

Research Article

Becoming Gracie: Mimetic Desire and Identity Appropriation in *May December* through René Girard's Mimetic Theory

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Abstract This study analyzes the transformation of Elizabeth Berry's character in *May December* (2023) through René Girard's Mimetic Theory, focusing on the progression from professional observation to identity appropriation. Previous studies have identified imitation, repetition, corporeal appropriation, remediation, and representational instability in the film, but the relational mechanisms that organize the intensification of Elizabeth's imitation remain relatively underexplored. This study uses a descriptive qualitative design with a theory-informed textual film analysis approach. The released film is used as the primary text, while the final screenplay is used as an auxiliary textual source. A total of 19 data units were selected purposively and analyzed through two-level coding that distinguishes descriptive evidence from Girardian interpretation. The results show that Elizabeth's pursuit is initially directed at representational authenticity, while Gracie gradually becomes a model/mediator who increasingly determines how the object is pursued. Elizabeth's engagement then progresses through embodied imitation, internalization of the model, experiential identification, and relational appropriation, until the embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational dimensions converge as multi-domain identity appropriation. However, increasing resemblance does not result in complete identification or mimetic satisfaction. The overall trajectory can therefore be read through Girardian metaphysical desire, where representational authenticity becomes increasingly model-dependent without ever being fully achieved. Based on this pattern, this study proposes unfinished mimetic appropriation as a data-grounded conceptual synthesis to explain the process by which progressive appropriation of the model's identity sustains, rather than resolves, the desire for further approximation.

Keywords: *May December*; mimetic desire; René Girard; identity appropriation; metaphysical desire; unfinished mimetic appropriation

1. Introduction

Character representation in film is not only concerned with how an actor convincingly portrays a character, but also with how that character's identity is learned, interpreted, and realized through performance. This process becomes even more complex when the character being portrayed is based on someone the actor can directly observe. When representation demands intensive observation of a person's voice, gestures, expressions, habits, experiences, and social relations, the boundary between representing another person and inhabiting another person's position can become increasingly unstable. In such circumstances, imitation does not always cease to be a representational technique but can develop into a process that influences how the performer constructs themselves. Film is a productive medium for examining this issue because identity is manifested not only through dialogue but also through the body, voice, costume, gestures, interpersonal relationships, and performative patterns that develop throughout the narrative. Studies of Todd Haynes's cinema have repeatedly

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positioned performance, embodiment, fragmented subjectivity, and the instability of identity as crucial issues in character construction and representation (Beltrami, 2020; Bennett, 2010; Geller & Leyda, 2022).

This issue is central to the narrative in Todd Haynes's film *May December* (2023), which pits Elizabeth Berry, an actress preparing for a role in a film, against Gracie Atherton-Yoo, the woman whose life Elizabeth will portray. Elizabeth's visit initially has a professional purpose: to obtain information that will enable her to portray Gracie accurately and convincingly. However, the process gradually goes beyond information gathering. Elizabeth observes Gracie's body and expressions, studies her appearance, reproduces her physical characteristics, enters the private spaces associated with Gracie's experiences, and increasingly approaches the relational configurations in the life of the woman she is studying. Thus, *May December* questions not only the accuracy of representation but also the extent to which one can approach another's identity without turning the process of representation into appropriation. (Ouellette, 2024) situates this question of representation within the context of tabloid remediation, showing how real life and scandals can be transformed into media characters and narratives consumed by the public.

The study most closely related to this research question is (Tremblay, 2023) reading, which positions imitation as a crucial structure in Elizabeth's transformation. Tremblay observes how Elizabeth reproduces Gracie's voice, pose, movement, and corporeality and links repetition to repetition-compulsion, misrecognition, and the inability to produce a truthful performance that truly matches the subject being represented. This study provides important evidence that Elizabeth's transformation is not simply a process of professional observation. On the other hand, (Ouellette, 2024) emphasizes extraction and remediation in the representation of Gracie's life, while broader scholarship on Haynes has shown that mediation, embodiment, performativity, and the fluidity of identity are recurring themes in his filmography (Geller & Leyda, 2022). In *I'm Not There*, for example, identity is read as fluid, performative, and anti-essentialist rather than as a stable core self (Beltrami, 2020; Wilkins, 2017).

However, recognizing imitation, repetition, corporeal appropriation, or the instability of identity does not in itself explain the structure of desire that organizes the intensification of imitation. The relatively under-recognized issue is no longer whether Elizabeth imitates Gracie, but rather how the pursuit of representational authenticity increasingly relies on Gracie as a model and why this dependence evolves from observation to embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational forms of appropriation. In other words, existing scholarship has productively explained what Elizabeth repeatedly does, but there is still room to explain how her desire becomes relationally structured through the person she is attempting to represent. This gap is significant because imitation can still be understood as a normal consequence of professional acting preparation as long as Elizabeth's actions serve only to acquire information or reproduce certain performative characteristics. A broader interpretation is only required when imitation persists in the absence of a model, extends to the reconstruction of experience, penetrates professional boundaries, and increasingly orients the subject toward a position associated with the model.

To explain these mechanisms, this study utilizes René Girard's Mimetic Theory, specifically the concepts of mimetic desire, model/mediator, triangular desire, internal mediation, and metaphysical desire. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, (Girard, 1965) challenges the notion that desire is entirely autonomous and moves directly between subject and object. Desire can be mediated by another party who serves as a model for the subject, so that what appears to be a subject-object relationship actually has a triangular structure. In this research configuration, Gracie is both the represented subject and the model/mediator, but not the initial object of desire. Elizabeth's initial object is representational authenticity—the pursuit of a performance deemed truthful and convincing. Gracie mediates Elizabeth's access to this object because authenticity is increasingly imagined to be achieved only through greater proximity to the voice, body, experience, and relational position of the represented subject.

This distinction is necessary to prevent mimetic desire from being simplified into mere imitation. In the Girardian framework, the model not only provides behavior to be copied but also helps shape the direction and value of the object the subject pursues. As the relationship with the mediator deepens through internal mediation, the model's position can become increasingly central within the structure of desire. At a certain intensity, Girard

explains the possibility of metaphysical desire emerging, as desire becomes increasingly connected to the being associated with the mediator. This concept is used in this study not as a psychological diagnosis of Elizabeth, but rather as an interpretive tool to examine whether the pursuit of representational authenticity is progressively becoming more model-dependent.

The use of Girard in film analysis also has methodological precedent. Mimetic theory has been extended from literary criticism to film and media through various studies that position cinema as a space to observe mediated desire, imitation, rivalry, and model-oriented relations (Bubbio & Fleming, 2019; Cowdell et al., 2016). In Indonesian scholarship, Girard's theory has also been used to explain the relationship between character, desire, revenge, rivalry, and violence in literary studies (Lantowa et al., 2025; Sarmi et al., 2023). This demonstrates that mimetic theory remains productive when used to analyze how desire develops relationally within narrative texts.

Based on this position, this study offers a mechanism-centered reading of Elizabeth's transformation. The novelty of the study does not lie in claiming that imitation or appropriation has never been found in *May December*. Rather, it explains how these actions can be understood as part of a shift in the structure of desire: from the pursuit of representational authenticity to increasing dependence on Gracie as a mediator, then to internalization and appropriation of the identity dimensions associated with the model. The study also distinguishes observable imitation from mimetic interpretation, so that a single act of imitation is not automatically considered evidence of mimetic desire.

This study aims to explain how Elizabeth Berry's professional observation of Gracie Atherton-Yoo develops into an engagement increasingly mediated by the model she is representing, and how this development moves from imitation and identification to identity appropriation, which can be read through Girardian metaphysical desire. Based on this aim, this study answers the following two research questions.

RQ1. How does Elizabeth Berry's professional observation of Gracie Atherton-Yoo develop into a mimetically mediated desire in May December?

RQ2. How does Elizabeth's mimetic engagement progress from imitation and identification toward identity appropriation, and how does this trajectory illuminate Girard's concept of metaphysical desire?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Representation, Identity, and Imitation in *May December*

Readings of *May December* revolve primarily around issues of representation, imitation, exploitation, and the fluidity of the boundaries between a lived subject and a reproducible character. Elizabeth and Gracie's relationship is at the center of these issues because the film positions acting preparation not simply as an information-gathering activity, but as a form of intimacy that gradually blurs the lines between observer and observed.

(Tremblay, 2023) offers one of the most direct readings of imitation in the film. He shows that Elizabeth not only gathers information about Gracie but also attempts to reproduce her voice, posture, movement, and corporeality. Repetition thus occurs through the body and performance, not just through verbal repetition. Tremblay's crucial contribution lies in arguing that imitation does not automatically bring Elizabeth closer to the authentic Gracie. Instead, repetition can actually lead to misrecognition because the more intensely Elizabeth repeats Gracie, the more apparent the impossibility of acquiring an identity completely identical to the represented subject.

The issue of representation takes on another dimension through (Ouellette, 2024), who reads *May December* in relation to tabloid culture and remediation. The film shows how life, scandal, and personal history can be transferred from lived experience to media forms that package humans as representational material. This reading is significant because it places Elizabeth's actions within a broader system of representation: Gracie is not simply an individual being observed, but a narrative source to be transformed into a media character. Thus, *May December* demonstrates the tension between claims to understand someone and the extraction practices necessary to convert someone's life into performance.

Both readings provide important foundations for this research. Tremblay explains repetition and corporeal imitation, while Ouellette highlights representational extraction and remediation. However, both leave room for a different question: how does the desire that drives Elizabeth's pursuit of authenticity change as Gracie increasingly becomes a model

inseparable from the object of her pursuit? Thus, this research does not seek to re-prove that imitation or appropriation occurs, but rather to explain the relational mechanisms that organize their intensification.

2.2 Identity and Performance in Todd Haynes's Cinema

The issue of unstable identity is not an isolated phenomenon in *May December*. Scholarship on Todd Haynes's films consistently demonstrates an interest in subjectivity that cannot be reduced to a single, stable, and transparent identity. (Geller & Leyda, 2022) show how Haynes's filmography can be read through feminism, embodiment, performance, mediation, and the relationship between the body and systems of representation. (Darby, 2013) situates several of Haynes's films within the issue of subjective dissolution, while (Bennett, 2010) shows how performance and identificatory structures shape the experiences of characters and spectatorship in Haynes's cinema.

Similar issues arise in *I'm Not There*. (Beltrami, 2020) suggests that the film produces a fluid, performative, and anti-essentialist view of selfhood. (Wilkins, 2017) also emphasizes the constructed nature of identity through the fragmentation of Bob Dylan's representation into several different figures. (D'Cruz & D'Cruz, 2013) even position authenticity as a crucial issue in the film, suggesting that biographical representation does not necessarily provide access to the authentic self.

This tendency is relevant to *May December* because the Elizabeth–Gracie relationship revives the problem of representational authenticity in a different form. While *I'm Not There* fragmented identity across multiple figures to deny the possibility of biographical unity, *May December* constructs the opposite problem: one performer attempts to get closer to a single living model. Yet the results are fundamentally similar—identity still resists reduction to a final representation.

Readings of cinematic identity have also developed in Indonesian scholarship. (Achmad, 2020), for example, shows that identity in film can be read through speech, action, physical appearance, gesture, intonation, and facial expression. (Sadia & Saraswati, 2026) use dialogue, monologue, and selected visual scenes to explore the transformation of social identity, while (Intany & Koiri, 2026) combine textual and visual analysis to examine changes in self-concept and diasporic identity. These studies demonstrate that character identity in film can be analyzed as a process formed through the relationship between narrative development, bodily performance, and relational configuration.

However, this research does not stop at the claim that identity is unstable or constructed. It focuses on the relational processes that led Elizabeth to increasingly orient her performance toward Gracie as a model. Haynes's scholarship helps explain why identity becomes problematic, while Girard provides tools to explain how this desire for authenticity is formed through mediation.

2.3 Mimetic Desire, Internal Mediation, and Metaphysical Desire

The main foundation of this research comes from René Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. (Girard, 1965) developed the proposition that desire cannot always be explained as a direct relationship between an individual and an object. In the various novels he analyzed, humans often learn what to desire through others who function as models or mediators. The structure of desire is therefore not simply subject → object, but a triangle connecting subject, mediator, and object.

A mediator is not simply a party that provides information about an object. The presence of a model contributes to shaping the object's value. A subject pursues something because their desire has been directed or mediated through a particular model. This perspective distinguishes mimetic desire from imitation, simply understood as copying behavior. Imitation can be one manifestation of mimesis, but mimetic desire concerns the deeper structure of how desire is formed, directed, and intensified through another subject (Antonello & Webb, 2015; Palaver, 2013).

Girard also distinguishes between external and internal mediation. In external mediation, the distance between the subject and the model is large enough that the mediator does not become a rival or a direct participant in the subject's world. Conversely, internal mediation occurs when the subject and mediator are in a relatively close social context. This condition can increase comparison and, in some contexts, develop into mimetic rivalry. However, rivalry

is not the primary aspect used in this study. More important is the principle that proximity allows the mediator to become more involved in shaping the subject's desires.

The concept of metaphysical desire becomes relevant when the object no longer fully explains what the subject is truly pursuing. Desire can evolve so that what is desired is not only the mediated object, but also the qualities of being associated with the mediator. In this form, the subject increasingly orients desire toward the imagined state or fullness of the model. Metaphysical desire is structurally difficult to achieve fulfillment because the subject can acquire a particular object or imitate various characteristics of the mediator, but cannot literally become another person (Girard, 1965; Palaver, 2013).

Girardian literary criticism then develops the relationship between mimesis, identity, representation, and subjectivity further (Antonello & Webb, 2015). (Lawtoo, 2013), for example, places imitation as a process that helps shape subjectivity rather than just an action carried out by a fully formed self. Thus, mimesis can be read not only in relation to the struggle for external objects, but also to destabilization and construction of self.

The use of Girard in Indonesian scholarship also demonstrates the framework's flexibility. (Sarmi et al., 2023) used mimetic desire to explain revenge and relational desire in Juan Rulfo's work, while (Lantowa et al., 2025) applied Girard to examine the relationship between mimetic desire, rivalry, and violence. Although the objectives and outcomes of these two studies differ from those of *May December*, both demonstrate that the Girardian framework can be operationalized through character relations, dialogue, narrative development, and patterns of desire.

The Girardian framework has also been applied to cinema and contemporary media. (Bubbio & Fleming, 2019) and (Cowdell et al., 2016) show that films can be analyzed through the relationship between mimetic desire, representation, violence, and relational structures. Film-specific studies also show that the triangular model of desire can be used to identify mediated desire between characters. Thus, films not only represent imitation but also provide narrative and performative evidence to see how subjects, models, and objects are interconnected.

2.4 From Mimetic Desire to Identity Appropriation

Girard's application of *May December* requires a clear distinction between observable imitation and mimetic interpretation. Elizabeth is an actress, so the observation and reproduction of voice, gesture, posture, or appearance in the early stages can still be explained as part of professional acting preparation. Therefore, a single act of imitation is not treated as sufficient evidence to conclude mimetic desire. Girardian interpretation only becomes relevant when the cumulative relationship between subject, model, and object indicates that the model increasingly organizes the subject's pursuit of the object.

The initial configuration of the research positions Elizabeth as the subject, representational authenticity as the initial object of desire, and Gracie as the model/mediator. Gracie is indeed the represented subject in the narrative, but within the Girardian structure, she mediates Elizabeth's pursuit of authenticity. In the initial phase, Elizabeth need not be assumed to desire to be Gracie. The analytical question lies instead in whether the pursuit of representational authenticity gradually makes Gracie increasingly inseparable from the object.

To explore this progression, the study uses several operational categories. Embodied imitation refers to the reproduction of the model's bodily and visual attributes, including facial expressions, gestures, posture, movement, appearance, and makeup. Internalization of the model occurs when model-associated patterns can be reproduced without the model's presence or direct direction. Experiential identification refers to efforts to reconstruct or enter into experiences associated with Gracie. Relational appropriation demonstrates Elizabeth's movement toward interpersonal positions that shape Gracie's relational identity.

Identity appropriation is used when at least two of the four formal domains—embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational—converge and are accompanied by internalization and/or boundary crossing. This term does not refer to cultural appropriation or literal ownership of another person's identity, but rather the cumulative incorporation of the dimensions of identity associated with the model into the subject's performance.

These categories are not Girard's original terminology. They serve as operational bridges that allow changes in the subject–model relationship to be observed textually before being interpreted through mimetic desire. Meanwhile, metaphysical desire remains treated as a trajectory-level interpretation, not a scene-level code. This concept only becomes defensible

if the overall narrative progression demonstrates that representational authenticity is increasingly model-dependent, that appropriation progresses beyond ordinary acting preparation, and that increasing approximation still fails to produce complete identification or mimetic satisfaction.

This operational distinction also serves as an analytical safeguard against conceptual inflation. Not every proximity to the model, repetition of a gesture, or change in appearance carries the same interpretive weight. Scene-level evidence must first demonstrate what Elizabeth actually did, then be placed in chronological relation to other data before deriving a Girardian interpretation. This principle allows the study to maintain the possibility that an action remains instrumental and professional until cumulative evidence emerges indicating a change in function. Thus, Gracie's role as model/mediator is not assumed to be dominant from the outset, but is traced through her shift from source of information to reference, which increasingly determines the value and form of representational authenticity. This framework also maintains identity appropriation as a stricter category than resemblance: similarity can emerge through a single attribute, while appropriation requires convergence across domains and evidence that the model's characteristics have entered the subject's repertoire.

Table 1. Operational Categories and Analytical Thresholds

Category	Operational definition	Indicative evidence	Analytical level
Embodied Imitation	Reproduction of bodily or visual attributes associated with Gracie.	Facial expression, gesture, posture, movement, appearance, makeup.	Scene-level
Internalization of the Model	Independent reproduction of model-associated patterns without Gracie's direct presence or instruction.	Reproduction of makeup, facial expressions, or mannerisms after prior observation.	Scene-to-trajectory
Experiential Identification	Attempt to reconstruct or inhabit an experience or position associated with Gracie.	Bodily reenactment of a Gracie-associated situation or experiential position.	Scene-level
Relational Appropriation	Movement into interpersonal positions or configurations associated with Gracie.	Entry into Gracie-linked relational arrangements; boundary crossing.	Scene-to-trajectory
Identity Appropriation	Convergence of at least two formal identity domains plus internalization and/or boundary crossing.	Embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational dimensions converge in performance.	Trajectory-level

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study uses a descriptive qualitative design with a theory-informed textual film analysis approach to analyze the development of the representational relationship between Elizabeth Berry and Gracie Atherton-Yoo in *May December* and examine how this relationship develops into a mimetically mediated one. Textual analysis is used because film is treated as a cultural text that generates meaning through narrative structure, characterization, performance, dialogue, bodily movement, and representational choices (McKee, 2003). A qualitative media research approach allows theoretical interpretations to be systematically developed from narrative, visual, and contextual evidence (Brennen, 2021).

The analysis is theory-informed rather than theory-determined. René Girard's Mimetic Theory is used as an interpretive framework after descriptive evidence for each data unit has been identified. Therefore, imitation is not automatically categorized as mimetic desire. This distinction is necessary because Elizabeth is an actress professionally expected to observe and reproduce Gracie's characteristics. The Girardian interpretation is only applied when the

cumulative trajectory indicates that imitation progresses beyond the immediate need for acting preparation to internalization, experiential identification, relational appropriation, and changes in the structure of desire.

3.2 Data Sources and Scene Selection

The primary data source for this study was the released version of *May December* (Haynes, 2023). The film was treated as the primary text because important indicators such as intonation, facial expression, gesture, posture, physical movement, makeup, gaze, and interaction depend on the enacted performance. The final screenplay by (Burch, n.d.) was used as an auxiliary textual source to cross-check dialogue, scene sequence, stage direction, and the relationship between scenes that have narrative continuity. The use of the screenplay as complementary documentary material is consistent with the principles of document analysis in qualitative research (Bowen, 2009).

Data were selected using purposive and criterion-based scene selection. Scenes were included if they exhibited at least one of the following: professional observation of Gracie; reproduction of voice, gesture, bodily movement, facial expression, or appearance; internalization of model characteristics; reconstruction of experiences associated with Gracie; movement toward a relational position related to Gracie; crossing of professional boundaries; or convergence between multiple identity domains.

The mapping process produced 19 data units, consisting of nine featured core units, seven supporting units, and three contextual units. All 19 data units were verified against the released film to ensure dialogue, gesture, voice, gaze, bodily performance, scene continuity, and final-cut wording. The released version was given interpretive priority if there were differences with the screenplay. Table 2 displays the nine featured core units; seven supporting units and three contextual units serve as supporting and contextual evidence in reading the overall trajectory.

3.3 Coding and Analytical Procedures

The analysis was conducted using a two-level coding procedure combining deductive and inductive logic. At the first level, each data unit was assigned descriptive codes that remained close to the observable evidence. Initial coding included professional observation, vocal reproduction, bodily reproduction, appearance reproduction, independent reproduction, experiential reenactment, relational boundary crossing, and model-centered return. This staged coding approach allowed for descriptive data to be distinguished from more abstract interpretations (Saldaña, 2021).

At the second level, these descriptive patterns are connected to analytical and theoretical categories. Deductive concepts originate from Girard, specifically subject, model/mediator, object of desire, internal mediation, and metaphysical desire. Meanwhile, embodied imitation, internalization of the model, experiential identification, relational appropriation, and identity appropriation are used as operational categories in the study.

Identity appropriation is only used when at least two formal identity domains converge and are accompanied by evidence of internalization and/or boundary crossing. Under these rules, the reproduction of a single gesture or the use of a single makeup item is not sufficient to qualify as identity appropriation.

After scene-level coding was completed, the data were analyzed chronologically to identify the dominant trajectory of intensification: Professional Observation → Representational Authenticity → Mimetic Mediation → Embodied Imitation → Internalization of the Model → Experiential Identification → Relational Appropriation → Multi-Domain Identity Appropriation. This trajectory is not understood as a rigid developmental sequence. Several forms of imitation, identification, and appropriation overlap throughout the narrative progression.

Metaphysical desire is not used as a code for a single scene. The concept is only evaluated at the trajectory level if the overall evidence indicates that representational authenticity is increasingly model-dependent, model-associated attributes and positions are increasingly appropriated, and the accumulation of appropriation still does not resolve the pursuit of authenticity.

3.4 Analytical Credibility

The credibility and transparency of interpretation were maintained through several strategies. First, selected scenes were repeatedly checked against the released film, while the screenplay was used to cross-check dialogue, stage direction, and scene relations; the released film retained interpretive priority. Second, the study used explicit coding thresholds to distinguish between ordinary acting preparation, imitation, internalization, and identity appropriation.

Third, each core scene was examined through alternative explanation tests, particularly the possibility that Elizabeth's behavior could still be explained as professional acting preparation. The Girardian interpretation was only strengthened when the explanation became increasingly inadequate to explain the cumulative pattern. Fourth, counter-evidence was not excluded from the analysis. Scenes that indicated that Elizabeth's transformation remained incomplete or that she still had professional motivation were retained to prevent confirmation bias.

This research does not claim empirical access to Elizabeth's psychological interior as a fictional character. All conclusions are interpretations of narrative and performative constructions supported by textual evidence and theoretical coherence.

Table 2. Featured Core Evidence and Analytical Functions

Unit data	Scene evidence	Primary analytical function	Role in trajectory
D04	Elizabeth studies an older image of Gracie and reproduces the expression in a mirror.	Embodied imitation	Observation begins to move through Elizabeth's own body.
D07	In the former pet-shop stockroom, Elizabeth bodily reconstructs a position associated with Gracie's past.	Experiential identification	Shift from appearance toward attempted inhabitation of experience.
D08	Gracie applies makeup to Elizabeth and directly shapes her resemblance.	Model-directed embodied transformation	The model actively forms the subject's appearance.
D11	Elizabeth says she is getting closer to something "true" and "honest."	Representational authenticity	Clarify the initial object of desire.
D12	Elizabeth reproduces Gracie's makeup without Gracie present.	Internalization of the model	Model-associated patterns become independently reproducible.
D15	With Joe, Elizabeth repeats a bodily configuration linked to the stockroom reconstruction.	Experiential + relational appropriation	Model-oriented approximation crosses into relational positioning.
D16	After intimacy with Joe, Elizabeth's attention returns to Gracie's private letter.	Model-centered return	Joe does not completely displace Gracie from the structure of pursuit.

Unit data	Scene evidence	Primary analytical function	Role in trajectory
D17	Mirror/camera letter performance combines voice, rhythm, gaze, embodied performance, and model-associated material.	Culminating multi-domain identity appropriation	Embodied and vocal features converge in a performance that carries forward experiential and relational appropriation established across the preceding trajectory.
D18	The final performance remains unresolved and further approximation is still sought.	Failed completion / persistent approximation	Extensive appropriation does not terminate the pursuit of authenticity.

4. Results

Analysis of 19 data units reveals a dominant trajectory moving from professional observation to an increasingly model-dependent pursuit of representational authenticity. This trajectory is not entirely linear; embodied imitation, internalization, experiential identification, and relational appropriation may overlap throughout the narrative. However, cumulatively, there is a progression from professional observation to multi-domain identity appropriation that still fails to produce complete identification.

4.1 From Professional Observation to Mimetic Mediation

In the initial phase, Elizabeth's relationship with Gracie was primarily constructed as that of an actress and a research subject. Elizabeth recorded information about Gracie, delved into her past, spoke with people who knew her, and observed her behavior and appearance. At this stage, Elizabeth's actions were still entirely consistent with ordinary professional research.

The initial change is apparent when observation begins to be translated through Elizabeth's own body. After studying an old photograph of Gracie, Elizabeth not only observes the image but also uses a mirror to attempt to reproduce Gracie's facial expression. She adjusts the expression, compares it to the photograph, and then repeats it. This action demonstrates that Elizabeth's body begins to function as a medium for testing representation against a model. However, this isolated scene can still be described as an acting exercise.

The organizing object of the initial phase becomes clearer when Elizabeth requests additional research time, feeling closer to something "true" and "honest." This suggests that Elizabeth's initial engagement objective is representational authenticity, not Gracie as the direct object. What is desired is a performance that is perceived as truthful and convincing.

However, the pursuit of authenticity increasingly depends on Gracie. The more Elizabeth desires to produce a portrayal deemed authentic, the more intensively she observes and reproduces models perceived as having access to authenticity. Gracie thus shifts from being a source of information to being a model through whom representational authenticity is pursued. This shift in function forms the initial basis for mimetic mediation.

4.2 Embodied Imitation and the Internalization of the Model

The next development is marked by a shift from discrete bodily imitation to internalization of the model. One of the most important scenes occurs when Elizabeth and Gracie sit in front of the mirror to discuss Gracie's makeup routine. Elizabeth initially observes and notes the products used. Their positions then shift when Gracie herself applies makeup to Elizabeth's face. The model is no longer simply observed; Gracie directly shapes the appearance of the subject she is studying.

The significance of the scene becomes clearer when the same behavior recurs without Gracie's presence. Elizabeth then applies makeup in the manner Gracie had taught her. This shift distinguishes direct imitation from internalization. In the first scene, reproduction still

relies on the presence of a model. In the next scene, Elizabeth is able to reproduce the pattern independently.

Supporting evidence suggests that internalization isn't limited to makeup. Gracie's facial expressions and bodily mannerisms begin to emerge as part of Elizabeth's performative repertoire. In one interaction, also verified in the released film, the screenplay explicitly indicates that Elizabeth reproduces Gracie's smile when responding to others. Thus, the model no longer needs to be physically present for her characteristics to be activated.

This pattern results in a progression from observation → deliberate reproduction → model-directed transformation → independent reproduction. Embodied imitation gradually moves beyond isolated acting exercises. Gracie's bodily and appearance patterns begin to become model-associated resources that Elizabeth can bring to her own performances.

4.3 Experiential Identification and Relational Appropriation

The most obvious escalation occurs when Elizabeth moves from reproducing external attributes to attempting to enter the experience associated with the model. The turning point occurs when Elizabeth visits a former pet shop associated with Gracie and Joe's history. After gaining access to the stockroom, Elizabeth goes beyond simply observing the space. She places her body on the stairs and physically attempts to reconstruct the configuration she imagines associated with Gracie's experience.

This scene marks a shift from embodied imitation to experiential identification. The difference lies in the object of reproduction. Embodied imitation reproduces how the model looks or moves, while experiential identification attempts to reconstruct the position associated with the model's experience. Elizabeth's body no longer simply represents Gracie; it is used to test the possibility of being in Gracie's position.

The connection between experiential reconstruction and relational appropriation is strengthened through Elizabeth's interaction with Joe. In the next encounter, Elizabeth's bodily configuration maintains continuity with the previously reconstructed position in the stockroom. Afterward, Elizabeth's attention returns to Gracie's private material, acquired through Joe.

This finding does not mean that Joe is not an independent object of attraction. The film still allows for sexual curiosity or attraction. However, Joe also serves as a relational access point to the experiences and positions associated with Gracie. Elizabeth first imaginatively reconstructs the model's position, then enters an analogous relational configuration with Gracie's partner.

This pattern forms the basis of the category of relational appropriation. The term doesn't mean Elizabeth literally takes over Gracie's relationship. What occurs is an extension of the representational process into the relational domain: to approach Gracie, Elizabeth no longer simply studies how Gracie speaks or looks, but increasingly enters the spaces, experiences, and interpersonal arrangements that shape Gracie's position in the narrative.

4.4 Identity Appropriation and Persistent Pursuit

The convergence of various forms of appropriation reaches its clearest form when Elizabeth reads Gracie's personal letter in front of a mirror/camera. At this stage, the transformation no longer consists of a single change in appearance. The scene brings together embodied characteristics through facial expressions, bodily mannerisms, appearance, and makeup with vocal dimensions through voice and rhythm. When read cumulatively alongside the experiential reconstruction and relational boundary crossing in the previous scene, this performance becomes the culmination of multi-domain identity appropriation. Thus, the experiential and relational dimensions are not assumed to appear entirely in D17, but are already formed in the trajectory carried through to the performance. Gracie's personal letter functions as material that facilitates this culmination, not as a separate identity domain.

Based on the research's analytical threshold, this convergence supports the category of multi-domain identity appropriation. This label wasn't given because Elizabeth successfully became Gracie, but because the imitation had expanded into more than one identity domain and was accompanied by internalization and boundary crossing.

However, the film's ending also serves as counter-evidence to the idea that transformation reaches completion. Elizabeth has accumulated various model-associated attributes and is increasingly capable of playing Gracie. Nevertheless, the final performance

doesn't provide representational closure. She continues to pursue a sense of realness that feels incompletely achieved.

Thus, the analysis does not support the simple interpretation that Elizabeth eventually "becomes Gracie." What is found is a becoming without completion. The more attributes, experiences, and relational positions she appropriates, the closer Elizabeth seems to move to her representational goal; however, this accumulation does not eliminate the distance between representation and represented subject. Appropriation does not end the pursuit of authenticity.

Overall, the results form a trajectory: Professional Observation → Representational Authenticity → Mimetic Mediation → Embodied Imitation → Internalization of the Model → Experiential Identification → Relational Appropriation → Multi-Domain Identity Appropriation → Persistent Pursuit of Authenticity.

RQ1 is answered by demonstrating that professional observation evolves into mimetically mediated engagement when Gracie no longer simply provides information but increasingly becomes a model that dictates how representational authenticity is pursued. RQ2 is empirically answered through a progression from imitation and internalization to experiential and relational appropriation to multi-domain identity appropriation. The Girardian implications of persistent pursuit after extensive appropriation are discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that Elizabeth's transformation cannot be explained simply by increasing the intensity of her professional acting preparation. Observation was indeed the starting point, but Elizabeth's relationship with Gracie gradually developed through embodied imitation, internalization, experiential identification, and relational appropriation until several dimensions of Gracie's identity converged in Elizabeth's performance. Most importantly, this accumulation did not resolve the pursuit of representational authenticity.

5.1 From Representational Desire to Mimetic Mediation

The first finding shows that Elizabeth's transformation did not begin with a direct desire for Gracie as an identity to be embraced. Her initial object was more limited and professional: representational authenticity. This distinction is important because a Girardian reading would be too simplistic if Elizabeth's initial attraction to Gracie were immediately assumed to be a desire to "become" a model.

In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, (Girard, 1965) shows that an object can initially remain outside the mediator, while the mediator increasingly determines how it is imagined and pursued. The initial configuration of *May December* can be read through this structure: Elizabeth is the desiring subject, representational authenticity is the initial object, and Gracie functions as the model/mediator.

In the initial phase, the relationship can still be explained as part of the actor's preparation. However, this explanation increasingly loses sufficiency as Gracie's characteristics begin to be reproduced outside the model's presence, as bodily imitation evolves into simulation of experience, and as Elizabeth moves toward relational configurations associated with Gracie.

These findings extend (Tremblay, 2023) reading. Tremblay convincingly identified imitation and repetition and interpreted them through repetition-compulsion, misrecognition, and failure of truthful performance. This research does not replace that interpretation. Girardian reading, on the other hand, reveals another dimension of repetition: repetition can also be understood as relationally organized through a model.

This shift in focus shifts the analysis from imitation as behavior to mimetic mediation as mechanism. The more Elizabeth desires representational authenticity, the greater her dependence on Gracie. Proximity does not diminish the need for models once sufficient information is acquired; rather, proximity generates a greater need for proximity. Gracie moves from being a source of information to being the condition through which authenticity itself is imagined.

5.2 From Imitation to Appropriation: When the Model Moves into the Subject

The shift from imitation to appropriation became apparent when the model began to be reproduced without her presence. The progression from facial imitation, observation of physicality, makeup demonstration, to independent reproduction shows that Gracie increasingly functioned as an internalized model.

This condition is related to internal mediation. In Girard's thinking, the proximity between subject and mediator allows mimetic relations to intensify and, in certain contexts, can develop into rivalry. However, the *May-December* data do not indicate rivalry as the dominant structure. What is more prominent is convergence: Elizabeth increasingly moves toward the characteristics and positions associated with the model. Therefore, internal mediation is used here primarily to explain the intensification of proximity, not to impose rivalry as an outcome.

The results become more significant when embodied imitation evolves into experiential identification. In the stockroom scene, Elizabeth is no longer simply trying to understand what Gracie looks like, but bodily attempting to reconstruct the position associated with Gracie's experience. Embodied imitation focuses on how the model appears, while experiential identification focuses on what it might mean to occupy the model's position.

This movement then results in relational appropriation. Joe is important not because the research necessarily denies the possibility of sexual attraction. Rather, Joe functions simultaneously as an independent relational figure and a relational access point to Gracie's associated position. The continuity between bodily reconstruction, intimacy with Joe, and the return to Gracie's private material demonstrates that representational pursuit has entered the relational domain.

This interpretation can be in dialogue with (Ouellette, 2024), who places the film within the context of the remediation and extractive logic of tabloid culture. While Ouellette shows how Gracie's life can be packaged into material media, this research's findings extend that extraction to the character level: Elizabeth progressively appropriates material identities—body, voice, experience, and relational position—to construct a performance.

However, mimetic reading does not negate exploitation. The two answer different questions. Exploitation explains the ethical structure of Elizabeth's actions, while mimetic desire explains the relational structure that intensifies her approximation of Gracie. Elizabeth can be both exploitative and increasingly dependent on the model she exploits.

5.3 Metaphysical Desire and the Impossibility of Becoming Gracie

The convergence of embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational dimensions allows Elizabeth's transformation to be read at a deeper Girardian level. As mimetic desire intensifies, the distinction between desire for the object and attraction toward the mediator can become increasingly unstable. Girardian scholarship explains this configuration through metaphysical desire (Girard, 1965; Palaver, 2013).

Elizabeth's trajectory qualifies for this reading not because there is a single scene that demonstrates metaphysical desire, but because the original object progressively becomes more model-dependent. Elizabeth initially needs Gracie to achieve representational authenticity. However, as the pursuit progresses, authenticity becomes increasingly identified with an approximation of Gracie's voice, body, experience, and relational position.

The object doesn't completely disappear. Elizabeth still wants to produce a "real" performance. However, the object becomes increasingly difficult to separate from the model. In this sense, Elizabeth's trajectory can be read through Girardian metaphysical desire: the pursuit of representational authenticity increasingly directs the subject not only to information about the mediator, but also to the attributes and positions that shape the mediator's being.

Most importantly, culmination does not result in completion. Elizabeth can increasingly resemble Gracie without gaining final possession of Gracie's identity. Resemblance does not erase the distinction between subject and model.

The ending makes the impossibility of complete identification even clearer. After extensive preparation and multi-domain appropriation, Elizabeth still needed further approximation. If imitation were merely an instrumental tool for acting preparation, more relevant information and more accurate reproduction should gradually reduce representational uncertainty. But the results show a different pattern: more information +

more imitation + more embodied access + more experiential access + more relational access did not result in less desire. Instead, it resulted in more pursuit.

This paradox explains why *Becoming Gracie* should not be read as a successful transformation. "Becoming" is a movement without a final arrival. Elizabeth moves closer to the model while simultaneously demonstrating that complete access to the model is never available.

5.4 Unfinished Mimetic Appropriation

To synthesize these patterns, this study proposes the analytical term unfinished mimetic appropriation. This term is not intended as a replacement or revision of Girard's Mimetic Theory, but rather as a data-grounded conceptual synthesis to explain the specific form of model-oriented identity transformation in *May December*.

Unfinished mimetic appropriation is defined as a mimetically mediated process in which a subject progressively incorporates embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational dimensions of a model in pursuit of an increasingly model-dependent object, while complete identification and mimetic satisfaction remain unattainable, thus sustaining further approximation.

This concept has four characteristics. First, there is mediated desire: the subject does not pursue the object autonomously because the model increasingly determines how the object is imagined. Second, there is multi-domain appropriation: the process does not stop at one gesture or one form of copying, but extends to embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational domains. Third, there is failed completion: the more elements of the model that are appropriated do not result in complete identification. Fourth, this failure results in persistent approximation, namely the continued pursuit of the model and the authenticity associated with it.

Thus, unfinished mimetic appropriation differs from simple imitation. Imitation only requires the reproduction of another characteristic; unfinished mimetic appropriation requires a relationship between reproduction, mediated desire, multi-domain appropriation, failed completion, and persistent approximation.

This conceptual synthesis also clarifies the research's position on Tremblay. Repetition-compulsion and misrecognition remain relevant because Elizabeth continues to repeat the model without achieving a truthful identity. This research adds that this repetition has a relational structure: Gracie becomes a mediator who becomes increasingly attached to the object of Elizabeth's desire. Repetition can thus be read simultaneously as a compulsive structure and as a consequence of model-dependent desire.

The same holds true for Ouellette. Extractive representation and mimetic appropriation are not competing explanations. Mimetic analysis, in fact, shows why extraction can continue to increase: the more authenticity is seen as dependent on proximity to the represented subject, the greater the urge to transcend the boundaries between observing, knowing, experiencing, and appropriating.

Three alternative readings need to be maintained. First, most of Elizabeth's early actions are still most economically explained as acting preparation. The Girardian interpretation derives its power not from a single act of imitation, but from cumulative movement beyond professional necessity. Second, Elizabeth can be read as an opportunistic and exploitative actress. This research does not reject this reading, but rather suggests that exploitation is insufficient to explain why the represented subject's identity is increasingly internalized in Elizabeth's performance. Third, the encounter with Joe can be read as independent sexual desire. This possibility is not ruled out, but Joe alone does not explain the broader trajectory that continually returns Elizabeth to Gracie as the representational and relational center.

The research's contribution, therefore, is not the claim that all of Elizabeth's actions constitute mimetic desire. It lies in the recognition that at some point, ordinary acting preparation can still explain individual acts but is no longer sufficient to explain the cumulative trajectory. When imitation persists without a model, evolves into experiential reconstruction, enters the relational domain, converges into multi-domain identity appropriation, and still fails to produce satisfaction, Girardian metaphysical desire provides a more comprehensive explanation.

Theoretically, this research makes three contributions. First, it reframes imitation in *May December* from observable repetition to part of the mediated structure of desire. Second, it shows that model-oriented desire can manifest through progressive appropriation of the

model's embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational identity. Third, the concept of unfinished mimetic appropriation suggests that appropriation does not necessarily resolve mimetic desire; as authenticity becomes increasingly model-dependent, greater resemblance can actually sustain the need for further approximation.

The relationship between approximation and failed completion also clarifies why identity appropriation is not identical to identity replacement. At every stage, Elizabeth remains a different performer from Gracie, and this difference is precisely the condition that allows desire to continue operating. If appropriation resulted in full equivalence between subject and model, mediated pursuit would conceptually lose its source of intensification. Instead, the film maintains a residual distance: the more dimensions that can be reproduced, the more apparent it is that reproduction is not the same as access to the totality of another person. This residual distance explains persistent approximation without having to assume pathology or a literal wish for identity substitution. It also helps maintain representational authenticity as the original object throughout the analysis. The object is not simply replaced by Gracie; what changes is its degree of dependence on the model. Thus, the metaphysical reading rests on the transformation of the object-model relation, not on the claim that Elizabeth explicitly desires to possess Gracie's identity.

This conceptual boundary is also crucial for the transferability of the findings. Unfinished mimetic appropriation is not intended to label every performance involving imitation, method acting, or biographical research. The concept is only relevant when evidence demonstrates a cumulative relationship between mediated desire, internalization of the model, movement across more than one identity domain, and persistent pursuit after extensive approximation. Thus, ordinary professional preparation remains the baseline explanation that must be tested first. Only when the subject's actions consistently go beyond the instrumental function of gathering information or reproducing role characteristics, and when the model becomes increasingly involved in how the object itself is defined, does the mimetic interpretation become stronger. This boundary keeps the concept of unfinished mimetic appropriation analytical and falsifiable at the level of textual interpretation, while also opening up the possibility of comparison with other films or literary works without assuming that all forms of imitation share the same desire structure.

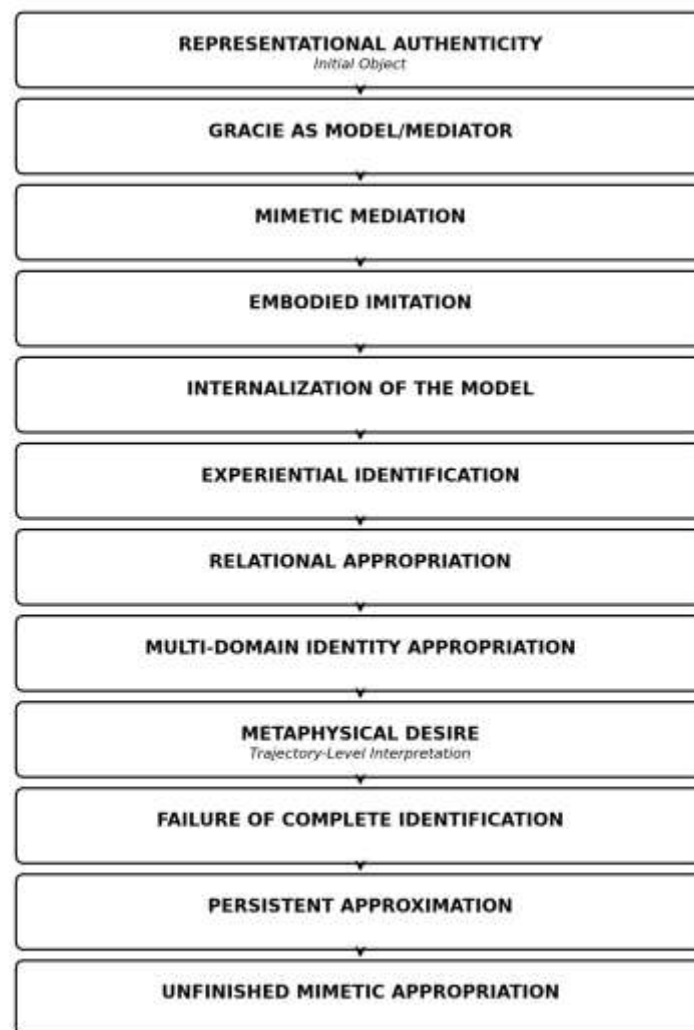


Figure 1. Dominant trajectory of unfinished mimetic appropriation after the professional-observation baseline. Note: Professional observation functions as the pre-mimetic baseline and therefore precedes the conceptual model shown. The model represents a dominant analytical trajectory rather than a rigid developmental sequence; several stages may overlap across scenes.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that Elizabeth Berry's transformation in May December did not begin with a direct desire to become Gracie Atherton-Yoo. The initial object that organized her engagement was representational authenticity, namely the pursuit of a performance that was considered truthful and convincing. Answering RQ1, professional observation developed into a mimetically mediated engagement when Gracie no longer functioned solely as a source of information, but increasingly became a model/mediator who determined how representational authenticity was imagined and pursued.

Answering RQ2, this development occurs through embodied imitation, internalization of the model, experiential identification, and relational appropriation, until the embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational dimensions converge as a multi-domain identity appropriation. However, this convergence does not result in complete identification. Elizabeth is increasingly able to reproduce the attributes and positions associated with Gracie, but greater approximation does not eliminate the gap between the representation and the represented subject.

The entire trajectory can therefore be read through Girardian metaphysical desire. This interpretation is not based on a single scene and is not intended as a psychological diagnosis of a fictional character. It arises from cumulative changes as representational authenticity becomes increasingly model-dependent and extensive appropriation continues to fail to produce mimetic satisfaction.

Based on this pattern, the study proposes unfinished mimetic appropriation as a data-grounded conceptual synthesis: a process by which the subject progressively appropriates the embodied, vocal, experiential, and relational dimensions of the model, while complete identification remains unattained and this failure actually sustains further approximation. The study's contribution, therefore, is not to claim that Elizabeth imitates Gracie—a phenomenon recognized by previous scholarship—but to explain how imitation is increasingly organized by mediated desire and how appropriation can sustain, rather than complete, the pursuit of authenticity.

This research has limitations because it focuses on one film and one character trajectory, so it is not intended to generalize to all cinematic imitation. Furthermore, the analysis is interpretive of fictional construction and does not claim empirical access to the character's interior psychology. The concept of unfinished mimetic appropriation needs to be tested in other works featuring doubles, impersonators, actors, biographical representations, or characters attempting to inhabit another person's identity before it can be developed into a more transferable framework.

Thus, *Becoming Gracie* does not refer to successful transformation, but rather to becoming without complete arrival: Elizabeth can increasingly approach Gracie through representation, embodiment, experience, and relational approximation, but resemblance is still not identical to possession of identity.

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