

## ***THE MAKING OF AMERICANS* by CAECILIA TRIPP**



**The Making of Americans, 2004, Color & sound video, 18 min. © Caecilia Tripp & Zeuxis Films LLC NY with the support of French Institute Alliance Française NY and French Institute Paris. Exhibition view PS1/MOMA NY**

### **THE MAKING OF AMERICANS (A re-staging of Stein Opera)**

While the title of Gertrude Stein's book *The Making of Americans* (written in 1908-09 and published in 1925) is a genealogical approach to American culture, presenting creation's infinite possibilities, Caecilia Tripp's interpretation is a real opening up of this musical and visual work. Although repetition is the very essence of Gertrude Stein's work, this repetition allows for precisely the juxtaposition of the sounds and images in the film, as though the desire to take the very notion of repetition literally should generate a multitude of dualities starting with reality and representation, images and copies, music and recording, voice and rhythm. The importance of African-American culture in the United States has always been defined by the recognition given to its music, performance and oral narration. These elements are also brought together in Stein's opera, but it is their concrete application in the context of black vernacular performance that Caecilia Tripp chooses to show. Starting with a history (and from its start), she proposes back-and-forth movements

in form and sound that suggest at once the incessant passage between the individual and the collective and also between scream and monologue, between interior and exterior space. This duality is further reinforced as the venues are evoked through nocturnal and luminous images of the Apollo Theater. The scene in which the meeting or splitting in two of the identity is played out is the one with the marionette manipulated by the magician in the smooth suit, the one with the little twin girls who add to the turmoil with their reflections in the mirror. “Any one is one” emphasizes the text, and one also hears “it is always a question of being”. While the Diva travels the streets of New York in a limousine which accentuates the quick horizontal movement of the image, the Poet affronts the viewer in a vertical scene reinforced by the walls covered with posters which seem to hold him up and maintain him in a most intransigent urban reality.

“In black culture, repetition means that the thing circulates (exactly in the manner of any flow) (...). In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is ‘there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it’. If there is a goal in such a culture, it is always deferred; it continually ‘cuts’ back to the start, in the musical meaning of ‘cut’ as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (...) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series (...) Black culture, in the ‘cut’ builds ‘accidents’ into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural coverage, this magic of the cut attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them but by making room for them inside the system itself”<sup>1</sup>.

The editing in Caecilia Tripp’s film is at once a construction of and a reflection on repetition. *The Making of Americans* does not seem to have a beginning or end, like a long improvised conversation that one stumbles into the middle of, and yet it is within this fluidity that the ruptures of voice and sound take place. Oral narration and music mixed by DJ Spooky become as many ways to construct a different history: A different story, A different history.

Elvan Zabunyan

<sup>1</sup> James A. Snead, « Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture », in *Out There, Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*; New York, Cambridge, The New Museum of Contemporary, The MIT Press, 1990, p. 220