Stony Brook University

The official electronic file of this thesis or dissertation is maintained by the University Libraries on behalf of The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.

Between Obscure Objects and Desire

A Thesis Presented

by

Alan Goodrich

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

May 2009

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

Alan Goodrich

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the

Masters of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend

acceptance of this thesis.

Christa Erickson – Thesis Advisor
Associate Professor, Department of Art

Stephanie Dinkins – Chairperson of Defense
Associate Professor, Department of Art

Andrew Uroskie
Assistant Professor, Department of Art

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

ii

Abstract of the Thesis

Between Obscure Objects and Desire

by

Alan Goodrich

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

2009

This thesis describes the art work produced in the third year of my degree program, both for my thesis show (a solo show) and for the group show required of my cohort. In the thesis, I describe the three video works produced, the process I utilized in the creation of the works, and the theoretical structures that undergird the works. This what, how, and why of the works themselves allows me to discuss topics that concern me as an artist, namely, the nature of spectatorship, economies of attention, the relationship of art work to society and social critique, the occult properties of art works, and the relationship of artists and their work to history. Illustrations of the described works are provided after the text.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

I. Introduction

What is a symbol? It is to say one thing and mean another. Why not say it right out?
For the simple reason that certain phenomena tend to dissolve when we approach them
without ceremony. E. Wind, quoted in *Poetics of Cinema*, Raul Ruiz[1]

Making art most of the time, and writing little of the time, at best, allows the

intellect to do its thing free of the constraints of a narrowed scope or a theoretical hang-

up, and, at worst, gives one the sense that one is always fumbling around in the dark. It

has been refreshing to sit down and have to say what I mean, or rather, what my work

means, without the discursiveness necessary for the work of art itself. Saying what one

means is hardly a simple task, but hopefully this thesis will be an honest attempt at

coming to grips with the work I've made over the past year, which has more in common

than I intuited while making it. With luck, approaching the work thusly will not cause it

to dissolve, like a castle made from sugar (or salt.)

The thesis will encompass both my third year solo show and the group thesis

show, for a total of three works. I'll begin in reverse chronological order with the two

works that made up my contribution to the group show; while my most recent works

chronologically, they form a conceptual basis that will allow me to discuss the solo show

work in greatest detail (that is, they are conceptually prior to the work in the solo show.)

The thesis will be broken into, roughly, two sections: the first will deal with the two

works in the group show, the second will deal with the single work of my solo show. I'll

conclude with some general comments as to what overarching "project" (if any) the

works point toward, and possible avenues for future art-making. The sections dealing

---

[1] *Poetics of Cinema*, Editions Dis Voir, 1995.

with the specifics of the various pieces will further be broken down into three constituent parts. I'll begin with a physical description of the works, how they were conceptualized in terms of display or presentation, and how that conceptualization played out in actual fact in terms of the final, concrete installations. Then, I'll move on to a description of the processes involved in the creation of the individual pieces, both in terms of explanation of my working methods and an introduction to the thinking that undergirded the work during the making. Finally, I'll engage with each piece critically, attempting to think through the concepts that support each piece and placing them in some kind of theoretical framework; this section, which I picture as the meatiest of the three, will be partly an attempt to theorize and historicize my own work, and partly an explanation, an attempt to clarify "what I meant" in each particular piece, what I think the work is saying and what issues the work is addressing.

II. Group Show

Presentation

For the group show, I presented two videos, one projected, and one on a monitor. The works were installed adjacent to each other in the gallery, at a 90 degree angle, so that while watching one the other was outside the viewer's line of sight [see figure 1].

The first piece, entitled *That Obscure Object of Desire*, is a thirty minute digital video with sound, which looped continually. The video consists of a semi-distinct ball of light, which begins as a small point and over the course of the piece grows to gigantic

proportions, eventually taking up the entire frame and visual field. The ball of light, orange/yellow in color, is in some ways a simple abstraction, in others supposed to recall the sun or a ball of burning gas. The screen is completely blank (black) for approximately the first three minutes of the video, and then a tiny orange point of light appears [figure 2]. Over the next ten or so minutes, the point grows larger and larger, as if coming closer to the viewer. As the ball grows in size, it becomes evident that there is a great deal of visual noise on the surface of the ball, and it is surrounded by a diffuse haze – the center of the ball is more intensely colored (yellow), while the haze remains more orange. By the thirteenth minute of the video, the ball is the size of the frame [figure 3]. Over the course of the next eleven minutes the ball continues to scale up, to the point that the viewer no longer has a conception of it as a shape or object, but simply as a field of color [figure 4]. The surface still undulates with noise, but given that the color becomes more monochromatic (the orange dissipates as the haze gets scaled out of frame, leaving a purer, brighter yellow), the noise becomes harder to distinguish as an effect. Finally, at about minute 24, a new type of black visual noise begins to emerge from the center of the image [figure 5]. As the color field continues to scale up, this black noise becomes more and more prominent, "eating away" at the surrounding color field with a swirling, whirlpool-like consistency [figure 6]. The black continues to consume the remaining color until, at minute 30, all the color is gone and we are again returned to an "empty" (black) screen, as at the beginning, and the video loops.

An audio track, of equal duration and importance, accompanies the visual. Ideally, the audio would be reproduced via speakers, but due to the constraints of a group

3

show, two pairs of headphones were used (this, of course, limited the number of

spectators to two at a time, if they wished to listen to the audio while watching). The

audio consisted of a continuous, evolving electronic drone. There is some degree of

correspondence between the drone and the image; that is, the audio, like the image,

begins in emptiness (silence to the visual track's blackness) and "scales up" (fades in)

along with the point of light. Overall, the drone has four semi-distinct sections,

corresponding to the emergence of the point of light, the period of change during which

the semi-distinct ball overtakes the frame and becomes a color field, the semi-static

section of the color field expanding its intensity, and the final emergence of the black

noise and disintegration of the field. Each section of the drone is intermixed with the

others such that, while it is possible to perceive the separate parts, there is no real

demarcation between one and another, resulting in a slow interweaving that leaves the

perception of one continuous, undulating audio experience.

The second piece presented at the group show is entitled *That's Entertainment*,

and consists of a ten minute digital video loop presented on a wall-mounted monitor, also

with two sets of headphones. The video is comprised of yet smaller segments, ten short

videos of exactly one minute each. Each segment is made up of found visual material,

imagery taken from movie trailers made between the mid-1960s and early 1980s, all of

which fall into the somewhat nebulous category of "exploitation" filmmaking. Each

section was intended to represent a demented trailer for a particular film; thus, the

material for each discreet segment came from just one film, and each segment in

accompanied by the title of said film [figure 7]. These "trailers," many heavily edited,

are accompanied by the synchronous sound original to the images used - that is, both sound and image are taken from the source material wholesale, with editing and juxtaposition as the chief intervention on my part.

<u>Process</u>

In general, my process is guided by experimentation and intuition, by pleasure and exploration. I often start working on a particular piece as a means of exploring certain tools, techniques, or particular types of imagery, without having a predetermined goal. This is very much the case with both of these pieces.

The first piece, *That Obscure Object of Desire*, grew out of my desire to find a visual corollary to the sound work I've been doing for the last eight or nine years. Much of the electronic audio I've done in the past has been longer work, some of it drone, some of it not. Almost all my audio, though, has been concerned with creating intensive, body-affecting experiences; in some sense, this desire was synaesthetic, in that I wanted to create audio that worked haptically, that made the listener "see" and "feel" things outside the realm of what audio normally strives to achieve. That said, the desire to find a visual corollary to my audio work, to create a visual experience that was likewise physically affecting, perhaps even overwhelming, was a more general idea that had been floating around in my head for quite some time. The real impetus for working on the visual portion of the piece came from seeing Olafur Eliasson's solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in the spring of 2008. The work he presented there achieved similar goals,

creating spaces that totally immersed the spectator in an experience that was at once fascinating and disorienting, but what impressed me the most was the simplicity of his statements, the really pure distillation of intent and sensation that made up each piece. His ability to achieve something like spectacle that was very clean, intelligent, and without bombast made me reexamine the possibility of doing something similar in the visual field, a possibility I had often dismissed because of my dissatisfaction with much large-scale, "shock and awe" style installation or video work.

I thus began working on a series of video experiments intended for projection which attempted to fuse Op Art with psychedelica, retaining the effects of both "genres" while stripping away some of the more meaningless, baroque, or bombastic elements of each. A few of the experiments were not to my liking, but a few produced effects I liked very much, but which I couldn't picture as "just" a projection, even if it encompassed an entire space. The effects would be too diffuse, I feared, without a sonic component. At that time, I was thinking that very ambient, positional audio would be the key to the projections, as a way of creating environments that would engage but not overwhelm. After settling on the solar piece as the one I wanted to try to finish and present, though, I realized that, while I didn't want to overwhelm, I wanted to push that border as far as I could - to not overwhelm, while always threatening to, to ride the thin dividing line between enjoyment and pain. The piece being very simple and directional, I realized that, to achieve the desired tension, I needed a counterpoint that would mirror the image while also pushing back – the play between pleasure and pain would also be a play between audio and video. It was at this point that I decided to go back to working with

6

audio as I had traditionally done, as one continuous mix that would be recorded "live" (in one take), which would give it the durational integrity of the visual, and decided on drone as a way to complete the homage to the experiments of the late 1960s that fascinated me.

If I have a flipside to experimentation as a means of jumpstarting a piece, it is the idea of practice – not practice in the general sense, as in "an artist's practice," but in the sense of a repetitive task of training, as in "practice makes perfect." Often such practice grows out of boredom, out of a desire to have something to do to fill time that can serve as a mental distraction; my Sharpie drawings function in this way. In the case of the shorter piece I presented at the group show, *That's Entertainment*, the practice involved was editing.

Over the course of the previous summer, I'd watched some DVDs that were comprised solely of film trailers, all from exploitation films (a category that is not very specific, and covers a wide variety of generic sins) made between the late 1960s and the early 1980s. Most of these films I hadn't, and still haven't, seen, and because the trailers were grouped by genre (horror, blaxploitation, kung-fu, and so on), I began to get a sense of the repeated themes that not only comprised the specific genres, which I already had a good sense of, but also the conventions that guided the even narrower construction of the trailers themselves as a generic category. Coupled with my own past experience of watching many such films, it started to become obvious to me that there were two films in existence for every trailer presented: one film that "really" existed, the feature length film being advertised by the trailer, which would be comprised of predictable, rote, often boring content that is quite conventional for the specific genres involved, and of which

the trailer represented the highlights, most spectacular moments of, etc., and a second film, which did not "really" exist, but which the trailer served as an index of, a pointer to, one which lived only in the spectator's imagination, perhaps naively being unaware of the conventions that would play out in reality. This secondary, imaginary film is the film we truly desire to see, and which trailers in general always try to create for us, that is, a film based on desire rather than reality. I became intrigued with the idea of creating this film, which would, paradoxically, reveal some of the boring conventions that typically make up such films, but only insofar as they are subverted or perverted. To accomplish this, I resolved that the resulting film must be shorter than the feature length film would be, indeed, it must be shorter than the trailer itself. So in a sense, the resulting one-minute films are trailers for the trailers I was originally presented with, an attempt to reflect what my imagined experience of the film, which I (importantly) hadn't seen, would be. The goal was to transmute the imagined film, the interior film of desire, into "reality." Because the film such a trailer would be selling necessarily does not exist, the trailer and the film collapse onto each other, and become one. These short videos are my attempt to represent the essence of the desire that lies behind these films, which, in some sense, is the desire to watch, voyeurism *par excellence*.

Given this general concept, the execution falls into the category of practice, as it really was just a way to structure my own desire to play around with video editing, to see what could be done within the confines of found sound/video pairings that I had no say in the creation of. On the one hand, using found material is a kind of ethical stance for me: unless I have something specific and personal to express, shooting video often seems a

8

less than humble task. The world is already drowning in images that are never given a first, say nothing of second or third, look (in the true sense of looking), so it seems much more sensible and modest to use what is at hand rather than add to the rubbish pile. Furthermore, as I am interested in cultural forms, often popular forms, it seems only correct that I make use of those forms I wish to investigate and critique in their immediate form, rather than through some discursive method. While I got the feeling that for some the resulting videos weren't critical enough, or rather, they mistook my enjoyment in the process, visible in the end product, as a lack of distance, in reality I find this to be an ethical decision as well. Critique, or at least critique that has much true power, can only come from a place of love, understanding, or care – I hardly find it seemly to take as subject matter for criticism that which I don't understand or care for, as I don't have a stake in it. Too much work I see does this, takes as a subject of parody, critique, or irony a topic which the artist has little affection for or understanding of, and this to me seems a very shallow and self-serving sort of gesture, often amounting to nothing more than self-congratulation and reassurance that the artist, and similarly likeminded viewers, ignorant of the reality of the topic and the interiority of those devoted to it, can stand above the fray and smirk at others who do have a stake in the game. For me, it was very important that my own pleasure in making these be visible, as it reveals that I am critiquing from a place of love and enjoyment (perhaps pain as well), and furthermore, that the spectator have some enjoyment too. These are entertainments. At least, the goal was to create entertainments which also question how and why we wish to be so entertained.

These short videos, then, represent my attempt at psychoanalyzing the material itself, forcing latent meaning out of two or three short minutes of footage, getting the material to speak its own desire. While making work, I almost always have such overarching goals, which might be classified as the "metaphysical" end of the dialectic of my work, but the other, material or "base" end of the dialectic, is the desire to practice, to set myself a series of constraints and do my best within them, to distract myself from myself through a series of exercises or mental challenges. They begin to ask, "How little material is actually necessary for meaning to arise?" And also, "Can less material make us more awake, more aware of what we desire as spectators, and why we desire it?"

Images of Elsewhere, Images of Nowhere

The question to be asked, given these two pieces being presented in conjunction with each other, is: do these pieces relate? And if so, how? Are they two separate pieces, or one piece with two parts? Seemingly, they are very different, often diametrically so. For me, this is the key to their interlocking nature. I would respond that these pieces are really one piece, albeit not necessarily so: they could be shown separately and still retain their individual integrity, and their individual meaning. They are not dependent on one another, but amplify one another, in their opposition. These pieces attempt to state the poles of a dialectic of spectatorship, one that runs from absorption on one end to distraction on the other. In a sense, they work together to describe the "simple" processes

that are involved in watching any kind of time-based material, but in specific, the experience of going to the movies.

The processes involved in watching a movie, a common experience we all have had, are really excruciatingly hard to pin down on an individual, psychic level and on a molar, social level – the fascination with the functioning of fascination has occupied my thoughts for quite some time, beginning in earnest during my period of working with such topics within film studies. As a starting point, as an individual unit of fascination, the best formulation thus far has been offered by Tom Gunning and his conception (pace Eisenstein) of the attraction. For Gunning, the attraction is both a concrete, particular historical formation in the history of screen practices, but also a more metaphysical, free-floating explanation of the desire to watch.[2] On the one hand, the attraction is a corrective to a historical misrepresentation of the spectator of early cinema: that he was naively fascinated by the screen, a rube who couldn't differentiate screen reality from lived reality, personified by the supposed early spectators who shrieked and dove aside at the early Lumiere film of a train arriving at the station (the spectators thinking the train was real, and hence trying to avoid being crushed to death). This misrepresentation is egregious not only because it casts early filmgoers as idiots, but because, by doing so, it casts early films as equally insipid – little entertainments for little brains. Thus, the rise of narrative film in the teens and twenties is naturalized, seen as an obvious turn away from the "primitive" language and subjects of the early years and toward the "mature,"

---

[2] See primarily "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde." Gunning makes the argument that the attraction lives on in genres that rely most on spectacular, or device-barring, elements: avant-garde films, musicals inasmuch as they contain musical numbers, scenes of gore and fright in horror films, basically any type of film where the narrative grinds to a halt for some scene of display. I am expanding his argument in ways he would likely not sanction.

adult topics that would herald the golden age of Hollywood. The corrective offered by Gunning and the attraction is the idea that what drew early audiences to film was not just the verisimilitude the cinema offered, the "reality effect," but indeed what made it very different from reality – the foregrounding of the apparatus (often spectators came to watch the projector work as much as what was projected), the uncanny relation of the projected image to what it represented (the image, unlike "reality," being drained of color, devoid of sound, and subject to the mechanical imperfections of projection). In sum, the attraction offers the idea that spectators were indeed very savvy and aware of what they were seeing, of the continuities and discontinuities with past modes of representation. That said, they were ALSO fascinated, caught up in the display. The attraction represents a truly uncanny space, a mixed experience: partly individualized, partly social, partly aware, partly unaware, partly engrossed (or, as would be said later of narrative cinema, sutured in), partly distracted and disengaged.

Thus, the idea of the attraction can springboard over being just a fleshing-out of an experience in the history of vision to representing a new paradigm of vision – the visuality of modernity, like many realms of experience within modernity, is fundamentally at odds with itself, working at cross purposes, mixed. This does not imply a paradox, but instead a dialectic – an experience that is not one thing, essential and fixed, but instead mobile, that moves between various poles or limits. In some sense, the attraction stands in as an emblem for an attempt to synthesize the visual experiences of modernity.

That said, what are the poles inherent in such a dialectic? If we take the attraction as emblematic of "why people go to the movies," how exactly does it function, in pragmatic terms? And what does any of that have to do with the particular pieces shown in the group show? In proposing the attraction as a fundamental unit, I'm really trying to explain how attention works in the movie-going experience (which is, to some extent, the locus of, if not a functioning blueprint for, how attention works in much motion visuality since). Fundamentally, the attraction implies that we go to the movies to see something novel: to have experiences that are new and surprising, or make us feel emotions that may lie dormant in everyday life. The promise of movies is the promise of an experience of "otherness," at a (safe) once remove, brought near without the risk that true otherness might pose to the individual. We go to the movies to laugh or cry, to see exotic people or locals, to see the contents of our collective imagination visualized. The basic unit of film is, in many ways, the special effect – the promise of representing something unreal with fidelity to reality. The problem with novelty and the new, of the attraction as such, is that it can't stay new forever, that, once seen or experienced, it has often been mastered. Thus, the history of cinema in general, but of narrative cinema in particular, can be read (against the grain) as a kind of continual reinvigoration and extension of the power of the attraction – a work of continual renewal that provides new specific instances and contexts to a bag of cinematic tricks that, to be honest, change very little in their conceptual framework. Special effects are special effects – they are simply technological possibilities that get reworked for the specifics of the historical and cultural milieu in which we find ourselves. If we take a very generic concept of any particular narrative film, and examine what it is comprised of, most can be broken down into a structure of

exposition punctuated by highlights of excitement, activity, or dramatic moments; a somewhat static background against which the "attractions" of any particular film (the content of which vary from genre to genre) stand out. The novel moments of film can only be seen as novel, as exciting, by being cast against a background of normality, a consistent surface of what usually goes by the name "reality" (but which is more properly a reality effect). Thus, in *Star Wars* (to take only the most vulgar and widely-seen example of narrative cinema) the quest story, which we are all familiar with in its generalities as a generic type, serves as the well-worn background against which the various highlights of the film (the space battles, the light sabers, Darth Vader's helmet, the Death Star) all stand out as unique instances, the truly memorable bits. If the film were non-stop explosions, weird creatures, and thrilling encounters, we would weary of them quickly, and the film would be incomprehensible. Thus, we move between these two types of representation, the well-worn and familiar and the extraordinary, as a way of conserving our attention, making the exciting parts stand out, and letting a few novelties do a lot of work (rather than forcing many novelties to do very little work). This is the distinct psychic economy that underlies the vast majority of narrative filmmaking. What sets a truly great film apart, and the truly great director, is the ability to balance both these elements, to make the background "reality" as rich and full as possible, and to make the attractions as integrated and "real" feeling as possible – the worst films are those where we know already in the trailer that we've seen the best the film has to offer, that is, the films that jerk back and forth between modes without much subtlety, while the best are those that satisfy throughout, that are finely balanced, where the exposition only serves to enhance the novel parts, and the novel parts make us feel the exposition more

14

deeply. All of this is dependent on generic conventions, of course, and exists on a

continuum – thus *Star Wars* is much more satisfying than the many knock-offs that

followed it, while much less satisfying overall than, say, Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*, which is

so finely balanced as to achieve an almost sublime stasis.

Of course, the particularities of any of this are very much debatable – the above

examples are given only to provide a backdrop for my own "attraction," that is, to

illustrate that almost all films partake of a certain dialectic of attentiveness, of managing

the economy of our attention, that I am somewhat arbitrarily naming the attraction.[3]

What are the poles of this dialectic? They are distraction, on the farthest point from the

attraction (deep in the exposition), and absorption on the other (at the point of the most

special effect). What does the functioning of this dialectic look like? The dialectic I am

describing here works roughly like this: attractions bring the spectator in, interest is

sparked and attention hones in on one particular aspect or content of the film, absorbing

her; likewise, distractions pull the spectator out, causing her to lose interest, or focus on

arbitrary or unintended surface phenomena (noise, the physicality of the space, other

spectators). I should make it clear that while in the above section my portrayal might

make one think I see these poles as determinate, as designated from "on high" (by the

studio, the director, etc.) I am in fact suggesting no such thing. What the spectator finds

of interest (the attraction, the absorption function) and what is boring (the distraction, the

---

[3] We could just as easily start from the other end of the argument and arrive at the same result: for instance, that audiences go to the movies to see stories that comfort and reassure them, that make them reaffirm their way of life, their habitus, and that the strange, novel moments exist only to reassure them all the more of their security after being endured and mastered. Like waking in your own bed after a bad dream (or even a good one), movies re-enchant the everyday by making us even more convinced of the "trueness" of our experience of lived reality.

ennui function) are mysterious, individualized, and, to a certain degree, unknowable. My point is that such a dialectic is part of the cinematic function as such; it is ontologically present. The multiplicity the cinema provides, the very fact of photographic movement itself, prevents any one aspect from becoming dominant and completely absorbing to the spectator, regardless of how heavily such moments are coded in one way or another. She is always moving, latching onto one aspect/object/attraction, being brought close to it (in terms of attention), and then drawn away again. Thus, the term "attraction" can stand in for all the terms of this dialectic, as it accounts for its opposite state – the poles of the dialectic complete each other and describe the same movement or process.

The pieces in the group show were certainly not created as an attempt to illustrate any such theory, and neither piece is a simple illustration of the dialectic, or even of one pole of the dialectic. Each piece contains both poles, it is simply that one pole is dominant, thrust into the foreground, while the other tends to by shy and receding. That being granted, *That Obscure Object of Desire* is dominant on the absorptive end of the dialectic, while *That's Entertainment* is dominant on the distractive end. What balances them out, and keeps them interesting, is that they are playing against type: that is, I use the piece that is most extended and constant, that has the fewest elements, that is slowest (or boring, given your point of view) to illustrate the absorptive attraction, and the piece that is fastest, shortest, the most "in your face," to illustrate the distractive, or boring, pole of the dialectic. Let me spend a moment sketching out my thoughts on this further.

At first glance, *That Obscure Object…* has little in common with the attraction: it is long, slow-moving, and monotonous (not boring, exactly, but comprised of few

elements that change only incrementally). If it contains surprises, or shocks, they are

accretive, experienced only through the duration of the piece. On the other hand, it also

has much in common with the more generic features of the attraction: it is large scale

(physically overwhelming), comprised of special effects (computer generated, no less),

and portrays a spectacular event (the approach to, and subsequent disintegration of, the

sun). In creating this piece, part of my hope was to create an object that could not be

ignored, that would draw a viewer in like a moth to a flame. While this may or may not

have been accomplished, admittedly the surface elements could trend either way,

dialectic wise; the deepest affinity the piece has for the attraction is in its phenomenal

elements, in the experience of watching it. Given a spectator that is willing to commit to

the duration, to be seduced by the glow of the screen, the experience is designed to be

deeply absorptive. Each sense contributes an element to this absorptive function. On the

visual side, the continued shifting of one or two elements of the visual field are intended

to keep curiosity aroused, to provide for a desire for resolution that at least minimally

outweighs the feeling of "I understand what this is" and hence the ability to get up and

leave. Some elements that factor in this: the shifting scale of the orb, which moves at a

pace that you intellectually, but not physically, perceive (that is, you realize it is getting

bigger, but it confounds your attempts to SEE it getting bigger); the exact shape of the

orb (comprehensible when not focused on, the orb shifts when you do try to trace its

purposefully hazy outline); shifting noise patterns and gradual increase in color

luminosity; the final disintegration, easily mistaken (at first) for glitches or visual noise.

In sum, I wanted an object that, the more you try to fix it, the more elusive it becomes;

the more you try to see it, the more you wind up seeing things that aren't present properly

speaking, but are byproducts of the perceptual process. On the aural side, the "music" induces a trance-like state via the drone, but the drone itself is variegated and constantly shifting, mimicking the perceptual play in the visual field, always different enough to keep interest, while not different enough as to be inherently "meaningful." In the few cases when there is visual stasis, the shifting drone can provide relief, and vice-versa.

In terms of the analogy to the attraction, then, the piece is absorptive because it keeps you watching, it keeps you trying to figure out what happens next, how it will resolve – we think of moments of attraction in narrative film as those events that keep you watching. The critical difference, though, is that in a narrative film, those moments are the moments when we forget the self the most, when our bodies are most distant from us. *That Obscure Object…*, on the other hand, acts as a mirror, in that the attraction is a reflection back into our bodies, as the "attraction" itself is nothing more than a series of perceptual sensations and phenomenal experiences. To be knit into the piece is to be very aware of how your body is responding to the piece. Thus the complication; in a narrative film, we often drift into reverie, or interiority, during the exposition, when we are bored and feel we have mastered whatever is present on the screen. In the case of this piece, at least ideally, it is the experience of non-mastery or less-than-perfect comprehension that drives us inward, that causes our reverie. In the space of the attraction, we are transported outside of ourselves, into a mode of (some have claimed inauthentic) forgetting; here, we are transported inside ourselves, forgetting that which surrounds us.

That's Entertainment works in the opposite manner. In a sense, it is comprised solely of attractions, in terms of the contents of the films: lightning fast impressions of strange, funny, scary, stupid moments, the very grist of film trailers. Indeed, the challenge of each mini-video was to fashion some kind of narrative, some kind of readable material, out of nothing but attractions. The complication in this piece is the de-spectacularization of the material: no voiceover announcer to suture you in, no conventional certainties within which to take refuge and make sense of the spectacular elements, no large screen to overwhelm and awe you. Instead, a small monitor, an uncomfortable wooden bench, and a perhaps annoying cacophony of narrative and temporal fragments. Whereas one might expect a compilation of only the most exciting, strange, funny (etc. etc.) moments of a film to be the "best of the best," really, like a child having nothing but candy for dinner, one ends up feeling a bit ill and woozy. One of the main points of the piece is that, without any kind of expository backdrop which can provide breathing room, constant attraction can only lead to distraction, to the inability to knit together a meaningful whole, to the desire to get on with the next one – not a desire for resolution, but for relief. As a means of coping, the spectator perhaps begins to look at the films as objects, rather than experiences, as a puzzle to figure out "what it means" – clues come from the generic codes that flash by, the ostensible era the film was created in. Instead of a mirror reflecting inward, this piece, like a prism, refracts outward, causing the spectator to reach to the outer world, to some kind of stable knowledge (of the cultural milieu from which these artifacts can be deduced) that can help guide her through the process. What guarantees that the piece will work, and not just be discarded in disgust, frustration, or the like, is the fact that there IS some type of narrative occurring

in each video – there is the promise of a meaning, even in the more purely formal of the

mini-videos.[4] Thus, like *That Obscure Object…*, the spectator sticks around, not for a

resolution, but for an explanation, which can only come from "out there," from some

relationship between these videos and the exterior world. Distraction here is the only

possible mode of understanding. If the video as a whole does provide a contemplative

moment, it asks only this simple question: Why do we desire to watch, and be

entertained, by such sights?

III. Thesis (Solo) Show

<u>**Presentation**</u>

My thesis show in the Alloway Memorial gallery was comprised of a single

channel video projection, accompanied by two channel sound (by virtue of using the

surround mode on the stereo receiver, I was able to simulate a 4.1 setup - two main stereo

pairs in the front of the gallery, two rear pairs behind the viewer under the projector itself,

and a subwoofer also behind the viewer, under the projector). The projector was

positioned in a bracket high on the rear wall, the image on the opposite (front) wall of the

gallery (the wall opposite the main doors, and visible through them). The image was

centered, taking up about one third of the wall space horizontally, and the entire vertical,

---

[4] My goal, as I mentioned earlier, was to try to psychoanalyze the trailers – to make them "speak" their interior truth through rearrangement, to uncover the unconscious elements within their own discourse. Thus, these mini-narratives often work like dream texts, cinematic primal scenes. Thus the inability to determine any particular narrative thrust, as the moments are, like dream-images, already over-determined. Thus also the compulsion to repeat that occurs in many of the pieces – the return as a symptom, as a place to conceal the true kernel of the real. For a similar approach, albeit in the mode of structural filmmaking, see Ken Jacob's *The Doctor's Dream* (1977).

floor to ceiling space. The audio was primarily emanating from the front stereo pair, mounted on either side of the projection, with the rear pair providing a low, atmospheric level that helped block out exterior sound from the hallway beyond the doors. The gallery was bare except for the projection and speakers – eight or nine folding chairs were provided for viewers. Above the guest book, in the corner on the far right as you enter from the rightmost doors, was a plain white sign that read "Dedicated to Hollis Frampton and Edward Land."

The show was not titled, and no title was attached to the video, which ran on a loop (the video is now entitled *Do You See What I See*). The video itself is 36 minutes, 34 seconds long. The video is a parody/homage/sequel to a Hollis Frampton film called *Nostalgia*, made in 1972 (I'll discuss that film further in the Process section below.) The video is comprised of twelve segments, each exactly three minutes long, and each separated from subsequent segments by about 10 seconds of black slug. Each segment is set up similarly – a Polaroid photograph is presented, which takes up most of the screen [figure 8]. It sits on a wooden background, and over the course of the three minutes, the photograph fades, until it is completely blank [figure 9]. At the start of each segment, the audio is relatively silent (a minimal crackle is heard on the soundtrack, a sound like a dusty vinyl record), and over the course of the segment audio fades in, in almost direct proportion to the image fading out (an audio/video cross-fade, if you like.) By the segment's end, then, the photograph is completely "empty," while the audio is hitting its peak of volume. The video, since it has no titles, looping with equal segments and equal

breaks, has no obvious starting or ending point – while the video itself has a definite beginning and ending point, in this presentation, that fact was deliberately obfuscated.

<u>Process</u>

Unlike many pieces, *Do You See What I See* started not with experimentation or play, but with a clear idea, a script or conceptual blueprint. The impetus for the piece was the Polaroid Corporation's decision, in early 2008, to cease production of all of its instant film products. Polaroid has always been important to me, I've worked with it as a medium for over 10 years (mostly in the realm of rephotography), and anyone who's seen my work in the past two or three years has seen many Polaroid pieces. I wanted, then, to make a piece that would both eulogize the medium, providing an elegy for Polaroid specifically, but also for the instantaneous photograph and the analog image as such. I'd also been thinking about the idea of remaking, or making sequels to, avant-garde classics, films that formed my thinking about film when I was younger and which would be more than a parody of the original film, which would provide for a conversation between myself and those past films and filmmakers, a way of dialoguing with them visually, taking account of how the world has changed by taking account of the ways these works had shaped me personally.

If there is a definitive film that serves as an elegy to a personal practice of image making, while critiquing the nature of image-making as such, it is Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia*. In that film, the artist, a photographer turned filmmaker (that is, a

22

photographer saying goodbye to photography) burns a series of his photographs on a hotplate; as each photo burns, the artist narrates a kind of commentary on the picture being destroyed. Each segment of burning a photo is exactly the length of one roll of 16mm reversal film; thus, each segment is about 3 minutes long. The film is comprised of 12 segments. Importantly, the audio for each segment does not match the photo it is "illustrating;" rather, Frampton offsets the narration by one segment, so at first we as viewers feel unmoored, trying to understand the relation between what we are hearing and what we are seeing. After two or three segments, we begin to understand that audio from the previous segment refers to the picture we are seeing now, and that the audio we are hearing now, in real time, refers to the picture yet to come. This tactic provides the viewer with a sense of mastery (we suddenly "get it"), but at the same time unmoors us even more, as we now have to engage with the work much more methodically and vigorously to come to an understanding of it. The viewer must continually recall the previous segment to understand the sound in relation to the current image, and project forward, anticipating what image will arrive based on the given (current) audio. At the same time, the viewer is present in a third state, an uneasy mixture of both spaces, where audio and image sync or fail to sync in unpredictable ways. The present becomes the most uncanny of any of the states, as we are presented with a surreal image/audio disjunction that is meaningful in its own right, but also recalls the past and projects the future. This constant uncertainty forces the viewer to be quite active, and mimics the experience of modernity almost perfectly – the fragmented nature of a temporality that doesn't deny a metaphysical understanding completely, but only from the standpoint of continual uncertainty, from a working-out-of that is perpetually postponed, waiting for a

future "stable" space which, when it comes, is simply the black end of the film strip (the only space that can guarantee meaning is an impossible one – the space of death).

Frampton's film provided a structure that, to me, seemed incredibly rich, a mode of viewing that was hardly exhausted by his masterful film. My desire was to update it, to see how it would function in the context of the present day. Certain serendipities also encouraged me to proceed – the fact that the time it takes a photo to burn in his film is exactly the time it takes a Polaroid to develop. By reversing the footage of the Polaroid developing, I could mimic the burning in Frampton's film with a more frightening (because less intentional and controllable) reality, that of disappearance. Early on, then, I was locked into this basic structure of mimicry, the bare bones for the piece provided by the earlier film. The important elements for me to work out, though, were the differences between Frampton's film and what my video would be.

First, let me discuss the selection of the images. Frampton was a trained photographer, and his piece was a goodbye to photography, so it only made sense that he used his own images. What would be the point to burning the images of others? My own practice has centered mostly around rephotography, so it made sense for me to use pictures that were not my own (or, rather, were made my own only via selection and cropping). Moreover, while I wanted to make my piece less obviously autobiographical, I also wanted to more obviously foreground the nature of photography as such. Thus, all the pictures included in my video are rephotographs of other photographs. How to proceed with such a selection? How to select images that make a general point about the nature of instantaneous imagery, but also convey something personal? I began to think of

24

the selection as a means of writing my own (secret) history of the 20th century by way of photography – the personal element in the piece would be this selection. Frampton proceeded from the particulars of his own life and biography to the general issues surrounding photography and temporality; I wanted to work in the opposite way, to begin at the general level and, as the spectator developed a reading of my piece as a history of or disquisition on modernity or the photographic, they would also be developing a reading of the artist behind the work. I wanted the sense of my own biography to be imbedded in these images, but unlike Frampton's film, where such a biography forms the base and structure, my own biography would be the furthest level of reading, the most distant, or most hidden, from the spectator. My process for selecting the images was thus: ten images specifically about the 20th century (one for every decade), one image for the first decade of the 21st century, and one introductory image (a total of twelve.) After having settled on a scheme for selecting images, my only criteria were that the images must be important to me personally, they must be images that have fascinated and continue to fascinate me, they must summarize their particular decade in some poetic or profound way, and they must also relate to an overall "ontology" of the photographic image, either having some fundamental element or calling into question norms of the photographic. Thus, each image had to fulfill two functions, both the general (the historical and theoretical), and the specific (the personal and poetic).

The second issue was the audio - what would it be comprised of? At first, I tried writing a monologue and reading it, as Frampton had done. Without the element of narrating my own life and my own imagery, as he did, the audio fell flat – it was more

general, as befitting the top-down approach of the imagery, and sounded very impersonal and pretentious. I decided that, as my photographs were really quotations, found material, I should use found sound as well, I should take my audio, like my visuals, from history. Thus, after I'd settled on images, I went through and selected audio, one clip from each decade. I tried to find audio that played with or problematized the image from its corresponding era; what made this difficult was the fact that the audio would be out of step with its "matching" visual by a factor of one. In the end, I tried to find audio that would match up with the image from its corresponding decade, but which also would "match" (play with, provide counterpoint to, or pervert) the image it was destined to cross-fade with (that is, the image from the subsequent decade.) The selection of the audio was less personal than the selection of the images – often the audio was not from sources I am personally as invested in, but instead was chosen for how well it works with both images it relates to, and how well it furthers the conceptual and historical reworking the piece is trying to accomplish.

Let me give a few short examples of the process in action, unpacking a bit of the thinking behind some of the images and sounds. The piece begins with an image of Edwin Land, using his invention to take a picture; this is the introductory image not associated with any particular decade. This image is also the only one with no sound element accompanying it. This is because the preceding image (the last image of the piece, which precedes it because the piece is on a loop) is of a man in freefall during the destruction of the World Trade Center, and thus the "proper" (chronological) audio for that image is emptiness, signifying both a respect for the gravity of the event and the

failure of language or sound to recoup the image (partly because we are still living in the era of the repercussion of the image, the sonic dead spot that indicates we haven't historicized the event yet). The audio is also appropriate for the image it is tied to (its "improper" or "non-chronological" image), the picture of Land, as it indicates an atemporal space of origin, an ontology about which nothing can be said or heard, an emblem of emptiness commensurate with ontologies as such. Moving to the next image, standing in for the era of 1900-1910, we see a cropped version of a picture of ling-chi, or "slow slicing" (also known as death by a thousand cuts), taken in China sometime around 1904 or 1905, and reproduced in Bataille's book *Tears of Eros*. The picture fascinated Bataille (and fascinates me) because it shows a man being dismembered who appears, given his facial expression, to be in an extreme state of ecstasy (the relation of ecstatic transport and death being a subject of much interest to Bataille). I chose the picture as an early example of what would be a dominate trope of photography in the 20th century – the depiction of horror as spectacle, the ecstasy of the viewer or the voyeur. I wanted to place this photographic telos as fundamental to the genealogy of images I try to trace in the piece. The audio accompanying this image is from a television commercial for the Polaroid camera, circa the late 60s or early 70s. Its "proper" image is obviously the previous one – it illustrates the promise of Land's invention, a promise that encompasses the ability to freeze time instantly, to produce a color result instantly, with no mediation of a lab or chemical treatment necessary. Attached "improperly" to the image as it is, the audio becomes an ironic commentary on the dichotomy between the supposed ideal that photography holds out and the rather base inclinations it has often served, as well as a joke on the fact that the image we see before us is in black and white, while the

commercial makes claims of full color reproduction which, in the case of this image, is the last thing (or perhaps the disavowed first thing) the spectator would want.

These introductory images are, in a sense, the simplest in their juxtapositions of image and sound, the easiest to read or unpack, and the goal of the juxtapositions is often not to make a clear intellectual connection or point, but to suggest something that resonates emotionally or intuitively, that makes the spectator sense, if not make sense of, an underlying, hidden history of the photographic – a flipside to the world we take for granted, a nighttime universe of signification that lurks around the corners of our consciousness, and that culture works hard to justify, if not disavow. At any rate, I provide some explication simply to give a fuller understanding of my own internal process regarding the selection and juxtaposition of these sights and sounds.

Post-Mortem

In this final section, I'd like to dissect the piece and unpack some of the many topics, themes, and problems that are put into play. I certainly can't exhaust the various tropes in this piece, nor do I want to; I simply want to open the piece up a little and show, for me, how it works and what it is working toward. While I limited the discussion of my previous pieces to the dialectic of the attraction, which is where I'll begin with this piece as well, I'd like to also touch on other key areas that this piece delves into: the occult (the dialectic of what is manifest and what is hidden, what is made visible and invisible); the relation of history and the personal; parody as a dialogue with history.

Absorption/Distraction

In the previous discussion of my two group show pieces, I put forward the notion that each piece, while a conceptual whole, worked at illuminating one end of a dialectic between absorption and distraction, which I designated the dialectic of the attraction. The pieces in that dyad set the terms of the dialectic, and it was up to the spectator to synthesize these two pieces into a cohesive experience. In *Do You See What I See*, I attempt to bring both sides of the dialectic into play equally, to balance the equation I set before the spectator, that is, to make both sides of the dialectic resolve or synthesize on the screen rather than within the spectator herself. Accomplishing this means holding the spectator in a kind of tension, it means putting on a show that can both seduce and dismay the spectator, a kind of striptease that presents novel and interesting sights in proportion to the promise it holds out of an answer, a resolution, or, better, a promise of solvability.

Unlike the previous works, this piece is not a very long single take, or a relatively short loop of very short, fragmented parts, but rather a long piece that is broken into relatively short but determinate segments. Thus it performs on a miniature scale, every three minutes, the dialectic of the attraction: initial interest in the image, perhaps in trying to decode it (content) or simply trying to see when it begins to disappear, curiosity as to the sights of the disappearance (form); interest begins to wane, due perhaps to some resolution of the image (the spectator knows what it is, ceases to care, etc.); the spectator begins to be "bored," which hopefully leads to a turn inward (a reminiscing that the image provides but is not necessarily based upon) but could as easily lead to the spectator

29

walking away; just at this point of falling interest the sound begins to slowly emerge, creating a new sense of curiosity; the spectator reinvests in the image because of the sound, tries to understand the relation of the two as the visual disappears from the scene; just as the image "resolves" itself (by dissolving), the sound is (usually) at its highest point of interest (drama, action, or revelation); before interest can begin to wane again, the image and sound abruptly break off, ten seconds of black, and then a repetition of the cycle. The element of repetition is key to the work of synthesis, as each segment that passes is a further seduction, a renewal of the possibility of coming to some greater understanding of the work (to figuring out the puzzle). At the same time, each passing segment, by being formally similar to all other segments, gives the spectator a sense of control (the ability to predict, a key to the puzzle) and a sense of mastery (the old *fort-da* game.) While the group show pieces clustered, meaning and experience wise, around one pole or another, looking rather like two black holes locked in vortical symmetry (one end prominent and large, sucking up meaning to be delivered to the smaller, more massive counterpoint at the other end of the dialectic), this piece attempts to generate a plane of consistency, a smooth space where the high points emerge, then recede. The synthesis that provides this consistency also provides for an opening up of other themes and experiences, namely, the occult nature of the image (and the artist) and the relationship between memory (history) and the individual (the spectator.)

Occult Experience

…every film is always the bearer of another, a secret film, and to discover the secret the viewer would have to develop the gift of double vision that we all possess. … About ten years ago, in the Acropolis bar, right across the street from the former Texas bar in the city of Lisbon, a film electrician was trying to enlighten me as to the multiple soul of the Portuguese. He told me that each Portuguese possesses a secret important for him and him alone. … All the acts of his life must be organized around this jealously guarded secret. It seems to me quite difficult to find any better explanation for the incognito journey through multiple films in the life of any film buff or filmmaker. The superstition that we only see or only film one single film is transformed within each of us to this: from film to film we are in pursuit of a secret film, hidden because its desire is not to be seen.   Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema* pp. 109-110

When I use the word occult, the obvious, surface meaning rises up first and foremost: something is hidden. Something remains unseen, even as it is an object, even as it passes before or amongst us. The occult, though, is not the same as the obscure, as the invisible, as the unknown, although it possesses all of these traits. What differentiates it is its functionality: the occult is necessarily unseen, hidden. It can be sought after, uncovered (at least temporarily, individually), but only through much exertion and prestidigitation – it always emerges in the opposite of where you seek it. It can only be accessed through certain techniques, certain protocols, certain training. To access the occult, in any of its many socio-historical forms (it is at base a trans-historical phenomenon), one must become, to some extent, an outcast, an other, both to society and to one's self. Thus the occult always emerges in liminal social spaces, amongst "disreputable" types: the classic picture of the medium is the foreigner, the alter-ego, the woman who can make the hidden manifest in her own flesh. This self-othering is in many ways identical to the process that Marcel Mauss describes in his book on magic,[5]

---

[5] *A General Theory of Magic*, Routledge, 2001.

the process of initiation, the process of becoming a magician. The condition of

possibility for magic is the occult, as magic is that process of sensuous understanding, of

analogical interaction with the unseen world that surrounds us, binds us, and creates

material effects on us, but which cannot be touched by empirical understanding (thus the

"primitive" character of magic and occult practices). As Bataille, among others, has

noted in his work on the nature of the sacred and transgression, the occult is the

component of a social organization that necessarily remains hidden if the group is to have

a transcendental, religious character: a secret must exist in this sacred world that binds

together the participants precisely because it can never be spoken in the "real" world.[6]

Just as it is the transgression and the ability to transgress that is the measure of the power

of the taboo and, eventually, the law, so the occult grants power to what is seen, the

sacred world makes the everyday world full and meaningful. The route to occult

understanding is, ultimately, discursive: it is never about what one learns to see, but what

one learns to see around – what one can see out of the corner of the eye. What is absent

is far more powerful than what is present. Or rather, it is the absence a picture suggests

that is the true picture, that holds the power to fascinate.

      While the occult is all of this, it is also, in a roundabout way, not so disconnected

from the attraction, in that it too is a form of attention management. It is first of all a

tactic. In the context of *Do You See What I See*, the tactic takes the form, on the surface

layer of semiotics, of a puzzle, a form of mental play that takes working out to arrive at a

---

[6] In Lacanian terms, this sacred world is actually the real on which so-called "reality" (for Lacan, the Symbolic order) is founded. That is, the symbolic, culture and the work of language, circles around the real because it is prior and unknowable - inexpressible, primordial, Freud's primal scene.

"solution." A pattern is present, and the images and sounds are somewhat familiar, at least, familiar enough to create a bond of interest, but how are they connected? What do they mean? The management of the occult, on this level, is a kind of seduction, an attempt at managing desire. The strategy is to give the viewer enough information to knit them in, to allow them to take up the work as a kind of puzzle – to give them enough information to become intrigued, turned on, but not enough to be satisfied. If the process turns into a pure tease, that is, if there is nothing ever offered besides the puzzle, or even a puzzle that can be solved, but only in a very puerile, surface manner, then the viewer will eventually leave, feeling perhaps simply deflated and disappointed, perhaps cynical. The goal is to use this seduction, the primary level of the puzzle, to open a deeper, emotional or poetic relation to the process at hand. That is, the lack of solution to the puzzle becomes more satisfying than any "answer" could be, because it is replaced by a kind of dialogue with the self, a spur to an inner awareness (of what, it is not for me to define – the goal of the work is to transmit obliquely my own interiority in the form of these pictures and sounds). The work must be playful enough to seduce and delight (intellectually) but it must also use those surface qualities to carry the viewer away, to sweep them up, a centrifugal energy that carries them down and in even as it spins them further out; it must offer an authentic (emotional, spiritual) payoff.

Aside from being a tactic or mode, the occult also offers a model of spectatorship inherent in 20th century art practice in the general sense, and of experimental film/video production and reception in particular. There is no denying that the 20th century contains a revivification of the cult of the artist, of the artist as mage or mystic, albeit an arbiter of

modernist, rather than primitive, magical belief – the many artistic movements of the

early part of the century are, in a sense, "modern primitivisms," attempting to make sense

of or rework modernity, to discover its occult powers (after the demise of religion's

purchase on such things), a practice that amounts to an analogical sensuous mode of

being which is both opposed to rationality and science but also takes it as a fundamental

base (inasmuch as modernity does), albeit critically. Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, et

al. are at the fundamental level an attempt to re-enchant a world fully in the grips of the

project of rationality, the byproduct of which is a fundamental disavowal, a

disenchantment or instrumentalization – this re-enchantment, importantly, is not

reactionary (although possibly atavistic), it is not an attempt to return to some fictional

idealized past, but rather an attempt to uncover that which science and the rational

overlooks, cannot see, or takes for granted – the blind spots in its own presuppositions. It

is an attempt to build a primitivism commensurate with the realities of the modernity (the

Surrealists as shaman of the urban jungle). As the work of art itself falls into further and

further disrepute, as it multiplies and becomes vulgarized by reproduction, as the aura

fades in the late 19th century, the work of the artist falls into the making of ways of being,

not objects. Thus, the mystique of the art object gives way, in the 20th century, to the

mystique of the artist; the personality of the artist takes on the aura that the art object

sheds. Warhol more than any other personifies such a movement – part mystic, part

cultural critic, perhaps a buffoon, perhaps a sage, his ambiguity and ambivalences take on

a fullness that works of art alone, due to conditions traced by Benjamin, can no longer

sustain. Just as art begins to fill the civic role of religion in the 20th century, so do artists

become the arbiters of an esoteric, occult knowledge (even if this amounts to a seeming surface effect, "coolness").

While the artist in general can be aligned with the occult, or the seer, the position of magus fits the practitioner of experimental or avant-garde film even more so. Experimental filmmakers, like the shaman, are often solitary figures, toiling alone at the fringes of the social, unknown and unrecognized except by a self-selecting few who seek out their works. They are rarely remunerated for their work in worldly ways – more than any other medium, theirs is truly "for its own sake," as, unlike even the most avant-garde of painters or sculptors, they are working in a medium that will has little history to work against, and their practice is inimical to the expectations of most spectators, in a way that experimental dance, poetry, and the like cannot be, as film, by definition a popular art, has no history of the avant-garde. They work in a disreputable mode, somewhere between art and industry, between human and machine, with little hope that their work will find an audience. Rather, the historical pattern is that the audience finds them. And this is my point – not a roundabout valorization of how tough amateur filmmakers have it, but rather that, because of the special situation they exist in, their work has a structural relation to its audience unlike most other media. This relation, which is one of invisibility, gives the work power. This is the very nature of occult power – power that comes from the revelation of what is invisible. The most powerful experimental films (and this holds true, to a lesser extent, for narrative film too, as film is inherently more concerned with magical effects than other modes of art) are those that remain unseen, out of reach. The structure is one of limited knowledge – if, as spectators, we had no

knowledge of the unseen film, we couldn't care about it. Rather, we know it exists, we

know what it purports to be (or what others have reported it to be), but, due to the

difficulty of seeing such films, due to the difficulty in understanding even after seeing,

due to the often polemical stances taken within the demimonde of avant-garde film, we

cannot trust others. We must see for ourselves, as it is the only way of knowing for

ourselves. It is a necessarily sensuous knowing, an erotics, an atavistic mode of

understanding. Because film exists in time, we can't take a still, or a reproduction in a

book, as a stand-in for the object. Such things are only provocations, spurs to desire,

motivating relics. Those who seek out such work are, then, self-seekers, and have much

more in common with the filmmakers themselves than, say, a museum-goer does with

Matisse or Warhol. To know the community, one must enter into it. Often, this leads to

fans becoming practitioners, with very little distinction between. For the initiate, then,

the most powerful films are the ones that are hardest to see, that remain unseen, usually

because of obscurity, perhaps due to duration, difficulty of comprehension, or the like.

Whether the object in question fulfills its promise once screened is irrelevant –

experimental film has as many masterpieces or duds as any other medium. Rather, the

point is that the discursive experiences of avant-garde film reception are as powerful, if

not more so, than the object itself. And all of this is to say nothing other than the power

of the occult is, ultimately, the formation of special social groupings, ways of

interrelating. The power of emphasizing the unseen is in the concatenate creation of

seekers – the power of the occult is the power to fundamentally reorient the subject to

new ways of thinking and interpreting, to a new relation with the world, to a new type of

being. Far from being merely a puzzle to be solved, the occult, as a molecular tactic or a

molar social organization, poses the puzzle that can never be solved; it offers insight (of no particular, determinate thing – the occult is not an ideology) as opposed to (or rather, by the way of) surface effects.

An Image of History

The occult is, of course, not just an esoteric mode, but, for most people, a collection of things, albeit unseen things. What I'm speaking of here are ghosts. Ghosts, or the idea of hauntings, are not the typical way of addressing an idea of history, but, as *Do You See What I See* is a work of history as much as anything else, I'd like to say a few things about the history it constructs.

The goal of most history is explanatory – it is the making sense of the past, mapping a narrative onto events that, in the pit of our stomach, we fear are random, purely contingent, out of control, unredeemable. The history I attempt to construct in the video, besides being intensely personal, is also a history not of, but by way of, the image. If history could be told by its fragments, piecemeal, without reference to overarching structures, but knit together only through personal, phenomenological experience, this is what it might look like. Like the figure of the ghost, history (the past) is never behind us – indeed, history is the very action of convincing ourselves that the past is past, that it will not return. A history that takes haunting as its methodology is precisely a history of the return, a history that defies discreet chronology and instead looks for sensuous analogies between the old and the new, the past and the present, and sees in the past and present moments bereft of continuity, unaware that they are "done and gone," which seek

to make themselves heard, as they are always with us, just (from willfulness or ignorance) invisible. This history is a properly occult history.

The medium of photography itself is the most amenable to such a history. One only need be aware of the use that photography was put to during the last half of the 19th century and the first half of this one to understand that photography and the spiritual have a deep linkage.[7] This is not necessarily intuitive, as photography was often criticized, in the days of its inception, as being a technology of surfaces only – painting held the path to the soul, to the spiritual, whereas photography could only recapitulate the vulgarity and plainness of the world as such. Others, though, began to see in the camera, conceived of as a technological eye, superior to the human eye, a path to the occult – surely, a superior mechanical eye could see what the human eye could not (both by way of its exacting verisimilitude and of its capture of the fleeting instance, the analysis of time in depth). Thus the Spiritualist movement began to use photography as one of the preeminent techniques (alongside the séance) of revealing hidden knowledge of the spiritual realm. The photograph, then, has a double nature, used by both poles of historiography – on the one hand, it is verisimilar and, as much as any object, can "picture" the objective truth of the past, telling us, visually, what the world was, what events occurred. On the other hand, the photograph, whether through manipulation or real occult power, can also reveal the hidden and the unseen; moreover, though, it persists, and can thus be used by different eras for different (ideological) purposes. It is never at rest, it is never fixed, it can never mean only one thing. For all its historical value, it has a disruptive underside

---

[7] See *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (Yale, 2004) for an excellent visual analysis of such phenomena.

built into it – even the most straightforward, guileless picture is haunted, as it continually returns the past to us, presses it onto us, and makes us interpret it anew. It restores to historiography the properly uncanny nature of history.

The uncanny historical is the domain of photographic reality – without photography, would history have the possibility of revisiting, of becoming uncanny? Aside from those elements that are properly archeological (the buried object suddenly unearthed, the ruin as celebrated by the Romantics, those kernels of otherness the Earth yields up from time to time), probably not. Photography, in its ubiquity, its unrelenting presence, allows for a thorough assault of the past on the present that could not have been imagined prior to its invention. Yet this uncanny nature of photography and the historical is part of the everyday, it has largely been naturalized. It only ceases to be natural, or can break out of its sarcophagus (to paraphrase Andre Bazin), in certain moments, modes, or uses. Kracauer unpacks one such mode in his essay "Photography."[8] The image he deploys is one of a young girl looking at a picture of her grandmother, sixty years hence. Such an image contains a kernel of the real, an ability to disturb, he claims, due, on the one hand, to its proximity to the present (a relative that the girl probably knew in life, coupled with the mirroring of the girl now and the historical girl then, the girl as herself, in the present, contemplating her grandmother as a girl), and on the other, to the accumulation of absurd details, which he places in the realm of fashion (all those things, mostly styles of dress, that are just old enough to be out of fashion and seem strange, but have not yet acquired the patina of distant otherness, the regality of traditions totally lost

---

[8] See *The Mass Ornament* (Harvard, 1995), pp. 47-63.

to us). Fashion is, for him, the disturbing factor, because fashion marks the novel, the

ever-changing, that which is disposable and not intended to last. The just-out-of-fashion

is reviled, mocked, as a way of disavowing its uncanny power, as the just-out-of-fashion

continually reminds us of the contingent, fickle nature of time's flow and, more

importantly, the meaninglessness of much of the everyday that we invest in during the

present moment. Such a photograph makes us distant from ourselves, it works against

our self-identical grounding. By dint of this, it opens the door not only for a more

authentic experience of the past, but it also allows for an analysis of the past. Viktor

Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization is not so far from an uncanny method of analysis;

by making those contents that we take for granted, that are natural to us, strange and new

(for him, this was accomplished through the devices of literature), we can see them in a

new light, attaching new values, observations, and insights to them. In our disturbance,

our habitus is shattered; this can either lead to insight, or to a more profound work of

disavowal. My goal in *Do You See What I See* is to provide a sensuous, fragmentary

analysis of the history of the 20th century via its images, to make use of the uncanny

rigorously (if not conclusively) as a mode of analysis.

Parody and History

Finally, let us return to the beginning of my process, to the notion of parody or

mimesis[9]. Many of my works contain, to some degree, elements of parody; some are

---

[9] I use the term parody not in the sense of a satire, which my work is perhaps only a small part of the time,
but in the literary sense of a genre of imitations, which are self-conscious. I mean it in a formal sense, as
borrowing structures that pre-exist me. Parody, though, also implies that such imitation is feeble or does
not approach the power of its object – while I am not humble enough to suggest that my own work lacks
the power of what it imitates in form, I also wish to keep the sense that it is separate from it, that it

purely citational, paying homage to others who have gone before me; some are ironic or winking, an in-joke on myself and my aspirations as an artist, a ward against taking myself too seriously; and then some, like this piece, are in dialogue with history. This video is the most thoroughgoing attempt to structure a piece as a formal parody from the inception, and working on it has given me a new appreciation for the power of such a form. On a basic, productive level, copying gives me a structure on which to hang ideas, a dialogic model that lets myself (and the viewer, if she cares to) trace out and work over problems via difference, comparing the way I "fill" a particular structure with the ways of others who have gone before me. It's a way of situating myself in history, providing a context within which I work, tracing a genealogy of my ideas and passions. In working on this piece, I've discovered a deeper level, though, a level of (re)enactment – a level of becoming. Parody more than any other form (except tragedy, perhaps) holds close to the Nietzschean sense of the return, which encompasses not just the idea that history repeats, but that it literally embodies the past, albeit differently, and this movement of difference trying to represent sameness is really the dialectical engine that generates meaning, both on the personal and aggregate (social) level. It is important not to lose the mystical sense that the Nietzschean return contains; it is not just a repetition, but a repetition from the place of… It is a becoming. In this sense, although parody allows a dialogue with history, it also allows something more, something occult – in some sense, parody allows a spiritual connection with, a transmission between, myself and my ancestors. My video

acknowledges a previous master who's output is being reworked, even to serious ends. I do not deploy it to denigrate my own work, or to disavow its seriousness, but rather to acknowledge those who have come before me, as recognition of those previous to me I am entering into dialogue with. We are all children in relation to history, playing at dress-up and imitating grown-up ways, only to discover, perhaps too late, that we are the adults, and those grown-ups we aspired to be are, at best, ghosts, and, at worst, mere dust.

is, at base, not so different from the occult photography practiced by the Spiritualists, in that I'm looking for evidence of the beyond in these images, in this technology. Not just looking, though – making. In venerating those spirits of my ancestors (both Hollis Frampton and the doomed, forgotten faces of times gone by that I accept as "one of me"), I am communing with them as best I can. It is an attempt to illuminate the materiality of the soul, to give those barely persistent traces of bodies the weight that is due to them. In that it is striving for a revelation of continuity within a hopeless, fragmented world, in that it venerates the abject, the remaindered, the lost, it is a kind of religious undertaking.

IV. Conclusion

In the past, I've always thought of my work as piece-meal, tactical, or perhaps a bit capricious, conceived and executed as a way of seriously entertaining myself, a way of saying something without having to come out and say it. I certainly wasn't disavowing overarching concerns, but it was hard for me to conceive of them as existing aside from myself, or rather, apart from my personality, which served as a kind of integrator of them. To put it another way, it was always hard for me to gauge how much of myself transferred to my work, and how much of myself it was necessary to know to understand or appreciate my work. It has been satisfying, then, by way of writing this thesis, to see myself apart from myself, to come to discover that I do have particular concerns that are part of me but that don't require my personality to communicate. While I wouldn't exactly say I've come to understand what I'm up to in a clearer sense, as I've

always understood, for myself, why I make what I make, this thesis has given me a clearer sense of what is at stake in my work in a larger social context. So, while my work is still unlikely to be the result of a larger, overarching project, or foreordained in any particular way, I'm beginning to see where I can intervene in a topic that matters to me, and have a sense of how to do so effectively. My interest in fragments and the occult, revelation by way of what is left unseen or unsaid, is strong, so my work will likely continue in those areas. The work has a political dimension too, even if it is not explicitly political – the dimension of forcing a spectator to confront themselves in some way, and of allowing them see (or think, or feel) that which they would rather not, or have been so unaccustomed to that they do not. Vague, perhaps, and really, what every artist should be doing – to quote Kafka, regarding literature, "What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us." I'd say the same for art, at least, that is my wish – to help awaken. If I had a program, I wouldn't be an artist, but a propagandist. So awakening is enough, but I'd like to do it with humor, and, when I can, compassion.

Already I'm accumulating video taken from the Internet – the Internet being the preeminent dumping ground for images these days, but, excitingly, images made by everyone, coming from everywhere, images made to live but a few days, like insects – a swarm that always exists, but as individuals are forgotten. My hope is to cull together a micro-history of our own time, minute by minute (or maybe month by month), a history

which picks up the minor, unseen moments and alienates us from the assurances (meager though they be, these days) of presentness, of the inauthentic orientation we have to adopt, day by day, to survive. Really, that's the goal of all my work – to be the ax that shatters the daily habitus, if only for a minute, to provide a space for sitting and contemplating; a call to remember the real life within, the real life that it is the work of society, capital, and (sadly, all too often these days) culture to make us forget.

In practical terms, I have no professional goals aside from finding work, hopefully doing something I enjoy, that will allow me to continue to make art. By working with video, I'm trying to make pieces that are both objects and moving images, that will allow me to exhibit wherever I can find the opportunity, be it gallery shows, public art spaces, or film and video festivals. The future as a category doesn't concern me much (on a personal level, that is) – I've been making work that has satisfied me for the past ten years, and I've only felt more fulfilled and satisfied the longer I've been at it. My fantasy is to create a body out of my work, not just a body of work, but a living, breathing entity, something that can walk and talk for me, something that can stand in my stead and will allow me to disappear ever more completely. Lately I've come to believe that the real ethic of our time should be disappearance. Given the last ten or twenty years in the art world, filled most fully with hype, hysteria, and the mechanical swirl of dollar signs in the eyes of artists and collectors alike, we could all use some disappearing…
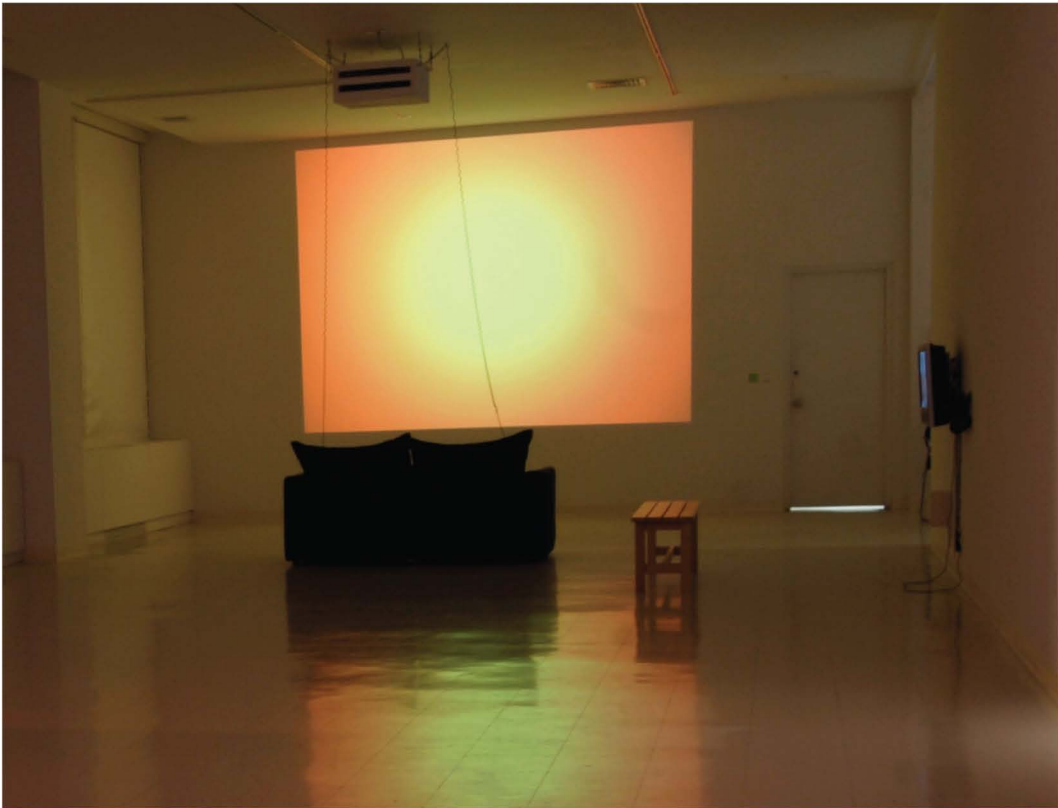
Figure 1
Installation view of group show

Figure 2
Video still from That Obscure Object of Desire

Figure 3
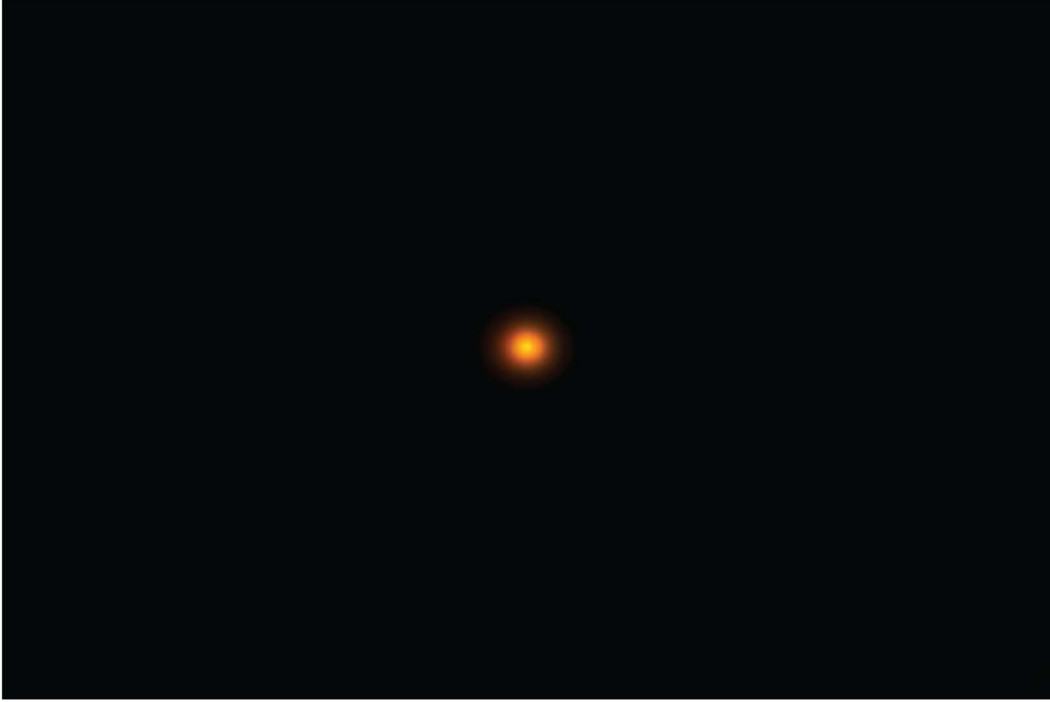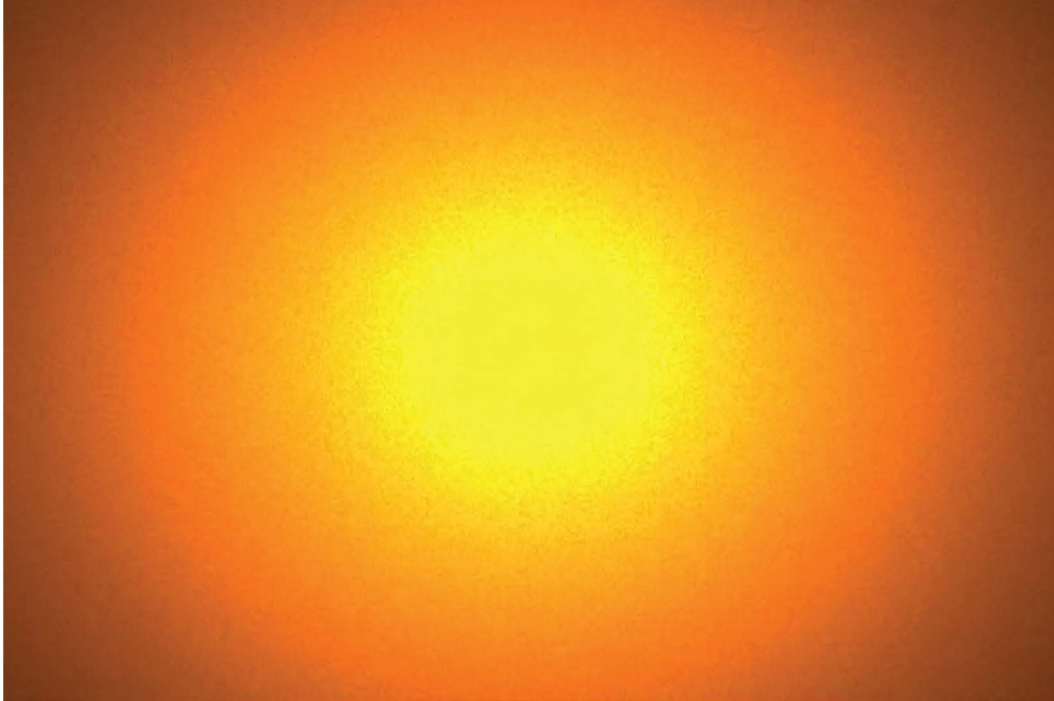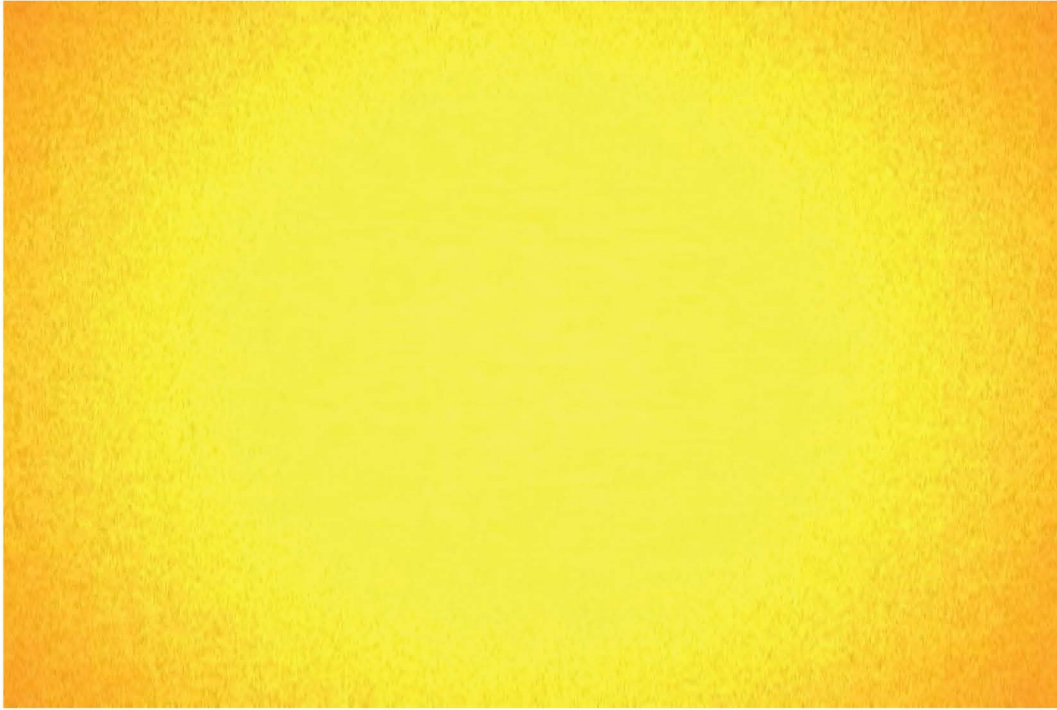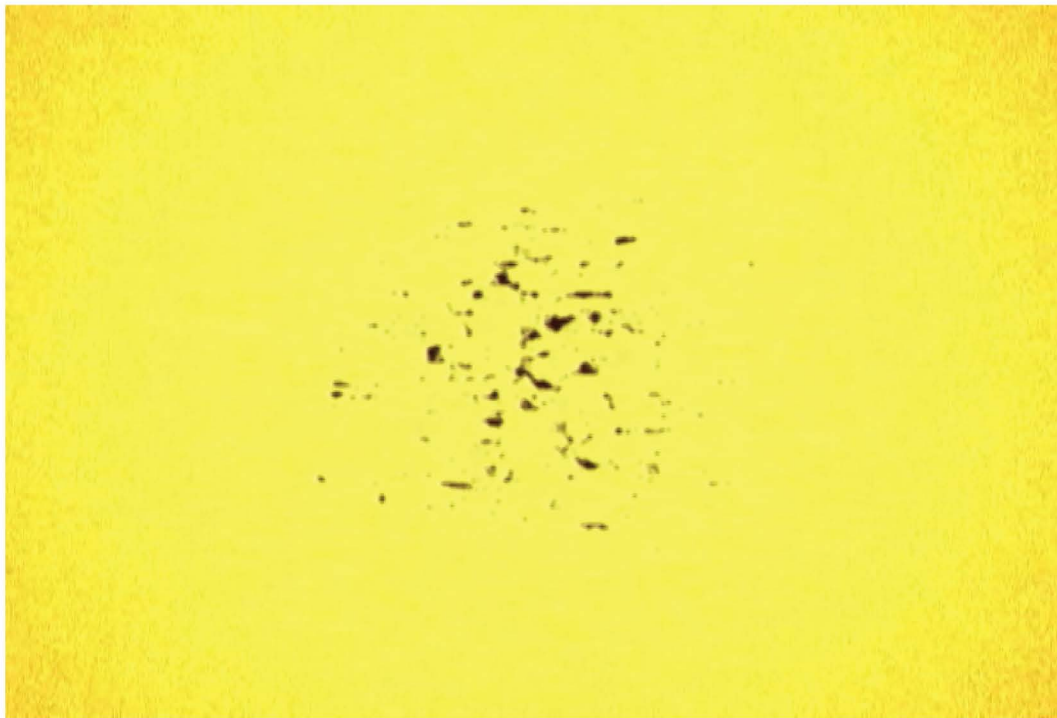*Video still from That Obscure Object of Desire*

Figure 4

Video still from *That Obscure Object of Desire*

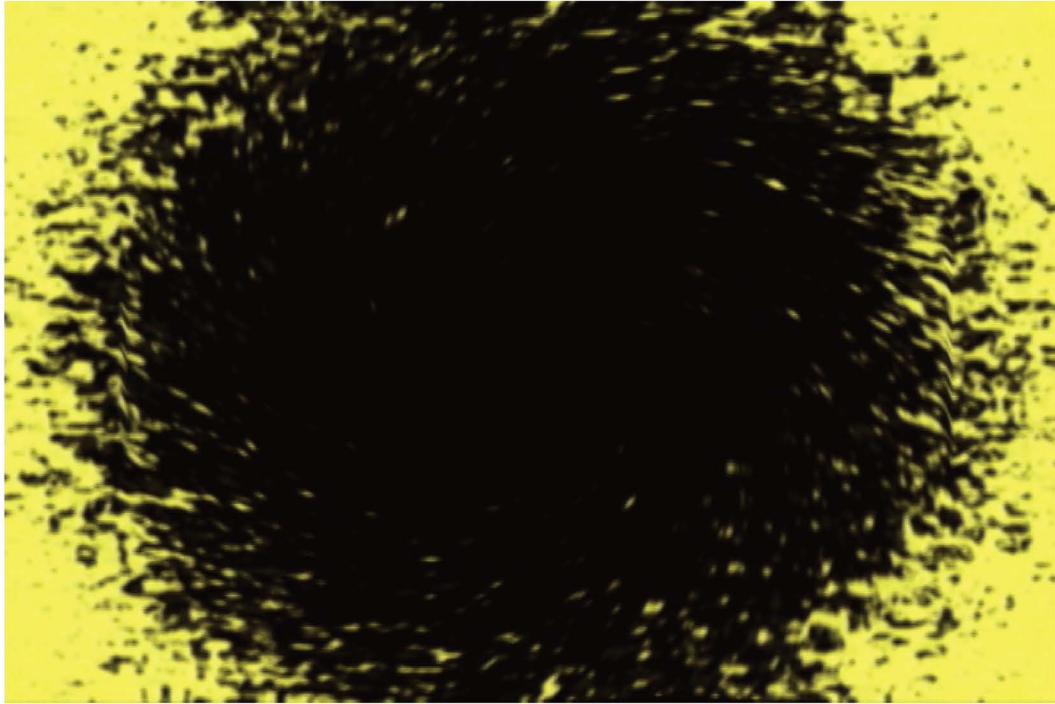Figure 5

Video still from *That Obscure Object of Desire*

Figure 6
Video still from *That Obscure Object of Desire*

Figure 7
Video still from *That's Entertainment*

Figure 8
Video still from *Do You See What I See*

Figure 9
Video still from *Do You See What I See*

Bibliography

Chéroux, Clément, Fischer, Andreas; Apraxine, Pierre; Canguilhem, Denis and Schmit,

    Sophie, eds. <u>The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult</u>. New Haven:

    Yale UP, 2005.

Gunning, Tom. "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-

    Garde." <u>Early Film</u>. Ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker. London: British

    Film Institute, 1989.

Kracauer, Sigfried. <u>The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays</u>. Cambridge: Harvard UP,

    2005.

Ruiz, Raul. <u>Poetics of Cinema</u>. Paris: Dis Voir, 1995.