, FVU). The title is not only a repeatedly spoken line by toys such as the Smile Inc.-manufactured HappyChat Beast; it also points to the monster that is unappeasable consumer neediness – both within and beyond Maclean's allegorical film. Set in an all-too-familiar world constituted by consumer objects, Feed Me parodies the way in which the customer's insatiable hunger for more feeds the ever-growing system of commodity capitalism, fuelled by marketers' and advertisers' discovery and exploitation of seductive new desires. As Melissa Gronlund explains: *'Maclean's films show the way that industries and their advertising tools create and form the subjectivity of the people they target as their consumers'* (2016).

At once a kaleidoscopic, explicitly constructed concoction that is in many respects far from our present reality – a grotesque fantasia where pointing a finger to mimic a gun really can kill – there is nevertheless an uncanny familiarity to the world of Feed Me. Its dystopian society can be paralleled with the worlds of Charlie Brooker's science-fiction television series Black Mirror (2011–). In multiple ways, it provides a twisted alternative present that *'exaggerate[s] pop culture in order to reveal its underlying absurdities, heightening our awareness of reality rather than providing fanciful distraction from it'* (Langley, 2016).

Some writers have also made links between the premium on positivity within the selfish world of Feed Me and the industrialisation and exploitation of happiness in capitalism. For example, William Davies cites Dubai's 2014 'Happiness Index', which aimed to measure interactively its visitors' and residents' satisfaction levels regarding the government services rendered to them. Other critics have stayed closer to Maclean's home country and identified similarities between the polarising of emotional experience in Feed Me and the binary choice presented by the 2014 Scottish referendum.

Maclean's moving-image practice has also been termed 'Post-Internet', linking to a trend in art concerned with the effects on society of technology and corporate culture: *'The pervasiveness of consumerism plays a particular role in what is contentiously being called post-internet art – a heading under which Maclean's work, with its use of green-screen technology, digital representation, and quasi-nostalgic pop-cultural subject matter can be seen to fall.'* (Gronlund)

Related works:



Rachel Maclean Lolcats 2012



Cindy Sherman Untitled #475 2008



Pipilotti Rist Open My Glade (Flatten) 2000



Rachel Maclean Spite Your Face 2017

Further reading:

Brown, A. Will, and Maclean, Rachel (2015). 'Rachel Maclean: "I'm taking and contributing to the weird recycled ecosystem of the internet"', Studio International, 3 June 2015. Available at: <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/rachel-maclean-interview-video-lolcats-britney-spears-scottishness-internet>

Davies, William (2016). 'Feed Me' in Rachel Maclean: Wot u :-) about? London: Hayward Publishing.

Gronlund, Melissa (2016). 'The Power, The Glory, The Culture Industry' in Rachel Maclean: Wot u :-) about? London: Hayward Publishing.

Langley, Patrick (2016). 'In Focus: Rachel Maclean', Frieze, 13 February 2016. Available at: <https://frieze.com/article/focus-rachel-maclean>

Maclean, Rachel, and O'Callaghan, Bren (2016). 'Rachel Maclean in conversation with Bren O'Callaghan' in Rachel Maclean: Wot u :-) about? London: Hayward Publishing.

Plaugic, Lizzie, and Maclean, Rachel (2017). 'Rachel Maclean on selfies, green screens, and art that reflects fantasy and reality', The Verge, 9 March 2017. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/3/9/14842906/rachel-maclean-artist-interview-videos-tate-museum>

Links:

- Rachel Maclean on Feed Me: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9DFdQvGn-w>
- Film and Video Umbrella Website: <http://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/feed-me>
- Rachel Maclean on her exhibition 'wot you :-) about?': https://thefifthsense.i-d.co/en_gb/article/wot-you-about-rachel-maclean-talks-us-through-her-new-exhibition/