



Mercy (1989)

Is This What You Were Born For?

by Abigail Child (7 films, 1981-89)

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In using found footage (TV commercials, Fifties educational films, old blue movies) and traditional rubrics of cinematic form (home movies, *film noir*, silent slapstick comedy), the films of Abigail Child position the viewer from the start within a familiar landscape. And yet, ultimately there is nothing comforting about this familiarity: it breeds not just contempt but more importantly, consciousness. If anything, Child takes this loaded baggage of cultural detritus and in the process of dumping out the contents, opens a larger Pandora's box of received notions: how we should lead our lives, and who should lead our lives.

The found images and found forms of Child's work collide with a complex use of sound (itself often of a found nature) to comprise a



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relentless examination of societal convention. Her assemblages *are* assaulting, but in the most positive sense of the word. They serve as a wake-up call to the life we are living, and to a life we could be living, searing complacency, breaking illusions. While the charge can be made that the films verge on the didactic, one must remember that Child has posed her films not in the form of a singular statement but of a collective and urgent question, "Is this what you were born for?" It is up to us to supply our own answers, and as paradoxical as it may seem, there is some comfort to be had in that.