THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

VIEWING THE WORLD AFTER STRUCTURAL FILM: REALIST IMPULSES IN EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

BY

DAVID BURNHAM

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2021

“I photograph to see what the world looks like photographed.”

–Garry Winogrand

Contents

LIST OF FIGURES		iv
ABSTRACT		vi
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS		viii
INTRODUCTION	ATTUNED TO REALITY Worldly Modernism and the Experimental Cinema Canon	1
CHAPTER 1	USE YOUR ILLUSION Worldbuilding in Michael Snow's Camera Movement Films	35
CHAPTER 2	"THE NEWS AIN'T GOOD" Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* and the Aesthetics of History	74
CHAPTER 3	BETWEEN FORM AND FACT Kevin Jerome Everson and the Formal Features of Reality	113
CHAPTER 4	THERE WAS NEVER AN OCTOBER Rhetoric and the Body in Hito Steyerl's Videos	152
BIBLIOGRAPHY		194

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Still from *La Région Centrale* (Snow, 1971)…….……47

Figure 1.2 Snow with the apparatus, 1969 (photo by Joyce Wieland)……51

Figure 1.3 Still from *La Région Centrale* (Snow, 1971), second section……...53

Figure 1.4 Still from *La Région Centrale* (Snow, 1971), fifth section……56

Figure 1.5 Still from *Wavelength*, (Snow, 1967)……66

Figure 1.6 Still from *Wavelength*, (Snow, 1967)……66

Figure 1.7 Still from *Wavelength*, (Snow, 1967)……67

Figure 1.8 Still from *Wavelength*, (Snow, 1967)……67

Figure 2.1 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)…….……75

Figure 2.2 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)…….……..104

Figure 2.3 Still from *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (The Film Group, 1971)...……..…104

Figure 2.4 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)…….……..106

Figure 2.5 Still from *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (The Film Group, 1971)...……..…106

Figure 2.6 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)…….……..109

Figure 3.1 Still from *The Island of St. Matthews* (Everson, 2013)…..……..122

Figure 3.2 Still from *Park Lanes* (Everson, 2015)...…….…….....…125

Figure 3.3 Still from *Park Lanes* (Everson, 2015)...…….…….....…128

Figure 3.4 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)...…….…….....…132

Figure 3.5 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)...…….…….....…134

Figure 3.6 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)...…….…….....…137

Figure 3.7 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)...…….…….....…139

Figure 3.8 Still from *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (Everson, 2016)……...…….....…141

Figure 3.9 Still from *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (Everson, 2016)……...…….....…142

Figure 3.10 Still from *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (Everson, 2016)……...…….....…143

Figure 4.1 Still from *Virtual Leonardo's Submarine* (Steyerl, 2020).……..…153

Figure 4.2 Still from *Virtual Leonardo's Submarine* (Steyerl, 2020).……..…154

Figure 4.3 *Lovely Andrea* (Steyerl, 2007) Installation View (ack-online.de, 2007)…….162

Figure 4.4 *Lovely Andrea* (Steyerl, 2007) Installation View (ack-online.de, 2007)…….162

Figure 4.5 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…180

Figure 4.6 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…180

Figure 4.7 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…181

Figure 4.8 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…182

Figure 4.9 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…182

Figure 4.10 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…182

Figure 4.11 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013).……..…….....…182

Figure 4.12 *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015), installation view (Photo by Justin Lubliner)……..188

Figure 4.13 *Liquidity Inc* (Steyerl, 2014), installation view, (Photo by Andrew Kreps Gallery)…….…188

Figure 4.14 Still from *Liquidity Inc*. (Steyerl, 2014)……..……..…190

Figure 4.15 Still from *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015)…….…….....……..190

Figure 4.16 Still from *Liquidity Inc*. (Steyerl, 2014)……..……..…190

Figure 4.17 Still from *Liquidity Inc*. (Steyerl, 2014)……..……..…190

Figure 4.18 Still from *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015)…….…….....……..191

Figure 4.19 Still from *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015)…….…….....……..191

Abstract

This dissertation argues for the importance of realist aesthetics to the theory and practice of experimental cinema. While experimental cinema has traditionally been conceived as cinema's most modernist form due to its rejection of representation in favor of an emphasis of cinema's material basis, I argue that this view has obscured key elements of experimental films and filmmakers, a problem that has only grown more pronounced with time. Drawing on Stanley Cavell's theory of modernist art, I draw out an alternative conception of experimental cinema that identifies an attachment to cinema's capacity to provide views of the world as a specifically modernist tenet. In this view, cinema's connection to reality becomes a formal problem to be worked through, rather than an ontological fact to be assumed or rejected.

I demonstrate the utility of this alternative by considering the work of four distinctive and prominent practitioners of experimental cinema. The core of the dissertation consists of close readings of the current practice of two artists, Deborah Stratman and Kevin Jerome Everson, whose films and videos are acclaimed within and beyond a festival circuit of experimental work but are largely taken up in criticism as documentaries or essay films, separated from the specific historical context of experimental cinema. I argue that through Stratman and Everson's realist interest in providing views of landscapes and bodies, respectively, their projects pursue history, performance, and race as matters of specifically cinematic form, casting their interests in a modernist light that grounds their connection to the concerns of experimental cinema throughout its trajectory. I strengthen this connection by examining the role of concepts "reality" and "world" in the "camera movement films" of Michael Snow, arguing for the role of cinema's provision of views of the world in works that have been almost exclusively received as anti-illusionist, reflexive, materialist, or "pure film." Finally, I offer a speculative case of how far this

logic of realism might be extended by tracing the role of the body in the work of artist and video maker Hito Steyerl, arguing that the *filmed* body's prominence in her practice demands a novel reading of her work that balances her critiques of representation with a recurrent attraction to photographing and presenting bodies in motion. Throughout I argue for the importance of developing a theory of experimental cinema by connecting its present instances with its history and demonstrating continuities of concern within formal and contextual heterogeneity.

Acknowledgments

I always read the acknowledgments first. It is here that one can get a sense of the world the writer has surrounded themselves with, and their sense of the debts and gratitude owed at the completion of a journey never fails to illuminate the path taken. At the top of my own list is a profound sense of good fortune for my dissertation committee, Tom Gunning, Dan Morgan, and David Rodowick. In conversation with David Rodowick, I have been continually struck by his acuity as a reader, devotion to clarity of expression, and our shared commitment to caring for the emergent by attending to its roots. David's commitment to mining the overlaps between art and philosophy for critical and creative sparks has influenced the direction of my writing in ways that I have only begun to pursue with the work herein. Tom Gunning has been an inspiration from our earliest encounter. Tom's devotion to artists dedicated to pushing cinema into new territory made an early and lasting impression, as did the rigor and scope he brought to thinking about such novelty in all its guises and rarity. Most of all it is Tom's fervent belief that delight in viewing can be the engine for scholarship, rather than its foe, that has guided me along my track.

To Dan Morgan, my committee chair, I owe a deep debt. Dan has guided my development as a writer and thinker in ways so numerous and profound I can no longer identify many of them. Dan's stewardship of my scholarly path has always managed to provide the resources I need to turn intuition into insight, and no one has spent more time convincing me that passion should be pursued with writing that can share the possibility of seeing things anew. Perhaps most importantly, Dan has succeeded in keeping this project from careening off the road by insisting on its value during the many periods where I began to doubt: Dan's generosity of time and attention to his students is a model I can only hope to live up to. Without my

committee, this project would contain infinitely less of whatever charm or value it holds for its readers.

My committee saw this project to its completion, but it is to Brett Kashmere that I owe the fact that I set out on this course at all. During my years as an undergrad, Brett quickly took me under his wing, singlehandedly opening a door to experimental cinema that I have never since considered closing. Brett's mentorship and friendship showed me the potential of film as a nexus of community, political engagement, scholarship, and creativity. It was with Brett's encouragement that I first began to believe I had my own small contributions to make to the lineage of writers and makers I was exploring under his tutelage. This dissertation was written in the attempt to begin repaying the debt that I owe not only to Brett, for showing me that there are other worlds in this one, but to those unforeseen worlds, for the home they have unconditionally offered.

Throughout the years of writing, I have been the beneficiary of the attention of innumerable fellow scholars at the University of Chicago. Amongst faculty, I owe a particular thanks to Salomé Skvirsky and Allyson Field for introductions to the work and person of Kevin Jerome Everson, respectively. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Masha Belodubrovskaya, Marc Downie, Richard Neer, Takuya Tsunoda, and Jennifer Wild for their support, guidance, and interest in my work.

Throughout the course of this project, Jordan Schonig has been a constant interlocutor whose advice has saved me from ruin more than once. It was during lunches with Jordan that I first worked out the ideas that I have tried to articulate in depth throughout this dissertation. That I have yet to finish refining those early conversations into prose is a testament to the contextual richness Jordan brought to them, his insistence on getting things perfectly clear, and his

encouragement that my still inchoate ravings had the makings of something worth thinking on. I have been lucky to be rely on Jordan to identify what it is that I'm talking about when I'm lost in a problem. I am luckier still that this was only the beginning of our friendship.

My fellow graduate students have provided a bottomless well of support and camaraderie. Getting a PhD in the 21st century is a befuddling, exhausting, and occasionally brutal experience, and I am immensely grateful to have shared my experience with a group whose brilliance is overshadowed only by their thoughtfulness and care. That I made it through the dissertation is a testament to the strength of our community in its members past and present. Hannah Frank was the first to show me that being a graduate student could be fun, I miss her deeply. Deep thanks to Francesca Lambert for her help in keeping me balanced. During the dissertation process Sean Batton, Tanya Desai, Tien-Tien Jong Zhang, Ritika Kaushik, Yangqiao Lu, Katerina Korola, Cooper Long, Maggie Sivit, Amy Skjerseth, Aurore Spiers, Pao-Chen Tang, and Zach Yost were sources of fellowship over meals, movies, and even via Zoom. More than anything, what I think of when I think of my fellow graduate students is their unshakeable solidarity with each other in facing exploitative systems throughout higher education and their commitment to playing a role in undoing the injustices therein.

To my family, I owe profound thanks for their unwavering support. Their joy in my completing this dissertation is made all the more special by their continual amazement that I was somehow *still* in graduate school. In particular, my parents Heather and David Burnham and Annie and Ben Philbrick alongside my siblings Elma Burnham, Clancy Philbrick, Cyrus Philbrick and McKenze Sigler have all shown support all the more genuine for their puzzlement in my chosen objects. Marilyn, John, and Courtney Dimling have welcomed me into their family

from the beginning, and given this project their unwavering support throughout its many, many phases. I am humbled by such generosity.

I will never find enough ways or adequate words to thank Cubby Dimling. I would not have completed this dissertation without their love and support, and any strengths it has radiate with Cub's influence as a partner, friend, and conversational companion. My gratitude for the life we have built together grows every day. There's no one I'd rather struggle alongside, and no one I'm happier to seek beauty with. The part of our life captured by my academic work, culminating for now in this dissertation, is only one facet among many that makes the world we find our way in together so rich. Nevertheless, this one, and any that follow, Cub, are for you.

Introduction

Attuned to Reality: Worldly Modernism and the Experimental Cinema Canon

"*In the 60s they said it was underground but it wasn't. Now nobody says anything and it really is."*—Stan Brakhage

Experimental cinema in 2021 finds itself in a strange position. On the one hand, the enduring presence of smaller festivals dedicated to alternative visions of cinematic form, larger festivals' continued maintenance of some kind of "avant-garde" slate, the continued establishment of canonical figures in academia and the accompanied preservation of their works in archives, and above all the continual global infusion of new makers into the cinematic bloodstream attest to the vibrancy of the pursuit of pushing film and video into new formal territory and technical dimensions. On the other hand, "experimental cinema" as a genre, mode, or definition has perilously little grip on this heterogeneous and growing body of work, and criticism that attempts to derive theories from contemporary films and videos in order to sort out their aesthetic import *as experimental cinema* are scarce. While the era of totalizing theories of any mode of film practice is long gone, this dissertation persists in arguing for the possibility of introducing novelty to the theory of experimental film and in so doing aims to provide a structure that can guide understanding of the rich output on cinema's economic margins. By examining the role of an aesthetic of cinematic realism in experimental filmmakers both contemporary and past, I connect the era of robust theorization of the purpose and meaning of modernist experimentation in film with its continually expanding horizon of creative output in the present day.

This need for a theory of what realism would have to look like within the trajectory of experimental cinema springs from my sense of the growing disconnect between the rich history

of the mode and its present instances. One way to gauge this is to examine the acceleration of canon-forming or solidifying scholarship and preservation measured against the engagement with works released in this millennium. While hardly a perfect measure, at the most recent SCMS, the ten panels sponsored by the Experimental Film and Media Scholarly Interest Group contained only two papers that explicitly named filmmakers who are currently working, while in contrast, seven were dedicated exclusively to Stan Brakhage.[1] That this is in part a factor of what the Experimental Film SIG was asked to sponsor is part of my case: there were papers at the conference dedicated to Ja'Tovia Gary, Jordan Bennett, Yang Yongliang, Cauleen Smith, and Basma Alsharif, but these remained disconnected from the conference's dedicated channel for discussing experimental cinema, one that remains focused on a rarely-disrupted canon.

This canon of experimental filmmakers and thinkers of experimental film is unquestionably worthy not only of the attention it receives, but continued investment and research. From Andy Warhol to Maya Deren, from the "New American," filmmakers like Brakhage, Jack Smith, or Robert Breer to the West Coast pioneers like Jordan Belson, Bruce Baillie, or Chick Strand, from "Structural" filmmakers on both sides of the Atlantic like Hollis Frampton, Ernie Gehr, Peter Gidal or Malcolm LeGrice, from the feminist filmmakers like Yvonne Rainer, Su Friedrich, or Barbara Hammer to Tom Gunning's "Minor" filmmakers like Peggy Ahwesh or Mark LaPore, or filmmakers like Ken Jacobs and Michael Snow whose continuing careers stretch through nearly all of the rich terrain that the canon encompasses, there is little doubt that continued research into this work—both films and writings—is both needed and rewarded.

[1] "SCMS Virtual Conference Schedule," https://docs.google.com/document/d/1H0NTMbFUWXCJOtnyI6wrNosK4nKPC7OfCXG6CY6azq8/edit. The two papers focused on contemporary artists focused on Sharon Lockhart and Sky Hopinka

This canon of filmmakers is matched by an equally rich canon in scholarship. Following a foundation laid particularly by P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974), the essays of Annette Michelson, and the criticism-cum-chronicling of Jonas Mekas, scholars like Paul Arthur, Daniel Barnett, Fred Camper, Regina Cornwell, R. Bruce Elder, David James, Bruce Jenkins, Scott MacDonald, Lois Mendelson, James Peterson, Catherine Russell, William Wees, and Gene Youngblood either brought their perspectives into new filmic terrain or introduced new critical models of their own, such as James' Marxist approach or Peterson and Barnett's efforts to bring the insights of analytic philosophy to experimental cinema (and vice versa). There have been further waves of emerging or established scholars: such as Robin Blaetz, Lauren Rabinovitz, Tess Takahashi's seeking to overturn the hegemonic whiteness and maleness of the canon; or Ken Eisenstein, Juan Carlos Kase, and Jonathan Walley, who take advantage of the accumulation and release of archival material to provide new historical context for the heyday of the 1960s and 70s; or Brandon Joseph or Gregory Zinman, who take this historical approach to new realms by bringing in considerations of contemporaneous currents in painting, sculpture, music and performance. While comparatively little of this work is explicitly theoretical in nature, the past decade has also seen books by Akira Mizuta Lippit and Ara Osterweil develop novel structures with which to understand canonical films, and Rebecca Sheehan and D.N. Rodowick have turned to philosophy in an effort to collide the touchstones of experimental cinema with those of 20th century thought.[2]

[2] This is a cursory, non-extensive list. Paul Arthur, *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Daniel Barnett, *Movement as Meaning in Experimental Film* (New York: Rodopi Books 2008; Fred Camper, "My Writing on Avant-Garde or "Experimental Film," fredcamper.com, https://www.fredcamper.com/Film/a-gfilm.html; Regina Cornwell, "Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current American Avant-Garde Film," *Kansas Quarterly*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 1972, 60-70, "Paul Sharits: Illusion and Object," *Artforum*, Vol 10, Issue 1 September 1971 56-62, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," *Drama Review* 23, September 1979, 77-92, and *Snow Seen: The Films and photographs of Michael Snow* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1979)); R. Bruce Elder,

Despite the richness of this body of scholarship, the field remains largely focused on and faithful to both the paradigms of thought and objects of analysis that have always defined it: Anglo-American experimental film of the 1960s-1980s, with exceptions made for the continuing careers of makers who emerged in that period, such as James Benning, Ernie Gehr, or Pat O'Neill. To be sure, there are innumerable practical reasons for this: access to archival materials is hardly possible with contemporary makers, the increasing dedication to preservation of

---

Harmony+Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008); David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Bruce Jenkins, "A Case Against 'Structural Film.'" *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 1981, 9-14, and "The 'Other' Cinema: American Avant-Garde Film of the 1960s," in *Art and Film since 1945: Hall of Mirrors* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 188-215; Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* Vols. 1-5 (Berkeley: University of California Press 1988-2006; Lois Mendelson, *Robert Breer: A Study of His Work in the Context of the Modernist Tradition* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981) and, with Bill Simon, "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son," *Artforum* September 1971, 46-52; James Peterson *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); Catherine Russell *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); William Wees *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) and *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); Gene Youngblood *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970). Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema 1943-1971* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Robin Blaetz, *Women's Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Tess Takahashi, "Experimental Screens in the 1960s and 1970s: The Site of Community," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 51, Issue 2, Winter 2012, 162-168. Ken Eisenstein, "On Tic | Tic On, Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs," *Millennium Film Journal* no. 55, Spring 2012, 10-12 and "Hapax Legomena," in *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey,* The Criterion Collection no. 607 (2012), 24-29. J. Carlos Kase, "Kitch's Last Meal: Art, Life, and Quotidiana in the Observational Cinema of Carolee Schneemann," *Millennium Film Journal* No, 54, Fall 2011, 72-83 and "Reassessing the Personal Registers and Anti-Illusionist Imperatives of the New Formal Film of the 1960s and 70s," *October* 163, Winter 2018, 49-70; Jonathan Walley *Cinema Expanded: Avant-Garde Film in the Age of Intermedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). Brandon Joseph *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad in the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008); Gregory Zinman *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); D.N. Rodowick, *What Philosophy Wants From Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Rebecca Sheehan, *American Avant-Garde Cinema's Philosophy of the In-Between* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

canonical work has vastly increased its profile and ease of viewing, and perhaps most importantly, scholarship tends to be "magnetic," drawing others into its orbit with developed and nuanced readings of works, contexts, and histories. However, as I contend in this dissertation, there is a growing body of film and video work that is not being incorporated into the canon by scholars and critics for reasons that are ultimately driven by the dominant theories of experimental film and moving-image media.

This dissertation is born of the struggle to find a way to bridge the gap between certain works that I had become drawn to and the canon I have sketched above. In particular, the films of Deborah Stratman and Kevin Jerome Everson, the analysis of which forms the heart of this project, present a deployment of film aesthetics that strikes me as both firmly faithful to the impulses that have driven experimental cinema throughout its canonical expressions and somehow perpendicular to its major concerns. Screened in the traditional venues for experimental cinema in United States and throughout the world, their films embrace the opacity, complexity, and dedication to formal nuance that have shaped the canon. And yet, how could these works, driven by stable camera setups and in-focus long-takes, absent of superimposition, frame-rate manipulation, rephotography, or loop effects, and calibrated through lighting, film stock, and composition to allow for maximum visibility of pro-filmic space, be considered "experimental"? How could films so explicitly driven by an attunement to reality or the affirmation of a fidelity between camera and world be part of the trajectory of cinema's working out of its modernism?

Delineating how experimental works that are explicitly driven by photographic capture and representation of features of the world can be part of the story of experimental cinema requires the introduction of a new theoretical model: realism. Traditionally anathema to theories

of what drives experimental cinema, and, in particular, to what makes it cinema's modernist form, this dissertation seeks to develop an account of what happens to the theory and practice of cinematic realism when it collides with experimental aesthetics. Seen through this lens, Stratman and Everson become direct inheritors of experimental cinema's modernist exploration of form precisely through their explorations of how accepting an affinity for the world in cinematographic capture and projection expands the palette of formal possibility in filmmaking.

In order to give an account of how realism could be understood to play a central role in experimental cinema, but also in modernist aesthetics more widely, I turn to the thought of Stanley Cavell. The bulk of what remains of this introduction is given over to an analysis of his thought on art, modernism, and film's connection to the world, laying a theoretical foundation for what is to follow. I trace his rejection of experimental cinema through to his thoughts on modernist painting and unite the two positions in sorting out his position on film and modernism. Cavell's views on what it is that makes a piece of art modernist provide a crucial lever with which to dislodge the canonical view of modernism as the reflexive exploration and reduction of a medium to its necessary material components, opening up fresh avenues for considering the theoretical significance of experimental cinema. Crucially, Cavell's perspective on modernism as a continuous and potentially endless process provides the basis for a theory of experimental cinema that can account for the significance of its present instances and its history under the same umbrella, tying the work of Everson and Stratman to the rich canon of prior cinematic and critical traditions.

However, before turning to Cavell in earnest, I want to clarify that this is neither a strictly Cavellian nor a truly philosophical dissertation. The primary orientation of the chapters following this introduction are formalist. I pay particular attention to how the artists I examine,

alongside their critical interlocutors, write and talk about the significance or rationale behind the formal choices made or denied by their practices. By summoning the field of discourse that surrounds the artworks and describing in detail how the films and videos operate, I demonstrate how the lack of a theory of realism within these discussions blocks a full understanding of the aesthetic complexity of these works. Armed with this embrace of an orientation towards reality as a modernist impulse, the viewer of these works can see them anew. By attending in detail to the formal makeup of the films that I analyze in the light of Cavell's thought, I provide a view of how the range of options in film form expands beyond the traditional aspects of film construction like sound/image relations, framing, or editing, to encompass the features of the world, captured and presented for viewing.

* * *

Bringing the thought of Cavell to bear on experimental cinema is far from an obvious choice. While his writings on film do indeed speak to the concerns of contemporaneous experimental filmmakers, Cavell himself ignores the tradition. As a friend of Robert Gardner, one of experimental film's most forceful proponents and his co-founder at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Study of Film, Cavell's protestations that he wasn't familiar enough with the field to pass judgment are hardly tenable.[3] Such abdications are compounded by the fact that Cavell does not actually opt for an agnostic position, but instead mildly dismisses the films of this tradition in a fashion that is especially unconvincing in the light of the rest of his writings on modernist art. Anthony Caro, Jules Olitski, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Ernst Kreneck all receive detailed examination and criticism in Cavell's work, while Samuel Beckett receives the

[3] Cavell even promoted *The World Viewed* on an episode of Gardner's *Screening Room* in 1971, alongside Standish Lawder. *Screening Room with Robert Gardner: Standish Lawder and Stanley Cavell*. DVD (Cambridge, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2005).

treatment of an entire essay. The frustration mounts in the face of the fact that the philosophical concerns that compel Cavell's reflections on avant-garde painting or music—in particular the struggle with the concept and tradition of a medium—are central to (at least) Anglo-American experimental cinema in the post-war period.[4]

Pursuing this problem leads to an account of some elements of Cavell's theory of cinema's relationship to modernism, and in turn foregrounds some peculiar tensions within. However, beyond merely highlighting some oddities of Cavell's account, examining his rejection of experimental cinema can also provide the materials necessary to reframe certain elements of the tradition. At the moment that Cavell was affirming his conviction, or faith, in the power of cinema to dodge the need to "establish presentness to and of the world, [as] the world is there" in *The World Viewed*, filmmakers and theorists across the "avant-garde" were experiencing a crisis of aesthetic faith—one related yet opposed to Cavell's claims for cinema. [5] The recurrent doubt of whether cinema really represented reality had again exploded by 1970, and experimental filmmakers largely dedicated their work to the effort of destabilizing the apparently commonplace myth of presence (notably the British structuralist/materialists and to a lesser extent North American structural filmmakers) or finding new logics and *raisons d'etre* for film (e.g., Stan Brakhage).

This canonical aspect of the experimental tradition is well-know and accounted for. The goal of this dissertation is not to review it, but rather to work through the cinematic responses of

[4] Cavell's detailed insistence on the difference between the terms "experimental" or "avant-garde" and "modernist," and his preference for applying the latter to the artists he favors is central to his arguments, particularly for film, as I discuss below. The use of "avant-garde" here is in a loose taxonomic, rather than theoretical, sense.

[5] Stanley Cavell. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1979), 118. (Subsequent references cited parenthetically).

some experimental filmmakers who negotiate this crisis not by heightening its contradictions or exposing how deep its rot has spread, but rather by forging a particular relationship between the world and film that *affirmed* the latter's capacity to establish the presentness of the world.

The key strain of Cavell's thought in this instance is not primarily his work on movies, but rather his consideration of modernist painting. Cavell's case in relationship to painting is one in which experimentation with abstraction emerges not as a rejection of representation, but rather as an effort to re-achieve it in a changed world. Turning to experimental film, I want to show how the tradition responds to a central concern of how it is that art can come to a point of strenuously achieving for its viewer a connection to the world generated by the camera. This is something Cavell explicitly denies is necessary for film to do. However, it is taken up nonetheless by experimental artist of the period, and more importantly, has become a dominant mode of experimental cinema in the present moment. This introduction demonstrates that while experimental cinema may not represent the clearest case for what Cavell thinks is important about movies, it nevertheless responds cinematically to some important issues that Cavell thinks are integral to *art* more broadly. In doing so, experimental cinema achieves a significance for movies that lies outside of Cavell's interests in how films can capture and present the thoughts, problems, and relationships between people.

* * *

My argument begins with Cavell's rejection of experimental cinema, which receives its justifications scattered in small comments throughout *The World Viewed*. Perhaps most illuminating is the point about the structural position of experimental films in relation to Hollywood. His argument is that experimental cinema's marginal position in relation to popular film belies at the very least a categorical difference between film and the other arts, such as painting and music, where "the major experimentalists have generally proven to be the major

artists of their period (Cavell 1979, 217)." There is a significant ambiguity of emphasis here. Cavell could be taken to mean that the unambiguous status of Hollywood filmmakers as major artists means they *should* be looked to as either subtle or obvious "major experimentalists" as well, something his criticism could be taken to promote or perform. Alternatively, he could be more interested in the idea that because they are not major artists, the "major experimentalists" of the avant-garde are marked apart from the kind of guaranteed attention and status they would receive in the other arts. In either case, the position of Stan Brakhage or Maya Deren in the cinema landscape is tautological—they are to be considered marginal figures because they are, technically, marginal; they are rarely seen, esoteric, underground. Cavell suggests that we focus instead on what are clearly the major works of film (however those are to be defined).

It perhaps marks our difference from Cavell's moment how unrecognizably strange this argument is. It runs against innumerable models of artistic ideology used to preserve the heritage of modernism in artists rejected by mass culture—the value of unrecognized genius, the artist ahead of their time, the suspicion of popularity, the allergy to consensus, the value of the new, the fetishization of the obscure, etc. Cavell even hints at the way in which the arrangement he describes was already falling apart as he wrote *The World Viewed*, noting the gap between "major" artists and those thought to be "important" to the lives of actual people, and laments its opening (Cavell 1979, 4). Regardless, Cavell's case is further evidence for a central point of his in the text: the assumption that Hollywood does not have the complexity, scope, or ambition of major works of art in other mediums is a failure of criticism, rather than one of direction, composition, or performance.

Cavell's attempt to answer this call to criticism is not just derived from his sense of the hidden complexity or sophistication of Hollywood film, but from his sense that it is the task of

the critic to respond to the major works of their period—or to use Cavell's term, works of "significance". It is here that his schematic point about the structural positions of Hollywood and experimental film is fleshed out. Cavell often invokes the idea of "significance" in *The World Viewed* to justify the value of certain films and downplay that of others. He uses the term most commonly in his frequent refrain that the value of any element or technique of film cannot be established outside of its use within what he calls "significant films". Agreeing with the claim that the power of cinema is unique and dependent on its technology, Cavell cautions that "the aesthetic role of this technology is no more specified by studying it apart from its specific achievements in significant films (Cavell 1979, 164)" than it would be to study the concept of electronic amplification separately from rock music. The only way to unravel the importance of technological facets is to locate and study them *within* "significant" objects.

The specific meaning of "significant" here can be hard to parse, but it is at least clear that significance becomes attached to objects for reasons beyond their technological base—ontology alone cannot secure "significance". The simplest version of significance lies in the role a film plays within a given culture or society; a significant film is one that reaches a broad audience, is important to that audience, and forms a real and enduring part of conversation within the community of moviegoers. This is the "significance" that undergirds the first chapter of *The World Viewed,* "An Autobiography of Companions," in which Cavell links the points that the cinema is popular and that "its highest and its most ordinary instances attract the same audience (Cavell 1979, 5)." However, Cavell's sense of significance extends well beyond this. "Significance" in the larger sense depends upon the presence of people within a film, whose actions and intentions we can recognize as congruent with our own, and whose problems (not necessarily the ones they would claim for themselves) are explored or resolved in ways that can

assuage our own difficulties in inhabiting the world.[6] When, in "Music Discomposed," Cavell writes that the central dilemma before him is why works of art can inspire their viewers to respond to them as if they were persons, he may as well be providing another definition of significant works.[7] Indeed, in *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell defends the intensity with which he reads the comedies of remarriage by comparing them to people, finding that "most texts, like most lives, are underread, not overread (Cavell 1981, 35)." However, in light of the non-representational, abstract nature of the paintings and music that provoke Cavell to respond as if to another person, the identity of art objects with personhood fails to illuminate why the presence of people on screen are required for such a response in film.

The closest Cavell comes to acknowledging this oddity comes in "More of *The World Viewed*." Considering the idea of an essence of film, Cavell writes that any idea of essence can only be illuminated by "the achievements of that art itself." As evidence for this claim, he points out that a common answer to the idea of an essence of film—that it consists of light and movement—seems empty to him, and even reveals the question to be less-than-useful. Such a question seems empty, he writes, because he had "seen no objects consisting essentially of light and movement (and essentially of nothing else) that have struck me as having the force of art (Cavell 1979, 165)." Cavell then goes on to clarify that those movies that he has seen which *do* have the force of art *all* involve "live persons and real things in actual spaces (Cavell 1979,

[6] Beyond his suggestion in "More of *The World Viewed*" that as a "moving image of skepticism (Cavell 1979, 188)," film can confront its provocations, Cavell's strongest, though still largely implicit, case for this position can be found in the introduction of *Pursuits of Happiness.* Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). (Subsequent references cited parenthetically).

[7] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 189. (Subsequent references cited parenthetically).

165).” The absolute barest survey of the films Cavell indicates as being significant makes this formulation seem rather too long, as every single one depends mostly upon “live persons.” The things within these films that are worthy of Cavell’s commentary are generally the *actions* that these people take, particularly regarding other persons—the “real things in actual spaces,” in his actual performed criticism, seem largely designed to support these actions.

Again, in the context of *The World Viewed* this is puzzling. Cavell provides no reason to think that live persons are necessary to the art of film, and indeed he spends much of the earlier sections of the book using people as examples to build a filmic ontology that, far from depending on them, reduces them in significance. From the epigraph that emphasizes how “things” make a world, to his definition of film as a “succession of automatic world projections,” to his point that the fact that “objects participate in their reproduction onscreen” can humble an audience who merely views such “objects capable of self manifestation (Cavell 1979, xvi),” Cavell’s filmic ontology stresses a relationship between cinematic technology, world, and audience that is either agnostic towards what is photographed and reproduced or emphasizes features of the world that are decidedly *not* human.[8] It is the effort to square this ontology with his comment that the only significant films are those that feature live persons and their actions that makes Cavell’s validation of Hollywood films mysterious and frustrating. Cavell tries to have it both ways. In arguing that significant films “give point to certain properties of film (Cavell 1979, 31),” Cavell

[8] See also Cavell’s essay “What Becomes of Things on Film,” the closing paragraph of which contains this remarkable comment: “the question of what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question of what becomes of particular people, and specific locales, and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just those objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us.” Stanley Cavell, “What Becomes of Things on Film,” *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 2 No. 2 (Fall 1978): 257. The presence of “objects” next to “people” affirms Cavell’s puzzling commitment to leaving open a door to a place he has no interest in going.

on the one hand retains his de-anthropomorphizing ontological commitments, but argues that they can only come to fruition in the context of people and their actions.

It is not necessary here to provide a logically sound solution to this dilemma, and any such answer would be largely speculative—compatible with Cavell's theory, perhaps, but not explicitly built from his comments on the subject. The material is simply not there. It is enough at this stage merely to indicate that Cavell politely allowed for the possibility that films without people and places existed which could inspire their viewers to respond as if they were persons—but that he himself had not seen any. While it may disappoint those of us eager to hear Cavell's enthusiasm applied to the kinds of experimental films he watched at the behest of Gardner and others, there may be some comfort in the possibility of a reconciliation of Cavell's theory and criticism with experimental cinema.

Such a rapprochement could take a number of forms. One route for the dual-devotee of experimental cinema and Cavell's thinking would be to accept his claim for the quasi-ontological status of persons in film and explore experimental films that emphasize real people and their actions—whether established classics contemporaneous with Cavell's arguments, like Hollis Frampton's *Hapax Legomena*, Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses*, Brakhage's *Cat's Cradle*, Ken Jacobs' *Little Stabs at Happiness*, Robert Frank's *Pablo and Andrea*, or the contemporary work of filmmakers like Ephraim Asili or Akosua Adoma Owusu—which all feature real people interacting (talking, working, making art, having sex, etc.) amongst real objects in real spaces.[9] Another tack would be to simply ignore Cavell's emphasis on the necessity of people to give

[9] For examples I take to inhabit this vein, see Rebecca Sheehan, "Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Renewed Encounter with the Everyday" *Screen* 53:2 (Summer 2012): 118-135 and J. Carlos Kase "Reassessing the Personal Registers and Anti-Illusionist Imperatives of the New Formal Film of the 1960s and '70s," *October 163* (Winter 2017): 49-70.

significance to the ontological properties of the medium and focus on how such properties are differently understood and negotiated in the post-war cinema of Ernie Gehr, Robert Breer, Laura Mulvey/Peter Wollen, and Peter Gidal, or the contemporary one of Jodie Mack (color, sound, editing), Takashi Makino (digital cinema), and Fern Silva (film in a digital era).

This dissertation takes a different approach. Focusing on Cavell's claim that the importance of "some modernist painting" rests on the capacity of those works to forge connections between their viewer and the world, I argue for cinematic equivalents in both the heyday of structural cinema and contemporary experimentation. My reading of these works rests upon their affirmation of a connection between viewer and world as mediated by the cinematic apparatus, and in particular, their capacity to achieve this after doubts have been cast about the automatic technologically grounded achievement of such a connection. The artists I examine in the chapters of this dissertation do not merely display an easy faith in cinema's capacity to present views of the world, but treat such a capacity as something to be re-achieved through complex and sometimes contradictory formal arrangements of cinematic technique. This emphasis on evolving aesthetic form to re-achieve something once thought to be natural or automatic is a core feature of Cavell's thought.

The passage that lays out the concerns crucial to modernist art is the close of "Excursus: Some Modernist Painting". I quote at length.

> The works of Pollock, Louis, Noland, and Olitski achieve in unforeseen paths an old wish of Romanticism—to imitate not the *look* of nature, but its conditions, the possibilities of knowing nature at all and of locating ourselves in a world. For an old romanticist, these conditions would have presented themselves as nature's power of destruction or healing, or its fertility. For the works of the modernists I have in mind, the conditions present themselves as nature's autonomy, self-sufficiency, laws unto themselves. ("Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the Mystical.")
>
> This is not a return *to* nature but the return *of* it, as of the repressed. It is the release of nature from our private holds. No doubt such art will not repeal the enclosure acts, but it seeks to annul our spiritual-biological-political accommodations and

> attachments to enclosure. It reasserts that however we may choose to parcel or not to parcel nature among ourselves, nature is held—we are held by it—only in common. Its declaration of my absence and of nature's survival of me puts me in mind of origins, and shows that I am astray. It faces me, draws my limits, and discovers my scale; it fronts me, with whatever wall at my back, and gives me horizon and gravity. It reasserts that, in whatever locale I find myself, I am to locate myself. It speaks of terror but suggests elation—for the shaking of sentiment never got us home, nor the shiver of the picturesque. The faith of this romanticism, overcoming the old, is that we can still be moved to move, that we are free, if we will, to step upon our transport, that nature's absence—or its presence merely to sentiment or mood—is only the history of our turnings from it, in distraction or denial, through history or industry, with words or works….
>
> It is a sad use of a few philosophical terms which discovers that pictures were never really objective on the ground that they were never perfect replicas of reality. But every semester somebody seems to make this discovery. It is as sensible to say that nature can never really be represented because paintings (or photographs) never fully resemble it, as to say that people can never be represented because their representatives are other people. In both cases faithfulness is required, and objectivity: then the questions are what you are being faithful to, or failing to be faithful to; and on behalf of whom, and to what it is, you appeal and protest; and why and when an objective representation, a likeness, fails to capture your interest in an object or an issue. Perhaps what we can be faithful to is our knowledge that distance from nature is no longer represented by perspective, which places us in relation to it, places nature before or away from us, and falsifies our knowledge that we are lost to nature, are absent from it, cannot face it. Then upon such unpromising ground, an art that reveals without representation may give us perspective. For example, it may show us that a painting must be viewed alone, from the one place one occupies at any time—an acknowledgment not directly that one must view things for oneself, but that one must take them one at a time (Cavell 1979, 113-115).

Cavell elaborates and clarifies this dense and opaque passage in the section that follows, addressing in particular the "fact of the series." In the groups of works he examines, he identifies a mode of presenting haecceity that can in turn assure us of the presence of a material object by way of its indisputable and fine-grained singularity. Yet the *how* of these works' connection to the claims Cavell makes for them goes underdeveloped. However, it is necessary here only to draw out some central points about the relationship between art and its representation of reality as he describes it.

The key term is "nature." Cavell here and elsewhere is philosophically opposed to providing *definitions* of the words that he deploys, and the usage of the word "nature" throughout his work seems to go beyond the non-human cohabitants of the world. There is a crucial slippage in the passage for instance between "reality," "nature," and "world," that suggests a perspective interested in how all three overlap; in the light of Cavell's interest in skepticism, this might look something like merely that which lies outside the mind. While "nature" is perhaps meant to bring out an angle on such a broad category that emphasizes what the Romantics thought of as nature—the gently rolling heath, the tumultuous sky or the lightless depths of the sea—it is crucially *not* meant to block out entirely the objects of human culture or invisible aspects of the world like the laws of physics, or time. Cavell goes so far as to suggest, in *Senses of Walden*, that "Heroic books are themselves part of nature (Cavell 1992, 26)," meaning at the least that a common sense division between culture and nature won't do. The placing of the human within nature breeds confusion and discontent—where human beings and their products belong and how is an object of continued discovery and investigation rather than an *a priori*. What belongs to nature and what belongs to "us" is something that is learned in language and inhabited in practice (akin to Cora Diamond's explanation of how we learn what are human beings and what are animals: "*We* are around the table and *they* are on it"), and a central task of Cavell's is to explore writers, like Thoreau and Emerson, whose goal is rethinking the bonds of this relationship.[10] For Cavell, the things of nature from everyday, if romantically-tinged language—clouds, animals,

[10] The central passages in Cavell that explore this broader sense of nature, and more importantly its ramifications, are in *Senses of Walden* pp.21-27, 43-44, 64, and 96-100. Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992). (Subsequent references cited parenthetically). The reference to Diamond is from "Eating Animals and Eating People," in Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 324.

oceans, rocks, etc.—invoke but do not complete the broader sense of "nature" in use for Cavell, which contains both a richer perspective of that in the world that is autonomous from us and the fuzzy borders of the human and the natural. Thus he repeatedly returns to these apparently simpler examples of nature as levers or stepladders that can lead the reader to a fuller conception of nature that overlaps with "world" and "reality."

The slippage between terms is found perhaps most prominently in the first two sentences of the final paragraph of the quoted passage, where Cavell moves from "replicas of reality" to "nature can never be really represented," and the salience of the slippage is revealed in the fact that his point about representation applies just as well to depictions of flowers, folios, and faces, though he mostly uses the word "nature." With that in mind, we can begin to unpack this passage, beginning with this point about representation. Throughout the chapter, and scattered across Cavell's work on painting, is the claim that an art-historical perspective is misguided if it understands the generalized progression towards abstraction in 20th century painting as a *rejection* of representation. Instead, Cavell argues, we should understand this period of increasing abstraction as a continuous series of attempts to *re-achieve* the conditions of representative art with all its affordances and structures.[11]

Though Cavell does describe in detail the entirety of what these capacities or affordances of painting are, or the needs they meet for their viewers, he does suggest here that a connection to nature is central. What Cavell is arguing for in these passages is an idea of abstract painting that sees the experience of the viewer as one in which all at once a series of conditions is

[11] See also in this regard "Music Discomposed" Section VIII: "…the unheard of appearance of the modern in art is an effort not to break, but to keep faith with tradition. It is perhaps fully true of Pop Art that its motive is to break with the tradition of painting and sculpture; and the result is not that the tradition is broken, but that these works are irrelevant to that tradition, i.e., they are not paintings, whatever their pleasures (Cavell 1976, 207).

affirmed: our presence in the world ("gives me horizon and gravity"), the contiguity of that world to nature ("nature's absence is only the history of our turnings from it"), our ability to act as agents within these worlds and identify our purchase on them ("we are free, if we will, to step upon our transport"), and finally that this is a shared feature of existence ("we are held by [nature]—only in common"). Crucial to Cavell's language throughout this passage is the reminder that this experience is not some automatic and instantaneous communion with the world, nature, or other beings, but merely the reminder that such things are achievable. The viewer of modernist painting is not cured of the skeptic's fear of the unreality of the world or other beings, but simply offered the experience necessary to see that enclosure within the mind is not a fixed feature of existence.

Indeed, Cavell suggests throughout this passage that it is perfectly likely that the lack of a communion with nature may well be unresolvable. Revealing his intermittently latent Kantianism, Cavell argues for nature's "autonomy" and "self-sufficiency," its laws that have nothing to do with our conscious experience, its scale of time and space that assures our irrelevance to it—and concludes that these may well be immutable, either in the modern moment or beyond. However, what Cavell also suggests here is that just because we are irrelevant to nature, because our conscious experience with its limited scale and scope is ultimately just incongruous with the spatio-temporal fact of the world—this does not and cannot mean that it is irrelevant to us. This is the logic of Cavell's language throughout the passage that refers to turning around and "facing" nature – at once metaphoric language that suggests our "words and works" have pulled us away from conceptual architectures that privilege the shared human fact of existence as natural beings, and yet also quite literal language that suggests something about

the presence in a body, and it's capacity to turn, to shift attention from one thing to another, grounds us in singular places and times within the structure of the world.

Again, this is no easy or simple task, and its achievement is more of a horizon of possibility than something to be experienced and moved through. This is why what Cavell describes in the final paragraph as "faithfulness" is so crucial to his argument. His point here is that the entire concept of "representation" requires a *fallible* connection between nature and representation, between representative and person, between thing A and thing B. Cavell suggests here that the conceptual apparatus of representation that views some kinds as objective (photographs) and others as faulty (paintings), misunderstands that neither is secure ontologically, and requires instead a kind of practical faith in the person for whom the representation matters. A sculpture, for example, is objective to the extent that it is capable of forging a connection between the concrete, bronze, or marble that forms it and the person (Karl Marx or Mother Courage), thing (a sword or fork), or idea (fear or freedom) being represented, a connection that is crucially sharable within communities that receive or use it.[12] It is not required that such a sculpture is easily understood to represent Marx or fear, only that once it is understood as such it can be communicated to others how or why it is so. Cavell's language here is littered with the keywords of contestation—appeals and protests, on whose or what's behalf—meaning that things which fail to capture interest do not do so ontologically, and are capable of

[12] Contrast this to that recurrent bugbear of film studies, Peircian indexicality. In such a view, indexical signs such as bullet holes or footprints possess a connection to their referent that is indisputable and more secure than the connections available to icons or symbols. For Cavell, it is this last claim that is especially problematic, as he views a successful representation—one that connects an individual or community to a referent—to be agnostic to the vehicle by which the representation is achieved, making it inapt to class successful representations by the solidity of their mode; if it works, it works. A compatibilist account that took into account the full complexities of Peirce's work, especially its sensitivity to kinds of interpreters, would be a welcome departure from the impoverished sense in which the index is generally deployed.

mutation at the behest of an interlocutor. Although Cavell's suggestion here is potentially alarming—there is no ontological ground that can secure the reality of a representation, that can assure us of its solidity, it is also his suggestion throughout his career as a philosopher that this is a fundamental condition of shared human existence, the ultimate aesthetic fabric of our shared reality.[13]

While the possible objectivity of the film image, analog or digital, is eye-rollingly familiar to film scholars, Cavell raises these complex issues of representation in painting only to contrast them to what he sees as the comparatively simpler case of film. Instead of addressing how such arguments might apply to the case of film, Cavell surprises any reader familiar with film studies by instead revealing that the preceding argument just does not apply to film, for the reason that films sidestep this problem of modernist visual art altogether—they do not "have to establish presentness to and of the world: the world is there." For Cavell in this moment, the reality of the world on film is not a matter up for discussion, but is rather the fundamental fact of film from which all others flow. Although such a reality is innumerably complex, as he acknowledges throughout the text and grapples with directly in "More of *The World Viewed*," it is not really sensible to believe that the world is not present to the viewer of film. This drawing of the viewers "attention wholly for *that* thing *now*, in the frame of nature, the world moving in the branch (Cavell 1979, 122)," exceeds historical novelty—if something has changed, it is our

[13] Nelson Goodman makes a similar case in *Languages of Art* (1968), summarized in his claim that, properly viewed, "Representation is thus disengaged from perverted ideas of it as an idiosyncratic physical process like mirroring, and is recognized as a symbolic relationship that is relative and variable (43)." While hardly an "ordinary language philosopher," even in the idiosyncratic manner of Cavell, Goodman shares with Cavell and Cavell's teacher J.L. Austin an interest in pointing out how it is that people already treat objects, persons and language, and emphasizes how such usages of representational objects belies the notion of some form of "objective" quality of reference grounded in the object itself, outside of systems of use and discourse. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

understanding of such an experience, not the reality of the shaking branches themselves.[14] It is more or less perverse to doubt it, in the tradition of Cavell's repeated mocking of those who view skepticism as a simple matter to be refuted by kicking a rock.

If Cavell's faith in the reality of the world viewed on film was supposed to represent a broader consensus, he was simply wrong. As a matter of course, film theorists and makers contemporaneous with Cavell were deeply and thoroughly scouring the way that film was constructed for ways in which the reality they saw on screen differed from the reality of everyday life, and in particular the ways in which the former was a source of manipulation, whether couched as ideological or more simply emotive. From P. Adams Sitney and Annette Michelson, to the apparatus theorists Jean-Luc Comolli and Louis Baudry, to the psychoanalytic theories of Laura Mulvey and Stephen Heath, to the writings of experimental filmmakers like Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Hollis Frampton, the issue of the "fact" of reality as a fundamental issue in film was being hotly debated and sorted out.

Cavell's disjuncture with the film theorists of the period is made all the more striking by the neatness of their temporal overlap. The period that marked his most direct engagement with Modernism, stretching from the 1965 conference that marked the original version of "Music Discomposed" and spawned "A Matter of Meaning it," up until the publication of the revised edition of *The World Viewed* in 1979, also marked the stretch in which a rough coterie of film critics and scholars were laying down what become foundational texts for the study of experimental cinema. These theorists broadly overlap with those who were calling into question

[14] Note Cavell's decision here to root the observance of "the world" in the perception of natural phenomena, in addition to the echoes of the "wind in the trees" that serves nearly as a metonym for a certain kind of realism-in-ontology for cinephila. For more on cinephila and motion see Jordan Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI," *Discourse* Vol. 40 No. 1 (Winter 2018): 30-61.

the automatic relationship of film to reality, and it is their arguments for the significance of experimental films that intimately related the capacity of those works to raise this issue theoretically. The texts—Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974), Michelson's essays *Film and the Radical Aspiration* (1966), *Toward Snow* (1971) and *On Snow* (1975), Wollen's *The Two Avant-Gardes* (1975), and Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision* (1963)—have as their guiding light a rough network of ideas to the effect that experimental film's most potent ability and structuring force lay in its ability to reflect in art on the conditions that made the experience of watching film possible—film therefore became about vision, perception, consciousness, light, movement, etc. i.e. Film about Film. In this context, they form Cavell's unconscious stalking horse, a case against which his arguments about acknowledgement come to light. For Cavell, such a reliance on an ontological base as a route into modernism is a pernicious shortcut with a very specific name: reflexivity.

Understanding the stakes of such reflexivity, and its linked concept of acknowledgment, requires reframing the issues traced above. For Cavell, reflexivity falls far short of the requirements of a modernist art. Though he denies the necessity for film to take up such a project, his affection for Hollywood film has to do with what his sees as its continued interest in thematizing the negotiation of acknowledgment, the requirement of modernist artworks to *confront* the essence of their medium and surmount it. Cavell's disinterest in experimental film springs from precisely this problem. The demand in the avant-garde cinema of this period for a form that can thematize and make visible the conditions of making and viewing film is for Cavell the flailing of a form that has mistaken reflexivity for acknowledgment.

For Cavell, the idea that "film about film" would be sufficient grounds upon which to build a theory of Modernism is hazy to the point of absurdity. "Stranded upon such a notion," he

writes, “you couldn’t tell the difference between Mallarmé and Joyce Kilmer (Cavell 1979, 123).” Cavell’s point that the genuine modern artist becomes indistinguishable from the author of the lines “I think that I shall never see / a poem as lovely as a tree” brings home forcefully the issue with pinning a theory of modernism upon a reflexive art. Though such an art may incidentally be modernist, Cavell’s view is that it is not so by virtue of its ability to “refer to itself,” but rather by way of acknowledgment, a more difficult and more lofty task. For Cavell, acknowledgement in art “is an act of the self…not done apart from an admission of the existence of others…or apart from an expression of one’s aliveness to that denial [or such existence] (Cavell 1979, 123).” Reflexivity is therefore no guarantee of aliveness to others, the failure to responsibly accept the burden of the consequences of such aliveness, or above all the assuredness that such a responsibility has been accepted, and shared. Although it appears to be candor, it only incidentally assures such (Cavell 1979, 122-123). Thus it appears that Cavell’s disjunction from the theorists of film who, drawing on a form of Greenbergian medium-specificity, identified experimental film’s obsession with the technical properties of its viewing conditions, is an issue both of understanding the nature of film’s medium and also of misidentifying the value of reflexivity. For Cavell, reflexivity about the nature of a medium is not an end to be pursued in and of itself, but rather a mode of negotiation the central problem of acknowledgment, without which an art cannot apply itself to the problem of modernism.

The confusion between reflexivity and acknowledgement also reveals a key facet of Cavell’s overall impression of what modernism *is*, and what it is not. While acknowledgement may seem to be a criterion for the achievement of modernism, a necessary and sufficient condition, what acknowledgement will look like is highly amorphous, subject to a balance between artistic creativity, critical interpretation, and historical context. Part of Cavell’s

argument with a slightly straw-manned Greenberg is the former's sense that Greenberg is too dependent on the idea that what matters is the trans-historical material basis of a medium.[15] Cavell's sense of what belongs to a medium, and thus what must be acknowledged and confronted, is far looser than Greenberg's. Cavell writes that his definition of modernism relies upon his attempt to "free the idea of a medium from its confinement in referring to the physical bases of various arts," going on to clarify that his sense of medium is closely wrapped up in questions of "form" and "genre," and that the problem of modernism is the "investigation of this confusion" between these terms (Cavell 1979, 105).

Importantly, because the overlaps between medium and form loosen the necessity of modernist artworks to refer primarily to their material bases, the sense of what is essential to a medium becomes historically contextual, and shifts over time. This is also why Cavell constantly emphasizes that the task of the modernist artist is to "keep faith with tradition (Cavell 1976, 191)," and to "maintain continuity of his art with the past of his art (Cavell 1979, 216)," arguing that what looks like the effort to forge a new definition of painting, for example, is in fact the effort to re-achieve the givens of painting once again, as the historical circumstances that once produced them have collapsed. Modernist art, art that Cavell once defined as "roughly, the art of one's own time (Cavell 1976, 170)," is not materially or reflexively criterial, nor is it the product of a past moment in history. The closest Cavell comes to acknowledging the historical event of modernism is to claim that it is when it "makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art

[15] Cavell here is also drawing heavily on the work of Michael Fried's work on convention. See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 93 and Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 168-9n6.

(Cavell 1976, 175)," that it must acknowledge and confront the difficulty of finding what its medium *is*, and in so doing create it anew.

Cavell is clear that reflexivity without acknowledgment is not merely empty, but toxic, and he also recognizes that telling the difference between forms of acknowledgment and forms of reflexivity is no simple task—and that in fact there is no guarantee that anyone could ever get it right. [16] This is the central concern of Cavell's discussions of fraudulence, and the gravity of its ever-present possibility in the modern period that concerns him.[17] As J.M. Bernstein puts it, the issue so often is that we encounter objects that appear to be art, but that decline its burdens, forcing the critic to determine the difference between genuine works of art and a "fraudulence [that] is not failure, but the producing of an art look (sound, appearance, shape), while disavowing the responsibilities of art."[18] The danger, in Cavell's view, is that as fraudulent art, or what he also calls "anti-art movements," are increasingly being taken as the genuine article, and thus the need filled by genuine works of art—the need for acknowledgment—goes denigrated or ignored. While leaving open the possibility that this need for acknowledgment has stopped being an option for artists to achieve, Cavell takes to task those who "claim to *know* this has happened and to provide us with distraction, or to substitute new gratifications for those well gone; while at

[16] "Someone who senses himself rebuked by modernism's custody of seriousness may say, as if expressing a new freedom of the arts, that now anything can be exhibited and so tried as art. But that is just the problem, that perhaps *all* you can do with your work and works is to exhibit them, that all hope for acknowledgment by and of the self is to be forgone, and all authority in one's intention, all belief in one's beliefs—stares of amusement or boredom replacing all acceptance and real rejection. People who claim to like this condition will be amused by the plight of the Hunger Artist or at any rate will feel that he rather exaggerates it (Cavell 1976, 120)."

[17] This receives fullest treatment in the two linked essays "Music Discomposed" (sections IV-VI) and "A Matter of Meaning it," (sections I-II). In Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say* (New York, Cambridge University Press: 1976). 180-212, 213-238

[18] Bernstein, J.M. "Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature: Cavell's Transformations of Philosophy," in *Stanley Cavell*. Ed. Richard Eldridge. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 121.

the same time they claim the respect due only to those whose seriousness they cannot share (Cavell 1976, 222)," a respect that he notes they are receiving with increasing frequency.

These debates emerge in the (unofficial) penultimate section of "More of *The World Viewed*", where Cavell he addresses some criticisms of his work to the end that it is insufficiently attentive to experimental film (whether Eisenstein or a "more or less farcical" inheritance of his period). The most illuminating point comes near the end of the section, where he defines his understanding of modernism as one that is "in service of an art that is in battle not particularly against Goliaths (which is not new, and which waxes and wanes), but against false Davids (Cavell 1979, 218)." Cavell here means to draw a line between the avant-garde and the modernist, with the latter category, as we've seen, more concerned with the fraudulent, the genuine, and their proximity to each other, than the former's obsession with advancement, novelty, and experimentation. Cavell goes on to define his own practice of examining carefully the cinema of Hollywood as a pursuit of "finding, if you like, Davids in Goliaths' clothing (Cavell 1979, 218)." There are two key takeaways here. The first is the significant room Cavell leaves for an interpretation of his theory that allows for experimental cinema to adopt the problems of modernism, the problems of Davids, even if tangentially, or accidentally. Though he is skeptical of their avant-garde leanings, finding them marginal, this doesn't disqualify them from adopting the concerns of modernism in a different context, one that does not necessarily emphasize their antagonistic position towards mainstream cinema. The second point, no less significant for this pursuit, is that Cavell aligns the concerns of Hollywood cinema with those of modernism in the other arts—while also allowing for the fact that those concerns are more or less buried within their objects. Appearing in the clothing of Goliaths, Hollywood cinema requires

the critic to uncover the ways in which the films within it are themselves negotiating the issue of acknowledgment that secures the modernism of painting, music, or literature.

Thus the space for a Cavellian theory of a modernist, experimental cinema begins to emerge. Far from embracing or emphasizing an antagonistic attitude towards mainstream movies, a model of modernist experimental film would instead balance the kinds of concerns that Cavell finds distributed in canonically defined modernist arts and Hollywood films, acknowledge their nature as problematic within the trajectory and history of their art, and in so doing surmount and redefine their medium. My contention here is that putting these two threads together insists—against Cavell's theory of film—on the centrality of cinema's relationship to reality as a site of struggle.

Seeing experimental cinema as a trajectory that contains the development of a realist aesthetic as a modernist skirmish with the nature of the medium does not only recast well-known debates about representation, ontology, and ideology. Reading realism into the fabric of experimental film culture also allows for novel readings of established figures at the heart of its canon that have been overlooked, drawing together a realist strain of filmmakers whose interest in affirming cinema's relationship to the world is driven by their conviction that doing so requires a deep and thoroughly experimental engagement with film form.

One such example of a filmmaker whose career falls into new alignment when looked at through a realist lens is Nathaniel Dorsky. Dorsky's career, stretching from the mid-sixties to the present, is one where cinema takes a worldly, bodily form, playing a crucial role in helping the viewer understand their emplacement within space and time. As he writes in his text *Devotional Cinema*, the experience of watching a film becomes "the opening or the interruption," that can "subvert our absorption in the temporal and reveals the depths of our own reality . . . [and] opens

us to a fuller sense of ourselves and our world."[19] Crucial to Dorsky's sense of the role film can play in this arrangement is its alignment with what he refers to as the "formality" of human existence, by which he means both human "metabolism," or pace of life, and the conditions of the physical world that determine it: "a planet, illuminated by a glowing star…air and light, in which we all participate (19)," as well as the ocean and climate.

Film form, while difficult to master, has according to Dorsky the capacity to incorporate "nowness," into the viewing experience, the successful integration of which allows the viewer to "suddenly see a hidden world, one that has existed all along right in front of us. In a flash, the uncanny presence of this poetic and vibrant world, ripe with mystery, stands before us. . . . Everything is alive and talking to us (35)." This "nowness" that provides access to views of the world in Dorsky's aesthetics is centrally linked to the way that films are edited. In an interview with Scott MacDonald, Dorsky refers to his editing style as "polyvalent," a mode of editing that eschews the accumulation of images to create a thematic point or purpose. As glossed by P. Adams Sitney, it is a form that, due to an almost complete lack of recurring shots or intercutting, camera movement, or superimposition, "results in the suppression of a future tense within the film. Each image founds a new present moment. . . . [I]t is essential that coherence remain mysterious."[20] The present moments that Sitney identifies are meticulously composed by Dorsky to allow for their continual flow into each other without disruption, to avoid any "cutting away from them [that] would be a disruption to the visual surface itself (*Devotional Cinema*, 46)."

What Dorsky's polyvalence amounts to in his argument and his films is a claim that

---

[19] Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba, 2003), 18.

[20] P. Adams Sitney, "Tone Poems: On the Films of Nathaniel Dorsky." *Artforum,* November 8, 2007, http://canyoncinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Dorsky_Sitney_art_forum.pdf. Accessed July 1, 2021.

explicitly emphasizes film's capacity to provide views of the world, but only if they are edited to allow this ability to express itself. Relating shots to cuts, Dorsky claims that the former are "the accommodation, the connection, the empathy, the view of the subject matter we see on the screen," whereas "the cuts are the clarity that re-awakens the view (42)." Editing in Dorsky's practice becomes neither a reflexive mode of making the viewer aware of the constructedness of montage, nor a tool in the creation of meaning, but rather a way of continually refreshing film's capacity to provide the viewer with views of the world, affirming a connection between human and filmic formality. The distinct and carefully crafted editing practice, seen as the working through of an essential component of film form in a novel manner, is a central facet of what makes Dorsky both a modernist and such canonical figure in the field of experimental film. It is also avowedly and thoroughly realist. Seeing the ability for the world to present itself in film as no automatic or simple technological capacity, Dorsky's mastery of editing is his method of keeping faith with cinema's essential affinity with the "formality of our being."

Dorsky is merely one example of the advantage of re-viewing the experimental cinema canon as containing strains of realism as modernist practice. The remainder of this dissertation is dedicated towards beginning the kind of genealogy that would allow for non-canonical figures like Everson and Stratman to be brought into its ranks. In doing so, I cast further light onto aspects of canonical figures that have not been explored and begin working out how a theory of realism might function in experimentally minded works that lie outside the canon for entirely different reasons of context and tradition.

The dissertation's four chapters are organized around two orientations to the world: bodies and landscape. If the core of my argument is that seeing strands of experimental cinema as realist reshapes our understanding of modernism's role in the medium, the filmmakers I

analyze are realist largely by virtue of their dedication to exploring the dynamism and affordances of cinema's interactions with the human body in movement and with views of both land- and city-scape. However, my argument also proceeds along a separate track in an effort to explore the capacities or limits of trying to see experimental cinema as containing realist strains or impulses. Chapters two and three focus on Kevin Jerome Everson and Deborah Stratman, artists whose works are often dubbed experimental documentaries or essays and thus are less surprisingly thought of as filmmakers oriented towards the representation of reality. However, the first and last chapters focus on submerged and ignored tendencies towards realism in artists who are generally absent from lists of realist filmmakers: Michael Snow and Hito Steyerl. In structuring the dissertation this way, I aim to show both how experimental cinema's failure to claim its realist tendencies distorts the understanding of artists who are working in this mode, and that in cinema's most avowedly reflexive, self-referential, illusion-destroying artists, reality is not dispensed with so easily. I show experimental cinema's modernist artists to be realist while establishing the modernist core of its realists.

Chapter one, on Michael Snow, looks at the apex of his early career in his "camera movement" films, *La Region Centrale* (1971) and *Wavelength* (1967) in particular. By articulating Snow's dedicated efforts to balance his formalist, modernist ambitions with what he saw as the realist base of cinematographic reproduction, I argue that these films have been misunderstood as the provenance of cinematic anti-illusionism. Rather, by examining how Snow's aesthetic system is driven by a pattern of deformation and return to ground, I show his commitment to establishing a link between the viewer and the world that champions cinema's capacity to represent space—whether the epic landscape of the Canadian Rockies or the innumerable details of a New York City loft.

Chapter two sustains this focus on landscape via the analysis of a single work, Deborah Stratman's sixty-minute, eleven-part 16mm film *The Illinois Parables* (2016). Stratman's piece is driven by the camera's capacity to document the sites where the barrier between past and present is "thin." Though driven by static-camera long-take cinematography of unpeopled landscapes, Stratman's film blends in archival footage and documents, recreation, and a layered soundscape to forge connections between film's aesthetics, its affinity for landscape, and its capacity to draw on and represent the formal structures that organize the experience of history. I argue that Stratman's film both draws on and exceeds the long history of experimental cinema's interest in historical documentation by tackling for the first time an embrace of film's capacity to capture the aesthetic forms of history in both their sensuousness and structure.

Chapter three shifts from landscape to the body. The work of Kevin Jerome Everson has risen to acclaim in recent years for his commitment to depicting the quotidian lives of black people in the United States, particularly at work. However, despite repeated attempts to label these works documentaries, Everson's self-conception as an artist and, particularly, a formalist, demonstrates a modernist drive that pushes against the sense that these works are merely observational. By working through the most acclaimed films of his recent career, *Park Lanes* (2015), *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (2016), and *Tonsler Park* (2017), I show Everson's commitment lies with finding the nexus between film or video and the formal features of reality they capture for projection. Everson's dedication to putting black people on screen is driven less by the politics of representation or inclusion than by his sense that this choice is of the utmost formal consequence.

The final chapter maintains the focus on the body through the audiovisual work of Hito Steyerl. Looking across her career, from the early video works of *November* (2005) and *Lovely*

Andrea (2007) to her breakout piece *How Not to Be Seen, A Fucking Didactic .MOV File* (2013) to the recent installation-based works *Liquidity Inc.*(2014) and *Factory of the Sun* (2015), I show that Steyerl's reputation as an artist dedicated to the videographic image's incapacity to represent, document, or tell the truth ignores a crucial facet of her career in its consistent reliance on cinema's capacity to bring the human body into view. Focusing on the prominence of the on-screen body in Steyerl's work, from the talking heads and archival footage of the early work to the performers captured in front of green screens in the most recent projects, this chapter reveals the humanist core hidden in Steyerl's videos and recasts her practice as one that consistently uses film's affinity for the body to explore the limits of escaping representation.

Pursuing Cavell's thought into the field of experimental cinema may mangle some of his concerns, and may also transform some of the dogmas of experimental cinema. That flexibility is part the hope of this dissertation. Suddenly flexible, two arguments of Cavell's that have been held apart—the importance of connecting to nature in modernist works of art and the fundamentally realist condition-cum-burden of film's connection to the world—are braided together, grounded in views of landscape, the body, and their union in the city. These arguments also reveal the works of the four artists considered in this dissertation as unembarrassed by their affirmation of experimental cinema's connection to the human experience of the world, and indeed as drawing significant strength from it. Reframing films by Snow, Everson, Stratman, and Steyerl in line with Cavell's philosophy means that they are not modernist in spite of such a frank affirmation of the link between cinema and the world, but indeed precisely and exactly because of it. By overcoming cinema's own skeptical doubt about such a link, they re-achieve the conditions necessary for the viewer to experience the world as "there." As their ongoing work demonstrates, the task of re-affirming and re-achieving is endless, and must draw on new

formal resources, new technologies, and new views to secure the possibility of viewing the world.

Chapter 1

Use Your Illusion: Worldbuilding in Michael Snow's Camera Movement Films

"Ultimately, it would be the structuralist films of the 1970s that would give Greenbergian ideas about medium specificity their cinematic apotheosis. Recasting film's ontology away from the photographic representation of the world and toward an anti-illusionist materialism that laid bare the process of production, structural film's dead-end essentialism exhausted cinema even as it attempted to save it."[1] This quotation, drawn from Gregory Zinman's 2020 book on handmade, cameraless, and intermedial cinema is the most recent post-mortem diagnosis of the phenomenon of structural film, and indicates a solidification of a certain consensus against the era's "dead-end" thinking and work. It is the ultimate goal of this chapter to argue for a different view of the goals and practices of those who participated, critically or creatively, in the period glossed by Zinman. I do so by re-evaluating the work of Michael Snow. Proceeding through Snow's work preceding *Rameau's Nephew* (1974), and the critical apparatus that surrounded it, I argue that Zinman's take reveals an accretion of mis-readings and misunderstandings that have calcified into a dogma, one whose casting of structural cinema as a chilly and cerebral pursuit of purity bears little resemblance to much of the work supposedly captured under its umbrella.

Following the path of Zinman's argument requires a return to the sites of the original debates that emerged with and around structural film and the overlapping analysis around the status of the illusionist/anti-illusionist binary. Mine is far from the first return so such debates:

[1] Gregory Zinman, *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts* (Oakland, Ca: University of California Press, 2020), 19. Note here the functional equivalence between "structuralist" and "structural."

two other notable attempts from recent decades return to the heady heyday of the structuralists and offer new evaluations of the period. Juan Carlos Kase's 2017 article, "Reassessing the Personal Registers and Anti-Illusionist Imperatives of the New Formal Film of the 1960s and '70s," joins Jonathan Walley's 2003 "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," in attempting to unseat the idea of a hegemonic anti-illusionist and narrowly medium-specific practice reigning supreme over the two decades.[2]

These articles both succeed at their stated goals. Kase demonstrates how Paul Sharits' *Piece Mandala/End War* contains images of sex and violence that recasts how Sharits' work from the period emphasizes "graphic content…conceptual obstinance and [an] inescapably anxiogenic function (56)," and shows convincingly that both Hollis Frampton's *(nostalgia)* and Malcolm LeGrice's *Little Dog for Roger* activate intensely personal and autobiographical registers that undermine claims to a purity of anti-illusionism. Walley's case, on the other hand, explores instances of what he calls "paracinema," most notably the work of Anthony McCall, to argue for an "idea of cinema" that is not bound by a "medium" grounded in physical film but rather in the exploration of "light and time," which for Walley are distinctly "cinematic qualities" that can be found in "nonfilmic materials (30)." Walley's article makes a strong case for the existence of his "paracinema," and his article is most convincing in arguing that works like McCall's *Long Film for Ambient Light* (1975) and the 1970s *Sukiyaki Film* experiments of Tony Conrad represent a shift in cinematic practice that was moving away from an emphasis on

[2] Juan Carlos Kase, "Reassessing the Personal Registers and Anti-Illusionist Imperatives of the New Formal Film of the 1960s and 70s," *October 163* Winter 2017, 49-70; Jonathan Walley, "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film," *October 103*, Winter 2003 15-30.

projected film while still drawing on the resources of cinematic tradition, both recent and long past.

However, both approaches remain locked in a peculiar paradigm. While seeking exemption for particular films or works of cinema on the basis of their content or relation to the medium, Walley and Kase shore up the consensus that there was such a thing as the anti-illusionist structural film, and argue only that its hegemonic influence had more cracks than had been previously posited. Walley is far more explicit and less nuanced about this than Kase, arguing that as expanded cinema had been evacuated from critical accounts and histories, what remained was "a general agreement among scholars that avant-garde filmmakers of this period followed the trend within modernist art toward medium-specific purification: the reduction of the art object to the essential physical or material components of its medium (Walley, "Material of Film," 17)." However, even as Kase pleads for an incorporation of the "personal richness, conceptual ambiguity, and ideological non-alignment of [structural] films," into the history of the period currently dominated by a view that such works "marched in tandem to mount a late modernist assault on filmic illusionism and eradicate it once and for all (Kase, 51)," his approach gives far too much ground to his supposed adversaries. By recovering facets of individual works that demonstrate how "reference" seeped in at the seams—despite the efforts of the maker (LeGrice) or in accordance with their stated philosophy (Sharits)—Kase leaves the critical apparatus that sustains the connections between medium-specificity, anti-illusionism, and structural film intact, if short a few more canonical examples.

The goal of this chapter is to activate the storied legacy of Michael Snow's most avowedly structural films to show that the kinds of things that Kase demonstrates are (at most) ineradicable traces of reference are in fact baked into structural film from the beginning, that the

frigidity of this supposedly inexorably reflexive and illusion destroying era is far more exception than norm, and finally, that at the core of the issue is a debate around the status of reality in cinema's self-conception, the consequences of which continue to reverberate today. In is in this context that the philosophy of Stanley Cavell returns to the conversation. In an appearance on Robert Gardner's program *Screening Room*, one that featured structural filmmaker par excellence Standish Lawder, Cavell inadvertently set the terms that my argument seeks to develop and ground in the films of the period.

> "You talked before about distorting reality, but presumably also in the service of something. In the service, as Bob Gardner was suggesting, of revealing either something about reality or reality itself, or something, that just the naked viewing of reality doesn't itself reveal. All film, of course, does that. Just projecting the clearest, most realistic image tells you something that seeing it naked, you wouldn't have seen, that's a truth fundamental I take it to film, and as you said before, making films means commenting about film as much as about anything else…*It suggests the point that no matter what you do to reality, in the way of distorting it, it's still there, it's still inescapable, and the more you distort it, the more one feels pressed between Heaven and Earth, still three-dimensional, still with gravity, still in this old hulk."*[3]

Cavell's suggestion here is that the presence of reality in experimental cinema cannot simply be *dispensed* with, whatever the severity of the distortions to which it is subjected. This position reveals yet again Cavell's oblique, disjunctive relationship to the conversation surrounding experimental film, from its basic terms and fundamental assumptions to its grandest philosophical and ontological claims. Turning to a resuscitation of this conversation is necessary not only to define the position I want to push against but to once again recall the fissures and heterogeneity of a body of criticism so prone to recalcification in banality and simplicity.

* * *

[3] Robert Gardner, *Screening Room with Robert Gardner: Standish Lawder and Stanley Cavell*. January 1973. Studio 7 Arts, 2005. DVD. Emphasis Mine.

As the coiner of the term "structural cinema," P. Adams Sitney often stands in as the targeted critic for theorists opposed to the supposed excesses and narrow-mindedness of the films gathered under its banner. Along with Annette Michelson, Sitney in this model is deemed responsible for the effort to find in the cinema of his moment an equivalent to Greenbergian modernism so as to elevate experimental cinema to the plane of the high arts and their accompanying theorizations. Seen this way, "structural cinema" becomes an imperious gesture of theory or criticism that encouraged further reductive and reflexive winnowing of cinema's deployment of its medium.[4]

On its own terms this argument is fairly simple to defend against. Sitney, for example, was not just uninterested in, but indeed actively hostile to the idea of modernism, preferring to see the art movements of the 20th century as working themselves out in the shadows and remnants of the Romantic-Symbolic dialectic.[5] Further, Sitney's project for experimental cinema at large, exemplified in *Visionary Film* where his essay on structural cinema took its final form, sought no particular special status for its anti-illusionism or reflexivity. Sitney downplays these aspects of the mode, both of which he finds present in the "New Formal Film" that he identifies as its immediate predecessor, in favor of the "cinema of structure" that emphasized consciousness, meditation, and the shift from "eye" to "mind."

This emphasis on consciousness is matched in Annette Michelson's work on the subject. While her interest in modernism is closely tied to a politics of anti-illusionism, this far from exclusive to structural cinema, but is the essence of her career long work on film. Michelson's

[4] See Michele Pierson, "The Accessibility of the Avant-Garde: Talk About American Experimental Cinema," *Discourse* Vol. 40, No.1, Winter 2018, 3-29.

[5] "Narrative Illusion vs. Structural Realism: Malcolm LeGrice and P. Adams Sitney," in *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 134-152, esp. 144-45.

work on Brakhage, for example, demonstrates that as she came to revere the filmmaker, her interest lay in his potential to obliterate the representation of time in cinema to create what she deemed the "eternal now," and her work on the Soviet filmmakers Eisenstein and Vertov was defined by their efforts towards what she referred to as a "maieutic" "communist decoding of reality." Michelson's interest in structural film is often shorthanded with her work on Michael Snow, but her essays on Snow are comparatively dis-interested in his anti-illusionist potential in favor of his demonstration of the basic principles of phenomenology as defined by Edmund Husserl, and more generally Snow's ability to make film philosophical in the way she favored in modernist art.[6] However, rebutting the aptness of the charge laid against Michelson and Sitney does not in itself defuse the argument, for their dominance in the critical conversation obscures a more lively interchange that forthrightly embraced the conceptual structure tying filmmakers like Snow to a political anti-illusionism found in reductive medium-specificity.

If, as I argue below, the "dead-end essentialism" model of structural cinema deployed by Zinman, Kase, and Walley is an ill-fitting robe for Michael Snow during his tenure as "Dean," of the movement, there are other figures from the period that would be more comfortable as its bearer. Foremost amongst these figures is Peter Gidal.[7] The filmmaker, critic, and driving force behind the London Co-op based U.K. experimental cinema scene, Gidal did much to define the terms of this forceful movement. As Bart Testa describes Gidal's mission, shared in many ways

[6] For a critique of Michelson's position, one that notes the shift from the full blown phenomenology of "Toward Snow" to a more measured position regarding ideology in "About Snow," see "Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969," in *The Michael Snow Project: Visual Art 1951-1993* (Toronto: The Art Gallery of Toronto, 1994), 323-339.

[7] Hollis Frampton at the time floated to Sitney the idea that structural film as a concept was a better fit for the co-op scene, remarking in the *Structural Film Anthology* "I said to Sitney, at dinner in July: I have found your Structuralists, P. Adams, and they are in England. Complete to the diacritical mark, influence of Warhol, the whole number." *Structural Film Anthology* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 77

by Malcolm Le Grice, experimental cinema was an attack on conventional cinema's dual faith in narrative and "illusion," the latter defined as "the arsenal of spatial and temporal effects that lend a semblance of reality to the image."[8] As an alternative, Gidal and Le Grice proposed a "strict formalism and systematic exposure of what they term the 'materialist' armature of film as the core of a political campaign against conventional cinema," based around "the reductive isolation and exposure of cinematic techniques as 'material practices.'(Testa, 44)."[9]

If Gidal's position is a much better fit for the extremist version of "structural" cinema described above, it remains unclear what could possibly live up to his model as we turn to extant films and filmmaking practices. As Kase himself describes above, Le Grice's films failed to live up to the purity of this mission, and Gidal's ferocious criticism of other filmmakers and his pessimism about the outcome of his own work belies any assessment of the structuralist/materialist project as a *success* rather than an influential failure. Further, as D.N. Rodowick has detailed, Gidal's position is more nuanced than its caricature, in particular in relation to the importance Gidal placed on a dialectic between material and illusion (Rodowick, 126-145). On the other hand, quibbles such as these have little impact in comparison to the influence Gidal exerted over the conversation around experimental cinema in this period, not least of which through his championing of Snow.

As Michael O'Pray described shortly thereafter, and has been well documented by Testa and others, the London Co-op scene was well primed to receive *Wavelength* as a confirmation of

---

[8] Bart Testa, "An Axiomatic Cinema," *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991* (Toronto: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995), 44

[9] For more on Gidal and Le Grice, see in particular Gidal's *Structural Film Anthology*. D.N. Rodowick's book *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) is the most detailed scholarly literature on the philosophical/theoretical basis and contradictions of Gidal's position.

their in-progress materialist philosophy.[10] In particular, both Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka had been priming the pump in European experimental film circles, so that when *Wavelength* premiered at Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium in 1967, European critics were eager define it as an U.S. outpost of an ongoing experimental method of "reductive isolation" championed by Europe's experimental filmmakers. As many have noted and as I will describe in detail below, this requires an uncharacteristically un-dialectical reading of Snow's film that not only ignores the context of his art-world career and previous films, but downplays or ignores many features of the film itself.[11]

While Gidal's theory is the most well-known and influential rendition of binding structural film to political anti-illusionism, other critics offered similar structures. In the context of American art, the most forthright critic to work on this connection was Regina Cornwell. In a series of articles and one book written between 1971 and 1979, Cornwell continually drives home the connection between structural cinema and the theoretical importance of its interest in "baring the device" of the essentials of film form.[12] While Cornwell dismisses Sitney's attempt at definition as "misleading," from the outset, she is interested in many of the same filmmakers: Snow, Ernie Gehr, Tony Conrad, Joyce Weiland, Ken Jacobs, Hollis Frampton, George Landow,

[10] Michael O'Pray, "Framing Snow," *Afterimage 11*, Winter 1979, 57-61.

[11] See Gidal's letter to Michelson on the subject, and her response in "Foreword in Three Letters," *Artforum,* September 1971, 8-9.

[12] See: Regina Cornwell, "Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current American Avant-Garde Film," *Kansas Quarterly*, Vol. 4, Issue 2, 1972, 60-70, "Paul Sharits: Illusion and Object," *Artforum*, Vol 10, Issue 1 September 1971 56-62, "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," *Drama Review* 23, September 1979, 77-92, and *Snow Seen: The Films and photographs of Michael Snow* (Toronto: PMA Books, 1979). "Structural Film: Ten Years Later," contains a critique of Sitney that clarifies Cornwell's position vis-à-vis structural film, casting her as one of the sole defenders of connecting structural film to Structuralism proper in the philosophical sense, and examines the connection between her own thinking and that of Gidal, through her comparison of Gidal's theories with those of Paul Sharits.

and in particular Paul Sharits. Cornwell's essays are perhaps the clearest articulation of the ideology behind the model deployed by contemporary critics like Kase and Walley, in which the filmmakers' intentions are reduced to displaying a material component of filmmaking that *forces* the viewer into a kind of active participation that *requires* the realization that the "standard" deployment of the material aspects of film practice produce only illusions: three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional screen, the compression and elongation of time, the perception of movement from a succession of still frames, and so on. While Cornwell is confident in the success of these maneuvers, and Kase and Walley (following the influential critique of this position in Rodowick's *Crisis of Political Modernism*) are doubtful, both share in their assessment that this is what is intended and important about the body of works Cornwell describes.

Yet even Cornwell's position is more ambiguous than its caricature. She allows that for all of the "highly intellectual experience" of viewing structural cinema it is also "perceptual and sensuous," rather than "ascetic, puritanical, and denying (Cornwell, "Structural Film Ten Years Later," 90)." Even in her work on Sharits, whose theories closely resemble those of Gidal in their reductivism, Cornwell argues that his cinema's relation to illusion is not simply one of isolation, presentation, and elimination, but rather can be multiplicative. In a passage that is as unclear as it is exemplary, Cornwell argues that "*Ray Gun Virus* projects its chromatic and achromatic frames onto a flat screen to create its own illusions and illusions of illusions…the viewer becomes more conscious of the fact that he is facing an illusion, and paradoxically, at the same time, this illusion is an immediacy in time (Cornwell, "Illusion and Object," 56)." What interests me here, beyond the dependence on a structure of "illusion," is how Cornwell wants to claim that while Sharits suspends the traditional "illusion" of three dimensional space, he does so to create a new

kind of illusion that does *not* "refer back to a prior time and place." Whatever the validity of the illusion paradigm—one I examine below in the context of Snow—it is clear that structural film, even in its most extremist interpretations of Gidal and Cornwell, is more bound by a dialectic between illusion and representation than an ascetic rejection of illusion altogether.

This massively compressed survey of structural film's connection to anti-illusionism has two primary purposes. The first is simply to argue that when contemporary critics want to return to this period, their shorthand reference to the theoretical battleground of one of uncompromised, unnuanced rigidity fails to capture the ambiguity of even the model's hardest edged theorists. However, more important than this, my contention is that contemporary scholars who invoke the critical apparatus erected by Cornwell and Gidal tend to simply *assume* that it has purchase on the objects that it describes: they use this theory as if it *worked*. To ascribe the intentions of Gidal to an entire body of creative work is critical malpractice, but this flaw is greatly exacerbated if those intentions are read as successfully instantiated across such a diversity of output. It is with this in mind that I turn now to Michael Snow's practice in earnest.

Excursus: **Corpus Callosum*

After the remarkable seven year period in which Michael Snow released *Back and Forth*, *Wavelength*, *La Région Centrale* and *Rameau's Nephew…*, amongst others, his film output slowed down, became more specific and strange, including the text based work *So Is This* (1982) and modified re-treads of earlier innovations like *Seated Figures* (1988). This pattern carried, matched by his more frequent, popular, and rewarded interventions into popular sculpture, until 2002 with the release of **Corpus Callosum*. Critics and scholars such as Malcolm Turvey have described the shock to the system that **Corpus Callosum* represented within both Snow's oeuvre and the experimental cinema of the early 2000s.[13] At once an exemplar of a kind of late style and fully continuous with his early works, Snow's film surprised not least by its apparently sudden and wholehearted embrace of the digital, as the film essentially consists of an inventory of the edits available within a particular suite of computer aided editing tools, performed on otherwise banal footage of office workers and a family inhabiting their living room.

A repeated figure in **Corpus Callosum* is the "stretching" of the people inhabiting the digital world of the piece. Snow's fourth-wall breaking voice frequently intervenes to connect the agent of the filmmaker with the actions occurring onscreen—the swaps in clothing, the changes in light schemes, the deformation of particular elements and figures in the movie. The stretching is marked by a particular kind of resilience by the characters, a resistance to any *permanent* change in their shape—whenever the omnipotent agent controlling their world reaches into to alter the coordinates of their extension into the world, as soon as the agent releases them, their form "snaps" right back into place. The figures of **Corpus Callosum*

[13] Malcolm Turvey, "The Child in the Machine: On the Use of CGI in Michael Snow's 'Corpus Callosum,'" *October*, Vol. 114, Autumn 2005, 29-42

therefore display a form of recalcitrance against the creative will of the filmmaker, the Michael Snow shaped god that attempts to determine certain aspects of their existence. Whatever their ultimate plasticity, any change in their standard form must begin from a ground that is predetermined in profilmic space, an origin that insists upon its right to exist despite whatever operations are performed upon its form.

This gesture, a pattern of deformation and return to base, is one that I argue defines Snow's career throughout his film work, and is especially prominent in the camera movement films that I examine here. In viewing these films what the deformations or their analogues consist of is clear in comparison to the more vexing question of how Snow articulates or defines a ground from which to develop. In *La Région Centrale* and *Wavelength*, I argue that this ground is a photographically realistic view of the world, one that has specific grasp on that world's consistency with the viewer's sense of their own world of perceptual experience. In demonstrating his interest in film's capacity to provide these views of the world for the viewer, Snow places the photographic capture and projection of the world on center stage in the definition of "experimental cinema" as a *medium*. As Annette Michelson wrote of Snow in a different context: "The consequences are still incalculable."[14]

[14] Annette Michelson, "Toward Snow," in *Michael Snow: The October Files 24* (Cambridge, MA: 2019), 9.

The Shadow of the Apparatus: *La Région Centrale*

Figure 1.1 Still from *La Région Centrale* (Snow, 1971)

In her 2020 book, *American Avant-Garde Cinema's Philosophy of the* In-Between, Rebecca Sheehan considers the relationship between cinema and landscape in the context of her titular concept of the *in-between*, a space between binary poles inhabited by many of the touchstone works of American experimental cinema. Her second chapter focuses on role of landscape in these films, drawing out how the films of James Benning, Sharon Lockhart, Ernie Gehr, Chick Strand, and others mediate or complicate distinctions between part and whole, subject and object, *viewing of* and *seeing through*, and knowledge and sight in their visualizations or presentations of the American landscape. For Sheehan, these works of film form the newest horizon for a trajectory of landscape art that is defined by the opposition

between "the promise of total visibility inherent to wide-angle views" and "the representational frame's limitations to that total visibility," one that can consequently activate the philosophical tradition of skepticism elucidated by philosopher Stanley Cavell in which the central question becomes the "extent to which we are capable of knowing or *seeing* a world unmarred by our own perception."[15]

As Cavell himself so persistently argued in his career-long engagement with film, cinema multiplies the theoretical complexity of the skeptical dilemma just as it also provides a route out of these complexities in the cinematic experience. The medium's capacity to show us the world without our presence provides a "moving image of skepticism," and the fact that "our normal senses are satisfied" of the reality of the world on screen reveals the skeptical gap to be a condition of mind, rather than world, holding the promise of its dissolution.[16] In the light of this Cavellian orientation towards the powers of cinema, Sheehan considers the formal choices made by the filmmakers her chapter surveys, tracking in particular the relationship between the long-take, wide-angle shots preferred by James Benning and Sharon Lockhart, with the style of more analytic editing utilized by Stan Brakhage and Ernie Gehr. This exchange revolves essentially around the issues of incompleteness and infinity:

> The picture of a landscape replicates both the incompleteness of a whole…and an incompleteness within the whole. In cinema, the former is suggested by the frame itself and the latter incompleteness is suggested by the spatial gaps that persist between the wide-angle shot…and the analytical editing that may break that shot down: close-ups and medium shots whose partial representation of the wider-angle view point to the infinitude contained *within* landscape's whole (91-92).

---

[15] Rebecca Sheehan, *American Avant-Garde Cinema's Philosophy of the* In-Between (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 87.

[16] Stanley Cavell. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1979), 87.

In Sheehan's reading, such incompleteness is not particular to landscape cinema, but is simply one instantiation of "cinema's spatio-temporal paradox of never-complete representation," an anxiety that inevitably accompanies any attempt or desire for "total representation (88)."

It is in considering this incompleteness in specific relation to the "avant-garde" she considers that Sheehan turns the reader's attention towards the familiar practice of political modernism, rendering mediation visible. While her goals are philosophical, rather than political, Sheehan argues that it is the specific ambition of avant-garde filmmakers to, "[hold] the spectator within her very *means* of apprehension where it provokes renewed encounters with thought and the world (88)." This foregrounding of the means of apprehension Sheehan attributes to the "avant-garde's self-reflexive work [that] so often makes the spectator's act of engagement with the medium of film itself part *of* the film (94)." This emphasis on spectatorial awareness of the media's material support, familiar to the point of cliché in discussion of experimental cinema, forms a key support of Sheehan's line of argument throughout her book. Sheehan argues that the awareness of mediation or "constructedness" in artworks parallels or models the necessity of creative acts to found knowledge and truth, following philosophers from Friedrich Nietzsche to Richard Rorty in their insistence that such things are not to be discovered but rather established.

By insisting upon the connection to philosophical conceptions of mediation as necessary and inevitable for all forms of knowledge, Sheehan's project represents a significant step forward in the consideration of the problem between illusionism and reflexivity in experimental cinema that I have been tracking in this chapter. It is with this "tenuous affirmation," in mind that I turn in full to Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*, as work of landscape cinema that poses serious

problems for Sheehan's theory as it insists upon a much different orientation towards mediation, medium, knowledge, and the apparatus of cinematic representation.[17]

My central contention about *La Région Centrale*, related to that of *Wavelength,* is to dwell on something that everyone notices and few care to think about in detail, which is how the film is structured. In Peter Rists's short article from 2002 in the *Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada*, for example, he writes that "initially, the camera pans through 360° passes which map out the terrain, and then it begins to provide progressively stranger views (on its side, upside down) through circular back-and-forth-motions."[18] My reading of the film depends entirely on the importance of this order of filmic events, one that efforts to give an "all-over" impression of the film tend to elide or ignore in the effort to turn the film into a purely abstract exercise.

This hesitance on the part of critics bears consideration. While *Wavelength* has received a number of fruitful and detailed "formalist" readings, most notably by R. Bruce Elder and Elizabeth Legge, the attention that gets paid to *La Région Centrale* tends to dwell on overwhelming impact of the film as a concept more than the details of individual moments.[19] While some critics might note the high-speed blurs of the film's climax and compare them to abstract painting, and others note the standalone bravura sequences like the camera's circling the

[17] I do not mean to suggest that Sheehan's disinclination to consider Snow's work is an unforced error: she is adamant throughout her text that she is focused specifically on American filmmakers, and the Canadian Snow's "tribute" to the landscape of the northern Rockies is in many ways his most "Canadian" film. See R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 290-291

[18] Peter Rist, "La Région Centrale," *Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada* ed. Peter Harry Rist (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), 188-189

[19] See John W. Locke's initial review, "Michael Snow's 'La Région Centrale': How You Should Watch The Best Film I Ever Saw," *Artforum* Vol. 12, No. 3 November 1973 or Thierry de Duve's analysis in "Michael Snow: The Deictics of Experience and Beyond," in *Michael Snow: The October Files 24* (Cambridge, MA: 2019), 93-122.

moon or the long stare into the sun that closes the film, these are exceptions to a corpus more concerned with the significance of camera movement in film history, examinations of subjectivity, or the phenomenological impact of pursuing the interaction of stable rectangular frame and a swirling (almost) 360° view.

Figure 1.2 Snow with the apparatus, 1969 (photo by Joyce Wieland)

My aim is not to correct for such broad scope views by returning the viewer to a kind of granular analysis of the film's sixteen discrete sections, nor readings of the "X" that demarcates each or the beeping soundtrack supposedly created by the machinations of the camera's hoist. Rather, my aim is to dwell on the implications of Snow's basic gestures in shaping the film, and the meaning of its materials. In doing so I am interested to bracket the philosophical or theoretical readings of Snow's accomplishment in favor of considering anew the components of such readings. By returning to the basics of Snow's film I hope to restore to the viewer

something of the buried significance of its legacy, in the form of its direct presentation of *views* of the world.

The first of the sixteen sections of the film lasts almost exactly thirty minutes, and follows one gradual camera movement that maps the territory as if it's the interior of a sphere. Starting with small circles around the base of the apparatus, the camera gradually tilts its neck towards the horizon as the circles widen then narrow again as the camera looks towards the sky, as if tracing the spiral pattern of removing an orange peel in one piece. As with *Wavelength*, this movement is not perfectly continuous: the camera's vertical adjustments are discrete and individual nudges, and the sequence contains one visible cut at about ten and half minutes, with another presumably hidden in the blue sky of the sequence's latter half (necessitated by the eleven minute limit of the 400 foot reels of 16mm film used by Snow).

What Snow does by spending the first section of the film gradually mapping out the landscape is to build up a world that can be gradually and progressively deformed. Unlike the lyrical cinemas that he so definitively broke with in *Wavelength*, which immerse the viewer immediately in a frenetic and subjective vision, Snow bothers to quite literally *ground* the viewer in an image world where one can clearly understand the coordinates. In viewing the film, one slowly learns where one *is* in relation to various rocks, whether the large, long one that resembles a crocodile or the agglomeration of boulders that lie at its polar opposite. The viewer gets a sense of the weather: clear, cold enough to render what little foliage is to be seen a definitive brown-to-yellow spectrum but warm enough to have melted the snow that accompanied all of Snow's promotional photography for the film. The viewer, perhaps most importantly, also learns how the camera mechanism is positioned, what its powers and limits are, how Snow intends to edit the film.

This latter impression is confirmed by the following sequence, after the first demarcation "intertitle" of a white X on a black screen. The camera, opening on the cloudy blue sky of the end of the previous sequence, performs one long arc around the sphere to end up on a "normal" human view that centers the horizon.

Figure 1.3 Still from *La Région Centrale* (Snow, 1971), second section

After adjusting its movement to follow the line of the horizon horizontally for forty-five seconds, tracing the arc of the ridge that forms the horizon line, Snow then begins rotating the camera on its Y-axis, performing a "barrel roll" movement that uses the horizon line as a center while continuing on its horizontal track, revealing the lake that dominates a view of the horizon adjacent to the ridge. As the horizontal motion completes its first circuit of the sphere, the speed increases for a second and then third pass, before the pace of the roll and its accompanying circuit of the horizon begin to slow, cutting to the "X" at the exact moment the earth and sky are aligned neatly in an inversion of "human" perspective, the sky below and the earth on top.

Thus a pattern is established for the sequences. Each is dominated by a singular definitive gesture, a pattern of movement for the camera to follow. Importantly, this is not as clean or "pure" as someone keyed to "structural film" might expect: In addition to the "imperfections," of the first sequence's cuts and nudge-like adjustments of the camera, the second sequence is not exclusively composed of the y-axis rotation that dominates it, but is rather bookended by different kinds of camera movements, the first serving as a transition to the correct angle for the rotation and the latter a closing flourish. Further, in each sequence, an effort is made to orient the viewer around a particular perspective and gradually use movement to attempt to pull the viewer away from that ground, as the barrel roll's increasing speed uses the initial horizon line and a "human" orientation towards it as the basis for its explorations or deformations. These reveal both the film's interest in continuing Snow's "structural" interest in mapping out the possibilities of camera movement in a taxonomic inventory, but also the limits of such an approach both from a creative and a critical lens. While the former is potently posed by the open-ended possibilities of the camera movement apparatus, the latter reveals that seeing Snow's film as mechanically indifferent to any affinity between viewer and world belies its efforts to repeatedly give the viewer a structure to cling to as it accelerates along its track.

La Région Centrale appears at first to be a kind of compendium of miniature "camera movement films," the self-applied broader name for the bulk of Snow's sequence of works from *Wavelength* to *La Région Centrale*, including *Standard Time*, *Back and Forth,* and arguably the much later *Seated Figures* (1988). The third sequence of the film focuses on a movement best described as tracing the symbol for infinity, ∞, with one apex on the ground and the other in the sky. The subsequent fourth sequence recalls Snow's earlier *Back and Forth*, and is the first movement in which the camera reverses direction in the middle of a sequence, frequently and

seamlessly stopping its horizontal tracks to reverse direction as it scans over, primarily, the large rock outcropping and the slice of sky that it abuts. However, while *La Région Centrale* initially seems to form a kind of analytic breakdown of possibility in the vein of Snow's earlier work, the film gradually seems to become overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite combinations offered by the machine Snow designed with Pierre Abbeloos.[20] Following the fourth section, which uses to the difficulty of grounding oneself spatially when the screen is entirely occupied by sky in order to relocate the pattern of back and forth movements, the fifth begins to invest more deeply and explicitly in using features of the world to generate effects, playing down the priority of an inventory of camera movements agnostic towards profilmic space in favor of a more holistic view.

The fifth section is largely dominated by an interest in the horizon line and the possibilities it offers to the filming apparatus. Like section two, section five begins with the camera "getting into position," rather than opening directly onto a movement that will define the segment. In this instance, the camera begins zooming out from the outcropping of rocks as soon as the films cuts away from the "X," positioned again in an "inverted view" with the sky on the lower two-thirds of the screen, leaving the earth on the top third with a clear horizon line delineating them. The lighting of the segment is such that the earth is almost totally black, the sun's rays not powerful enough to show the brown foliage or texture of the rocks, accentuating the clarity of the horizon's boundary between earth and sky. The camera returns to the left-right back and forth movements that defined the previous segment, with irregular sections of the horizon traced before the camera changes direction. The apparatus stays oriented towards

[20] For the most complete, though still not exhaustive, inventory of possibilities offered by the machine, see Bill Simon, "A Completely Open Space," *Millennium Film Journal* nos.4-5, 96.

roughly one half of its possible 360° motion, occasionally allowing glimpses of the sun, positioned directly on the horizon line, clarifying the time of shooting as either daybreak or sunset.

Figure 1.4 Still from *La Région Centrale* (Snow, 1971), fifth section

After about three minutes of tracking this segment of the horizon, the camera, on a track right, continues beyond the boundary it has established, beginning a 360° circuit while also zooming in, increasing the sensation of speed. While the previous lens length had allowed for the horizon to stay in a relatively consistent position on the screen, the new zoomed-in view creates an undulating pattern, occasionally vanishing in the clouds, as the intersection of boulder-strewn earth with sky shifts on the camera's circuit. Retaining the complete rotation, Snow shifts both zoom length and speed along the camera's subsequent three passes, before slowing the camera

almost to a stop and zooming out, revealing a hidden adjustment in camera angle that now place the horizon on a slight bias, its line lower on the left side of the screen than the right. As the camera continues to circuit, Snow begins visibly but subtly adjusting the camera angle, shifting the bias of the horizon line until it has completed a pass, at which point the camera begins a similar barrel-roll rotation to the one seen in section two, before landing on an angle that makes the horizon a vertical line separating left side of the screen from the right. Snow then shifts the camera's movement. Rather than keeping the horizon line in view the camera begins a perpendicular course that alternates between segments of all sky and barely distinguishable earth, the horizon occasionally appearing as a kind of "wipe" from left to right. Finally, the camera shifts back to its original circuit, this time with the horizon as a vertical line dividing the right, earthy section from the left's sky, completing two passes before cutting to an "X," concluding the segment.

I go into such detail on this section not only to indicate the fashion in which Snow begins to involve features of the earth as key compositional aspects, or to show how quickly the options provided by the apparatus begin to multiply and intersect, but also because this section indicates the stage at which Snow fully begins to "deform" the space he's created, allowing an interaction between camera and world to take off from the pattern and space he's so carefully mapped and inventoried. The shift to shooting at twilight also indicates Snow's recognition, as with *Wavelength*, of the dramatic shifts in compositional possibility offered by shooting at different times of day. In this sequence this allows for the horizon to neatly delineate two fairly homogenous blocks of color, and allowing for a loss of ground in the black earth in addition to the blue sky, a maneuver made all the more dramatic by the previous establishment of detailed views of the ground's patterns now obscured.

Snow's worldbuilding in *La Région Centrale* serves the compositional purpose of providing a viewer's orientation that he can then gradually or abruptly expand or deform. But it also attests to the kind of disjuncture that I've been tracing between Cavell and experimental cinema in its relation to world. As I suggested in the introduction, when Cavell writes in *The World Viewed* that movies "do not…have to establish presentness to and of the world: the world is there (Cavell, *World Viewed*, 118)," he was speaking in entirely adjacent terms to the experimental cinema of his moment, which was deeply concerned with questioning that kind of assumption. In *La Région Centrale*, Snow attests to the necessity of *building a* world, rather than assuming that *the* world is simply there. Forging a link between camera, viewer, and world is not automatic in Snow's practice, but must rather be assiduously established. Seen this way, *La Région Centrale* becomes a course in Cavellian modernism, in the effort to use film's formal capacities—here, camera movement—to map out and ground the viewer in the presence of the world so that it can be explored in depth. After this fifth segment described in such detail here, Snow launches into the remaining two hours of the film, in which he will repeatedly demonstrate the possibilities offered to composition by attesting in form to the manifestation of views the world in projection.

While one of the ways this can be seen most clearly in the way the film closes with a long, direct stare at the sun, it is just as prominently explored in an earlier, frequently noted sequence in which Snow's camera "dances," with the moon. As described by Bill Simon:

> Snow's camera performs a series of movement past the white moon which is visible against the otherwise totally black sky. Because there are no visual cues other than the moon within the totally black frame by which to compare or measure the camera movement, an optical illusion very similar to the one explored by Stan Brakhage in *Anticipation of the Night* is induced. Rather than perceiving frame or camera movement (the necessary visual cue for the perception of what we usually refer to as camera movement being the movement of the frame in relation to sufficient visual material within the frame), we perceive the moon seeming to pass through what appears to be a

> static frame. In effect, the moon performs a little dance movement as it seems to enter and pass through the frame in different directions (99).

I quote Simon at length for the clarity of his description and his angle on its meaning. As Simon notes, Snow's gesture recalls a similar sequence in Brakhage's landmark film thirteen years earlier, suggesting that Snow's "break" with the lyrical mode of Brakhage was perhaps not so definitive as it seemed, and further that a continuity between to the two artists could be found in their playful *use of the world* to explore camera movement. The presence of the moon, its capacity to be captured, projected, and viewed in moving photography, become a feature that determines the form of Snow's film. Snow's interest in the moon is only one instance of a feature of the profilmic world directing the kinds of camera movements he is interested in tracing, but it is critical to my argument not only for revealing how Snow's supposed abstraction is actually explored in collaboration with features of the world, but how such collaboration is keyed around the concept of an illusion.

In Simon's analysis then, his description above becomes an "optical illusion…created in this section [that] leads to a number of smaller and more significant illusions." Simon notes the frequent problems posed by Snow's photography of blue sky or darkness, where it becomes difficult to see if the camera is still moving, despite the continuation of the soundtrack beeps that have become associated with the adjustments and speed of the camera's motion. However, Simon goes further, indicating that as the film begins its final and most dramatic acceleration, tracing "something like a figure-eight," creating an "optical illusion" of a "flat fan-like disc [that] darts across the blue frame…[a] land mass can be understood as moving through the sky as a planet orbits in space (100)."

As I noted earlier, the question of illusion in this era of experimental film, and in particular in relation to "Structural film," is fraught with conflict and prone to misuse. While in

this context it is crucial to note that Simon is tracing how *La Région Centrale* creates illusions, rather than dispelling them, I want to dwell on this example because it poses a comparatively strong example of "illusion," with which to unpack the use of the term in relation to Snow's work, one which I argue poses essential questions of the relationship between knowledge and film.

On the one hand, the instance of the moon's "dance," is as straightforward an instance of a true optical "illusion," as film can generate: without the presence of background with which the viewer can orient themselves, the moon appears to take over the agency of movement from the camera, an impression that can largely only be dispelled conceptually rather than phenomenologically—the viewer can *tell* themselves that the camera is moving rather than the moon, but what they *see* argues otherwise. At the same time, however, what Simon's use of "illusion" here, and more significantly in his extension of the term to the visual qualities of the final part of the film relies upon is an unspoken hierarchy of kinds of knowledge of the world that configures human vision as "unmediated" and photographic representations as fundamentally illusory and therefore false. Aside from the problematic reliance on a definition of human vision as fundamentally non-representational, Simon's use of illusion indexes this school of thought which suggests that the specific alterations wrought in photographic representation somehow undo the link between viewer and world, presenting a simulacrum rather than a representation. While Simon may be correct to say that it is an illusion that the moon *dances*, it is the tendency to doubt that it is *the moon* that dances that I am concerned with here.

What Snow's film insists upon is that the accretive worldbuilding of 360 degree representation establishes the detailed presence of a terrain that is then progressively deformed without ever eliminating its own ground. While the foregrounding of the apparatus is famously

noted in analysis of *La Region Centrale* in the way that the machine-implanted camera occasionally glimpses its own shadow on the ground underneath the mechanism, the ever-quickening and increasingly baroque camera movement that defines the film never lets the viewer escape awareness of the *dispositif* at its heart. But this ceaseless foregrounding of mediation doesn't necessarily add up to what Sheehan insists upon, the figuring of an *in-between* that says because of the avant-garde insistence upon mediation we can and should comprehend *everything* as mediated. Rather Snow's work compels the realization that as mediation is omnipresent and cannot be overcome even through the aggressive winnowing of Gidal (who at best can only point to the failures of representation, like the targets of Cavell's critique of false art), it doesn't need to be made obvious to have grip on the "actual" world. It is not only through reflexivity's illusion-shattering transcendence of mediation, were such a thing achievable, that a form of representation could, in its negativity, produce "real" knowledge or perception. Beyond the fact that reflexivity is no guarantee of awareness (or, even if it succeeds, that such awareness has *content*), Snow responds to reflexivity by showing how it is not simple or naïve to persist in treating film as a tool for representation. *La Region Centrale* does not avoid the contention that everything is mediated, but instead makes an argument for the compossibility medium and world in the same object.

In the chapter on exhibition and self-reference, one of the thorniest sections of *The World Viewed*, Cavell writes of film that "nothing revealed by the world in its presence is lost," before asking himself in a Wittengensteinian aside, "Am I saying that everything revealed by film is true? Then why, say, does Steichen take a thousand various pictures of the same cup and saucer?" Cavell's response is to argue for the value of each of Steichen's photographs by reference to their truth value, claiming Steichen knew not to "assume that we know beforehand

how few or many revelations the truth will take, or how any may be made. Call truth infinite; certainly there is no reason to suppose the number of facts to be limited, and all are compatible… (*World Viewed*, 119-120)" Cavell's points are numerous, but what I want to draw out in relation to *La Region Centrale* is his insistence that while cinema *can* "tell the truth," and particularly a truth that is of "the world," what these truths are is not determined by the mechanism of photography. Just as mediation's presence cannot be an ontological block to the presence of truths in films, nor can the medium guarantee anything in advance. *La Region Centrale*'s representation of the world in this sense contains potential truths to be worked out by its viewers while attesting to the continuous presence of rocks, lakes, or the sun and moon.

Snow's Chair: Wavelength

Among the positive and awed responses that *La Région Centrale* received upon its release, there emerged a common theme of shock at its sudden interest in landscape, in particular the rugged and monumental landscape of the Canadian Rockies. Snow's previous work, after all, had established him as a master of interior space, in particular that of 1960s New York. *Back and Forth* and *Standard Time* documented the vagaries and possibilities of camera movement in a classroom and an apartment respectively, while *Dripping Water* (1969)*, Short Shave* (1965), the "illustrated lectures" *Side Seat Paintings Slides Sound Film* (1970) and *A Casing Shelved* (1970) and photographic works like *Sink* (1970) all revolved around the materials and detritus of the working artist's studio.[21] Working "outdoors" was not entirely unprecedented, as *New York Eye and Ear Control*'s (1964) roaming of New York's city streets and *One Second in Montreal*'s (1969) use of snow covered public sculpture demonstrate, but the barren depopulation of *La Région Centrale* presented a striking departure into new terrain that challenged critics to incorporate this change of scene into analytic models built on Snow's use of somewhat sparsely populated interiors.

None of these interiors is more well known than the Canal Street loft apartment in which *Wavelength* unfolds. If the previous section sought to draw attention to how Snow's landscape film made use of film's connections to the world as configured by rocks, lakes and the moon, I want to argue here in part for the seriousness of Snow's connection to the reality of the room in which *Wavelength* takes place. As Manny Farber described it in his initial review of the film when it was shown in Toronto as part of a "Canadian Artists" competition in 1968, alongside

[21] The interior is a space that Snow would also return to in several later works, most notably the overpopulated artists' manse of *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Dennis Young) by Wilma Shoen* and the office space and *Sims*-like living room of **Corpus Callosum*.

works by Joyce Weiland and Larry Kardish, Snow's film is a "straightforward document of a room in which a dozen businesses have lived and gone bankrupt."[22] This "straightforward" tilt of Farber's enthusiastic review is somewhat jarring given the legacy *Wavelength* gradually established as the crowning achievement of "the Dean of Structural Filmmakers," so readily absorbed by Peter Gidal's Structuralist/Materialist practice. As Farber has it, the theme of the film is "the overpowering, indestructible reality of the physical world alongside the wispiness of human presence," a reality enhanced rather than undone by the "severe abstractions of time-space techniques (70)."

These abstractions that Farber references have been well documented in analyses of *Wavelength*, and compose the for many critics the "content" of the film far more than its "four human events" or it's structuring matched crescendos of zoom and sine wave. As referenced above, the zoom of *Wavelength* is not, as Farber would have it "imperceptible," but is an aggregate of discrete and obvious nudges. Snow shot the film out of order, as the performer who falls dead on the floor, fellow experimentalist Hollis Frampton, was only available on Snow's first day of shooting, and the film is consequently compiled from several cuts the seams of which are obvious to the viewer even when Snow partially disguises them in superimpositions. Snow also couldn't perform the entire zoom from his primary shooting position across the loft and had to move the camera forward significantly for the footage the composes the final ten minutes of the film, minutes which also include an adjustment of angle, clarifying that the photograph of waves, rather than one of the windows, is the destination of the zoom.[23]

---

[22] Manny Farber, "Film," *Artforum* Vol. VII No. 5, January 1969, 70

[23] Elizabeth Legge, *Wavelength* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), 1-12, 18-22.

More significant than any of these is the way the film renders and deals with color. Several critics have noted that when the two women in the first "human event" play the Beatles song "Strawberry Fields Forever," a pinkish-red gel is placed over the lens, and refer to this as the first major intervention into the film's registration of color, despite a flicker to a yellowish tint and a flash of pure red frames that occurs quickly almost a minute earlier. What is clear either way is that from early on in the film Snow is keen to explore the variations offered to him in the photographic apparatus to manipulate the color palette of the film. In addition to the gels and filters of various colors that he uses several times throughout the film, Snow makes use of multiple film stocks, including expired rolls, and introduces the sine wave at eight minutes and twenty seconds with an extended passage of tinted negative stock. Just as importantly as these interventions, however, is that because Snow shot the film in chunks over the course of multiple days, the lighting in the room differs dramatically across the film, depending on the quality of sunlight illuminating the room and the wildly different colors offered by fluorescent lights during the sequences shot at night.

One way to register the both the effect and importance of this color patterning is by reference to what Snow has referred to as the "protagonist" of the film: a yellow chair. Painted yellow especially for the film by Snow himself, this chair occupies the center of the frame from the beginning of the film, and as the zoom progresses can initially be thought of as its destination. It's not until the film is two thirds over that the chair is eclipsed by the zoom, pushed out of frame in favor of the photographs that have clarified themselves as the true destination of the zoom and are beginning to be rendered visible in their depiction of one of Snow's *Walking Woman* sculptures and a wave. The chair, painted a glossy banana yellow, provides a consistent index of how the sunlight, interior light, and film stock are interacting to render color in the

interior space. More than any other object in the film, it is its protagonist's consistency that establishes a ground from which the deformations of color and shaped space can be observed, measured and compared:

Figure 1.5 Still from Wavelength (1967)

Figure 1.6 Still from *Wavelength* (1967)

Figure 1.7 Still from Wavelength (1967)

Figure 1.8 Still from Wavelength (1967)

As I mentioned in the excursus above, part of the difficulty in establishing a ground-deformation structure is establishing on which ground Snow rests his variations. In *La Région Centrale* even the most "abstract" segments, such as the filming of an unclouded section of sky

as dawn breaks, take place against the background of a world whose boundaries and features have been thoroughly documented. In *Wavelength*, however, Snow begins modifying his view about two minutes into the film, with flickers of a yellow-tinted, washed-out alternative rendering before the initial saturation of color in the form of a gel. Further, beyond getting started earlier, Snow's arsenal of devices is far more vast than in *La Région Centrale*, and while their use is systematic, it is not "structural" in the sense that the viewer can quickly determine or predict their unfolding.

Thus, while the viewer can hold on to the ground of a view "through" the devices, in the form of the constantly narrowing view of the room, their layered and complex deployment renders this purchase uncertain, encouraging the reading of the film as one in which reference is assaulted, rather than explored. The yellow chair, however, provides a strong baseline with which to evaluate the deformations of stock, color, and lighting. Whatever Snow does to the apparatus that captures a view of a room, the chair remains the same color, allowing the viewer a method of judgment, a way of comparing the variations against each other through a fixed point. The yellow chair becomes an anchor, something with which the viewer can retain their balance.

The concept of balance is a central one for Snow's thinking about his own work. In a letter written to Thierry de Duve, responding to his article "The Deictics of Experience," Snow attempts to push back against de Duve's claim that his painting isn't "good enough" to inherit the question of spectatorial experience from Caspar David Friedrich, a status de Duve is comparatively happy to grant to *Wavelength*'s final moments. For Snow, the key to understanding his painting is part and parcel of his overall "attempt to make the work a 'now,' 'materialist,' yes a 'modernist,' experience *as well as* to have and to direct the references

elsewhere of representation, 'away' and back to you and the work itself."[24] Snow's claim is in keeping with his discussion of his work, particularly in relation to *Wavelength*, in his insistence of having his cake and eating it too. Throughout his discussions of the film, Snow often invokes this principle of "balance," a mode of keeping various defining poles of the work at equal strength, so as not to privilege one over the other.

While the invocation of balance recurs frequently throughout interviews and other artist's writings of Snows, probably the most famous instance is in what may be the single most-quoted artist's statement in experimental film, Snow's two paragraph text written to accompany *Wavelength*'s debut at Knokke-le-Zoute. Snow introduces the idea of balance in terms of his desire for the film, his urge to create "a time monument in which the beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated…a definitive statement of pure Film [sic] space and time, a balancing of "illusion" and "fact," all about seeing (Qtd. Michelson, "Toward Snow," 2)."

Snow elaborates on the meaning of this balance in an interview, and later letter, to Jonas Mekas and P. Adams Sitney both published in Film Culture issue 46 in the fall of 1967. In the interview, Snow describes the structure of ground and deformation I sketched above, arguing that at the very beginning of *Wavelength*, "the room is shot as realism. It is shot the way you would see a room as much as there is a consensus about how one sees a room…[b]ut then there are intimations of other ways of seeing the thing…It is the other side of that, and yet it's colored light…I was concerned with making a balancing of all these things."[25] In the letter, written due to Snow's concern that he had been "dumb," in the earlier interview with Mekas and Sitney,

[24] Michael Snow, "A Letter to Thierry de Duve," *October Files 24: Michael Snow* eds. Annette Michelson and Kenneth White (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2019), 124

[25] Michael Snow, "Conversation with Michael Snow," *Film Culture* 46, Autumn 1967, 3

Snows elaborates that "one of the subjects of or one of the things *Wavelength* attempts to be is a "balancing" of different orders, classes of events, and protagonists." Finally, in the same letter, Snow points to Cézanne as his artistic inspiration for his attempt at balance, praising the painter's solution to the "illusion/reality balancing act" as the "greatest…his creation of a work which both *represents* and *is* something, thus his balancing of mind and matter, his respect for a lot of levels are exemplary to me (5)."

I do not want to simply validate Snow's optimistic claims about his own work's capabilities, only to drive home the degree to which the principle of balance is central to understanding both the power of *Wavelength* and move towards correcting the history of its continued mis-readings. Importantly, scholars and critics have noted Snow's interest in balance and how it pervades *Wavelength*.[26] Regina Cornwell's analysis of *Wavelength* in her book *Snow Seen* notes how "Snow has it both ways (76)," in the film's "oscillation between the representational and the abstract (78)." Crucially, Cornwell's analysis remains locked in the anti-illusionist paradigm in which Snow's interest in representation can only be in the service of demonstrating its failures, arguing that "despite the representational nature of the room image, the zoom works subtly to stylize, formalize, and abstract the image against the very grain of reality," and more pointedly that the arsenal of devices described here "function to distance the viewer and point reflexively to the film as object…forcing one to perceive, to think and rethink (78)."

While Cornwell's attention to Snow's interest in balance helps to clarify the stakes of Snow's artist's statement and their instantiation in the film, my contention here is that the

[26] See Legge, 20-22, and R. Bruce Elder, "All Things in Their Times," *Cine-Tracts* Vol. 5, No.1, Summer/Fall 1982, 15, 40-41

consequences of this attempt at balance have been thoroughly misread. By casting Snow's attempt to *balance* representation as one in which representation is revealed as *merely* an illusion, Cornwell tips the see-saw too definitively away from Snow's avowed interest in the film's capacity for realism, and for "fact." Snow is not interested in deploying his devices to show that all representation is illusory, but rather the reverse, to explore the deformations that film can perform while retaining its grasp on presenting views of the world. It is this kernel of realist ground around which the film revolves, and what makes the philosophical importance of the film as documented by Michelson possible, as its mimicry of the movements of consciousness depend upon not merely a metaphorical kinship but the film's ability to present perceptual experience that is recognizably congruent with our experience of the world.

However, establishing the persistence of the realist kernel of Snow's works does not address what its meaning is. What, ultimately, is the significance of reading Snow's work against the grain in this way? My suggestion here is that the answer lies in the success of its conceptual achievements, which rest upon Snow's fidelity to cinema as a photographic and representational medium rather than a "purely visual" structure of light and time. For Snow, experimental cinema as a medium does not necessitate the abandonment or challenging of representation per se: rather, the medium of cinema is fundamentally tied to a representation of the world. Though *Wavelength* appears to "question" representation, what Snow characterizes as a movement *away* from representation inevitably leads *back* to it in the film's pursuit of balance. In balancing the scales of illusion and representation, Snow drives home the strength of the medium's connection to reality.

This also clarifies both Snow's importance to experimental cinema as a creative and discursive field separate from that of the art world, and his advance over the representational

structures of the "New Formal Film," as described by Sitney. Where Sitney saw "structure" in the cinema that emerged in contrast to Brakhage's romanticism, we can now see a renewed faith in the *conceptual* importance of cinema's photographic basis, and the formal possibilities that lay within a renewal of that faith. However, Snow's conceptualism remains engaged with the perceptual particularities of cinema in a way that his contemporaries in Fluxus or his successors in Conceptualism such as Bruce Nauman ignored. As the devices that mark *Wavelength* along its zoom demonstrate, Snow remains engaged with the "visionary" capacity of cinema to explore and extend the possibilities of perception. In testament to Snow's modernism, what was visionary or romantic in Brakhage becomes conceptual in Snow: his work has digested the maneuvers of the "Formal film," and registers them as ideas rather than as "expressions" of some "inner," or alternative way of seeing.

Finally, in one more turn of the wheel, while this suddenly conceptual image palate has been freed from "expression," this does not simultaneously turn the images into images unbound by reference or representation. While experimental cinema can and does "question" representation, it is folly to imagine that is succeeds in overthrowing its structures, ideologies, or more importantly our affiliations with them. It is as if the critics of structural film took Gidal at his word, as through the structuralist materialist cinema *worked*, as if its most stringent critics were *right* both about the failures of any ideology-ridden representation and their own ability to challenge it. Where Snow's success lies is in demonstrating that questioning representation does not overthrow it, that depending on representation does not make us suckers or dupes, and that within the realm of representation lies not only conceptual but formal material for exploration in creative work.

Chapter 2

"The News Ain't Good": Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* and the Aesthetics of History

The shortest segment of Deborah Stratman's eleven-part 2016 feature *The Illinois Parables* spans only two minutes and twenty-eight seconds, and is composed of eleven shots including a title card that reads, "VIII." The three shots after the title card are extreme long shots of earthen cylindrical mounds—in the manner of Quonset huts made of earth—arising from a field of waist high grass on sunny day, followed by a partial close-up shot of a slightly battered sign listing the radio stations that will broadcast emergency information in the event of a "3-5 minute siren." The subsequent three shots gradually reveal that the mounds from the previous shots are, in fact, bunkers: captured from new angles that show concrete facades with metal doors at the end of each mound. The first and third of these shots show individual bunkers with similar distances and framings to the earlier shots of the mounds while the second pulls much further back to reveal a field of roughly ten bunkers scattered erratically across a tree-dotted plain. The last two shots of the sequence, each about twice as long as the previous seven shots, at 25 seconds a piece, move away from the bunkers and show a handful of residential buildings nestled under trees, an overcast sky and more verdantly green vegetation helping to establish a distance between this location and the previous. The first shows a car barely hidden in the background, behind a trailer, a square wood building on a low platform with a corrugated tin roof, and a small red doghouse, "Buddy" painted in white letters across its red surface, resting on a patch of bare earth familiar to anyone who has tried to keep grass and animals growing in the same location. The final shot of the sequence shows a single building, a narrow, rectangular, single story wood-plank house with a low-slung porch sheltering the door and a white plastic

chair. A large tree with a bike resting against it towers over the building, its branches shading the entire structure, as well as the two Confederate flags on the building's left, their gently waving motion the only movement in the shot.

Figure 2.1 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)

The sequence of shots that reveals the concrete facades and doors to the bunkers' interior suddenly clarifies the placement of a shot that precedes the title card, a medium shot of one of these doors, open to the unlit interior of a bunker. Throughout the film Stratman uses title cards to delineate her segments, but these cards are porous barriers, and shots belonging to the segment proper are frequently stranded on the other side, bleeding into the preceding or succeeding segment. In this instance, a careful or repeat viewer might recall the door that preceded the title card once the doors to the bunkers are revealed. However, beyond the resemblance between

doors, the sonic architecture of the sequences affirms continuity across the barrier of a title card. In the medium-shot of the door, music that began several shots previous fades out and leaves the buzzing drone of a low-powered airplane as the only audible sound. This sound continues, slowly fading and moving from the left to the right channel, through the title card and into the shots of the bunkers, gradually melding into a background drone that ceases when the first shot of the residential buildings appears. Meanwhile, the first shot after the title card introduces the sounds of insects, birds, and breeze moving through plants, a plausible diegetic source for the images. Droning cicadas gradually take over the mix, becoming the overwhelming sound source in the final shot of a bunker, before dramatically dropping out along with the background drone when the residential buildings appear, revealing the continuation of softer noses of birds and insects and the introduction of a yelping dog and human voices, faint but decipherable ("Go on, get outta here" are the only fully comprehensible words) and entirely muddled.

I open this chapter on Stratman's film with a description of this segment not because it is representative of the various aesthetic and discursive strategies she uses in *The Illinois Parables*, but rather because it represents its zero-degree form: the film's approach winnowed to its barest, simplest structure. [1] It is only in the film's conclusion, in its credits, that the segment is directly

[1] This invocation of Barthes' "Zero-Degree Writing" aims to recall his ideal of a "neutral writing," that resembles journalism without its "operative or imperative (that is, emotive) forms." In this context, as we will see, Stratman's vast inventory of devices is here stripped away for a segment that "takes its place in the midst of all those ejaculations and judgments, without becoming involved in any of them." Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 77. Barthes' conception of zero-degree writing is complex and explicitly opposed to literary realism. I deploy it here as a relational concept rather than one that attempts to establish a visual equivalent to the concept as located in the novels of Robbe-Grillet, e.g. For the latter see, Victor Burgin, Ryan Bishop, and Sunil Manghani *Seeing Degree Zero: Barthes/Burgin and Political Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), esp. 109-136.

tied to any information that could ground the viewer.[2] After the film's final segment, Stratman's very important credits begin, which label each segment with a date and time: segment VIII described here is branded "Joliet, IL 1940-1976." It takes some time on search engines and Wikipedia to uncover that this place and time refer to the existence of the Joliet, IL, Army Ammunition Plant, which opened in 1940. However, even the end year, 1976, refers more specifically to the date the site stopped its manufacturing of TNT—the site itself ceased operations a few years later, though much of the territory it covered is still managed by the government, the remainder being private industrial parks. The tension here lies in the conjunction between an in-film structure that contains no discursive information but only the audiovisual imprint of a site and the (still minimal) grounding such information receives long after the fact, in the credits of the film. What kinds of information is Stratman trying to make available to the viewer? What is it that gives the segment, and the piece at large, unity, purpose, or form? Unfolding these questions requires delineating the complexity of Stratman's style, exploring its connections to the documentary and essay forms that it simultaneously expands and exceeds, and demonstrating how its aesthetic makes creative use of reality to stretch the experimental film in new directions.

Thus the two purposes of this chapter. The first goal is to lay out some of the complexities of *The Illinois Parables*: to contextualize the film within Stratman's career as an artist, and explore some of the reasons this piece represents a capstone or culmination of her work thus far—a status I am far from alone in attributing to the film, its exhibition at the Chicago

[2] In the same way that in the previous chapter I demonstrated how Everson's use of credits can cast the preceding film in new light by revealing its subjects as actors or its quotidian objects as fabricated sculptures, Stratman makes powerful use of after-the-fact revelation.

MCA in 2020 being only the most recent testament.[3] In analyzing the film in the context of Stratman's career, a central goal is to demonstrate her indebtedness to and inheritance of the traditions of experimental film, and further to isolate those elements of the film that expand the scope experimental cinema as a mode and, consequently, film as a medium. A central obstacle in doing so is to demonstrate what novelty Stratman brings to the table, what expansion to the field her film could represent. In its form, a colloquy of eleven "parables" shot on 16mm, each of which distills a piece of Illinois history without overt trickery, manipulation, or formal reflexivity, the film does not present itself clearly as a formal advance in the history the medium. Yet, I will argue, it undoubtedly is.

This is closely linked to, and perhaps even revealed by, the reception that *The Illinois Parables* received, both by film critics with varying levels of familiarity with the histories of experimental cinema and by academics. What these reviews and articles have in common is the effort to incorporate Stratman's film into more stable generic form, alternately the essay film or the documentary.[4] I see this as a mistake, and a crucial one. As I have discussed with the uneasy overlap between the documentary and the film in the case of Kevin Jerome Everson, this chapter focuses more on the essay film and its relative inapplicability. This is both because the reception

[3] https://mcachicago.org/Exhibitions/2020/Chicago-Works-Deborah-Stratman

[4] See for example: "This hourlong film is at once an experimental documentary, a work of historical excavation, and an insistently moral ideological critique." Manohla Dargis "One of the New York Film Festival's Best Movies Isn't at the Main Event," The New York Times. October 6, 2016; "Experimental documentary." Nick Pinkerton. "Short Take: The Illinois Parables." *Film Comment.* November-December 2016; "Hour long essay film" Michael Pattison. "Berlin 2016 "The Illinois Parables" and "Invention"" *Roger Ebert.com*. February 22, 2016; "Hourlong essay film." A.O. Scott. "Review: 'The Illinois Parables' Soothes and Inflames Feeling About America." ; Even Mike Hoolboom, who repeatedly notes the insufficiencies of this label ("Deborah Stratman Introduction," mikehoolboom.com, September 17, 2010 http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=79#essay_495), refers to *The Illinois Parables* as an "hour-long essay doc." "The Illinois Parables," mikehoolboom.com, http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=79#essay_490) accessed 1/15/2021. I discuss a more detailed version of this in the work of scholar Katrin Pesch below.

of Stratman more commonly places her work in that box and because it's a closer fit for the work in my view and understanding. As with Everson, the purpose here is in part to demonstrate the disadvantages of categorizing Stratman's work as an essay, but more importantly to try and reveal the anxieties latent in such a categorization and what they have to say about the state of the experimental cinema in the contemporary moment.

What it reveals is something central to the state of contemporary filmmaking, which is the crisis of realism in experimental cinema. "Realistic experimental cinema" formally a contradiction in terms, is in fact exploding in ambition and output, and the continual application of the terms of the realist arts of essay and documentary to the experimental movie are an index of the failure to recognize what is most alive and central to this tradition in our moment. This—the celebration of and exploration of cinema's capacity for realism—is the central work of modernist experimentation in the contemporary cinema. While it may well take place in documentary or the essay, its most dogged pursuers are the inheritors of experimental cinema, who understand centrally as a problem of film form to be confronted, acknowledged, and surmounted, guaranteeing their work's centrality to the continual revision of filmic modernism.

While the section described above contains the least in-film information to place its footage and audio, many of the other segments are almost as opaque, particularly to anyone who is not well versed in the history of the Midwest or the United States more broadly. Many of the segments contain varying quantities of contextual clues that can help the viewer understand what they are seeing, such as a road sign in the third segment that reads "Trail of Tears rd," but for nearly every sequence the information in the credits is essential. These credits, accompanied by the choral rendition of Arvo Pärt's "Summa," proceed through five sections. These are, in order,

the place names and dates that accompany the roman numeral of each segment; some of the bodies and voices that appear on screen, the musical credits in alphabetical order, a block of "citations," and finally a set of more standard credits for intertitles, sound recordists, sound mix, camera, edit, sound design, funding, thanks and dedications. While the information contained in the latter segments is of interest, it is the first that serves as the skeleton key to the film. They read:

I
Cahokia, Il
600-1400CE

II
Alton, IL
1673

III
Golconda, IL - Jonesboro, IL
1838-1839

IV
Nauvoo, IL
1839-1848

V
Icaria/Nauvoo, IL
1849, 1860
VI
Gorham, IL – Crossville, IL
1925

VII
Chicago, IL
1942

VIII
Joliet, IL
1940-1976

IX
Macomb, IL
1948

X
Chicago, IL
1969

XI
Buffalo Rock, IL
1985

What is most significant about this section of the credits is what it reveals about the overall discursive strategy that Stratman pursues throughout the film. As I demonstrated in the example that opens this chapter, the information here is frequently necessary to fix the images and sounds to a determinate location, and consequently to an event, or in the terminology of the film, a parable. The knowledge of any viewer varies widely, as does the relative renown of the events referred to by each parable, and thus the necessity of each credit is also variable. However, their necessity as an overall structuring mechanism for the film rests on Stratman's total absence of *specific* discursive information. Each segment in the film does not provide the information given in the credits, but rather reveals what the viewer has, with varying degrees of success, attempted to identify as they view the film. Importantly, what these events are is not irrelevant: Stratman has chosen key events in history alongside relatively mundane ones like the manufacturing of TNT. Segment VI references key facets of the first sustained nuclear chain reaction under the squash court of the University of Chicago; "I" shows the remnants of the largest pre-Columbian human settlement in North America; and "X" the murder of prominent Black Panther Fred Hampton by the police in 1969. The strategy pursued is here is one in which events and their remnants are given heavy audiovisual weight, with as little of the traditional kinds of information as possible to accompany them. Crucial events are referenced, but opaquely. Stratman provides the texture and sensuousness of historical events and their records,

without instructing the viewer as to what exactly these events are, much less any clues to their significance.

Further, while Stratman does occasionally pursue what appears to be an observational strategy, reducing her aesthetics to one of simply recording betrays the complexity of her formal arrangements. Stratman's authorial interventions into the structure of the film are numerous and firmly block any imagined pretext to a hands-off approach. The film is full of carefully staged re-enactments, montages of re-photographed text, archival footage, textual citations, dense audio collages and non-diegetic music, and an elaborate final segment that is shot with a zoom-equipped handheld camera from a hot air balloon.

This combination of a heavy authorial hand and a sustained disinclination to "teach" or otherwise explain the context of audiovisual content that is nevertheless determinatively and concretely tied to history raises key questions that it is the purpose of this chapter to expand upon and develop theories to explain: What are the relationships between film, history, and reality afforded by such a structure? What heritages are claimed by Stratman's film, and how do they relate to the various categories of non-fiction filmmaking that have evolved and proliferated over the trajectory of film as a medium? What kinds of historical information are made available by the formal structure preferred by Stratman, and what kinds (if any) of aesthetic potential do they have? In short, what—and where—is the overlap between the aesthetic and the factual?

* * *

The pursuit of this overlap marks out Stratman's career from its origins. A lifelong Illinois resident, Stratman's initial academic love of science gave way to the arts, a move that took her from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana to the School of the Art Institute of

Chicago, where she earned a BFA in 1990.[5] After freelancing, working as a projectionist, and accumulating a "backlog" of ideas that needed to be executed, Stratman attended CalArts largely to find the time to "make stuff." Her 1995 MFA degree was completed under the tutelage of James Benning, Betzy Bromberg, and Thom Anderson (she is credited with much of the cinematography for the latter's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003)), and critics, as well as the artist herself often note Benning's particular influence on the shape of her work[6]. After completing graduate school, Stratman spent time in Europe, particularly in Iceland and Latvia, the former of which is the subject of her first post-graduate work, *From Hetty to Nancy*, a forty-five minute piece that juxtaposes, a la Benning, static, composed, and seemingly observational shots of various Icelandic landscapes with voiceover text taken from Louis MacNeice's faux-travelogue written with W.H. Auden.[7]

After returning to the U.S., Stratman quickly established herself as a crucial piece of the experimental film firmament. She has held short-term professorships at CalArts and Bard University, and since 2007 has held an Associate Professorship in the School of Art at University of Illinois Chicago; she has won grants from Creative Capital, Sundance and the Wexner Center, and exhibited work at MoMa, Anthology Film Archives, and the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar. More importantly, her films regularly debut and win awards on the festival circuit that provides the core of the international experimental film community: TIFF, Rotterdam, NYFF, The Images

[5] http://www.cinemad.iblamesociety.com/2006/12/deborah-stratman.html

[6] Stratman's thesis film, *On the Various Nature of Things*, remains in her regularly screened repertoire, unlike the nine films completed between 1990 (*My Alchemy)* and 1995 (*Iolanthe)*.

[7] For more on this strange source text, see: Michael A. Moir Jr., "'The pause before the soufflé falls': MacNeice, Auden, and the Travel Book as Idyll." *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 39, No. 2 (2016), pp..162-179.

Festival, True/False, Cinéma du Réel, Viennale, and most importantly the Ann Arbor Film Festival, where she has won the Old Peculiar Award (*On The Various Nature of Things* (1996)), Best Sound Design (*Hacked Circuit* (2014)), a Special Jury Prize (*Ray's Birds* (2011)), Best Experimental Film (*In Order Not To Be Here* (2003)), and the Ken Burns Award for Best of the Festival (*O'er the Land* (2009)).

Against the background of this firm emplacement within the festival/university/museum circuit for experimental cinema, Stratman's work contains a diverse range of forms and approaches. Her self-chosen description reads that she "makes films and artworks that investigate power, control and belief, considering how places, ideas, and society are intertwined," a depiction that goes on to list as the subjects of recent projects "freedom, surveillance, sinkholes, comets, raptors, orthoptera, levitation, exodus, mineral evolution, sisterhood and faith."[8] This body of work can be cut up in a number of ways: shorts vs. longer-form pieces, those that string together multiple subjects vs. those that hew closely to just one, 16mm vs. digital. It also contains films that seem drawn to either pole of a reflexive vs. expository dichotomy alongside those, like *The Illinois Parables*, that seem to reject such a dichotomy altogether.

Within these axes there are also groups of films that establish formal continuities with each other. *The BLVD* (1999), *Kings of the Sky* (2004), and *Kuyenda N'kubvina* (2010) take Stratman the closest to a documentary mode. These feature length pieces about (respectively) Chicago drag racing, Uyghur tightrope walkers, and Malawian cultural imports, include interviews between artist and subject where the camera serves as Stratman's view and her voice is heard from off-screen. They also feature long passages of "mere" observation, which is the

[8] http://www.pythagorasfilm.com/bio.html

mode of several shorts Stratman has made that are tied to a single site, such as Chicago's East 95th Street Bridge (*Shrimp Chicken Fish* 2010) or a Northumberland, England nature sanctuary *Ray's Birds* (2010). Stratman has also helped establish a mode of filmmaking most prominently associated with David Gatten, which John Powers has described as The New Historicist Film, typically oriented around the photography or reproduction of archival documents (definitively *not* archival films themselves in the manner of someone like Bruce Conner) on screen, a technique Stratman develops in *These Blazeing Starrs!* (2011)*, It Will Die Out in the Mind* (2006), *Musical Insects* (2013), and *Immortal, Suspended* (2013). She does have several films that make extensive use of archival film (*Untied* (2001), *Village, Silenced* (2012), and Second Sighted (*2014)* and two films that perform elaborate camera movements in single takes (*Immortal Suspended* and *Hacked Circuit* (2014).

Across this litany of varied forms, Stratman has gradually developed a formal arrangement that forms the backbone of *The Illinois Parables*. This structure—based on a largely static, lengthy, and thoroughly composed 16mm shots of multiple subjects that differ in time, space, and orientation, and paired with the occasional bravura camera movements or repurposed archival footage and complex soundscapes that incorporate sync sound yet eschew exposition—is Stratman's richest and most acclaimed form. *In Order Not to Be Here* (2002), *Energy Country* (2003), *O'er the Land* (2009), and *The Name is Not the Thing Named* (2012) all adopt and develop this aesthetic, culminating at the time of this writing in *The Illinois Parables*. While this chapter focuses exclusively on the last of these, it is my goal to elucidate the singularity and power of this aesthetic strategy, developing it against its primary competitor, the "essay film," and to lay out the challenge this vein of Stratman's career offers for current thinking about the form of experimental cinema.

Like its predecessor the film-poem—and rather unlike the documentary—the essay film is difficult to define at least in part because of the struggle to adopt the principles of a literary mode in cinematic form. While theorists inside and outside of film studies have debated what exactly makes a film an essay, the corpus of essay films is more dependable. The works of Chris Marker, Harun Farocki, and Jean-Luc Godard loom large, as do those of Alexander Kluge, John Akomfrah, Agnès Varda and Hans Richter. While general agreement reigns as to the fitness of these artists for any consideration of essayistic cinema, the *why* of such a match is more elusive, as theoreticians offer competing and contradictory evidence for what makes a film an essay. Part of the difficulty is identifying a heritage to draw upon. As many of its theoreticians note, the written essay has a long and rich theoretical history: from Montaigne to Adorno and Lukacs, essayistic practitioners are often generous enough to offer reflections upon the form in their characteristic style.[9]

Practitioners of the filmic essay are less magnanimous, and essentially every theorist of the essay film pauses on three names. The first is Alexander Astruc, and his concept of the camera-stylo[10] that would free cinema "from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of

[9] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1948; Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1 New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 3-23; Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1974), 1-19.

[10] Nora Alter, *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5; Timothy Corrigan, *From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 64-67

writing just as flexible and subtle as written language."[11] Astruc's claim, though complex, is often glossed along the lines of Timothy Corrigan as "personal expression on film (65)" made possible by the emergence of compact, portable, and comparatively affordable filmmaking technology in the 1940s and beyond. The second, Andre Bazin, concretizes the concept of essay film in connection to an actual piece of cinema in his review of Marker's *Letter to Siberia* in 1958. What Bazin notes so memorably in his review is the concept of lateral montage, a relation between a vocal intelligence and the image track that establishes a counterpoint that goes beyond elucidation into a genuine dialectical relation. Following Bazin's review, an accumulation of forces—including generous government subsidies for the making of short films and the preservation of a WWII rule mandating the programming of shorts before features in French cinematheques—would help cement the establishment of the essay film in Marker's footsteps.[12] Finally, Sergei Eisenstein, who explicitly uses the word "essay" in his notes for making a film out of Marx's Capital, is the third canonical support for the idea of the essay film, and the most relevant for the purposes of this chapter. What Alter, Corrigan, and others note is Eisenstein's effort to convey abstract ideas on film, to turn the intellectual weightlifting of describing and analyzing capitalism's machinations into cinema (Alter, 17-20; Corrigan, 56).

Of course, Eisenstein never made his film of Capital, and despite the monumental effort by Alexander Kluge to continue the thrust of such a project (see his nine-hour *Nachrichten aus*

[11] Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* ed. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 604

[12] Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the* Future (London: Reacktion Books, 2005), 47-50; David Montero, *Thinking Images: The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema* (New York: Peter Lang AG, 2012) 33-35; Corrigan, *From Montaigne*, 45-50; Alter, *After Fact and Fiction*, 126-132.

der ideologischen Antike),[13] what the former's effort would have amounted to is less than clear. His characteristically associative notes (from 1927) are dominated by a creative re-reading of his past work as establishing a progression towards an explicitly Joycean conception of the universal in the singular, and adds up to what Fredric Jameson describes as "a Marxian version of Freudian free association… that leads us from the surface of everyday life and experience to the very sources of production itself (Jameson, "Marx and Montage," 113)." Whether such a task would have been conceptually, much less than practically possible, is irrelevant in the face of what Eisenstein accomplished on the theoretical plane, as a preliminary account of "the discursive film," the film treatise, or a fully "intellectual" cinema.

However, the mere fact of this accomplishment is often where discussions of Eisenstein within the context of the essay film end. While the theorists discussed here offer token appreciation of Eisenstein's effort to think of essayistic cinema as a theoretical and *conceptual* medium, this ideal plays, at best, a supplementary role to attempts that foreground the subjectivity of the artist, their voice, and the hybrid of personal expression and lateral montage taken from Bazin and Astruc. The analysts of Marker, Godard, or, especially, Farocki want to retain Eisenstein's goal of using cinema as a mode capable of generating abstract ideas, but they do so without finding it necessary to adopt the terms and framework laid out by Eisenstein in his fragmentary notes on the *Capital* project.

These terms are explored by Annette Michelson in two essays on Eisenstein's *Capital* project, published in 1976/77 in the second and third issues of *October*, alongside a translation of Eisenstein's notes, originally assembled and published by Naum Kleiman in *Ikusstvo Kino* in

[13] Fredric Jameson, "Marx and Montage," *New Left Review* 58 July/Aug 2009, 109-117. Julia Vassilieva, "Capital and Co.: Kluge/Eisenstein/Marx," *Screening the Past* 31: Cinema Between Media, August 2011. http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-31-first-release/capital-and-co-klugeeisensteinmarx/

1973.[14] Michelson's two essays are the core of her career-spanning analysis of Eisenstein, the companion piece to her more well-known essay on Vertov, "From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*." As Malcolm Turvey notes in his forward to a 2020 collection of these writings on Eisenstein and Vertov, what marked Michelson's analyses of these artists was their ambition to develop the capacities of an art form to do "maieutic" work, sharpening and bringing forth the viewer's capacity to see, and more importantly, understand the world—an approach that distinguished Michelson's approach to the art she wrote about throughout her career.

Thus it is hardly striking that Michelson's detailed analysis of Eisenstein's effort to create a filmic language capable of "not only dialectical demonstrations but instruction in the dialectical method (Eisenstein, "Notes…", 26)" proceeds by way of bouncing his incomplete and tentative sketches against polemics and invectives by his peers and competitors, namely Vertov, Jean Epstein, and Kazimir Malevich, all of whom argued for their art's capacity to bring an audience to a sharper and truer view or understanding of the world they inhabit. Michelson stages this discourse alongside a guiding principle derived from a letter written by Eisenstein to Léon Moussinac, in which the former describes the necessity of developing a film language adequate to *Capital*, lest the cinema of the future rise only to the level of "filming things like *The Idea of Christianity* from the bourgeois point of view (Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein, Part 1," 28)!"[15] This dividing line drawn by Eisenstein, between a materialist but "bourgeois" view of

[14] Sergei Eisenstein, "Notes for a Film of *Capital*," October 2 (Summer 1976), 3-26; Annette Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital*," October 2 (Summer 1976), 27-39; Annette Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital*," October 3 (Spring 1977), 82-90. Michelson's essays have been merged into one text, making no note of a missing third part, in *On the Wings of Hypothesis: Collected Writings on Soviet Cinema*, ed. Rachel Churner (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), 59-87.

[15] The reference is a non-standard translation of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*.

philosophy and a properly Marxist or dialectical version, is sustained by Michelson throughout her essays. Thus Jean Epstein's analysis of slow motion as a way of revealing "truth," is critiqued for its "innocence of an awareness of social or class determination," a kind of idealism in which the view of cinema as a form of production is lost. The alternative to this bourgeois perspective is one in which cinema is revealed not only to be another mode of production analogous to the innumerable productive modes that shape the individual's view of the world, but one in which its own decoding, aspirationally made visible in the experimentations of Eisenstein and Vertov, renders a further decoding of those analogous structures available, leading to a revolutionary consciousness able to penetrate capitalist ideology and film form at the same time (and in the same way) (Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Part 1," 64-73).

While Michelson does not dramatically overextend Eisenstein's role in the theories of the essay film, in the last pages of the second part of her essay she drills into *what* exactly Eisenstein would have to happen to film form to bring his idea to life. As Michelson, Jameson, and others are careful to note, Eisenstein's project for filming *Capital* was closely related to his aspirations of adapting James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Jameson, "Marx and Montage" 109; Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Part 2," 78-81). Michelson glosses the difference as that between an "analytic, dialectical method," necessitated by Marx's approach and one that models "the movement of consciousness," as in Joyce, but is clear that both are bound by the horizon of a similar conception of the "intellectual cinema (Michelson, "Reading Eisenstein Part 2," 79)." Thus, while Eisenstein's crucial description of the film form adequate to his idea is derived from his notes for *Ulysses* rather than the more "pristine" form advanced in his notes for *Capital*, Michelson's assertion is that they are dual prongs of the same project that saw Eisenstein

attempting to build on the achievements of *October's* "confrontation with the crisis of representation."

Throughout her writings, Michelson collects and annotates what she refers to as "arsenals" or "inventories" of "devices," that mark the work of a particular film or filmmaker.[16] Here she catches Eisenstein assembling an inventory of his own in his essay "A Course in Treatment," for his planned "180-degree advance in sound film culture." His beloved "montage lists," for *Ulysses* "would proceed with visual images. With sound. Synchronized or non-synchronized. …With a black screen, a rushing imageless visuality…zigzags of aimless shapes, whirling along…in synchronization. Then racing visual images over complete silence. Then linked with polyphonic sounds. Then polyphonic images. Then both at once."[17] This effort to make film model consciousness in all its contradictions and cross-sensory modulations neither came to fruition, nor, as Michelson notes, did it foreshadow Eisenstein's career after its development. However, in Michelson's telling, this does not spell the end for Eisenstein's "affirmation of disjunction, of the shifting relations of image and sound, its stress on polyphony, upon the use of silence and of the black screen as dynamic formal elements," but rather they are to serve as a "blueprint for a cinema that was still to come," in the form of the "American Independent Cinema," the avant-garde cinema of a post-war United States.

This claim, that the high-water mark of Soviet cinema in the projects—realized and unrealized—of Eisenstein and Vertov would be reached, re-achieved, and fulfilled in the work of

[16] See, in *The Wings of Hypothesis* alone, Michelson, "Camera Lucida / Camera Obscura," 54; "From Magician to Epistemologist," 157; "Dr. Crase and Mr. Clair," 193. The first inventory belongs to Brakhage, the latter two are possessed by Vertov.

[17] Sergei Eisenstein, "A Course in Treatment," in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* ed. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 105

Brakhage and the rest of the New American Cinema, is one of Michelson's most influential arguments, one that she revisits throughout her writings. In its essential substance, Michelson's case is that the arsenal of devices in the practices of the Soviet filmmakers, their tools of analysis, dialectical transformation, and the "Communist decoding of reality," are resuscitated as tools for "a thoroughgoing critique of the codes of representation" in the hands of filmmakers from Brakhage to Snow to Kubelka, who collectively revitalize the relationship between cinema and modernism lain fallow since the "fall" of their Soviet predecessors. The establishment of this connection, the identity of a heritage for experimental cinema in the full flowering of filmic modernism of the Soviet era, has had massive consequences for the theory and practice of experimental cinema in the Anglo-American context since Michelson's writing. Here, however, I want only to focus on Michelson's sense that the establishment of such a heritage depends upon finding in Eisenstein's writings a connection between his montage practices, and their correlates in Vertov's work, with the effort to create an "intellectual cinema."

What Michelson's essays achieve then, is an alternative trajectory for an intellectual cinema that is politically charged, aggressively modernist, and avowedly anti-subjective.[18] While Eisenstein may play a relatively minor biographical role in the histories of the essay film theorists, his structural position has outsize importance in delineating its possibilities, and its claims for a particular kind of intellection. The importance of Michelson's essays, not least for the project of this dissertation, is to find in the New American cinema, and thus the trajectory of experimental cinema more broadly, a new and different kind of heir to the aspirations of intellectual cinema dreamt up by Eisenstein. Michelson's priority in this work is to emphasize

[18] Michelson's downplaying of the deeply personal forces at play in Brakhage's work marks the biggest difference of opinion between her evaluations of the filmmaker's achievement and those of P. Adams Sitney, who emphasizes above all else the Romantic subjectivity of Brakhage's cinema.

the *intellectual work of form and formalism*, and thus a trajectory for the intellectual cinema that lies outside the bounds of both documentary and essayistic thinking and making.

Thus, if the essay film theorists so often emphasize the form's hybridity, its capaciousness that easily swallows other forms of thinking and making, what Michelson's intellectual cinema isolates is the question of what a medium specific model of cinematic intellection would look like. If Michelson's case has something to offer to the theorization of the essay film it might be the separation of two paths, one offering an analysis of films capacity to merge with and absorb the form of essayistic prose, transforming it into something new, and the latter which seeks to replicate the essay's capacity for generating thought exclusively within the domain of forms specific to the medium of film.

* * *

The pursuit of "thought" transformed into cinema without the mediation of spoken or written language is a grounding principle of the way that Stratman thinks and talks about her work. Stratman repeatedly emphasizes in the discourse surrounding her films that she is invested in non-linguistic ways of thinking and, indeed speaking. In an interview with Julie Perini from 2011, Stratman states her position clearly, elaborating on a quotation of hers that "cinema can do intellectual work that language can't do," specifying that her conception of intellectual work is "problem solving or critical thinking." Stratman goes on to argue that she thinks of her filmmaking practice as a compulsion to "visually or sonically work something out" that doesn't have "the right word based solution."[19] Stratman is also adamant that the bounds of this kind of intellectual work in audiovisual form is not itself bound by particular rules or affinities, but is

[19] "Interview with Deborah Stratman," by Julie Perini. *INCITE!* February 2011. http://www.incite-online.net/stratman.html

capable of dealing with "strongly held beliefs, political sentiment, existential longing, even historical reverie," and further, can interact profitably interact with other forms of non-linguistic thought, such as the "geographical or physical modes of telling" present in *The Illinois Parables*.[20]

It is upon this ground that I want to return to Stratman's film and its reception as an essay film. While I do not wish to argue that the application of the term is somehow "wrong" when it comes to Stratman's work (as it more clearly is in Everson's work, with "documentary"), I do want to emphasize what I see as the inaptness of the term, alternatives to such a taxonomy, and what I see as the critical advantages afforded to seeing Stratman's film as part of the lineage that Michelson identifies, an intellectual cinema that isolates the intellectual work of form without the guiding thread of a single, speaking, diegetic subject.

The stakes of what a film is called, generically—documentary, essay-film, or experimental cinema—initially appear unappealing, particularly in an era of increasingly hybridity and fluidity, where the barriers between these genres are weak and flexible, and the objects themselves freely avail themselves of the complete typological buffet. However, it *does* matter what we call these objects, I argue here, because in naming them as belonging to a particular genre, we also claim for them a particular tradition, a heritage of films and makers. This is turn matters tremendously to how we see these films, both on a literal level—what festivals they're programmed in, sites that make them available, distributors who reluctantly

[20] An interview with Deborah Stratman." Interview by Mike Hoolboom. *Mikehoolboom.com.* http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=79#essay_116 . Accessed 8/21/20. "The Illinois Parables: Deborah Stratman on her histories of the land." Interview by Erika Balsom. Sight & Sound online. October 10, 2016. https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/deborah-stratman-illinois-parables. For more on Stratman's non-linguistic thinking see also "Deborah Stratman by Pamela Cohn: Sound, image, espionage, and methods of control." *BOMB*. Accessed 8/20/20. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/deborah-stratman/

release them on expensive and poor-quality DVDs—and in an individual, perceptual sense—what we are cued to pay attention to, and the meaning we attribute to particular gestures or forms that appear on screen, is cued by in which culture we imagine the film to participate. Most important is this meaning we attribute to features of the pieces that we watch, as it is this kind of meaning that is the most directly connected to the aspirations of a tradition. A viewer is most likely to mistake the purpose of a gesture if they do not know what tradition the gesture is drawn from.

The disjuncture of sound and image, a frequent if not incessant technique in both Everson and Stratman, is a key example. If their films are thought of as documentaries or essay films, the purpose of such a disjuncture is prone to rebound on the kinds of truth claims the genres offer. A breaking apart of sound and image in the documentary, for example, is on the one hand common to the expository form—voiceovers explaining the sorts of image we see—and on the other a fundamental betrayal of the observational mode, begging explanation or ground. The essay film, in turn, depends on the disjuncture of sound and image to provide its first-personal tenor, the anchoring voice or perspective emerging from the speakers to bind the images into univocity. In the experimental film, however, the disjuncture of sound and image has no particular purpose or meaning, and is indeed taken for granted—such a genre depends upon abandoning the assumption that such things should have been sutured together in the first place, and therefore the viewer of the experimental film is freed to ask *first* what the effect of such a disjuncture is, and look for an answer in the resources of formalism—what does such a gesture do, how does it feel, what kinds of responses does it trigger or generate, and how do all of these things fit into the overall structure, the form, of a piece? Turning to this formal figure in *The Illinois Parables* shows Stratman's command over the broad palate of options afforded by pulling apart sound and

image.

In one of its most basic forms, Stratman's approach to sound recalls work of one Stratman's teachers and fellow filmmakers, James Benning. In Benning's work, sound often *appears* as sync sound—the audience hears the waves lapping against the beach in *13 Lakes,* a brash industrial buzz while watching a plume of exhaust billow in *Ten Skies*, or the sound of evening insects in *Nightfall*. However, in each instance, these sounds have been carefully manipulated by Benning to produce certain results: *13 Lakes* both layers multiple takes of recorded sound and eliminated those Benning considered distracting, such as an airplane passing, *Nightfall's* volume gradually and steadily increases over the course of the film rendering the insects more and more prominent, and *Ten Skies* exclusively uses sounds drawn from other of Benning's films, such as gunshots recorded for and heard in *13 Lakes*.[21]

In Stratman's *The Illinois Parables*, this technique of carefully manipulated sound that appears as synchronous, observational recording is most frequently an effort to bridge a gap between shots and even sequences, as in segment VIII described above, where a layered soundtrack is gradually built up—in this instance, from buzzing insects, the roar of a distance airplane, and wind through vegetation—and then gradually broken to establish continuities between shots that might otherwise feel disjunctive. In that segment, the continuous soundscape elicits the sense that the viewer is in one larger place, whose soundscape is consistent enough to appear relatively seamless across shots.

[21] Scott MacDonald, "Testing your Patience: an Interview with James Benning," *Artforum*, September 2007, https://www.artforum.com/print/200707/testing-your-patience-an-interview-with-james-benning-15707 See Nick Bradshaw, "The Sight and Sound Interview: James Benning," *Sight and Sound,* October 2013, https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/sight-sound-interview-james-benning

In other segments, however, Stratman's audio collage is considerably more complex. It reaches its densest moment in segment VI, which deals with a massive tornado that wrought destruction across the 100-mile corridor between Gorham, IL and Crossville, IL, in the states southernmost reaches. This sequence is also unique in the film for being composed entirely of archival materials. The three part sequence begins with an extensive montage of on-screen text in the form of re-photographed materials from newspapers that cover the tornado's path and the damage it caused. The second and third are archival footage, both from the ground, witnessing people beginning to pick up the wreckage, and from the air, what Stratman describes as bi-plane footage.

The first of these archival sequences is scored with a song for a prepared piano by the contemporary musician Hauschka. As the newspaper headlines give way to the on the ground footage of the streets full of rubble, fire, and people, Stratman introduces three interviews, clearly delimited and one after another, with survivors of the disaster. In each the viewer hears the voices of the survivors, as they describe the astonishing power of the destructive tornado. These interviews are clearly done long after the event they describe, as the voices are those of old men and women, while the events they describe are from the point of view of small children.

The last interview mentions an odd episode in which a family's parrot had been found in the rubble, covered in soot or stained by smoke, but singing the hymn, "Sweet Hour of Prayer." As the witness to the event describes this event, the third section of the sequence begins, with footage from the air, shot through the obtrusive wings of a 1920s biplane, and Stratman quickly unfolds her densest audio collage. Here, her description of the components of the sequence is necessary to understand the number of layers and, more importantly, their sources: "You're hearing those stories, which cut to a gospel rendition of the song, which gets layered over by a

municipal tornado warning announcement, and then atop that by contemporary audio of a father and daughter hunkered down in their bathroom describing a tornado live, as it rips apart their house and their neighborhood."[22]

The density of this audio collage and its collapse of sound elements sourced from across time and space is paradigmatic of Stratman's approach. Unlike her comparatively restrained approach to the visual field, Stratman's soundscapes embrace a far broader sense of intervention and management. As Stratman makes clear in her interviews, she sees sound not just as "half the film," but as a component of filmmaking with a very different set of affordances.[23] Foremost amongst these is the capacity for manipulation to pass by the audience undetected in ways that aren't possible with images. Stratman argues that "we bring such sophistication to how we watch films, we're trained to visually break them down, but not so much the soundtrack," which gives sound enormous capacity for "control," something she invokes as a necessary and desirable achievement for filmmakers over their audience (Perini, Interview).[24] This control and capacity to shape the audience's experience without their awareness is something that Stratman attributes in part to an understanding of sound's facility for extension drawn from the theory of Michel Chion, in which sound "can convey scale from extreme intimacy…to vast expansion for miles," and also the human sense of emplacement *within* sound, rather than *in front of* the screen displaying a film (Perini, Interview; Cohn, Interview).

---

[22] "Deborah Stratman Uses Illinois History To Examine Ideology, Exodus and Divinity," interview with Alex Teplitzky, *Creative Capital*, August 13, 2020. https://creative-capital.org/2020/08/13/deborah-stratman-uses-illinois-history-to-examine-ideology-exodus-and-divinity/

[23] Interview with Julie Perini. http://www.incite-online.net/stratman.html

[24] See also Deborah Stratman by Pamela Cohn: Sound, Image, Espionage, and Methods of Control." *BOMB*. Accessed 8/20/20. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/deborah-stratman/.

Whatever the validity of these claims, Stratman reveals a crucial piece of her aesthetic, one that I've referred to throughout this chapter as a form of realism. What Stratman suggests is that because the aural and the visual have no natural suturing together in experimental cinema, the soundscape is available for intensive manipulation to achieve particular results, and need no display any particular fidelity to the image as the "source" of the sound. However, Stratman goes beyond this to reveal that while she is in favor of intensive manipulation of the soundscape, this is because of a crucial affordance sound possesses that image does not, which is the capacity to maintain clarity throughout superimposition. Stratman's densely layered soundscapes throughout *The Illinois Parables*, making use of sounds sourced from within the realms she's filming and well beyond them, bound by only thematic ties, nevertheless do not suppress the audience's capacity to absorb sonic cues without confusion or the loss of information. Stratman's claim that "we can listen on many levels," reveals a difference between what counts as realist in a fashion that is directly compared to the image, as she argues that "you can superimpose images but it never has the *clarity* that sound does. Sound lets you stack geological layers, and you can still make *meaning* out it, instead of just a mush (emphasis mine)."[25]

These terms, "clarity" and "meaning", are crucial to understanding the purpose of Stratman's differing approaches to sound and image, and show some of the latent philosophy behind her aesthetic. Unbound by any ontological or technological necessities of cinema, Stratman instead relies upon what she sees as her audiences' thresholds for absorption without awareness, and pushes up but does *not* cross the limits that would require viewers to question the

[25] Interview with Alex Teplitzky, https://creative-capital.org/2020/08/13/deborah-stratman-uses-illinois-history-to-examine-ideology-exodus-and-divinity/

purpose of an overt intervention into the soundscape. One of the most significant results of such an approach is to keep authorship and subjectivity restrained in the background, by emphasizing the need to find the answers about the sources or meaning of certain sound cues within the text, rather than in the para-text of auteurship or as a (reflexive) move in the game of art. However, as both Stratman's discourse and her works bear out, an audience who seeks the meaning of sound cues in the text will have to overcome the assumption that such answers are bound by a firm integrity between sound and image. They will instead, at least in the case of *The Illinois Parables*, have to expand their sense of how history can speak. Further, while Stratman's belief in the capacity for the land itself to offer a non-linguistic knowledge that can be captured by film is her most obvious sense in which history can be expanded, it is when she turns to the more obviously human records of the past that her challenge to traditional historiography becomes clear.

In one of the few pieces of sustained critical writing dealing with *The Illinois Parables*, Katrin Pesch argues that Stratman explores non-anthropocentric, geographically grounded modes of telling, in an anti-subjective approach to the essay film that links up with Laura Rascarolli's definition of the essay as theoretical rather than grounded in the "I[26]." Pesch's essay forcefully brings out Stratman's insistence on foregrounding the sense of place each segment brings forth, and echoes the filmmaker's repeated point that each site was chosen for its capacity to make

[26] Katrin Pesch, "Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* (2016): Intellectual Vagabond and Vagabond Matter," in *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality, and Technology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 121-140.

visible something of its history—"where an event had soaked into the soil[27]," or where "certain forms in the landscape mirror each other[28]," and thus her interest, discussed above, in how to bring this history forward without language. However, Pesch's account fits some of the film's segments better than others. While Pesch's argument about extending the essay film doesn't require a full account of Stratman's film, her lack of engagement with moments where the work slips into a mode that foregrounds people and language ignores crucial aspects of the film—with ramifications beyond misreading, as I explore below.

Such a disinclination on the part of Pesch is all the more striking for the material that composes the segments that must be ignored to pull off her analysis. While her essay skates over material about the discovery of nuclear fission, the "Firestarter," and the tornado of 1925, it ignores entirely the penultimate "parable," about the murder of Chicago Black Panther Fred Hampton, one of the film's most complex segments in its ambition and its dispensation of material. Indeed, while other segments exceed this one in their density, the conceptual complexity of Stratman's retelling of Hampton's execution is the theoretical high-water mark of the film.

The segment is largely based on the 1971 documentary film *The Murder of Fred Hampton,* made by the Chicago production company The Film Group (also responsible for *American Revolution 2* (1969)), and primarily shot and produced by Mike Gray and Howard Alk. Alk and Gray's documentary itself is an astonishing and storied piece of filmmaking—originally planned as a relatively straightforward documentary portrait of rising Black Panther leader Fred

[27] "Deborah Stratman Uses Illinois History To Examine Ideology, Exodus and Divinity," https://creative-capital.org/2020/08/13/deborah-stratman-uses-illinois-history-to-examine-ideology-exodus-and-divinity/

[28] Interview by Erika Balsom. Sight & Sound online. October 10, 2016. https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/deborah-stratman-illinois-parables.

Hampton, the fate of the film changed dramatically when Hampton was killed in a police raid organized by Cook County State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan, with the assistance of an FBI informant undercover with the Panthers, William O'Neal.[29] While Hanrahan and the police maintained a narrative in which armed Panthers fired shots at officers attempting to execute a legal warrant, Alk and Gray visited Hampton's unguarded apartment the morning after the execution, shooting footage of the scene that ultimately proved essential in overturning Hanrahan's story. Thus the second half of the Film Group's documentary focuses on the public relations battle between the police and the Panthers for the responsibility of Hampton's death in the raid, including a "recreation" of the raid organized and executed by the police and shown on television, one later proven in court to be a complete fabrication of the events leading to Hampton's death.[30]

It is this police re-creation that Stratman's segment focuses on, by again re-creating it and then intercutting this footage with on-screen text pulled from FBI files detailing the COINTELPRO operation that led to the implantation of William O'Neal in Hampton's inner circle, and a small selection of audio and film snippets from the Film Group's documentary. Stratman has said that originally her intention was to find the footage of the police recreation as it was broadcast on WBBM-TV, but finding the uncut footage proved too difficult and that her

[29] "The Murder of Fred Hampton (1971), *Chicago Film Archives*, http://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/pres-projects/the-murder-of-fred-hampton-1971 accessed 5/5/21

[30] For accounts on Hampton's murder and the subsequent trial, see Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010) and Jakobi Williams *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 167-191. Hampton's murder returned to the forefront of national consciousness as I wrote this chapter in the form of Shaka King's feature film *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), largely an account of O'Neal's coerced collaboration with the FBI.

inability to source this footage was the catalyst for making her own re-creation.[31] The core of Stratman's take on the assassination of Hampton is a recreation of a recreation that was itself a politically motivated, fictional account of the real event, the truth of which was only in dispute due to the racist and politically motivated lies of the police.

In his interview with Stratman, critic Nick Pinkerton characterizes the segment's primary gesture—the recreation of the police "recreation"—as "almost Brechtian." There is something to seeing the segment through the lens of distanciation or as a form epic theater: designed to free the actions of her actors from a kind of semblance of the original, this method points out the manufactured setup that the police recreation was, and therefore regains some kind of grip on the original event of the murder itself. However, as becomes clear in the comparison, and especially with the surrounding context of footage from The Murder of Fred Hampton, the police recreation is already a form of distanciation, one that retains no grip on the original event at all. Rather than a recreation of the event, the footage filmed by the police is designed to convince an audience of an event that never occurred, and thus is shaped and performed not for fidelity, but rather for a maximum kind of plausible intelligibility—what the confrontation between Panthers and police had to have looked like to reach the desired outcome of the state: a dead Panther leader and un-prosecutable police. Stratman makes this clear not by exaggerating the actions of her actors, but rather by doing as straightforward an imitation as possible, blurring the boundaries between each recreation and exposing both for fictions-without-referent, floating signifiers of state violence.

[31] Pinkerton, "Interview: Deborah Stratman." *Film Comment*, November 17, 2016. https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-deborah-stratman/. Accessed July 1 2021.

Figure 2.2 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)

Figure 2.3 Still from *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (The Film Group, 1971)

Comparing the sequences of the WBBM broadcast as they are reproduced in *The Murder of Fred Hampton* with Stratman's recreation, the most striking differences are in the clarity and definition between Stratman's well-lit 16mm and the over-lit high-contrast police recreation, as well as Stratman's choice to position the camera significantly closer to the performers in the shot. Otherwise, the format remains the same: black suits and white shirts, wooden frames to indicate where the boundaries of the rooms are, the taped sections on the floor to indicate where furniture lay, and the gestures of a figure "acting" his part slow, exaggerated, and frontal.

The most important difference between the two setups is the way Stratman again disaggregates sound and image. As the figures in her recreation perform their actions, a voiceover describing scenes from the event plays without any indication on-screen as to who is speaking. In *The Murder of Fred Hampton*, the recreation's audio is dominated by each figure acting is narrating their own actions as they perform them. Stratman's choice of audio for her segment brings in recordings of State's Attorney Edward Hanrahan at a press conference, audio pulled from elsewhere in the Film Group's documentary, which plays over a series of shots of her performers gesturing within the set. Stratman's selection from Hanrahan's press conference records the most infamous of Hanrahan's lies about the event, his claim that when officers knocked on Hampton's apartment they were immediately greeted by "shotgun fire." In fact, of the dozens of rounds fired during the raid, only one came from a Panther's gun, the shotgun held by Mark Clark, who was shot in the heart and died instantly: the gun discharged at the ceiling as it fell from his hands.[32]

[32] The police released a photograph, published by the Chicago Tribune, purporting to show the bullet holes fired at the officers from inside the apartment: as *The Murder of Fred Hampton* documented at the time, these were in fact nail heads in the doorframe. Stratman's piece includes a shot from the Film Group's documentary of a hand pointing out the nail heads.

Stratman's recreation is clearer in its events and is more transparently the work of someone with experience trying to figure out how things will look on film. Although she gestures at the intensely high-contrast lighting of the original, her semi-washed out look allows the audience to see borders between elements of the set that are invisible in the original. Further, and more importantly, Stratman's filming demonstrates a clear interest in legibility in blocking, making sure that the events that the audience is supposed to be able to see *are* indeed visible.

Figure 2.4 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)

Figure 2.5 Still from *The Murder of Fred Hampton* (The Film Group, 1971)

However, this interest only extends so far, as Stratman preserves many of the original's shot set-ups, including those that do not necessarily allow for the clearest view of the action they purport to capture. One segment included in both *The Murder of Fred Hampton* and Stratman's piece is the description by one of the raiders, identified in the WBBM version as Officer James "Gloves" Davis, of a moment in the raid in which Davis kills Mark Clark. Both Stratman and the WBBM footage show Davis in medium close-up from over his left shoulder as he fires at Clark, moving the camera back after Davis has "fired two shots," giving the officer and the actor both enough room in the frame to stand up and demonstrate the brief physical struggle in a doorway with Clark before the latter fell down dead. In both segments, the camera is placed at Davis/the actor's back, presumably in an attempt to give the audience some semblance of his point of view

on the action he's now in the position of recreating, despite the drawback that prevents that audience from seeing things like his facial expressions as he shoots, kills, and wrestles with the Black Panther.

Despite Stratman's fidelity to certain aspects of the presentation of events in the WBBM footage—a faithfulness that does more to *preserve* than establish the absurdity of the original in its divorce from reality and its inability to shed light on the events it attempts to depict—Stratman's freedom with altering her source material is as evident in this section as in the rest of the *Parables*. Here as elsewhere she frequently moves audio around, de-synchronizing it from the image, which here crucially removes contextualizing information that might give the viewer a sense of what exactly is being shown or demonstrated in the footage. A second strategy involves Stratman re-ordering segments according to an internal logic of the piece, respecting neither the original chain of events nor the way they are portrayed in the WBBM footage or Alk/Gray's documentary. The third and most significant strategy that Stratman employs is itself two-fold. The shot setups with which she opens the segment are not found in the original, as they are shot much closer in and isolate specific hand gestures without showing their context. Further, she cuts entire shots into her recreation that are not present in the original. In the section described above, for example, when Officer James Davis kills Mark Clark, Stratman cuts early in the sequence to a medium shot of two other officers, not present in either the shots that precede or succeed it, at the edge of the set looking in.

I linger on the specifics of this segment and detail Stratman's decision-making in shaping it because it is a crucial example of how the priorities of the piece balance depictions of the historical events it purports to cover with the necessity of transforming them artistically, thus shaping historical material not in an effort to call its representation into question but rather to

allow its aesthetic potential to shine forth un-encumbered by a narrow slavishness to truth-telling. Stratman painstakingly re-creates the set of Hanrahan's infamous recreation of Hampton's murder, but pulls the information necessary to comprehend the historical specificity out of the piece itself. Not once is the name Fred Hampton mentioned in the entire segment, nor the name of Hanrahan, or any information about what the various forces that confronted each other in the raid were doing there. This is crucial to emphasize because of the way that Stratman's work has been lumped in with John Powers' New Historicist film mentioned above, one that emphasizes the work of experimental filmmakers who participate in the telling or narrating of history. Despite Stratman's inclusion of text on-screen, the FBI memos famously stolen and made public by the Citizen's Committee to Investigate the FBI in 1971, Stratman is uninterested in telling history itself. At most her film is a goad for the viewer to do this historical research themselves, after watching the film, with just enough information included to do so.

Stratman has described her motivation for this segment by reference to the fact that Hampton's apartment where the murder took place was only a few blocks from where she lives, arguing that she couldn't resist her proximity to one of the places where history bleeds through into the contemporary urban landscape. Yet, as the segment makes clear, history has left comparatively little physical residue in this instance: the apartment building had been demolished years before Stratman started filming, and the parable is made up of footage shot on a set, on-screen text, and archival footage. An exception is the final shot of the sequence. Pulling the audio from one of Hampton's most well-known rhetorical maneuvers, a call and response of "I am…a Revolutionary," Stratman cuts from a archival, black-and-white shot of people lined up to see the apartment where the FBI raid occurred to a long-shot of a mural about a mile from where the murder occurred. Shot from street level, the camera frames a young Black boy

alongside the painted chairman Fred, equating them roughly in size, and gesturing to one of the Panthers' most pointed threats to the established order of the state, their capacity to radicalize Black children by providing them with the things denied to them by the ruling order—free breakfast, political education, and the knowledge of their revolutionary power.

Figure 2.6 Still from *The Illinois Parables* (Stratman, 2016)

Whatever the inspiring power of the connection between past and present, such a conjunction also speaks to Stratman's concern with how history maintains itself, or fails to, in the present. Just as concerned with the erasure of history as its maintenance, Stratman is just as much evoking here the closure of Hampton's revolutionary era in favor of our reactionary one, as the conjunction between chairman Fred and the young boy is one that happens only for the film and its audience. The boy cannot hear the chants of Hampton and his fervent crowd, and indeed

has his back to the mural, until he closes the shot by running off camera. While Stratman's film is capable of reassembling these strands, it is an achievement of art that binds them, rather than the discovery of history's maintenance in the world itself.

Stratman is certainly interested in history, and most if not all of her works reference past events, but her interest is aesthetic rather than didactic. In works like *The Illinois Parables*, what is evident is Stratman's interest in the *forms* the residues of the past take, what their aesthetic shape is, not what information they contain or lessons they might offer. Those aren't closed off, but rather are for the audience to deduce, uncover, and decide on. In a light that initially recalls the experiments of Ken Jacobs and Ernie Gehr's analysis of history, Stratman takes the material remnants of the past and holds them up for view, considering carefully what confluence of material and immaterial forces had to congregate to preserve them for the future. However, unlike Gehr and Jacobs, Stratman is not primarily interested in querying or questioning that form of representation, and does not take the step suggested by them towards seeing film as both too powerful and too malleable to be a medium entrusted with the preservation of the past. Rather, because she is uninterested in how these materials convey *information* (in the classical historical sense) but only wants to examine their forms, she is agnostic about whether history is represented "accurately" or not. Such a position has little to offer those concerned about the potential for mediatic manipulation, but instead encourages a view that sees the remnants of past lives and worlds that remain in our present as the aesthetic offerings of history itself.

The view of history that Stratman's film presses against is one in which there are the events of the past and there are the representations of them, through which we, as residents of the present, come to know such events. It is an ever-present corollary of this view that such representations, including physical evidence, are variably fallible, and only allow a partial view

of past events, skewed by ideology, the limited perspectives of individuals and groups, and a general lack of omniscience. What Stratman's film presents is an alternative way of thinking these relations and of history more generally. Stratman vacates both our sense of representations as somehow being fallible by demonstrating repeatedly that an objective view cannot exist as an alternative—there is no sense in seeing representations as somehow failed or fallen when the standard of objectivity that seeing them as such projects is the point of view of a God. What takes the place of this impossible ideal is a deflationary account of objectivity, in which individuals make history out of the remnants and representations of the past, which are objective inasmuch as they are insensate—literally objects. History is something assembled in the minds of individuals and has grip only there.

What Stratman's film insists upon, however, is the sense in which the materials out of which we make history, as subjects of the present, have aesthetic form. This is meant in two senses. The first is the film's emphasis on the ways in which history is made from the sensory qualities of its materials—the objects from which history is made are touched, seen, felt, tasted, heard. The second way in which history is aesthetic is in the sense of having *form*. History comes to us through senses but we also give it shape as we encounter it, and in doing so rely on aesthetic judgment to understand, evaluate, and communicate our sense of the past. Thus when segment X shows us a clip of a Black hand pointing at nails in a doorframe, testimony of the anti-Black violence of the state, the viewer does not see the gap between the representation of history and some pure tally of actual events, they see one of many material confluences given shape.

This is importantly not an attunement to how the representation of history contains aesthetic potential, as if there's history out there waiting and the representation of it is where the

aesthetic resides, but rather, how film as an audiovisual medium can communicate the ways in which history is sensed—is seen and heard—in recreation, in what the archives can preserve, but most of all in the traces that historical events leave on the skin of the present, where past events, traumas above all, linger in sensory form for capture, exploration, or control.

Chapter 3

Between Form and Fact: Kevin Jerome Everson and the Formal Features of Reality

Reviewing the 2017 New York Film Festival's slate of experimental moving-image works known as "Projections," *Artforum* critic Tony Pipolo praised the programmers for choosing works that "forgo irony in favor of artistic and moral forthrightness," identifying such forthrightness as concern for threatened groups such as "racial, gender, ethnic, and environmental" communities and the defense of "democratic values and ethics."[1] In his comments on the features presented at the festival, Pipolo makes particular note of the U.S. or North American premieres of three films, Ben Russell's *Good Luck*, Vera Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Caniba*, and Kevin Jerome Everson's *Tonsler Park*. In their succinctness and clarity, Pipolo's comments on Everson's film serve as neat encapsulation of the kind of reception the latter's films tends to elicit, matching effusive praise with a lack of skepticism. They are presented here in full:

> "On a more serious note, Kevin Jerome Everson's *Tonsler Park* is a work of great beauty, simplicity, and hope. Everson takes on a public institution, fixes his camera unwaveringly, avoids overt filmic manipulation, and eschews commentary of any kind. While Frederick Wiseman comes to mind, it's worth noting that he never tackled a polling site on election day, no less one seemingly run entirely by African Americans. The doc opens as a black woman swears in a group of volunteers who will serve as pages at several precincts in Charlottesville, Virginia, during the 2016 presidential election. Some stand at the entrance to guide people; others sit at the tables, check IDs, and otherwise assist voters. The seamless, unruffled manner is reflected in Everson's long takes, the camera focused patiently on each volunteer performing his or her job efficiently, cordially, and without fuss. If Everson harbors a subtle irony, this white male liberal missed it entirely. What I grasped is a document, the directness and sincerity of which is grounded in every ten-minute take of the welcoming faces and earnest demeanors of the volunteers as voters enter and leave the frame, momentarily blocking our view, in a well-coordinated flow. What we witness, in short, is a white supremacist's

[1] Tony Pipolo, "Irony of Ironies," *Artforum,* September 25th, 2017, https://www.artforum.com/film/tony-pipolo-on-projections-at-the-55th-new-york-film-festival-71193

> nightmare—aka American democracy in action. Essential to the movie's impact is that Everson does not belabor the "point." *Tonsler Park* is not just a forthright counterpoint to the deluge of violent images and condescending sermonizing offered by mainstream media. It's an act of artistic and political clout that should run as a permanent installation on museum walls across the country in a continuous loop."

Pipolo's comments may seem unobjectionable, but his central assertion that Everson's work serves as a direct and sincere document of its subject is exemplary of the discussion that looms over Everson's career. But one the immediate implications of this approach can be seen in the way that Pipolo's reading flattens the nuanced role race plays in Everson's work. Pipolo's most revealing comment is one in which he admits that his position as a white liberal prevents him from seeing irony in Everson's work. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the consequences of this lack of vision.

Born in 1965 in Mansfield, Ohio, Everson received his BFA from the University of Akron in 1987 and his MFA from Ohio University in 1990. His filmic output as of this writing is comprised of 178 works of film and video, dating back to 1987's *Little Blocks*, a Super-8 sound film he made as an undergraduate. By the mid 2000s, as his output accelerated Everson began to attract attention in the experimental film circuit with the features *Spicebush* (2005), *Cinnamon* (2006), and *The Golden Age of Fish* (2008), and the shorter films *Emergency Needs* (2007) and *Company Line* (2009). The subsequent decade cemented Everson's status as one of North America's most acclaimed and prolific filmmakers, marked by such highlights as co-curating the 2018 Flaherty Film Seminar, accepting in 2019 a named professorship in the University of Virginia's Department of Art, and an American Academy in Berlin Prize in 2020.

It is this latter portion of Everson's career that this chapter examines, in particular the standout films released between 2011 and 2017—*Quality Control* (2011), *The Golden Age of Fish* (2013), *Park Lanes* (2015), *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (2016), and *Tonsler Park* (2017).

Beyond being the most widely released and acclaimed pieces of the past decade of Everson's career, these works represent and important shift in Everson's practice, one that concentrates and expands his commitment to reformatting and surmounting a new approach to formalism in film and video.

At a basic level, my analysis of Everson's recent films and videos seeks to extend scholarly work on black artists from other fields to the realm of experimental cinema. In his book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English laments the current status of how work by black artists is discussed in the U.S. context, pointing towards the lack of "rigorous, object-based debate," around such works that are instead "uniformly generalized, endlessly summoned to prove [their] representativeness (or defend its lack of same) and contracted to show-and-tell on behalf of an abstract and unchanging 'culture of origin.'"[2] What Pipolo's comments index is precisely the way Everson's work falls into the gap that English identifies here, one in which an investigation into the purpose, orientation, or form of the films is blocked by the assumption of a transparent view of essentially static black life.

English's corrective to this problem is multifaceted, but one imperative provides guidance towards thinking about Everson's practice. Writing of the need to be more attentive to the multiplicity black artists embody, English urges an approach in which "we might accommodate in our interpretations all that the work itself engaged in order to be possible. This means not simply to 'diversify' one field or another but to integrate fields with what has remained external to them (12)." In the context of Everson's work, my approach is to start trying to think seriously about the demands its nuanced interest in, and use of, race places on *formalism* in experimental cinema.

[2] Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 7.

It is here that this chapter departs most significantly from the contemporary debates surrounding Everson's work. This is not to dismiss the lively and ongoing conversation surrounding Everson's practice, which goes beyond Pipolo's gloss. Indeed, for scholars interested in the current permutations of the idea of documentary cinema, or what contemporary moving-image art might have to say to black studies (to name just two promising directions), Everson's work and the critical community surrounding it provide a crucial resource that is beginning to get the attention it deserves.[3] However, my purpose here is to show how Everson's own pushback against his association with documentary cinema reveals the utility of resuscitating an understanding of experimental cinema, a line of though most prominently promoted by theorists like Annette Michelson and P. Adams Sitney. It's a way of thinking in which the true subject of cinema is first and foremost film form.

To argue that Everson's work be understood in the light of such a conception of experimental cinema is not simply to argue that these films are a kind of atavistic throwback to the days of reflexive formal purity. Though there is some utility in understanding Everson's work as being modernist in this sense—and ample evidence that he understands his practice in these terms—my interest is in a tension. Bringing this older theoretical (and cinematic) context to Everson's recent films and videos demonstrates how this vein of theory might be renewed and reshaped by the interaction. Everson's interest in and use of race in cinema and, in close relation, his dedication to the formal features of reality that moving images can capture, restores some of formalism's purchase on the contemporary experimental cinema landscape.

[3] Beyond Everson's extensive paratextual discourse around his work, largely as an interviewee, the most notable essays on his practice are Ed Halter's *ArtForum* piece "The Practice of Everyday Life, from April 2011 and Erika Balsom's article for e-flux, "The Reality Based Community," from June 2017. I discuss the latter, in its strengths and limits, later in this chapter.

This approach of arguing for the primacy of formalism has two linked ambitions. The first is to bring an interpretation his work closer to Everson's intentions, though in a way that he does not himself exactly articular. The second, following from the first, attends to the formal complexities of films and videos that are rigorously composed and arranged, but which tend to be treated as windows. I argue that this treatment of the work as a transparent document of its subject does a disservice to Everson, and his views of his films and practice, yet at the same time taking his protestations at face value can also lead to a caricatured view of documentary cinema. Thus this chapter begins by drawing on Everson's relatively voluminous interviews to sketch out the complexities of what it means to address his work's documentary potential before proceeding to the alternative viewpoint that places an emphasis on form. While this trajectory demonstrates the importance of the alternative view by illustrating the theoretical shallowness of the current association of Everson's films with documentary rather than experimental cinema, it does so in the context of his 2015 piece *Park Lanes*, a piece that has much to offer theorists and critics of documentary. By doing so, I leave the door open to a more thoughtful incorporation of Everson's practice with contemporary work on the documentary mode, albeit while illustrating the hurdles such an incorporation faces and demonstrating a comparably more attractive formalist emphasis.

"Not Here to Change Shit"

Park Lanes (2015), is an eight-hour digital video work features the employees of a QubicaAMF factory in Mechanicsville, Virginia at work putting together the various components of bowling alleys, the product the factory produces. The tasks the employees are occupied with range from the apparently simple and repetitive, such as spraying black paint over identical

planks of metal that float past, suspended on track-following hooks recalling those that move animals through a slaughterhouse, to the more complex, like the seemingly endless job of adjusting the parameters of intricate and mysterious assemblages of moving bits of spring, plastic, and metal. The film also portrays these same employees on their breaks and at lunch, their slightly garbled conversations blending with the noises of phones and TVs in the background, as they consume the caffeine and calories necessary to get through another four hours of labor.

As a "shift film," *Park Lanes* follows the activity of these employees over the course of an entire eight-hour working day, opening with their arrival, roughly aligning the timing of the breaks in the film with where breaks would occur in the course of the eight-hour shift, and closing with the workers' departure into the grey light of a late Virginia afternoon. Furthermore, at least in the screening I attended, the piece began at 9 A.M., meaning the activity of watching the work linked up cleanly with the labor of the employees we watched, a sense cemented by the draining process of watching the footage unfurl for eight hours from a hard-backed chair.

Everson, who filmed the piece alongside several of his students over the course of three days, winnowed the activities of the many employees of the factory down to a relatively select few, tracking about a dozen people throughout the course of their day. The digital cameras are handheld, and frequently shift, adjust, track, and drift, following each employee throughout the stages of their designated roles as they repeat and iterate.[4] There are no interviews, the workers never speak unless it is to each other, and even this is extremely rare, mostly limited to the break room, creating a soundscape dominated by the noises of factory work—spraying paint, grinding

[4] Cf. Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020). I am here and throughout this chapter deeply indebted to Skvirsky: her lens on Everson as a practitioner of the process film is the context in which I first encountered his work.

metal, the hum of hydraulic presses, and often, just the buzz of fluorescent lights. Described this way, *Park Lanes* may sound like the work any number of documentary practitioners: Frederick Wiseman's interest in the processes of repetitive and intricate labor of *Meat* (1976) or *Adjustment and Work* (1986), Wang Bing's epic fourteen-hour depiction of oil-rig workers in *Crude Oil* (2008), or some of the comparatively straightforward products of Sensory Ethnography, such as Véréna Paravel and JP Sniadecki's *Foreign Parts* (2010) or Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor's *Sweetgrass* (2009).

However, Everson rejects outright any comparisons of his work to documentary. In a 2013 interview with Terri Francis, Everson rejects the idea that his work is made for an audience primed to receive facts or knowledge from viewing, trajectories he associates with documentaries, instead claiming of his work that "I make it for myself. And then of course I'm an artist so I can't—I'm not a documentarian or a journalist trying to change shit or inform. I'm looking for form. That's the game."[5] Although Everson's insinuation of a limited definition of, or purpose for, documentary is relevant here, for now I want to turn to simpler reasons Everson has for distancing his work from documentary goals, both real and imagined.

The interview from which this quotation is drawn is from 2013, prior to the release of *Park Lanes* and the same year as the release of Everson's preceding feature, *The Island of St. Matthews*. While the earlier work is of a different nature, it is worth exploring Everson's discussion of it in some detail, as it crystallizes his indifference to documentary procedures and reveals some hurdles to applying the term to his work. While only some of these issues linger into the structure of *Park Lanes*, what they reveal is how Everson's stated pursuit of form rests

[5] Terri Francis, "Of the Ludic, the Blues, and the Counterfeit. An Interview with Kevin Jerome Everson, Experimental Filmmaker," *Black Camera* Vol. 5 No. 1 Fall 2013, 197.

foremost in his mind when approaching his practice, and the lengths to which he will go to ensure this remains the emphasis of his films and videos.

The Island of St. Matthews takes place in and around the small town of Westport Mississippi. The film, in color 16mm, is inspired by a comment of Everson's mother, who, when asked about a lack of family photographs responded, "Oh we lost them in the flood of '73."[6] This flood is the unseen event the film revolves around, blending shots of activities in and around the river that caused it, such as waterskiing and a baptism, with anecdotes from the community about the impact flooding had on their lives and snippets of these same storytellers working, chatting, or hanging out. The shots capture each anecdote and activity and "last as long as the event," with some events such as the waterskiing taking several minutes, and others, like the intermittent ringing of a bell, take only a few seconds. Many reviews of the film characterize the film's approach in terminology akin to the kinds of film forms employed by the documentarians listed above, noting how the film presents "bits of visual reportage" in "a simple sheen of verité,"[7] that reveals "the workers' lovingly filmed activity as both ravishing and profound."[8]

However, as Everson makes clear in his discussions of the piece, this impression is misleading, as he sees his approach to the piece as "not a document. I just see it as making it up (Shultz-Figueroa, Interview)."[9] While Everson is prone to make this claim in regards to his work,

---

[6] Kevin Jerome Everson, "Always in the Present Tense," Interview by Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa, The Brooklyn Rail, April 2014, https://brooklynrail.org/2014/04/film/always-in-the-present-tense.

[7] Jesse Cataldo, "Review: *The Island of St. Matthews*," Slant, March 3, 2014, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-island-of-st-matthews.

[8] Dan Sullivan, "Review: *The Island of St. Matthews*," Film Comment, March 5, 2014, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/review-the-island-of-st-matthews-kevin-jerome-everson/

[9] See also Francis, 192 where Everson casts a similarly wide net over the piece "When I was in Rochester I told 'em I made all this shit up."

in the context of *The Island of St. Matthews* he is more specific as to what exactly this means. Speaking to Aaron Cutler for *Cineaste* in 2013, Everson claims that "for me, *The Island of St. Matthews* is totally made up…the guy being sold insurance was a student of mine at Tennessee. I put that bell there. I had Charlie the Hook read out of the Bible. Even with the Stennis Lock and Dam guy, we were running around there doing fake shit. The only un-staged stuff you get is my aunt and the people at the church talking."[10] In context, this means that the staged activities occupy far more screen time than those un-staged, and cover nearly all of the scenes of people doing something other than talking. Everson is clearly not merely observing anything here, but is rather arranging the actions of people to deliver a particular kind of effect. Importantly, however, the un-staged actions contain the bulk of the dialogue in the film, the reminiscences about the flood, which discourages a reading of the film that slides down the spectrum into fiction—the stories people tell in the film are truthful.

Everson affirms this reading, portraying his relationship with these storytelling subjects as one in which "the whole thing is not about them, it's about what they say in relationship to the entire film," emphasizing that his concern is "how can I use them to look like art (Shultz-Figueroa, Interview)." Everson characterizes his staged elements in similar terms. A motif that *The Island of St. Matthews* shares with some of Everson's work filmed in The Republic of Congo (*BZV,* 2010) is the figure of the water-skier, in both films shot in long, mobile takes that capture both skiers and their environment. What Everson makes clear in his discussions is that filming water-skiing—an activity neither the residents of Brazzaville nor Westport, Mississippi engaged in without Everson's training or prompting—is a way of motivating the filming of the

[10] Kevin Jerome Everson, "Searching out the Next Vessel," Interview by Aaron Cutler, Cineaste, Vol. 38, No.4, 2013, https://www.cineaste.com/fall2013/searching-out-the-next-vessel-an-interview-with-kevin-jerome-everson-web-exclusive

river, by establishing a figure against which the ground can become more visible.[11] Both staged and un-staged actions are used to find form in his subjects, and this form binds them together more directly than either is bound to their truthfulness.

The bell that is rung intermittently throughout the film, and that Everson references above as having placed, is itself one of the most notable instances of Everson's other approach to "making it up," more unfamiliar the artificial staging of scenes. In the program notes for a series

Figure 3.1 Still from *The Island of St. Matthews* (Everson, 2013)

of Everson's films at the Harvard Film Archive last year, Carson Lund describes this motif of *St.*

[11] Cutler, Interview, and Kevin Jerome Everson, "School is not in Session," Interview by Jarrett Gregory, Mousse Magazine 59, Summer 2017, 213.

Matthews as "a bell-ringer who fulfills his duty with the same resounding force applied by the madman at the end of Bela Tarr's *Satantango,*" a scene that he is not alone in recounting as particularly memorable.[12] Everson describes the process that led him to the scene in this way: "My grandfather founded that church that you see in the movie. I remember somebody telling me that there was a certain way that people used to ring the church bell in order to communicate with the community. I wanted to do something like that. So I got into the church in January 2012, but then we couldn't get the bell to move, so I said, 'I'm gonna make a bell.' They didn't believe me, but when I came back that summer with a bell, they were pretty impressed (Cutler, Interview)." Thus the bell that we see ringing in the film is not a hallowed aspect of the historical fabric of the community, but rather a sculptural object that Everson fabricated. This allows Everson to shape the bell to what he sees as the formal needs of the piece, allowing him to select material, size, and design according to the role he needs the bell to play, whether visually or thematically.

This sculptural component is no small element of Everson's work. He frequently refers to himself as a sculptor, and his movement of sculpting an element of the film that becomes part of its fabric is a common one, which he traces back to his undergraduate professors who emerged from the University of Iowa in the 1970s and consequently emphasized "Materials, process, and procedure." Everson notes in the Cutler interview that he had "Now I'm making a film about guys stealing manhole covers in Cleveland, so I made manhole cover removal tools, like big crowbars. I just forged metal last week (Cutler, Interview)." Everson's sculptural practice is one that is entirely occupied with making replicas of everyday objects that can stand in for their

[12] Such a reference encourages another recollection of Andrei Tarkovsky's bell-maker in *Andrei Rublev*, although here the film's relation of inspiration between craftsman and artists is collapsed into the single figure of Everson.

inspirations—the bell, the tongs or crowbars, but also binoculars and hammers. Thus while he is interested in crafting objects, it is less important that Everson's audience know they are crafted, as blocking the capacity to verify whether an object, story, or activity has a correspondent beyond his lens leaves only the form of the thing available to view.

This approach to sculpture returns us to *Park Lanes*. In contrast to *The Island of St. Matthews*, Everson has provided no concrete indication that his interventions of that film linger into the form of *Park Lanes*, no indications that the actions of the workers he filmed were staged, nor that the objects they handle were sculpted by him. However, the piece's approach to the labor it films retains a multifaceted interest in sculpture. As Michael Sicinski notes in cinemascope, Everson's selection of the QubicaAMF factory allows for the camera to frequently capture in detail the actions of shaping metal—bending plates, sealing bolts, painting slabs, the activities of work akin to the act of making a piece of sculpture. Sicinski however further notes that the framing of the individual scenes of work in *Park Lanes* transforms them into their own kinds of sculptures—delimited from other actions by both camera position and the organization of the factory, Everson declines to connect the pieces to each other or allow a sense of understanding or mastery to obtain for the audience, but instead films each scene as a kinetic sculpture. Everson grounds this effect by creating a shallow pro-filmic space wherever possible, isolating the actions of each worker against a neutral or inscrutable background. Thus the viewer comes to understand how an action is organized formally rather than how it is connected to the world it occupies.

Figure 3.2 Still from *Park Lanes* (Everson, 2015)

As Sicinski notes in his review, the arrangement of space required to achieve such an effect may have required Everson to move things around the shop floor. The establishment of "mini-prosceniums" in which each worker is cordoned off from others, their activities abstracted through displays that maximize their formal arrangement rather than their comprehensibility to the audience raises the specters of intervention, staging, or manipulation on the part of Everson. Unlike with *The Island of St. Matthews*, Everson has provided no indication in interviews or in the body of the film itself that such an alteration took place, but in the context of his career, the absence of such an admission is not itself a claim for the veridical status of the images.

Placing *Park Lanes* within the context of Everson's career clearly raises questions about the relationship the piece might have to documentary filmmaking. His interventions into his material, altering and re-arranging activities, letting sculptures stand in for tools or bells, are matched by his interventions into the discourse surrounding his work, pleading for his viewers to take him at his word that he "makes everything up." These manipulations of film and context

may well problematize a classical understanding of observational-style documentary, in the manner of someone like Frederick Wiseman. However, such a comparison, while seemingly in line with what fills the slot of "documentary" for Everson and for many of the critics or scholars interested in his work, declines to engage with more subtle or complex approaches to the documentary mode.

Foremost amongst these approaches is the example of sensory ethnography. The Sensory Ethnography Lab, hosted at Harvard and directed by filmmaker Lucien Castaing-Taylor, is the clear standard-bearer for this approach to documentary form. They define their approach to filmmaking as one that explores "the aesthetics and ontology of the natural and unnatural world," with a special focus on the "many dimensions of the world, both animate and inanimate, that may only with difficulty, if at all, be rendered with words."[13] Anthropologist and theorist of sensory ethnography, Sarah Pink, reiterates this theme of capturing or rendering the sensual qualities of the world that escape language, placing particular emphasis on the "sensory ways of knowing" that are oriented around "other people's lives."[14]

In practice this approach to filmmaking results in a wide range of formal arrangements, from the cameras dangled from the ends of fishing poles in Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012), to the more restrained observational footage of Jeff Silva and Vic Rawlings' *Linefork* (2016), to the pseudo-structuralist one take, one roll view of pilgrimage in Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's *Manakamana* (2013). What the films share, and what makes them such a profitable comparison to Everson's practice, is a balance between the "aesthetics"

[13] "Sensory Ethnography Lab," Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University, accessed March 1, 2020, https://sel.fas.harvard.edu/

[14] Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, (Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE: 2009), 7-23

and the "ontology" of the world they record and project. While remaining focused on the lives of other people that is the meat of ethnographic practice, these films are equally devoted to capturing the sensory, embodied knowledge of the world such lives inhabit and share. In the case of *Leviathan*, this approach extends to the creation of novel forms of sensory knowledge, as the immersive cameras float alongside the fish being caught and processed.

While it is tempting to see the emphasis on "knowledge" of "other people's lives," as lying at the core of a distinction between Everson's practice and sensory ethnography, this falls flat in the face of the kinds of sensorial knowledge the ethnographic films make available. Far more productive is an understanding that whatever differences there are between Everson's willful shaping of his material and sensory ethnography's more removed view, both are equally attentive to the ways in which cinema displays the forms of embodied knowledge out of which more complex ethnographic views are built. Viewed as a portrayal of the lives of employees of a QubicaAMF factory, *Park Lanes* has dubious documentary value, given Everson's penchant for distortion in favor of form. However, the display of sprayed paint sticking to gleaming metal, the worn qualities of hands bent over a sander, or the intractable motion of a hydraulic press, skirts the issue of Everson's level of intervention entirely—it no longer matters if such motions are staged, or if the objects being handled are sculptures or tools.

From such an angle, there is little room for a material difference between Everson's practice embodied in *Park Lanes* and that of sensory ethnography. Nevertheless, placing too much emphasis on their overlap risks losing some of the distinctiveness of Everson's work. Beyond Everson's indifference and hostility to the ethnographic principle of revealing something about the world and the people who inhabit it, what unifies his practice is the single-mindedness

of his approach to form.[15] What unifies the heterogeneity of approaches in *The Island of St. Matthews* is their emphasis on the formal quality of the things portrayed, and Everson is clear that while sometimes the world is formally driven enough for him, when it is not, "I'll add things to it." What makes *Park Lanes* so distinct in Everson's career is the degree to which the world has apparently become formally adequate to his practice, and no longer seems to require direct invention into its makeup on his part.

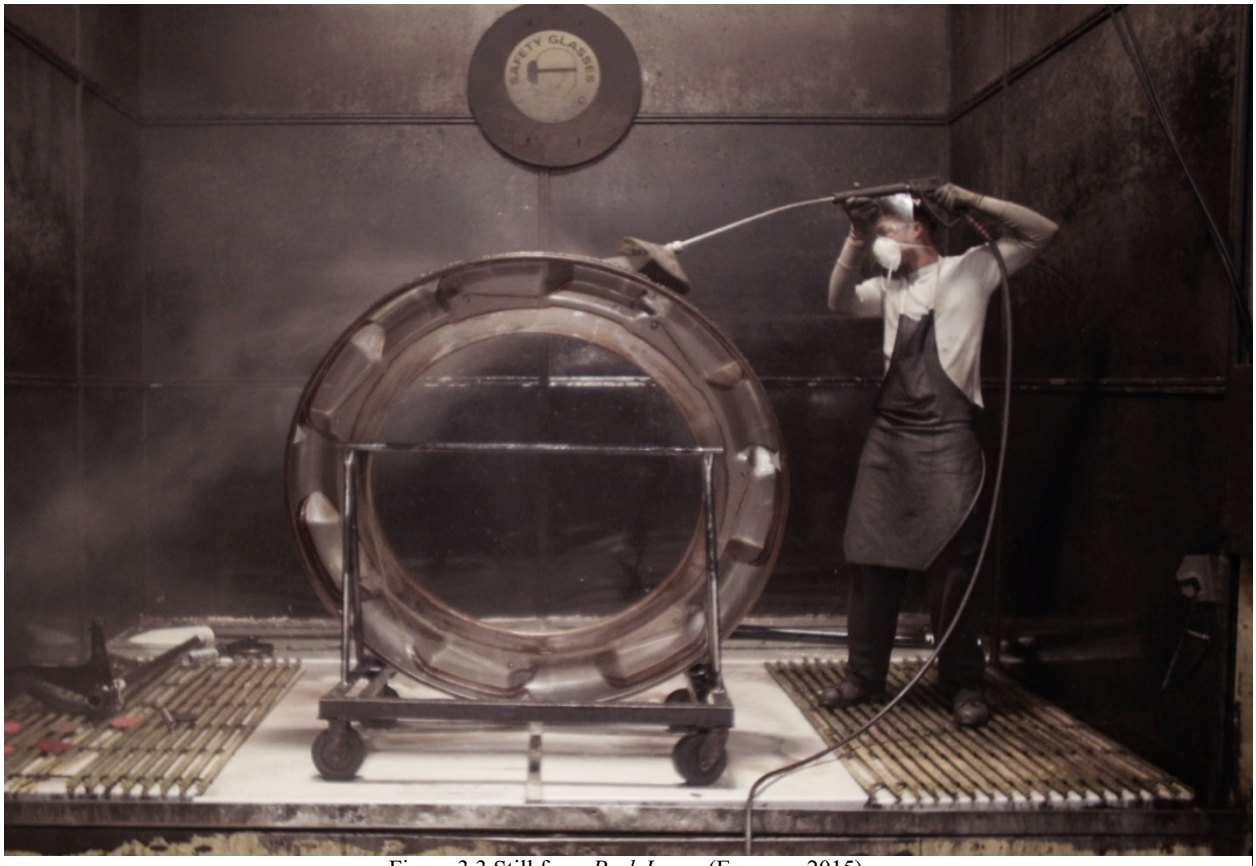

Figure 3.3 Still from *Park Lanes* (Everson, 2015)

[15] For an explicit disavowal of this approach, see Jordan Cronk's interview with Everson, where Everson distances himself from both anthropologists and "doc makers who talk about how they try to be friends…No, I don't have time for that. I tell them I'm making some art. That's it. I'm not lying or stringing a motherfucker. It is what it is…you have to realize you're not that important to them. You are taking their likeness and representation somewhere else, but if you're true to the subject matter and respectful, there's not much harm in it…they're not really lives. They're re-representations. The goal is to have certain formal qualities come out." Kevin Jerome Everson, Interview by Jordan Cronk, *Bomb*, April 6, 2017.

This marks the difference between *Park Lanes* and sensory ethnography as one of degree, or emphasis. Everson's pursuit of the abstractions of forms in the world, when compared to the perceptual knowledge captured by sensory ethnography's experimental approaches does not necessarily produce definitionally distinct works of art. Indeed, seeing each from the angle of the other may well be an enriching path for both Everson and the ethnographers. However, Everson's drive to emphasize form over knowledge, either sensorial or ethnographic, pushes his work in directions that require the centering of a formalist approach rather than one that embraces knowledge of people or things in the world.

Telling Backstories: Tonsler Park *and* Ears, Nose, and Throat

One prominent distortion of Everson's work throughout his career is to understand him as a chronicler of labor. This is an easy mistake to make, as Everson frequently films people at work, and makes a point of attending to the toll such work takes, and more importantly, to the skills and time required to do a task. However, as Everson has stated repeatedly, these people are, by and large, not *actually* working in these instances, but are instead performing work for Everson's camera. From the billboard installers of *Erie* (2010) to the employees of Cleveland's Water Department in *Sound That* (2014), the people who appear in front of Everson's camera only appear to be working, and are instead completing variously complex tasks (which often do resemble their actual jobs) according to Everson's instructions.

As I discussed above, *Park Lanes* stands outside of this aesthetic in its apparent absence of these forms of manipulation. In an interview done before the making of *Park Lanes,* Everson identifies 2010's *Quality Control* (2010), composed of seven full reels (eleven minutes each) of 16mm sound film showing the work of an Alabama dry-cleaning plant, as his "only film where

they'd be doing the same things if [he] hadn't shown up (Gregory, Interview, 208)." What was once an exception has become a pattern, strengthened by *Park Lanes* but solidified in Everson's most recent feature to date, *Tonsler Park* (2017). All three of these films feature extensive footage of people working, in an observational style that has been neatly but problematically tied to a kind of reserved documentary practice. What *Tonsler Park* reveals is further limits to this approach, recasting the footage of labor as not necessarily revelatory of the working practices of the people they capture, but rather as a vehicle for formal development and experimentation. Looking closely at *Tonsler Park*, which received relatively extensive coverage for an experimental film, demonstrates not only the limitations to an approach that seeks to identify Everson as only a documentary chronicler of labor but also reveals some of the formal intricacies and nuance of the work's navigation of the influence of race on film form.

In the literature that has emerged on *Tonsler Park* since its release, the emphasis has been repeatedly placed on the historical coincidence of its production. Filmed at a polling station the day of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, *Tonsler Park* has been billed as uneasily prophetic, revealing the tragic irony of a democratic system that requires the labor of black people to keep its infrastructure running, while that same infrastructure fulfills its role of bringing a racist demagogue to power. This narrative, which seeks again to force Everson into the role of politically minded commentator and documentarian, betrays (again) not only the pressures Everson bears as a black experimental filmmaker with a realist bent, but a desire to read such political commentary into formalist work that forcefully denies it in essence, practice, and structure.

Commentary on *Tonsler Park* generally attends to the aesthetics of the piece only to the extent that it tries to account for its seeming lack of urgency and pointedness, its relaxed pacing

and denial of cumulative structure, by pointing to the fact that Everson filmed the piece not knowing that Clinton would lose, buying into the strange optimism of the dominant media narrative on election day 2016. The logic of this argument suggests that because a Clinton victory would ensure the continuity of a centrist, stable state, Everson's film lacks the aesthetic urgency predicated by an inevitable Trump win. Surprisingly, rather than use this fact as a rationale to attend to the role *Tonsler Park* plays within Everson's body of work, it is instead redeemed for a political reading that understands the piece ironically, as a last gasp of the liberal order, an innocuous filming of innocents who could not have known the looming danger.[16]

Whatever Everson knew on November 8th 2016, commentary that insists on favoring the political realities of an election's outcome to explain the aesthetic makeup of a work has things backwards. Attending to the formal qualities of *Tonsler Park*, from film stock to choice of lens to the angle the camera takes towards its subjects, could furnish the materials for a "political" reading of its gestures, but this is not what I seek to do here. Rather, I want to explore Everson's aesthetic decisions and how they fit with and impact each other and resonate with the rest of Everson's project. Leaving the political reading a possibility, I assert nonetheless that such a reading must justify and explain itself on the basis of the works' gestures and movements, and must ground its necessity against Everson's continual disavowals.

[16] An summary of such commentary is compiled in Criterion.com's survey of responses to Everson's films at the 2017 New York Film Festival: David Hudson, "NYFF 2017: Kevin Jerome Everson's Tonsler Park," *The Criterion Daily*, October 6, 2017, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5016-nyff-2017-kevin-jerome-everson-s-tonsler-park

Figure 3.4 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)

Tonsler Park was shot in 16mm black and white film with a telephoto lens, and is composed of twenty shots, of varying length, many reaching Everson's favored eleven-minute mark of the complete 16mm reel. The sound of the piece was recorded the day the film was shot, but separately, and the resultant soundtrack is composed of on-site but very asynchronous sound. Everson has indicated that this formal arrangement was a matter of some necessity, as the rules around filming at a polling place required a certain distance from the subjects he filmed, which required a telephoto lens to achieve the portrait-like framing he wanted, and also made sync sound impossible. As I've indicated, however, pulling apart the synchronicity of image and sound is a favored gesture of Everson's that is often read as a forceful disruption on his part of the expectations of documentary aesthetics. In Erika Balsom's gloss in her article "The Reality-

Based Community," such a "cleavage of image and sound ruptures any possible impression of total capture, ushering the film away from discredited notions of immediacy."[17]

The resulting soundtrack of the work presents interactions between voters and pollworkers that are clipped, muffled, partial, and unrelated to the actions occurring on screen. (There is one brief exception at the end of the film where the sound briefly comes close enough to syncing up that both the sound and its source are playing at the same time). Commentators have seized upon the fact that we don't hear the words Clinton or Trump uttered at any point in the work, but perhaps more significant is the rarity with which one hears a complete sentence uttered. Phrases trail off, people are interrupted, rustling papers overlap with doors closing, and in general, any kind of linguistic clarity takes a back seat to the recording of a sonic ambience that is immediately recognizable as bureaucratic.

The overlapping of varying sound sources is mimicked by the compositional aesthetic of Everson's images, which rely on the z-axis compression of the telephoto lens to create portraits in which the subject is continually elided by figures somewhere in the foreground. In discussing his practice with Jarrett Gregory in *Mousse Magazine*, Everson clarifies this aesthetic in terms of his pursuit of a kind of abstraction favored by his beloved mid-century minimalist artists—in this case Ellsworth Kelly and Sam Gilliam: "I just keep pushing the materials around so it becomes less pictorial…In *Tonsler Park* I wanted people to be in the way. Everything is about the election, but it's really about these people in front of them moving back and forth. I was trying to make a flicker film (Gregory, Interview, 213)." The relatively slow speed with which the

[17] Erika Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community," *e-flux* no. 83, June 2017, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/ While Balsom's article admirably tracks the ways in which Everson's formal decisions frustrate readings of his work as documentarian, I discuss below our differences in the appropriate conclusions to draw from this aesthetic.

foreground subjects occlude and reveal those in the background may belie the seriousness of such a comment, and certainly frustrated Everson's attempt to make a true flicker film, but what it allows for is a kind of portraiture that uses the waiting-in-line pace to intermittently reveal its subjects, moving them in and out of a more strict abstraction, or between abstraction and reality.

Figure 3.5 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)

It is easy enough to see how one could wring a political reading out of this gesture of flickering, as exemplified by Erika Balsom's article for *e-flux*, "The Reality-Based Community." While this article stands apart from the bulk of commentary on Everson for its effort to thread the needle between the poles of documentary and a rejection of reality necessary to grapple with Everson's work, it reconstitutes an aesthetic analysis in baldly political terms. Balsom first makes the familiar move indicated above, claiming that what Everson's apparently simple images—images that she claims are "shorn of any great eventfulness,"—do is "activate[s] a labor

of associative thought that seeks to link the "concrete specificity," of Everson's film with such "farther-reaching thoughts" of: Barack Obama's departure from the White House, the role of race and gender in shaping work, voter suppression, and the Voting Rights Act. Attending more directly to a political reading of the form, Balsom argues that what is gestured towards by such a "dialectics of revelation and concealment" is the "ambivalence" of "visibility" for "populations more subject than other to police harassment and violence (Balsom, "Reality-Based Community)." The appearance of black people on the screen, in Balsom's terms, becomes metaphorical, or metonymic, for the violent consequences of visibility and disclosure in black life.

Everson's own testimony troubles these interpretations. As reported in the notes for a screening of *Tonsler Park* at the Toronto microcinema, Vertical Features, Everson has rejected invitations and bookings of his film from the predominantly white world of "local officials and university representatives," liberals who see his film as the kind of political act detailed above. Everson's words in responding to such requests are worth quoting at length: "'They' think because the films have Black folk in them, it is a protest. We have respectfully declined the use of our films for that protest. The projects cannot be reduced to 'their' terms. The films function without 'their participation.' The films were not made to center white Americans. I told them 'white supremacy is your fuckin' problem, not ours."[18] Aside from being yet another plea from Everson to stop locating his work within a political fabric that he rejects, this also points to a crucial message of Everson's work, which is the burden borne by black people centered in aesthetic work to become symbols of "protest" rather than of beauty or form.

[18] Leo Goldsmith, "Democratic Duty," Vertical Features, accessed March 1, 2020, https://www.verticalfeaturesto.com/tonsler-park.

As Everson puts it in his gloss on the (sometimes hostile) reception his work can receive from white audiences, art world denizens "aren't used to seeing labor or people working, or black people just telling stories. They're used to seeing black people in relation to a body politic, and so they get freaked out when the work doesn't inform their politics. The liberal folks want to be told that they're white and liberal. Because they want to do good, and just by viewing a documentary it seems like they're contributing, so to speak." Everson's critics are often close to the mark in understanding his work as bringing aesthetic attention to the activities of daily life. As he puts it in the same interview, referencing his film *BZV*—made in Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo—"I didn't want to give them Africans working, and sweating in the heat…you have to actually make more of an effort to find that than you do the people getting off the bus, going home, meeting their families, watching TV. I wanted to tell this backstory of looking for a bed...(Gregory, Interview, 208)" However, a conclusion that such quotidian things are consequently *about* either labor (and thus politics), or about the political gesture of displaying such acts to a white audience proves to be a reductive reading that block attention to the nuances of how and what Everson puts on display.

Building an alternative perspective on Everson's work requires putting several different pieces together. First is Everson's admission that a lingering tactic from his more direct interventionist days is to adjust the filmed situation to include more Black people. Regarding *Tonsler Park*, Everson admits that the only thing he changed about the situation was to "tell them to bring in more African-American workers (Gregory, Interview, 208)," and when he made *Park Lanes*, a crucial element in choosing the factory that he eventually filmed was its preponderance of Black employees.[19] Second, Everson references his preference for filming Black people in

[19] Kevin Jerome Everson, Interviewed by Deborah Stratman, UIC Gallery 400, April 2, 2016.

reference to its formal consequences, by answering the question of how he chooses his subjects by claiming that "it's mostly the formal qualities." Grounding such a claim, Everson compares *Tonsler Park* to how painter Kerry James Marshall has informed his work: "some of those [scenes] used that high con[trast] stock…their faces are super black, like a Kerry James Marshall painting."[20]

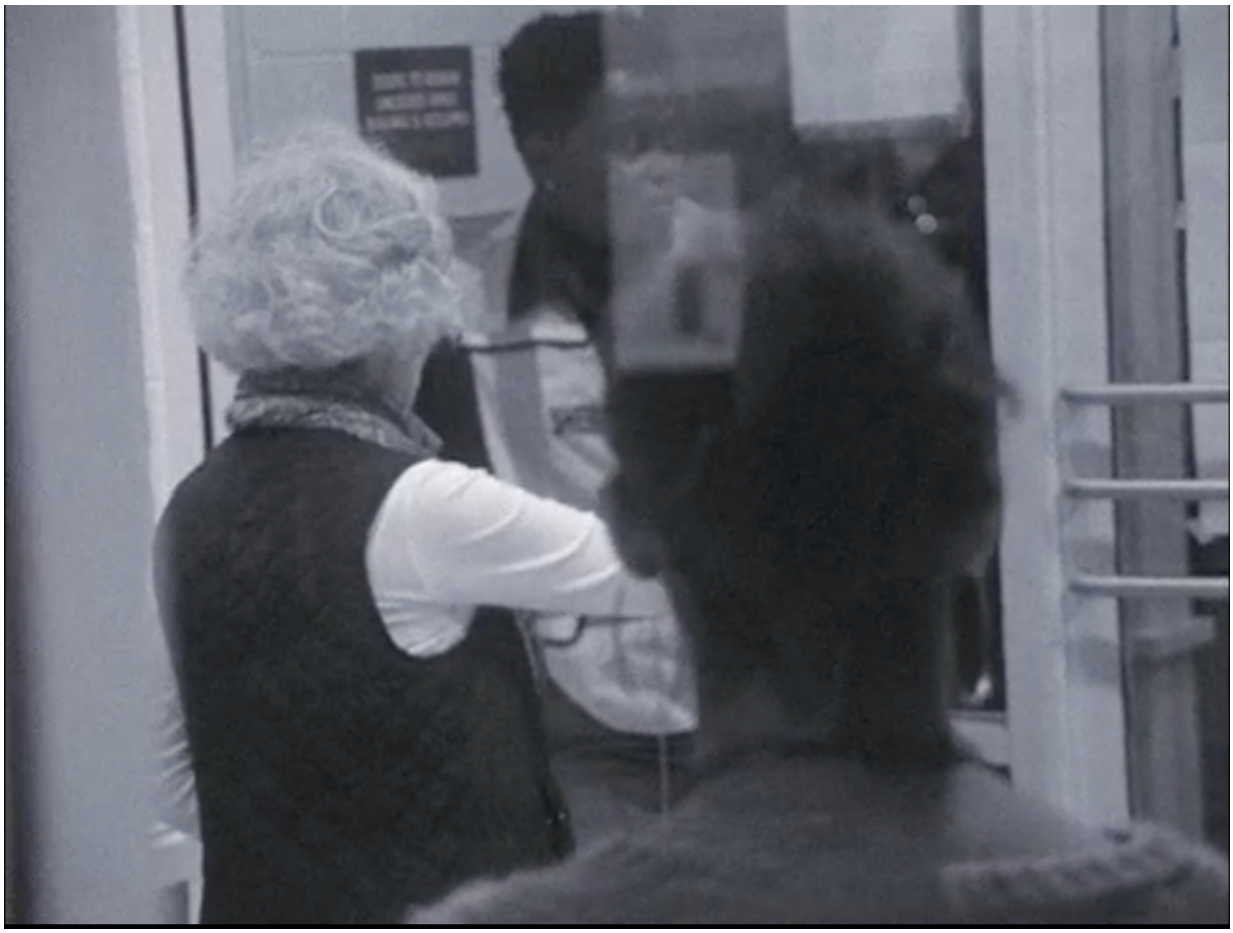

Figure 3.6 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)

[20] Kevin Jerome Everson, "'There's Some Leisure in it Too': Kevin Jerome Everson on Labor, Art, and Film," Interview by Dessane Lopez Cassell, Hyperallergic, October 24, 2019, https://hyperallergic.com/523764/theres-some-leisure-in-it-too-kevin-jerome-everson-on-labor-art-and-film.

Finally, Everson has been direct about the "why" of choosing black subjects, though his answer is more expansive than the "formal qualities" referenced above. In his interview with Jarrett Gregory, Everson describes the consequence of having black people on the screen in terms of narrative, or backstory: "…when I look through the viewfinder, I know that these people have a different set of histories than people of European descent. And for me, that's part of the backstory. It's the history of 'how did I get here?,' the black migration, and that's important to me (Gregory, Interview, 208)." This connects with his comments above about backstory, and the idea of storytelling as a crucial element of his work. Storytelling and history are persistent themes in Everson's work, most notably in *The Island of St. Matthews*, but here too it's easy to misunderstand his interest.

Everson often refers to his turn away from sculpture and towards film as a reorientation of his sense of the importance of time, where film "was like the sculpture, [but it] had *time*…it was about the backstory." However, at the same time, the centrality of backstory to his film aesthetics does not mean that such a backstory is important or relevant to the viewer; it matters only to Everson. "Watching those guys…" he says, speaking of *Park Lanes*' central lunchroom scene, "you put a backstory on them—or I do. When I look through the viewfinder…all that's going on in my head during the exposure. So then I'm trying to frame it up so it's clear to me—I don't care about the viewer, but it's clear to me. I make films for the subject matter and me (Lopez Cassell, Interview)."

Evident here is Everson's declared interest in choosing black people to be the subjects of film for formal qualities, a choice made both literal in terms of how black faces appear on high contrast black and white 16mm film stock, and more metaphorically, in terms of how the backstories of black people differ from white people, and how this necessitates an entirely

different field of choices in terms of how such subjects are filmed or "framed up." In rejecting a project of filming black people to placate or gratify a liberal, white, documentary-loving audience, Everson instead makes clear that such a decision is driven by renewing the elementary gesture of allowing content (the backstories of his black subjects) to determine formal choices and options. To wrest *Tonsler Park* away from an explicitly political reading is to insist upon taking literally Everson's repeated evocation of trying to achieve something of the minimalist impact of Ellsworth Kelly on film, both repeating the literal formal gesture of overlapping blocks of color and acknowledging the reality of his subjects as bearers of backstories that determine such formal conditions.

Figure 3.7 Still from *Tonsler Park* (Everson, 2017)

However, this remains an unsatisfying gloss on the importance of storytelling and history in Everson's work. Surely, the invocation of history, and the gesture that the histories, backstories, or simply stories of the people he chooses to film are unified in a particular way, demands an explanation that exceeds the influence of this perspective on Everson's choice of framing. Such an analysis demands focus on a work of Everson's that incorporates storytelling directly, *Ears, Nose, and Throat*, and attempt to digest that work's use of storytelling as a form.

The story of *Ears, Nose, and Throat* is that of the murder of Everson's son, DeCarrio Antwan Couley, who was shot and killed by a friend after an argument on March 9th, 2010. Couley, who had appeared in a small handful of Everson's films, most notable Spicebush (2005), and Company Line (2009) was twenty-five years old. This devastating, brutal death is related by Shadeena Brooks, a witness to the event who testified at the trial following Couley's murder.[21] Everson's delivery of this horrifying tragedy within a deceptively complex formal structure registers several key features of his interest in storytelling, and demonstrates that his characteristic reluctance to be straightforward in relating form to content extends to the most intimate and painful forms of the latter.

Everson discusses his approach to placing this story in the piece as being one in which the viewer has to "catch up," and as such does not make it immediately apparent what it is that's being related, or that such an event is the subject of the piece at all (Ratner, 61). The film opens with two minutes of handheld, underexposed, and grainy shots of a largely empty residential intersection, while the audio track is occupied entirely with infrequent high-pitched beeps, alternating between the left and right channels. The shots capture the houses surrounding the

[21] Megan Ratner, "Abstraction through Representation: Interview with Kevin Jerome Everson," *Film Quarterly* Vol. 71 No. 3 Spring 2018, 58, 61.

intersection and the streetlights that illuminate it, but focus mainly on the T-shaped meeting of two roads, the street itself.

Figure 3.8 Still from *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (Everson, 2016)

Following this sequence is two minutes of footage of Brooks undergoing an otolaryngological exam, performed by "the only black ear, nose, and throat doctor in the state of North Carolina (Ratner, 61)," who examines Brooks' nose and mouth with instruments and lights, as the camera films from behind his shoulder, allowing the viewer to see Brooks' face. As the doctor examines Brooks the viewer hears his voice relating an abnormality he's discovered on her vocal cords, however, the audio and video are not in sync, and it is clear what the viewer hears is a result of the examination being shown.

As this portion of the examination concludes, the audio of the doctor's voice disappears, leaving a few seconds of ambient fuzz before Brooks' voice enters the track as she gets up from the doctor's chair and wipes her nose with a tissue. As she says "March 9th, I was standing on my porch," the video cuts to another portion of the examination, a hearing test, where Brooks raises her left and right hands from within a glass booth, the camera again positioned behind the administrator of the exam and pointed towards Brooks. For the next four minutes the camera stays in this exact position, as Brooks continues to raise her left and right hands and the audio track relates her story of witnessing the argument that lead to DeCarrio's murder, as well as the killing itself and the arrival of the police.

Figure 3.9 Still from *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (Everson, 2016)

When the film reaches the eight and half minute mark the camera cuts to a new shot from inside the booth where the hearing test is being conducted, and the audience hears for the first time the high pitched tones of the test, finally registering the beeps heard during the opening two minutes within the context of the exam. When she hears a beep in her left ear, Brooks raises her left arm, and vice versa. Though Brooks has been participating in the test for several minutes of screen time, it's only in this new shot on the other side of glass separating her from the administrator of the test that the audience begins to hear the tones that she's responding to.

Figure 3.10 Still from *Ears, Nose, and Throat* (2016)

However, this moment of synchronicity is merely apparent. In fact, the audience's aural position is the reverse of Brooks'—when she hears a tone in her left ear, the audience hears it in the right channel of the audio track. This is difficult to pick up on, as the sequence immediately

follows the straight on extended shot of Brooks, which has established a sense of space that, while we now have a new angle on it, creates the impression that we are in fact in sync with her.

This seemingly minor audiovisual oddity crystallizes many of the issues surrounding storytelling in Everson's piece. Why does Everson come so close to synchronicity, only to subtly reverse it, and what consequences does this decision have for the viewer's response to the story being told? Does the elision of the relation between aural and visual content prevent the audience from believing Brooks' story, or less polemically, engaging with it on the level that its significance demands? In other words, what is formalism doing *here*, of all places?

Unpacking this requires attending to Everson's specific position on story and witnessing. The movement Brooks performs to indicate that she has heard a tone during the ear exam recalls the motion witnesses make as they are sworn in, and as the beeps Brooks responds to initially enter the film before the exam even begins the viewer most likely mistakes them for the tones that allow sync sound to be correctly lined up. Everson has explicitly linked *ENT* with Caravaggio's self-depiction in his paintings, where the painter serves as the eyewitness of an event that he then paints (Lopez Cassell, Interview). Clearly the method is different here, but Everson's interest in the inclusion of the eyewitness is not inspired by the effort to ground the film's reality in the depiction of a person who saw, but rather as a tool of formal organization that could shape the film into "the eyewitness view," which explains the early shots of the intersection where the murder took place.

Other commentators have interpreted the film as an indictment of the lack of trust society places in the testimony of black women. By depicting Shadeena Brooks going through an ENT exam, in this interpretation, Everson is asserting how evidence provided by black women needs a kind of certification or grounding in authority before it can be believed (Lopez Cassell,

Interview). This interpretation, bearing a certain resemblance to my question about formalism above, also carries a valid political message that goes some distance towards resolving the formal gestures of the work. It does not, however, attend to the features of the film that fit with the rest of Everson's body of work. Everson frequently discusses his fascination with the textures of voices and accents, discussing how one motivation for keeping dialogue in his films is so that they can serve as records of how people speak, in particular as accents are marked by region (Lopez Cassell, Interview). This fascination fits Everson's formalism, as he discusses how regional accents that are difficult for outsiders to comprehend are his favorite "because there's more form in that," and his inclusion of such accents breeds requests for subtitles that he bluntly and forcefully declines.

This fascination with the qualities of a voice finds its rationale in *Ears, Nose, and Throat* rather directly, as the result of the serendipitous occurrence during the filmed exam (Ratner, 61). The doctor performing the exam discovers a mild deformation of Brooks' vocal cords during his tests, and the film presents to the viewer the doctor explaining to Brooks that this deformation is why her voice becomes hoarse after a long day and during the winter, a fact she readily confirms. Everson's formalism creeps again to the surface in his most storytelling-forward recent work, in the analysis of the sonic qualities of a voice.

While this points to but does not conclude in a rationale for Everson's interest in story as principle of organization, a structural logic that encourages certain affordances for the organization of a piece, rather than as an interest in the content narrative can convey. The question that remains to be answered, perhaps, is :why this story?" If *Ears, Nose, and Throat* is designed to foreground the aesthetic qualities of storytelling, and their interaction with witnessing and recording, why is the "content" of the piece the account of his son's murder?

Everson has demonstrated, most notably in *The Island of St. Matthews*, an interest in his family's past, and has indicated that his work filmed in the Congo is at least in part inspired by the attempt to think about the historical significance of African-American heritage. However, as with the forged bell and the water skiers in Brazzaville, history or family connections are merely the push that gets a piece moving, and once Everson becomes involved, he abandons an attempt to develop a true story or genuine narrative and becomes more interest in the formal affordances such a motivation brings.

Everson describes this in different terms in what can be called his artist statement, a document worth quoting here at length. The statement dates from roughly 2014, and as such only gestures at the work discussed here:

> My recent film work still embraces the similar condition but I am increasingly interested in interrupting documentary scenes with abstract, formal scenes, those situations where necessity collides with coincidence. The coincidence is the scene that looks as if it was culled from archival footage, an accident or mistake in the actual film material, while necessity is the plot or character that drives the film. I am pleased when these qualities collide in terms of form, because it plays with this ambivalent relationship between art and narrative, fact and fiction. Eventually, I trust that by working in this manner, years from now, I will see my work as achieving pure form.[22]

In a much more recent interview, Everson refers to and develops this idea:

> But for my other work, there's no invitation to it. It's self-referential, almost like an abstract painting, so to speak … Back in the day, for me it was all about the coincidence and the necessary colliding together — meaning for coincidence, me framing up some kind of task or condition or gesture, and the necessary was putting it next to something else to have it in conversation with something (ibid).

I see Everson's interest in story as the necessity that drives the coincidence, the formal qualities of filming, and the materiality of the objects with which he works. His drive towards pure form can be read as the gradual abandonment of intervention as a form of coincidence in

[22] Kevin Jerome Everson, "Untitled," Drain Magazine: Black, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2013, http://drainmag.com/kevin-jerome-everson.

favor of more direct formal choices, a project that has recently culminated in his graphic depictions of the moon.

However, there is more to extract from this statement, when Everson discusses the foremost importance of materiality to his work. Here he writes that:

> It is important for the work to project and reveal the materials, procedure and process... I firmly believe that the materials (film, video) of the work must be noticeable. A light flare, over-exposed film, color flares, distorted sounds and even prolonged taping enhance my notion of materiality. Procedure is the formal quality I am exploring with the work. The process is the execution of the formal quality. Once I have a grasp of procedure, the process becomes a discipline. The films *Old Cat* (2009) and *Erie* (2010) feature single eleven-minute takes, the real-time exposure of a 400' roll of 16mm film. The materials are the 16mm film and camera. The procedure is that everything has to be framed within a limited time structure. The process is filming everything with that eleven-minute time structure in mind (ibid)."

Procedure and process thus emerge here as kinfolk to the arguments above relating to necessity and coincidence. Procedure for Everson is the goal—like necessity, it produces the structure around which process and coincidence can unfold. The emphasis on procedure indicates one of the ways in which Everson is a structural filmmaker in disguise, allowing the material conditions that he brings to the work to dictate both what the film is trying to be—the flesh of each eleven minute take being, in his understanding, subordinate to their material, physical limit in the world. However, unlike the structural filmmakers of the 1970s, Everson allows "coincidence" to intervene, to become important, and occasionally in his latest works, overrule the bounds of both procedure and necessity. Everson strikes an uneasy balance of allowing a structural principle to shape his approach to the films that he makes, but as the viewer's understanding of that is wholly unimportant to him, he does not seek purity of structure, nor does it always dictate the final process.

Therefore, for Everson, perhaps storytelling is best understood as part of film's material and process. It is important to leave the lingering traces of narrative, history, and story in the

films because it is part of the process of making them. In this manner, *Erie* or *The Island of St. Matthews* become reframed not as structuralist documentaries but formal experiments that acknowledge the role storytelling both as a form and as a frame on which to hang explorations of film's materials, procedure and process.

This obsession with process shapes Everson's work to a striking degree, and reveals another angle towards reinterpreting his work. What commentary on Everson identifies as his recurrent obsession with work is in fact an obsession with process, with the gradual coming to understand a process as a formal structure. The laundry workers *in Quality Control*, the billboard installers in *Erie*, the assemblers of bowling alleys in *Park Lanes*, even the doctor and his assistants in *Ears, Nose, and Throat*: these are the so often touted examples of Everson's dedication to labor, but are in fact archetypes of his interest in work as a kind of vernacular formalism. This is also why Everson is not a strict process filmmaker in the sense that Skvirsky describes, as he has no interest in how processes link up with each other, separating for example the employees of the bowling alley so that the viewer comes to no new understanding of the assembly of each piece or the entire alley, but instead comes to grips with a sequence of operations as individual forms, crystalline but monadic.

The Formal Features of Reality: Race, Storytelling, and the World

In the preceding sections, I've tried to show that features of Everson's work that are understood as commentary, political or otherwise, are revealed to be better thought of as part of his obsession with form. What I want to turn to now is the question of what it would mean to place Everson in his context of experimental cinema, not just in the contemporary moment, but historically, that is, if he's thought of as a rigorous, reflexive formalist, rather than a covert

documentarian. My claim here is that hypostasizing Everson's formalism requires not only a more forceful acknowledgment of the formalism already present and visible in his work, but also an account of the ways in which he ropes elements, materials, and structures previously thought to be form-neutral into the formal argument, expanding our definition of film form and, thus, finally, proving his work to be part of a modernist lineage of finding novel ways to remain faithful to film while remaking it.

Everson's interest in storytelling shifts from a desire to express *something* in a narrative format to a fascination with the shape of storytelling as a structure. In terms of Everson's concern with what he calls necessity, the motivating force that requires a formal sorting-out, storytelling becomes an organizing principle rather than tool for delivering a message. More directly, however, storytelling is an opportunity for Everson to display people making form out of their own lives—the process of relating an event and giving it shape, and the qualities people bring to such a narration (i.e. accent and tone of voice). Everson's interest in story has the same rationale as his interest in work—what draws his attention are the ways in which Black people pursue form in quotidian and vernacular registers.

I discussed above the ways in which race factors into Everson's formalism. First, as a feature directly influencing composition choices, where Everson is attentive to the way Black skin registers differently on, for example, high-contrast film stock (as in *Tonsler Park)*, and thus allows for different kinds of compositions to unfold. Secondly, and more indirectly, Everson indicates that the histories of the people he films, while imaginary, are also distinctly different from those of white people, and this knowledge of the distinct background of Black subjects alters the way he "frames them up." Filming black people has different affordances but also insists upon different requirements, and different structures.

In the still overwhelmingly white world of experimental cinema, this gesture alone is sufficient to expand the range of formal possibilities of film. However, it can also point us towards a more radical expansion of the importance of Everson's filmmaking, not because of its novelty, but because it opens a door to a reinterpretation of the tradition of which Everson is the latest turn. The philosopher Paul C. Taylor, in his book *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, argues for a distinctly aesthetic understanding of race. Race is, in Taylor's terms, part of the aesthetic fabric of reality, and the apparatus built around the aesthetic appreciation of, for example, painting, plays a role in how we use and understand race in the world, in our daily lives.[23] This argument has two prongs in Taylor's argument, the first of which is simply to point out the aesthetic features of lived existence, the ways in which interacting with the world requires, for example, certain kinds of categorization or typology that requests a fundamentally aesthetic approach from human beings. The second prong is that the philosophical tradition of aesthetics is helpful to scholars who may wish to use the sophisticated language such a tradition has produced to sort out issues that crop up in everyday life, not merely in the museum or concert hall. While this second argument has received much attention recently, for example in the work of scholar Caroline Levine,[24] it's the first argument of Taylor's that I'm more interested in here.

The consequences of Taylor's argument for Everson's work may not be obvious. My claim here is that the achievement of Everson's filmmaking is that by recognizing and articulating the way the formal features of something in the world—in this case, race—must be

[23] Paul C Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 6-12

[24] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Network, Hierarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

incorporated by the filmmaking decisions that are more traditionally understood as formal, Everson acknowledges a facet of experimental filmmaking that has largely gone repressed—that of cooperation with the world. The world, too, has formal features, and these cannot be ignored or made irrelevant by an exclusive focus on the ins and outs of the cinematographic *dispositif.* Whether Everson recognizes this is immaterial; what matters are the consequences of this altered understanding for his work. Rather than being a formalist in the traditional sense—though again, he is also this—Everson is a master of finding ways to incorporate the formal features of the world, and in so doing, both founds and masters a new category for experimental cinema.

Obviously, cooperation with the world is a feature of all photographic cinema by definition. Everson is a master of the formal features that most directly shape the way the world appears on screen, in particular the composition of the frame. What changes in Everson's work, or what his work is especially attuned to, however, are the formal features of the world that precede filming. What experimental cinema has traditionally focused on is the ways in which the world *changes* on film, how film deforms the world for creative expression, but what Everson's interest in race and storytelling demands is an understanding of forms in the world as aesthetic givens, a way of reading the world not as raw matter for formal shaping, but rather as *already* formed, already given shape in a way that simply requires amplification, voice, or acknowledgement.

Chapter 4

There Was Never an October: Rhetoric and the Body in Hito Steyerl's Videos

As 2020 came to a convulsive close, Hito Steyerl was floating in a tank. Or rather, her avatar, dressed like a security officer, was floating in a 3D virtual oceanic environment, inviting viewers to join her via a VR headset or simply through the screens of their laptop. The virtual exhibition was part of an effort to rescue what was supposed to be a culminating period in Steyerl's career, marked by *I Will Survive,* the first career-spanning, comprehensive retrospective of her work, shared between the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (which promptly cancelled the show due to coronavirus restrictions in Dusseldorf) and the Centre Pompidou (which merely curtailed their presentation of the work, as COVID-19 restrictions had eased by early 2021). In an effort to adapt installation specific moving-image work for the Zoom era, Steyerl and e-flux.com had launched a sequence of videos touring viewers around the shuttered Kunstsammlung exhibition, titling the series *4 Nights at the Museum: A weird-ass visual podcast*. Inviting the viewer to join her avatar in the tank, Steyerl's U.S. and German gallerists took a different approach, revisiting her piece *Leonardo's Submarine*, first displayed at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019.[1] The piece's rendition at the Biennale made use of three curved screens that surrounded a viewer placed at their center. Unlike some of Steyerl's other work, the installation component of the Biennale version of *Leonardo's Submarine* was minimal, and the

[1] On the podcast see Christian de Mouilpied Sancto, "Podcast for a Pandemic," *Performing Arts Journal* 128, 2021, pp. 75-80. The VR version of *Leonardo's Submarine*, is available on the websites of Steyerl's gallerists: http://www.andrewkreps.com/exhibitions/online-exhibition-hito-steyerl https://www.estherschipper.com/exhibitions/951-virtual-leonardos-submarine-hito-steyerl/. Accessed July 1, 2021.

screens held the entirety of the piece, a critique of an Italian weapons manufacturer—Finmeccanica—that had recently rebranded themselves "Leonardo."

To adapt the exhibition for the virtual presentation, Steyerl preserved the screens, but transformed the environment, dropping the curved displays into an aquarium-style tank, complete with coral, sand, jellyfish and a dolphin. Alongside the viewer floats Steyerl's avatar from her *SocialSim* exhibition, a new work that was supposed to debut as the heart of *I Will Survive*.[2] While the tank has no walls, the space obeys certain mechanics familiar to video games—the viewer can control their orientation and move around the "tank," but cannot break through the surface of the water, nor get far away enough from the screens, coral and fish that they are lost in the ocean entirely.

Figure 4.1 Still from *Virtual Leonardo's Submarine* (Steyerl, 2020)

In keeping with her style, the soundtrack matches an ambient aquatic soundscape with a robotic sounding voice that reads a text written by Steyerl discussing Leonardo da Vinci's

[2] See Marcella Lista, "Playing Machines," in *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive, Films and Installations*. Exhibit Catalogue. Germany: Spector Books, 2020, 181-192.

designs for weaponry that he concealed for fear of their power, as the screens display a combination of da Vinci's drawings and digitally filtered shots of the architecture of Venice.

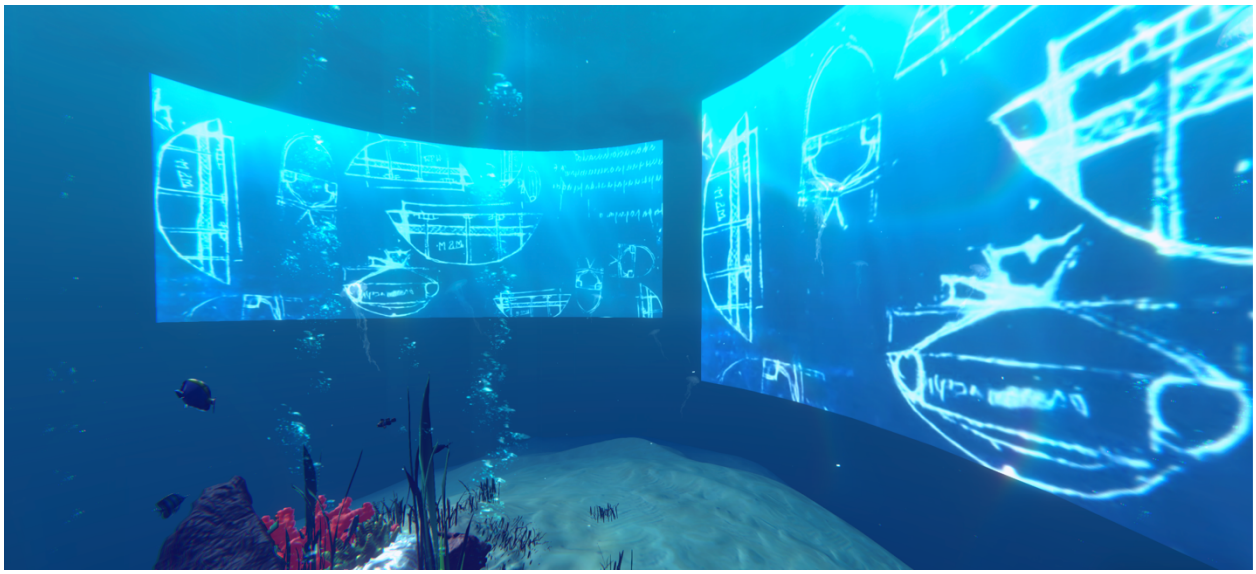

Figure 4.2 Still from *Virtual Leonardo's Submarine* (Steyerl, 2020)

The drawings seen on the screens stand out sharply within the context of the virtual undersea environment. Amongst the computer generated sand, coral, and water of the environment and the algorithmically processed images of Venice that otherwise occupy the screens themselves, these comparatively clear and unmistakably analog drawings of da Vinci's recall a feature of Steyerl's practice that is actively denied in most analyses of her work: her use of cameras to present direct views of human beings and here, their works. Steyerl's rise to her preeminent status has been accompanied by the steady accumulation of a critical consensus that the strength of her work lies in its gleeful embrace of the destruction of the photographic image's permit of reference, truth, or documentation. And yet here, in a computer-simulated fish tank, a trace—in the form of photographs of something literally handmade—persists in forging such a

representative connection between the photograph and the thing photographed, one that depends upon the fidelity of reference.[3]

In this chapter I propose a theory of Steyerl's work that centers her photographic images of the body. I examine a range of Steyerl's work across her career, from her early films *November* and *Lovely Andrea*, to her landmark and well-traveled short video *How Not to Be Seen: a Fucking Didactic .Mov File,* to the pair of installations that helped cement her position atop the art world, *Liquidity Inc*. and *Factory of the Sun*. Throughout I will show that the caricature of Steyerl's work as rejecting any connection between photographic media, documentary form, and truthful representation—a caricature partially abetted by Steyerl's own writings—is consistently complicated by her fascination with and deployment of images of human beings, and the function that specifically *photographic* images have in their capacity to deliver not just doubt and confusion but verifiable and useful information about their subjects. I argue that the persistent critical narrative around Steyerl as a demolisher of assumptions embedded in documentary or essayistic filmmaking relies upon a strawman of documentary logic, one that conjures an extended era of uncritical image making in a naïve, prelapsarian filmmaking past. While Steyerl's more nuanced probing of the intricacies and failures of representation and documentation cannot be so easily brushed aside, the connection between model and image demonstrates a resistance to total decay. This tension I argue is borne out in her work. Thus, I see Steyerl's practice as one that cannily and *deliberately* deploys these powers of

[3] The trace in this instance recalls the injunction of Andre Bazin's formulation of photographic realism: "No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction…" ("The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What Is Cinema* Vol. 1, trans. Hugh Gray, (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2004), 8).

reference to pursue an aesthetic form adequate to political intervention in a world that is, "now more than ever," infused with virtuality.

In the context of this dissertation, this chapter is a speculative effort to extend the logic of reading realism into experimental cinema to new terrain. Steyerl lies far outside the context of the other three figures examined in the previous chapters, in her aesthetics but more importantly in the art historical context from which she emerged and in which she continues to practice. Nevertheless, without seeking to flatten these distinctions entirely, I want to examine how an artist working in such a different arena of moving-image experimentation might still contribute to the heritage of an experimental realism. By demonstrating how Steyerl's reflexive and critical practice still relies upon and explores the camera's longstanding fascination with providing views of the body, I aim to show how the development of a theory of realism for experimental cinema might function across borders, art-historical contexts, and aesthetic priorities.

"Traveling Images" and Documentary Doubt: November *and* Lovely Andrea

Part of the challenge of thinking with Steyerl's work is parsing the separation between experimental cinema, in the sociological sense of its networks of makers on the festival circuit and the university campus, and that of the art world. It can be tempting to view Steyerl's career as one in which an experimental filmmaker is gradually absorbed by the world of the gallery and museum, as an emblematic example of the comparative robustness of these spaces as grounds for the exhibition of moving image media in comparison to the black box of the movie theater. While I will want to argue for the relevance of my reading of Steyerl's work to experimental cinema both writ large and as a more localized North American phenomenon, it is important to signal from the outset that the networks that foster and circulate her work are distinctly different

from the other artists examined in this dissertation, and indeed that such a difference has ramifications for how her work gets considered. Unlike the North American artists I considered above, Steyerl's work generally appears in the world of the various Biennales, and in recent years, in the form of solo exhibitions of site-specific work at prominent contemporary art venues like the Art Gallery of Toronto, the Park Avenue Armory in New York, or the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Castello di Rivoli in Turin.[4] This distinction matters: the world to which an artist's work is seen to belong is central to how it is judged by both critics and a public. Steyerl's role in the artworld, for example, partially explains the response to her writings, which are generally treated as a skeleton key that can transparently explain her work rather than *read* as rhetorical or artistic gestures that demand the same kind of working through as her audiovisual pieces.[5]

In claiming that Steyerl's writings need to be worked through in the same way that her audiovisual work does is not to claim that the essays do not have critical purchase or explanatory power. They are not merely formal exercises, and nor, importantly, are they just jokes, as funny as they are. Steyerl's arguments draw much of their force from her mastery of absurdity and juxtaposition. In "Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise," which first appeared in e-flux in December 2014 before being republished in Steyerl's most recent collection of writings, *Duty Free Art* in 2017, Steyerl examines the sorting algorithms that underpin image processing on social media,

[4] For a (partial) list of exhibitions see : https://www.estherschipper.com/artists/102-the-work-of-hito-steyerl/exhibitions-archive/. Accessed July 1, 2021.

[5] Although I use artworld here in its colloquial sense, I want also to recall Arthur Danto's original formulation of it here to emphasize his insistence that "It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld and art, possible." The overlap between the theories of Steyerl's work and the work itself is tremendously important, and her belonging to that world determines how the value of her work is discussed. Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 61, Issue 19, 1964, 581.

which she launches into by considering the butt. "Let's have a look at one example," she writes, "drawing a line between face and butt…It is no coincidence that Facebook is called Facebook and not Buttbook, because you can't have any butts on Facebook. But then how does it weed out the butts?"[6] Deadpanning her way through absurdity is a trademark of Steyerl's style, one that structures both her written and audiovisual essays. In this instance, by literally describing what must go on behind the scenes at Facebook, Steyerl's style plays up the bizarre and novel requirements of the intersection between image creation, processing, and social distribution.

Steyerl also uses this humor to devastating effect by juxtaposing it a few sentences later to its more horrifying other half, the need for Facebook to form rules about violent content on its site and enforce them through poorly paid exploitative human content moderation. Noting that "decapitations and large amounts of blood are acceptable," on Facebook while "butts" are not, Steyerl intimates the terrifying violence these content moderators are witness to, "working from home, earning around $4 per hour." Further, this essay demonstrates Steyerl's capacity to unfold an argument through the invocation of what Liz Linden and Susan Ballard refer to as the "scale invariance," necessary to grasp any concept in the globalized Anthropocene.[7] Steyerl shifts quickly from human and algorithmic content moderation in Chatroulette, government surveillance, and porn-detection systems (capable, she writes, of discerning the formal relations of not only "pussy, nipple, asshole, and blowjob, but asshole, asshole/only and asshole/mixed_with_pussy "(36)), to the idea of political representation, pointing out through Jacques Rancière that the question is essentially one of discerning signal from noise, "citizens

[6] Hito Steyerl, "Proxy Politics: Signal and Noise," *Duty Free Art*, (London: Verso Books, 2017), 33.

[7] Liz Linden and Susan Ballard, "Art Writing and Allegory in the Anthropocene," *October* 175 Winter 2021, 108

from rabble" (37). Opening the door to representation allows Steyerl to consider the role of using images or sounds as "stand-ins" for persons via social media, and the "proxies" opened up by this process, (such as the bot armies that inhabit Twitter to influence shopping and voting choices) with detours through proxy wars and the blockchain, ultimately concluding that "in proxy politics the question is literally how to act or represent by using stand-ins…and also how to use intermediaries to detourne the signals or noise of others" (45).

Steyerl's capacity to use what Linden and Ballard refer to as "scale invariant" allegory, the quick and ceaseless shifting between micro- and macro- analyses has been criticized for a lack of rigor and critical purchase that hollows out the sharpness of her political claims.[8] This criticism is misplaced and linked to the too-credulous reception of Steyerl's work by her more praise driven interlocutors, both of whom take Steyerl too literally and miss the opportunities opened up by her work for a more aesthetic form of critical engagement.[9] Steyerl closes "Proxy Politics" with an almost breathless series of sentences littered with faces, butts, and puns, writing that "[i]n the space of proxy politics, bodies could be Leviathans, hashtags, juridical persons, nation-states, hair-transplant devices, or freelance SWAT teams…[i]n the end, however, a face

[8] See Hal Foster, "Smash the Screen," *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 40 No. 7, April 5th 2018. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n07/hal-foster/smash-the-screen. Accessed July 1, 2021, and Saul Anton, "The Whole is the False," *Artforum* March 2018, http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/31/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen/. Accessed July 1, 2021.

[9] For examples beyond those addressed directly in this chapter see: Maya Harakawa, "Hito Steyerl: Artists Space | March 8 – May 24, 2015," *ARTSEEN*, April 2015, 61; Ryan Anthony Hatch, "Hallucinating Networks and Secret Museums: Hito Steyerl on Our Aesthetic Immiseration," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* Vol. 41, No. 2, May 2019, 119-124; Lizzie Homersham, "Hito Steyerl: Duty Free Art," *Art Monthly* issue 411, November 2017; Marcella Lista "Red Alert 2007," in *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive, Films and Installations*. Exhibit Catalogue. Germany: Spector Books, 2020, 178; Catherine A. Steinmann, "Visceral Exposure: Melanie Gilligan, Hito Steyerl, and the Biopolitics of Visibility," PhD diss., (The University of British Columbia, 2015), 59-98.

without a butt cannot sit. It has to take a stand. And a butt without a face needs a stand-in for most kinds of communication" (45).

These jokes, puns, and hyperbolic riffs are not cleanly separable from her more "serious," critical ideas, as Steyerl modulates constantly through overlapping rhetorical modes that her interlocutors rarely bother to parse, much less consider as deliberate effect. As I detail below, this produces serious mis-readings of her work, that attend to the most extreme versions of her ideas without considering how they interact with the aesthetic makeup of her writings, lectures, performances, or videos. The imbrication of artwork and essay is crucial to Steyerl's practice, demanding that her audience attend to the aesthetic makeup of her criticism as much as they valorize the critical impulses of her artwork. Steyerl's most well-known written essay, "In Defense of the Poor Image," for examples, often serves as Steyerl's aesthetic manifesto, an approach that ignores her ambivalence about the poor image's fate in contemporary media or the ambiguities she tracks in its deployment, and swaps her descriptive diagnosis for a prescriptive aesthetics. This is a mistake easily corrected by, for example, visiting the HD lushness of her installation work starting with *How Not to Be Seen*, which makes extensive use of image forms that could hardly be considered "poor," in the sense meant by her essay. Therefore the logic of fitting her critical work and her artworks together is not one of using the latter to undermine the former, but rather begs consideration of how these two threads might be working with each other to produce complexities and nuances that neither can address in isolation. The necessity of using both Steyerl's writings and her artworks as components of one interwoven practice is best seen by turning towards the issue of the documentary image and the relationship between photography, representation and truth.

While I track this nexus around representation in thinking through Steyerl's audiovisual work, another essay that made its way from lectures to *e-flux* to *Duty Free Art*, "Is the Internet Dead," offers a useful microcosm of the problem. Steyerl posits that a moment in the "Romanian uprising in 1989, when protestors invaded TV studios to make history" is when "images changed their function."[10] The essay becomes an overwhelming, comma-stuffed flow of Steyerl's thematic concerns: the proliferation of screens, the invasion of reality by images, the endless manipulation of images in post-production, and the structures of circulation that defined the internet and now exceed it, shaping all forms of life in a fashion we can only hope to detourne for positive ends. Throughout, Steyerl unleashes hyperbole, allegory and metaphor to land her lines: "Cinema today is above all a stimulus package to buying new televisions," (145); "[Cinema was] shot, executed, starved and kidnapped in Lebanon and Algeria" (146); "[the internet] is a sphere of liquidity, of looming rainstorms and unstable climates…a space of rōnin of old, the masterless samurai freelances fittingly called wave men and women" (147); "Reality itself is post-produced and scripted, affect rendered as after-effect" (148); "Why not open-source water, energy, and Dom Pérignon champagne?" (151). Steyerl's key gesture here is to force the reader to justify their pushback against her exaggeration and stretched metaphors, overstepping the "reasonable" to expose and unsettle the assumptions that ground the situation of common sense.

The work of using Steyerl's writing as a guide to questioning the givens that her exaggerations expose is an active, interlocutory process. My contention here is that critics do Steyerl a disservice by treating lines like these are either transparent keys to understanding her practice, a way of making criticism fun to read, or as fully grounded arguments. Such

[10] Hito Steyerl, "Is the Internet Dead," *Duty Free Art*, (London: Verso Books, 2017), 143.

engagement declines to attend to the rhetorical work that defines her essays, and consequently cannot determine what devices like hyperbole and allegory require of an audience. Giving Steyerl the status of internationally renowned artist seems to allow her writing to speak for itself, to "stand in" for the critical work necessary to determine its purpose and relation to her audiovisual and installation work.

This status as member of the artworld is also borne out in how her pieces come to exist, their conditions of exhibition. The two films that I discuss in this section and which brought her work to its initial prominence, *November* (2004), and *Lovely Andrea* (2007), premiered at Manifesta 5 in San Sebastien and Documenta 12, respectively, venues for contemporary art in which moving-image media exist happily alongside sculpture, painting, and installation work. While not accompanied by elaborate installations that thematize the films or videos in question, as applied later as in to *How Not to Be Seen...* or as part of the overall structure of the piece as in *Liquidity Inc.* and *Factory of the Sun*, any analysis of the text of *November* and *Lovely Andrea* is necessarily accompanied by an accounting of their origins as gallery works, in which an average viewer might simply stand in a well-lit room in the middle of the day for a few minutes to watches a small, low-quality projection from the other side of the room, or in the case of *Lovely Andrea*, across a balcony:

Figure 4.3 *Lovely Andrea* (Steyerl, 2007) Installation View (ack-online.de, 2007)

Figure 4.4 *Lovely Andrea* (Steyerl, 2007) Installation View (ack-online.de, 2007)

However, while I will return to their status as installation or site-specific works later, in reference to the influence this form has on the videos themselves, it's possible to over-emphasize the importance of these origins in evaluating the piece. Steyerl's most well-known written text is probably "In Defense of the Poor Image," originally published in e-flux magazine and collected in her book *The Wretched of the Screen*. The most famous intervention of the essay is an argument for the political and aesthetic potential of moving images that have been ripped from their original, potentially auratic contexts, downgraded to allow for quicker transport across the web and to take up less space on hard drives, and copied enough times that their data has begun to irreversibly decay.[11] Further, Steyerl has hinted elsewhere that she deliberately releases all of her work onto the dark web, in the hopes that it will circulate, and that its most portable and accessible version, the ripped, downloadable file, is as authentic its original installation. This digital ubiquity—*November*, *Lovely Andrea,* and another early feature *The Empty Center* (1998) are available on UbuWeb, Artforum.com has hosted *How Not to Be Seen* since 2016, and *Liquidity Inc.* and *Factory of the Sun* are widely available on private trackers like Karagarga—speaks as much to Steyerl's position in the artworld as her presence at Documenta and the Biennales.[12] It is with this dialectic in mind—between the white box of these works' origins and their sustained existence as widely available digital files—that I want to turn to videos in earnest.

November gets its title from its interest in what Steyerl calls "the gestures of liberation after the end of history, as reflected through popular culture and travelling images…when the

[11] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 31-45.

[12] On the significance of the relationship between the site-specific work and its well-traveled digital components, see Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), particularly 81-106, "Bootlegging Experimental Film," and 219-237 "Transmission, from the Movie-Drome to Vdrome."

revolution seems to be over and only its gestures keep circulating."[13] This gap between the real revolution and its circulating gestures is affirmed by Steyerl's title's reference to awkwardness of dating the October revolution, which is known as such only due to the Russian preservation of the Julian Calendar—for most of rest of the world on the Gregorian calendar, the events of the revolution took place in November. This ambiguity reveals a crucial tension that is submerged in Steyerl's work in its evocation of an original revolution that is cloaked in myth and confusion, that may not have taken place in the way it is memorialized. There was never an October revolution, Steyerl's work suggests, it was always already November.

The inheritance of revolution and its memorialization, particularly in Sergei Eisenstein's *October*, defines Steyerl's attitude throughout, signaling her interest in the relationship between film form and the possibility of revolution while explicitly maintaining that the closure of the era of actual revolutions has left revolutionary cinema in a crisis of legitimacy and effectivity. Steyerl activates this heritage through an analysis of the life of her friend Andrea Wolf, discussing three phases in the life of the latter: as a teenager making a feminist martial arts film with Steyerl, years later as guerilla fighter with a women's unit of the PKK, the army of the Workers Party of Kurdistan, and finally as an icon, the martyr known as Sehît Rhoanî, a Kurdish name that Wolf adopted and held when she was killed in 1998 by the Turkish Army. Steyerl moves in the piece's twenty-five minute length through footage from these three phases of Wolf's life: a scene from the martial arts film, a television interview Wolf gave as a guerilla fighter, and a Kurdish demonstration in Germany where protestors hold posters brandished with

[13] Hito Steyerl, dir., *November* (Wien, Austria: Sixpackfilm, 2004), DVD, 25min.

the image of Wolf/Rhoanî as a symbol of resistance.[14] Accompanied by a voiceover spoken by Steyerl that muses on the meaning of Wolf's life in relationship to terrorism, martyrdom, and the uses and abuses of her image, Steyerl emphasizes throughout that the story of these images is the story of her own experience of them, as when she shows the interview with Wolf by placing videotapes in a television set that is filmed from the other end of a room in Steyerl's apartment, showing the viewer both the footage of the interview and her set-up used to view it.

Throughout the deployment of these scenes from Wolf's life and Steyerl's role in it, Steyerl cuts in clips from adjacent works of political cinema, martial arts films, exploitation movies and their overlap: most notably Russ Meyer's *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, the situationist détournement of *La dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?*, Costa-Gavras' *State of Siege*, and Bruce Lee's final film *Game of Death*. Each film tells its own suggestive piece in the story of Wolf's life, as in the case of the Costa-Gavras film, which was cited by members of Germany's Red Army Faction (a group Wolf was rumored to have joined before the PKK) as both inspirational and instructional for their own terrorist activities. While Steyerl leaves much of the determining of the meaning of these excepts to the viewer, preferring to use her voiceover to thematize rather than describe, the montage that compiles them into the film is comparatively patient in the light of her later work, with the excerpt of *La dialectique…* for example, playing uninterrupted for forty seconds before Steyerl interrupts it with footage of Andrea on a motorcycle and intones over its soundtrack that "films take over the duties of the wandering fighter and spread the pictures of the fight without weapons throughout the world."

[14] "November," *I Will Survive Catalog*, http://www.ubu.com/film/steyerl_november.html, T.J. Demos, "Travelling Images," *Artforum*, Summer 2008, 408-413, 473

Situating Andrea's story, mediated entirely through images drawn from a variety of sources, alongside footage from experimental and feature films, Steyerl builds an argument for what she refers to in the film as the "travelling image, wandering over the globe, an image passed on from hand to hand, copied and reproduced by printing presses, video recorders, and the internet." This gesture has been seized upon and thoroughly glossed by Steyerl's interlocutors, such as T.J. Demos, who reads this infinitely expanding circulation of images through the lens of both "Debordian spectacle" and "Deleuzian dispersal," arguing that Steyerl's video urges us to "confront the dissolution" of "distinct filmic elements as they succumb to the endlessly fluctuating economy of images and flexible networks of power that constitute our new digital milieu (Demos, 410)." This argument about the significance of Steyerl's work has become a commonplace, shaping the discourse around her current work as much as it does the pieces it was written to describe.[15] As in the broader discourse around this circulation of images, it is unclear how the mere fact of such multiplication leads to the conclusions that Demos draws, that "now no truth is safe, no identity secure, and no protest incorruptible (10)," *fait accompli* that have become shorthand for Steyerl's practice.

A key section of *November* reveals some of the logic of this connection. Approximately 16 minutes into the video, Steyerl cuts to footage of her marching at night in a crowd of people, holding a candle, draped in a yellow, red, and green scarf, while a male voice says, "The war in Iraq rages as far as Berlin…160,000 Turks live here, a third of them Kurds." The image of Steyerl holding the candle then freezes, as her voice returns, clarifying that "This is me as a Kurdish protestor in a TV documentary." As the motion of the image returns, Steyerl clarifies that she had gone to the protest to film it, but when the director of the documentary saw her,

[15] For examples, see note 9.

knowing of her project, he intervened, giving her the flag to drape around her neck like a scarf, her candle, and the instructions to "look sad and meditative…look as if you were thinking about Andrea." Steyerl goes on to explain that this shot of her was the only one to make it into the final documentary, and that while her analysis of the martyred hero Andrea reveals the expediencies necessary to iconize a human, "there is another pose that is much more problematic, and this is the pose of the sensitive, contained and understanding filmmaker who tells a personal story…but I don't understand anything and this pose is much more hypocrite [sic] than even the crudest propaganda icon." Finally, as a male voice previously identified as a fighter formerly belonging to the PKK describes how truth is the "first to be sacrificed in war" and that any story that is "told straight forward, which is told without contradictions" is necessarily wrong, Steyerl cuts back to the shot setup in her apartment and shows the footage of her at the march composited into the TV she has been using to watch the interview with Andrea. As the footage ends she waves her hand at the person filming, indicating that she's had enough as she smiles and walks towards the camera, her voiceover claiming that "none of us found our way out of the labyrinth of traveling images…not *I* am telling the story, but the story tells me."

Describing this section in detail is important because it precisely articulates the kind of mechanism away from documentary truth that so interests Steyerl, in ways both productive and problematic. For Steyerl, the fact that this clip made its way into the documentary, and that her photographed body can stand in for a person who does not exist, as a pose, reveals a core of uncertainty at the heart of documentary. What Florian Ebner productively labels "the fatalistically shifting semantics of images" is hinted at by Steyerl's complex montage that attempt to flatten the distinctions between Meyer's exploitation film, her own martial arts footage of Andrea Wolf, and Wolf's icon as a Kurdish martyr, but made explicit by her

revelation of the chasm between what the television documentary purports to show and the reality she describes beneath it.[16]

Steyerl's point is complex, and worth pursuing along a few different paths. First is the claim embedded in the piece's title, which Steyerl refers to consistently in her film, labeling our time as the "time of November," in which both the international solidarity and the artistic strategies of the revolutionary project embodied in *October* have collapsed. As T.J. Demos glosses it, Steyerl's problem becomes then to question "what avenues remain if there is no recourse to preexisting 'truth,' no fact that can't be revealed as subjective viewpoint (410)." The problematic kernel of this argument is its implication of a previous regime of documentary truth that has suddenly been thrown into crisis, whether by the emergence of digital and virtual technologies or merely the march of time. Summoning the image of a past or artistic heritage in which "truth" was safe and secure is both a conservative gesture and a strawman with which Steyerl's interlocutors seek to define her achievements.

Steyerl herself offers a slightly different take that goes down a little easier, arguing in her 2007 essay "Documentary Uncertainty," not simply that there was an old regime of truth that has been disrupted, but rather that the emergence of digital technology has made the uncertainty, the *doubt* that lies at the heart of documentary as a form suddenly and unavoidably explicit. Her intervention lies in embracing this uncertainty as the "core quality of contemporary documentary as such,"[17] instead of trying to dispel doubt altogether. Such a gesture recalls Cavell's claim that

[16] Florian Ebner, "Resurrected Again and Again, Forever, Resurrected Into Something New: Hito Steyerl and the (Negative) Redemption of Images" *I Will Survive*, 83.

[17] Hito Steyerl, "Documentary Uncertainty," *The Long Distance Runner Production Unit Archive*, No. 72, 2007, http://www.kajsadahlberg.com/files/No_72_Documentary_Uncertainty_v2.pdf. Accessed July 1, 2021.

the challenge of the modernist artist is confronting the inherent problems of their medium suddenly rendered explicit—that what lay unspoken at the heart of any form of art has suddenly become the core task of the artists intervening in their medium.[18] Indeed, it can be tempting to assume with Steyerl that inheriting the doubt "as old as documentary itself (2)," and centering it in her practice is less a historical claim and more of an artistic gesture appropriate to the 21st century modernist documentarian.

However, I also want to emphasize the particularity of the kinds of truth claims that Steyerl wants to make, and dig deeper into the problems within. As pointed out by Tom Gunning, Dan Morgan, and others, the capacity for films or photographs to tell the truth depends entirely on what one takes them to be telling the truth *of*.[19] In Steyerl's sequence from November described above, it is certainly true that the images are deceptive if they are taken as the TV director means them to be, but if they are meant to validate the presence of Steyerl at the parade, shorn from context that might tell us why, it's hard to countenance the claim that someone is being deceptive here. The fact that photographs *can* be faked is far from evidence of their lack of trustworthiness: it is in fact an indication of the opposite. The fact that photographs have to be *faked* in order to tell an altered truth is a testament to their powers of reference, to provide information that, while it must be verified, can relate the truth of an event, or the accurate details of a person's face. As Ricky Jay, conman and card sharp, related towards the end of his life, the

[18] Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 176.

[19] Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 23-41, Daniel Morgan "Aesthetic Form and Ethnographic Discourse," in *Looking with Robert Gardner* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016) 36-37, see also Kris Paulsen, "Rogue Pixels: Indexicality and Algorithmic Camouflage" *Signs and Society* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2018), 412-433.

relationship between trust and the con is an intimate one, an inseparable bond: "You wouldn't want to live in a world where you can't be conned, because if you were, you would be living in a world with no trust. That's the price you pay for trust, is being conned."[20]

While this might help to resolve the difference between the falsifiable narratives documentaries employ and the photographic images that lie at their basis, the latter are still in doubt via Steyerl's insistence on the unreliability, the *special* uncertainty of digital images, in their virtuality, lack of substance, or capacity to circulate. This is where I think the power of Steyerl's artworks complicate the kinds of claims she wants to make about them, a theme that I will continue in looking forward from *November*, though the problematic is present already in *November* itself. What Steyerl presents as the special permit of "the time of *November*" is a globalization of image making that has shorn objects from their referent, freeing them to inhabit all kinds of new semantic shells, as in the image of Andrea Wolf cum Sehît Ronahî. However, the paradox that emerges becomes that Steyerl wants to insist that digital images demand a feature of photographic images that has been embedded in them from the beginning—the need for verification, the necessity of "checking" the facts they might contain by evaluating them against the evidence from our world. The slippery dual nature of these images suddenly clicks into place when we realize that what Steyerl presents as a problem—these images cannot speak truth on their own—is not only not novel, but actually a testament to the power of the digital photograph, that even potentially shorn of its indexicality it *can* be verified at all. In attempting to distinguish the digital from the analog via the principle of verification, Steyerl has inadvertently shorn up the partial claim to truth that digital photographs share with analog ones:

[20] Errol Morris, "Seven Stories about Lying," *The New York Times,* August 6, 2009. *https*://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/06/seven-lies-about-lying-part-2/ Accessed July 1, 2021.

The presence of Andrea Wolf in her video interview as a member of the PKK cannot tell us everything it might seem to promise, but if we use digital photographs to orient ourselves towards features of the world, we can discern that within them lie provisional truths.

This recalcitrant core of the photograph's capacity to refer or attest to a feature of the world becomes programmatic in Steyerl's next major work, *Lovely Andrea*, first shown at Documenta 12, in 2007. If *November* is marked by Steyerl's attempt to trace the derivations of the images of Andrea Wolf and the veracity of the stories they come to embody, *Lovely Andrea* is instead indexed to the pursuit of a single photograph, a picture of Steyerl in the Japanese rope bondage known as *nawa shibari*. Steyerl, the film reveals early on, modeled a single time for a bondage shoot while in film school in 1987. Adopting the false name Andrea for the shoot as a kind of homage to her friend, Steyerl decides two decades later to see if she can track down the images of her body in rope bondage, searching for the film's titular one-off spread in a specialist pornographic magazine.

The form of the resultant piece seems to be in part triggered by the kind of paradox that Hal Foster has argued is emblematic of Steyerl's approach to her visual and written work (Foster, "Smash the Screen"). While *Lovely Andrea* makes repeated claims as to the difficulty, if not sheer impossibility of finding the image Steyerl pursues in the flood of the hundreds of thousands of similar photographs made that year, distributed across countless platforms, Steyerl and her team find the photograph in about thirty-six hours.[21] What Steyerl envisioned as a long-term and potentially fruitless "*recherche du cul perdu,*" in the film's terminology, the impossibility of finding ones past self in the multiplying flux of images and platforms becomes a

[21] Michael Connor, "Hito Steyerl's 'How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File'" *Rhizome.org* May 31, 2013. http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/31/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen/. Accessed July 1, 2021.

piece of evidence of the fortitude of the link between self and image and the potential difficulty of pulling these things apart.

However, as numerous writers on the film have pointed out, Steyerl is less concerned with actually obtaining the photograph—once she has it, she is decidedly uncurious about its details—than she is on using the pursuit to unfold a wide-ranging exploration of the subjects that the photograph captures or opens up. The core of the story is didactic, exploring the story of Japanese rope bondage's origins in the martial arts, its use in torturing and transporting prisoners of war, and its 20th century evolution into an erotic art practice. Towards the end of the video it is revealed that the woman who has been serving as Steyerl's translator, Asagi Ageha, is a bondage model herself, justifying in part the ease of Steyerl's access to the luminaries of the tight-knit world of rope bondage pornography production whose musings compose the matching thread to a didactic history. Suspended between these two poles, Steyerl mixes in a frenetic blend of references whose presence insists upon punning or topical relationships to forms of bondage, consisting largely of pop-culture references like Spiderman or the X-Ray Specs but including references to the torture of prisoners in Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib. Unlike *November*, these references are inserted in clips of a few seconds, often overlapping and mixed with each other rather than preserving the integrity of sound-image relations to maximize what Pablo Lafuente calls Steyerl's montage modus operandi, "wit."[22]

This wit, Steyerl's mastery over the unexpected juxtaposition, and her omnivorous and irreverent grasp on source material, is part of what allows for a semi-consensus as to the meaning of *Lovely Andrea* for Steyerl's critical interlocutors. In contrast to *November*, which seemed to

[22] Pablo Lafuente "In Praise of Populist Cinema. On Hito Steyerl's *November* and *Lovely Andrea*," in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl* ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 88.

lament the gradual dissolution of any photograph's documentary integrity, *Lovely Andrea* revels in detournement, finding "joy" in montage's capacity to use images to work against their "original function (Lafuente, 89)," liberation in the "degraded connection between sign and referent (Demos, 473)," and the political potential in warning that the "documentary image…[that] may now find itself both taken hostage and in bondage."[23] Just as Asagi argues for the productive tension that exists between bondage and freedom in her own modeling and performances, Steyerl's piece according to this critical view suggests that the dissolution of reliability in the image and the flattening of forms of referral between media can and must be the basis for a renewed creative political engagement with image-making.

As with *November*, I want to pull back from this view by insisting upon the sharp differences in media that Steyerl elicits through her approach to both cinematography and montage, and their very different solicitations to the audience in terms of the kinds of truth they purport to access. Aside from the thematic potential of Steyerl's red-herring drive to find the originals of her bondage shoot, the film does not ultimately succeed in flattening out the mediatic difference that supposedly free photography from its curse of indexicality and provide it with novel potential. Again, as in *November*, the revelation of a discrepancy between truth and appearances—here the dual life of Asagi as shy translator and bondage model—relies upon a strawman of documentary logic that insists information unfold in a linear manner lest it be deliberately deceptive. In this logic, waiting until the end of the film to reveal that Asagi is herself a bondage performer betrays only an audience's unwarranted assumptions about her role.

[23] Thomas Elsaesser, "Lovely Andrea," in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl* ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 108.

Further, to the extent that Steyerl depends upon her thematic montage achieving a kind of political grip on the world outside of the film, she depends upon photographic reference as a technique of form as much as any other mode, as when she repeatedly inserts the famous image from Abu Ghraib of Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh being tortured. What Steyerl in fact relies upon, far more than the "degraded connection between sign and referent," is the multiplication of references that photographic images can bear, their capacity to take on additional meanings *without* losing their capacity to refer to the time, place and context of their origins. This is made explicit by Steyerl's reliance on the traditional documentary technique of the filmed interview, a mode that makes up the bulk of the piece as she talks primarily to Asagi and the pornographers who might have information about how to find the image from the "Lovely Andrea" shoot. In addition to bookended interviews with her producer who grills Steyerl (appearing visibly on-screen for the only time in the film, less the shots from her bondage shoot) about her feminist bona-fides and the purpose of her project, the vast majority of the film is these men and Asagi talking on camera, filmed in low-quality digital video.

An objection might be made here, that Steyerl's video simply instrumentalizes the presence of these figures, lifts them beyond the purpose of referring to the presence of real people in particular places and times, and uses them simply as generators of information that can provide grist for Steyerl's witty mill. This has some truth to it. Like the search for the photo, the pornographers and Asagi are more means than ends, and Steyerl's montage continually interrupts them with the pop-culture references in an apparent effort to level the playing field between their world and the intermedial world of the video. Nevertheless, the amount of screen time *Lovely Andrea* gives to the interviews with the men of the Japanese bondage scene is a testament to her interest in allowing for character and personality to leak through the particular transparency

afforded by even degraded cinematography. Thomas Elsaesser notes in his review of *Lovely Andrea* that his viewing experience is one of gradually becoming disgusted with these men and their behavior, noting their fondness for a libertine era now past in which they largely pressured and deceived their models into posing and rarely paid them at all. Crucially, what Elsaesser attributes this to is the kind of affective qualities of personality that are captured by Steyerl's cinematography, the details of expression in dialogue that grounds the talking head as a form.

This continual presence of bodies on screen is a testament to the connection between photography and people in Steyerl's work. While her constant insertion of references from animated cartoons, punk songs, and Hollywood movies lifts the thematic material into a general consideration of the multiple possible meanings of bondage, her continual deployment of the talking-head interview grounds the piece in the power that even degraded digital video has in attesting to the presence of a person in a room, regardless of the veracity of any of the words that come out of their mouth. This is also the meaning of Steyerl's bookended interviews, which provide information about the personality of the persona guiding us through the piece, and which, staged or not, are suffused with contextual information that shapes the experience of the piece beyond its supposed purpose as a joyful liberation of the image from its capacity to refer.

Steyerl also closes her piece with an extended clip of Asagi performing in bondage, accompanied by the latter's voiceover discussion of her relationship to bondage performance as one of self-expression and empowerment. Here Steyerl indulges briefly in the logic of photographic or cinematographic pornography, in which the co-presence of a real person and their performance becomes part of the allure. However, more direct than the eroticism is the video's fascination with portraying what happens to Asagi's body in its performance. Suspended from a complex arrangement of ropes, Asagi's body becomes formalized and expressive as a

bearer of intention and meaning differentiated from "normal" movement like walking or talking. At the same time, Steyerl's detailed filmic capture allows for the audience to see Asagi's body as a the carrier and distributor of weighty flesh, shifting a complex network of muscles in order to move from one pose to the next. Tracing how the performance emphasizes the gradual evolution of bodily motion tilts Steyerl's interest towards the relationship between camera and body that evolved alongside cinema itself, marked early and obsessively by Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne Jules-Marey in their chronophotographic analyses of people in movement. Recalling *November*'s interest in the martial arts, and looking ahead to Steyerl's interest in the dancing body compelled by techno beats in *Factory of the Sun*, Steyerl's relationship to the body is one of captivation by the detailed tracking of skilled and complex movements as much as the bearer of narrative information.

However, *Lovely Andrea* also devotes a fair portion of its run time towards the development of Asagi as a character, even emphasizing her demureness by showing her unwilling to read the smutty captions to Steyerl's photoshoot. Thus, much of the shock the reviews of the piece register have to do with their perceived distinction between the character of Asagi the translator and her performance as a bondage performer, revealing again the importance of narrative over photography's supposedly novel instability as the key to documentary doubt. The character of Asagi demonstrates in Steyerl's piece that while photographs present a form of uncertainty as to the kinds of truths we can discern from them, people can operate much the same way.

This gap in the knowledge supposedly communicated by the technology of photography versus narrative is helpfully turned on its head by the closing lines of Elsaesser's review. Differing from Demos and others' assumptions that the issue at play in Steyerl's work is the

decaying bond between "sign and referent," Elsaesser writes that Steyerl's real interest is "the uncanny power of [documentary] images, prized from their context, but trading on their authenticity." As I claim above in indicating that the effect of Steyerl's montage is to both point out and exacerbate the multiplication of possible meanings of her source material, Elsaesser's argument is closer to the mark in terms of Steyerl's aesthetics and the reality of documentary images. What is less clear is the novelty of this dilemma. While Elsaesser claims that the documentary image "came into filmmaking as a weapon in the struggle for truth and justice" this is hardly tenable in the face of the evidence of photography's historical role in the maintenance of state power and war. A cursory glance at the history of the documentary image is enough to reveal, at the least, a powerful ambiguity of both its aesthetic and political status. From the role of orientalism in the Lumière brothers' actuality films to the salvage ethnography of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* to the pressures of the colonial project in Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*, the documentary image has been stalked by its role in the perpetuation of power, empire, and the hierarchies of the social order right from its origins.[24] The issue of the truth and effect of documentary images is never a given but a matter of aesthetic and political judgment, one that relies not on the ontology or technology of the apparatus but the way in which any image is woven into the lives of makers and viewers. Steyerl's real achievement in *November* and *Lovely Andrea* is in demonstrating again and again that the persistent gap between what a documentary

[24] Katherine Groo, "The Maison and its Minor: Lumière(s), Film History, and the Early Archive," *Cinema Journal* Vol. 52, No. 4, Summer 2013, 25-48; William Guynn, "The Art of National Projection: Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*," in *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, New And Expanded Edition,* ed. Jeannette Sloniowski and Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 64-80; Scott MacKenzie, "The Creative Treatment of Alterity: Nanook of the North," in *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic*, ed. Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 201-215.

image purports to show and what it actually shows still reluctantly attests to the fact that it does *actually* show *something*—or someone.

Seeing *November* and *Lovely Andrea* as instantiations of documentary recalcitrance rather than documentary decay allows for a shift in how they're read as artworks more generally. Predictably, this reading reveals a comparatively traditional humanism at play in Steyerl's dedication to recording the gestures of the body—smoking, talking, marching, looking at photographs or suspended from ropes—in their particularity. Less predictably is the role these gestures and their accompanying humanism play in generating the force behind the political critiques of media that Steyerl unfolds in her text, voiceover or montage. In showing Andrea Wolf as a feminist martial arts performer or Steyerl herself as a demonstrator, by allowing the viewer to watch Asagi translate live for Steyerl or perform in rope bondage, Steyerl builds up characters from capturing and presenting the ways individual bodies inhabit the world. Presenting these characters as falsified or betrayed, Steyerl emphasizes the dangerous, tragic, or erotic potential of documentary uncertainty but does so by depending on the camera's capacity to build a connection between viewer and performer. The images that Steyerl exploits have the force they do in her arguments because of their representational qualities, in spite of their degradations or falsifications. It is not merely the rhetoric of Steyerl's story of Andrea that makes the viewer care about the fate of her traveling image, it's the way Wolf's hair moves in the wind or the last glimpse of the headlight on her motorbike disappearing behind a ridge as she rides into the sunset.

Green Screens: How Not to Be Seen, a Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File

In my analysis above of *November* and *Lovely Andrea*, I spend considerable time elaborating on the simple point that despite Steyerl's reputation as someone exposing and reveling in the falseness of documentary's images capacity to refer to things and people in the world, her work makes extensive use of, and depends upon a certain kind of veracity in, photographic images of people. This is because in the trajectory of her career, particularly after *Lovely Andrea,* but increasingly since 2013, has seen Steyerl carve away the photographic elements of her work in favor of virtual forms of image composition. The exception is bodies.

This process of winnowing away the purely photographic elements of her pieces is a programmatic and thematic key to her 2013 work *How Not to Be Seen, A Fucking Didactic .MOV file*. The piece works through five sections, referred to as "lessons," that offer strategies or rationales for how something can avoid being captured by vision or, particularly, photographic resolution: "How to Make Something Invisible for A Camera," "How to Be Invisible in Plain Sight," "How to Become Invisible by Becoming a Picture," "How to Be Invisible by Disappearing," and finally "How to Become Invisible by Merging Into a World Made of Pictures." These sections are accompanied by two text-to-speech style robotic voices with vague British accents performing a characteristically "witty" Steyerl script, one that nestles a joke suggesting that an easy way to disappear is to be "female and over fifty," alongside the idea that "most important things want to remain invisible. Love is invisible. Capital is invisible. War is invisible." Throughout the text Steyerl mixes jokes, absurdities, puns, and pointed commentary with a history of the resolution target, painted squares of concrete in the California desert used by the United States government "to calibrate aerial photographs and videos."

This resolution target is one of three sites for the visual component of Steyerl's video, the other two being a green screen studio environment and a fully virtual architectural rendering of an apartment building and commercial complex. The pace of the video, as suggested by the titles of its sections, is one of escalation and then imbrication, with each site developed individually before collapsing into each other. The first and final sections, for example, present themselves as composed of different angles on the same events. In the first, Steyerl, in medium shot, carries a model of a resolution target off screen to demonstrate the voiceover's lesson of the camera's limits of frame. The final section shows the same event with Steyerl in extreme long shot, revealing to the viewer that the green screen that bound the frame in the first is a large prop on the resolution target in the desert—we can see Steyerl's off-screen destination from the first section.

Figure 4.5 Still from *How Not to Be Seen...* (Steyerl, 2013)

Figure 4.6 Still from *How Not to Be Seen...*(Steyerl, 2013)

The device of the green screen is the indicator of a rule of image compositing that drives the primary formal structure of *How Not to be Seen*. Throughout the first half of the piece, Steyerl focuses the attention on herself as a performer, as she demonstrates various "ways of becoming invisible" using the green screen as both malleable background and as symbol of the logic of compositing. Frequently in the first three sections, Steyerl will composite video and images onto the square of the resolution target while leaving the green screen itself intact as a

blank bright background, inverting its logic. Steyerl also exploits its more traditional use of providing a moving-image background for an in-studio performance, first demonstrating the actions of swiping and scrolling in front of a series of white balance and greyscale calibration charts in the second lesson before actually applying green face paint in the third, thus compositing the image onto her face, producing the context for some of the videos most-circulated screengrabs:

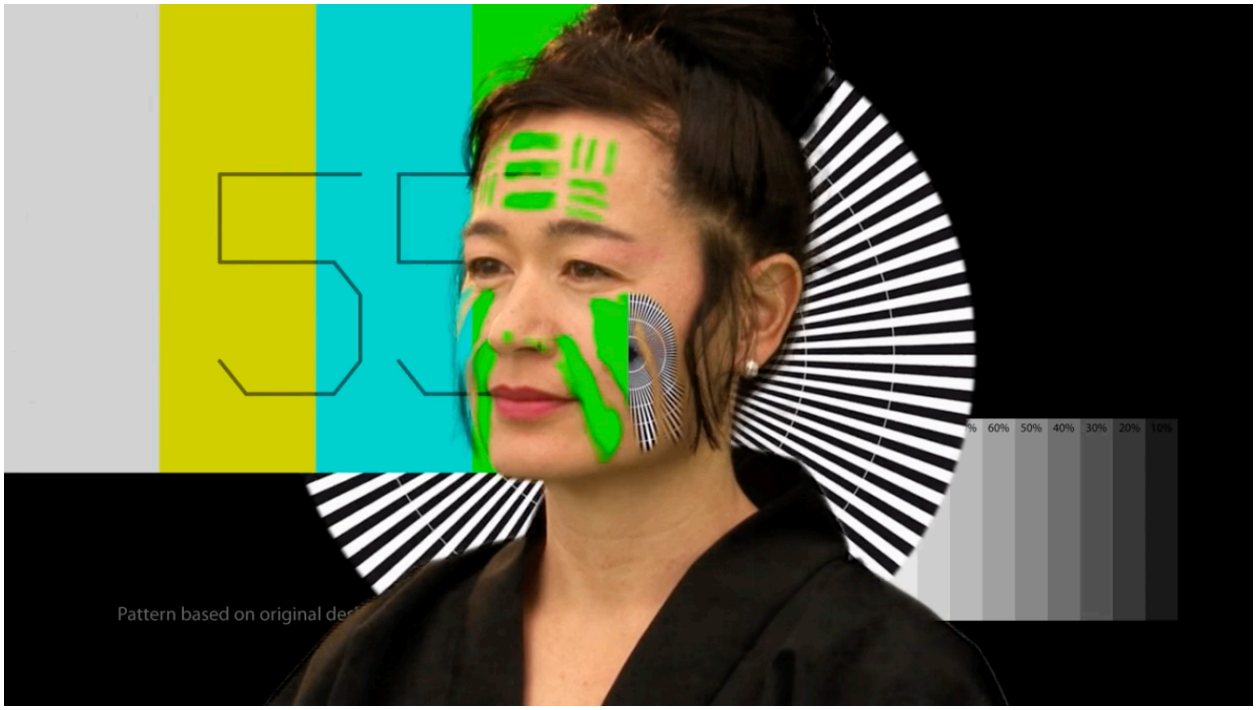

Figure 4.7 Still from *How Not to Be Seen...*(Steyerl, 2013)

After this sequence Steyerl largely disappears from the visual world of the video, but introduces new performers for the green screen backgrounds, a series of bodies wearing black clothes and black or white boxes on their heads meant to represent pixels, groups of figures in green niqabs, and finally a series of bodies wearing green spandex body suits. Steyerl's deployment of image compositing grows more complex as she introduces these figures, showing them not only in front of a photographed background but inserting them into the 3-dimensional

world of the architectural rendering. Further, as the video shows the green screen in its desert setting on the resolution target itself, along with its camera and crane operators, Steyerl often composites some of the figures in niqabs and bodysuits into the footage rather than filming the performers on the desert site itself. This process renders them partially transparent, likening them to the white-outlined human figures from the architectural rendering, both of which can be seen—on and off the desert green screen—as Steyerl further drives home her effort to merge the worlds she has displayed for the viewer.

Figure 4.8 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013)

Figure 4.9 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013)

Figure 4.10 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…*(Steyerl, 2013)

Figure 4.11 Still from *How Not to Be Seen…* (Steyerl, 2013)

Critical engagement with *How Not to be Seen…* emphasizes the overlap between image and reality that Steyerl depicts in closing her video. Liz Linden and Susan Ballard argue that Steyerl's collapse of different registers articulates the logic of the Anthropocene, in which both argument and art need "to associate freely, strategically, and eclectically (98)," in order to

capture the interconnectedness and "scale invariance (108)" of an image-strewn epoch. As Alexandra Delage has it, Steyerl is following theorist Vilém Flusser in arguing that images have escaped their traditional bonds and are now "released from the frame bounding the screen" and "have laid siege to our reality, 'shaping and affecting people, landscapes, politics, and social systems.'"[25] Moreover, Delage emphasizes that resistance to this regime must take the form of engaging with image technology rather than battling against it. Recalling Steyerl's call to make "doubt" the locus with which the documentary image is registered, Delage argues that to change reality, one "should start with a Photoshop tutorial (77)."

The political potential of accepting this new conception of the image is affirmed in Florian Ebner's take on Steyerl's work as a whole, in his encouragement of her effort to perform what he calls the "(negative) redemption of images," on that accepts the "actual impossibility" and "failure" of the documentary image in its reappropriation. Ebner reads the celebratory tone of the end of *How Not to be Seen* in this light, referring to both the white human figures of the architectural rendering and the green spandex-ed performers as "new images" that embrace their mediated condition and in doing so demonstrate "a way to escape the ponderousness of existing conditions."[26] Further, Ebner argues that it is in the images' capacity for camouflage and opacity rather than their use in "rendering the visible" that reveals "images in all their paradoxes," allowing us to "turn the question of their representation of reality on its head (83)." The suggestion of inversion in which the new image Steyerl creates in merging the worlds of the

[25] Alexandra Delage, "How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV file, 2013," in *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive, Films and Installations*. Exhibit Catalogue. Germany: Spector Books, 2020, 77.

[26] Florian Ebner, "Resurrected Again and Again, Forever, Resurrected Into Something New: Hito Steyerl and the Negative Redemption of Images," in *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive, Films and Installations*. Exhibit Catalogue. Germany: Spector Books, 2020), 81.

architectural rendering, green screens, resolution targets, and variously disguised performers demonstrates both that images have no capacity for revelation and that this is the key to their (negative) power is a clean encapsulation of the logic at the heart of the critical enterprise around Steyerl's work.

And yet, this negative redemption is again complicated by the actual content of Steyerl's work and the affordances of photography that it employs. Ebner's case draws directly from Steyerl's own writings, particularly "Documentary Uncertainty". In "Documentary Uncertainty," Steyerl builds her case around images broadcast by CNN during the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, where a journalist transmitted video live from a cell phone. As Steyerl points out, these images were of such low resolution the only thing viewers of CNN could see were "green and brown blotches, slowly moving over the screen (1)." Steyerl's critical maneuver with these images is in keeping with the argumentative style that marks all of her work, as she embraces these unfocussed images for their truth value, precisely because "these pictures do not really represent anything (8)." Because "representational" or "objectivist" images are subject to the network of "ideological illusion[s]" that capture everyone involved in producing them, they cannot possibly deliver on an objective truth, whereas images that do not represent anything are freed from this burden by their failure to represent anything at all, allowing us to "still speak of truth with regard to them (8)."[27]

Hal Foster has written of Steyerl's method of argument as "less dialectical than paradoxical…this leads her to oscillate between semi-paranoid projections and semi-cynical implosions ("Smash the Screen")." Similarly, art critic Saul Anton has diagnosed Steyerl's

[27] For an analysis of the long history that lies behind claims such as these, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in French Thought* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

writings with an excessive "use of analogy [that] enables critical overreach," and a tendency to invoke "macro concepts not suitable for making fine distinctions ("The Whole is the False")." Importantly, Foster and Anton allow that Steyerl's artwork is more successful than her written arguments, without articulating why. Given the consistency of Steyerl's discursive mode, whether written, spoken, or ventriloquized, it would seem the answer requires delving into the visual language of her pieces. By attending to what her work actually does, we begin to see fissures and contradictions that provide effective counterweights to the paradoxical macro concepts that define her arguments.

Foremost amongst these counterweights is her use of video to capture bodies in movement and performance. While her example of CNN's live broadcast video from 2003 is a clear example of why someone might be tempted to assume a "degraded connection between sign and referent," her actual work almost never resembles something so hard to pick out, and in fact is loaded with crystal clear capture of bodies moving against composite backgrounds, starting with Steyerl's own. While her voice dominates *November*, and she is seen on screen frequently if obliquely (either live or in photographs of her shoot) in *Lovely Andrea*, Steyerl's replacement of her voice with a robotic one is counterbalanced by her front-and-center position during the first half of *How Not to be Seen.* The effect of the video in part depends on the identity between Steyerl's performance in the video what might still be referred to as her "star text," the network of associations that someone familiar with Steyerl's work will bring to their viewing of the work. Steyerl's puckish grin collapses her status as a well-known provocative thorn in the side of an artworld too cozy with finance capital and the state into the text of the video itself, in a method that depends on video capture to attest to the presence of "the real thing," the actual artist in front of her camera.

As in her earlier work, Steyerl's effort to merge the worlds she summons often has the counterintuitive effect of reinforcing the viewer's capacity to distinguish between them. The third "lesson," as described above, features Steyerl applying green paint to her face in front of a green screen, demonstrating chroma key technology's capacity to take over the real estate of her skin wherever paint is applied. In a paradox worthy of Steyerl's style, this effort to demonstrate that chroma key technology can camouflage even the moving human body also allows the viewer to see precisely what is not composited, the parts of her body mediated only by the camera. An effort to merge worlds also depends on demonstrating their separateness.

The same paradox of flattening distinctions applies to the performers that frolic through the video—the body suited, pixel-headed bodies that move from a composite background of the resolution target into the three dimensional rendering, the performers in Niqabs and the spandex-suited green people underneath. While the climax of *How Not to be Seen* demonstrates that both these performers and the white-outlined figures autochthonous to the architectural rendering can move between worlds due to the nature of compositing, Steyerl's video never implies that this renders them functionally equivalent, and indeed the viewer can easily distinguish between human performers captured by the video camera and the virtual figures summoned by rendering technology, even as the former are rendered as transparent as the latter. More importantly, the logic of Steyerl's text in part depends on the viewer's knowledge of a real human performer underneath their "disguise." What Delage refers to as the "low-res army of image proletarians," and what Steyerl's text hints at as "rogue pixels" are in fact performers in less than convincing guises, forming a crucial element of the joke that underpins much of the video. By identifying what are very obviously human bodies as pixels Steyerl plays up the very absurdity that forms

the characteristic overreach of her style, the at once ludicrous and utterly serious suggestions that provoke an audience into questioning what such a collapse might portend.

Of course, provoking an audience into contemplating the absurdities of context collapses is not the same as arguing that such collapses have already occurred, despite the presence of language that states the latter directly. My intervention into the critical discourse surrounding Steyerl's work is to suggest that there is as much provocation in her arguments about the nature of the documentary image as there is in her suggestion that one can disappear by "owning an anti-paparazzo handbag," or "by becoming smaller than a pixel," and the aesthetic makeup of her projects productively insists upon the gap between word and deed. As Steyerl's work becomes more virtual and depends on increasingly complex forms of compositing, the necessity of approaching her work with an eye towards delineating its various registers becomes all the more urgent. It is with this in mind that I turn to *Liquidity Inc.* (2014) and *Factory of the Sun* (2015).

"Be Like Water:" Layering Flows in *Liquidity Inc.* and *Factory of the Sun*

Liquidity Inc. and *Factory of the Sun* mark major developments in Steyerl's work in several ways. While *How Not to be Seen* was initially installed simply as a video at the 2013 Venice Biennale, when it made its premiere in the United States at the Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York in the summer of 2014, it was accompanied by an "architectural environment," that featured props such as the resolution targets and greyscale calibration charts that populate the video. *Liquidity Inc*., originally commissioned for the Bergen Assembly in Norway in 2013 (but as the credits indicate, delivered "8 months after opening") and *Factory of the Sun*, which premiered at the 2015 Venice Biennale, are both accompanied by specific installations that have travelled with them as they circulated the museum circuit.

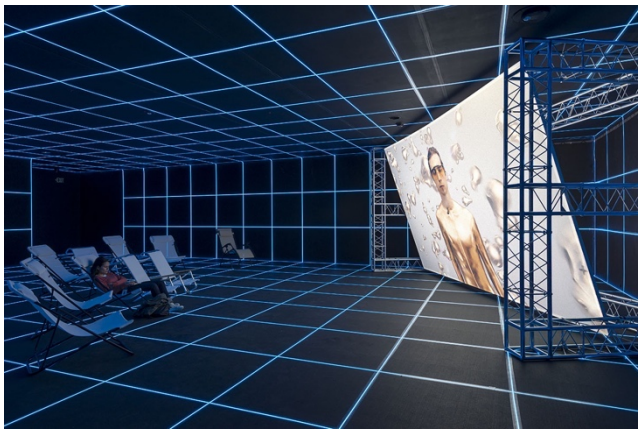

Figure 4.12 *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015), installation view (Photo by Justin Lubliner)

Figure 4.13 *Liquidity Inc.* (Steyerl, 2014), installation view (Photo by Andrew Kreps Gallery)

Though indisputably marked by their lives as blue chip installation pieces, nevertheless the accompanying videos have long since been available online, if in slightly more difficult to access realms than the Artforum page that has hosted *How Not to be Seen* for years.

In addition to the solidification of an elaborate installation to accompany the videos, the other major trends that are accelerated in *Liquidity Inc.,* and *Factory of the Sun* are the displacement of Steyerl's voice and person from the work (she is neither seen nor heard in *Liquidity Inc.*, and featured only in brief snippets in *Factory of the Sun*) and, more importantly, the utilization of chroma-key and other forms of image compositing to build out a complex and layered visual environment. In *Liquidity Inc.,* this visual environment only gradually takes over from a more straightforwardly documented story of Jacob Wood, a former financial advisor turned mixed martial arts fighter and commentator. As in the case of *Lovely Andrea*, *Liquidity Inc.* uses Wood's story and his method of relating it to launch into a series of barely linked segments that unfold various metaphors on the affordances of liquidity, from the financial to the meteorological. In contrast, *Factory of the Sun* develops an absurdist and incomplete narrative that directly implicates the viewer, implying that they are playing a kind of game in which finance capital as embodied in Deustche Bank has accelerated the speed of light, amidst segments of a corporate spokesman defends killing protestors with a drone and dancers in gold-lamé-bodysuits resisting the harnessing of their energy to create more light while in film studios, on location at a decrepit building described as an NSA listening station in "Germania," or composited incompletely into an office building's server room.

While Steyerl's visual or aural presence recedes into the background, in the case of *Liquidity Inc*., she inserts reminders of her authorial hand by presenting chats and emails with person who commissioned the piece and the artists she has contracted with to write text, and particularly, to render the CGI sequences that form the most novel element of the two pieces within the trajectory of Steyerl's work. While both pieces have significant screen time devoted to custom CGI sequences, those in *Liquidity Inc*., are subject to budget constraints described in the

texts and emails resulting in an aesthetic of "flotsam from C4D tutorials," as compared to the bespoke and glossy renderings from *Factory of the Sun*. Whereas the former displays images repurposed from pop culture or the basics of graphics software that exist on clearly delineated planes, subject to fairly basic transformation like color inversions, *Factory of the Sun* opens with a typical two minute sequence in which golden lightbulbs function like atoms in a fractal environment, dissolving and recombining to form shapes and objects like a MacBook Pro, before gradually giving way to the black box studio where the dancers are recorded.

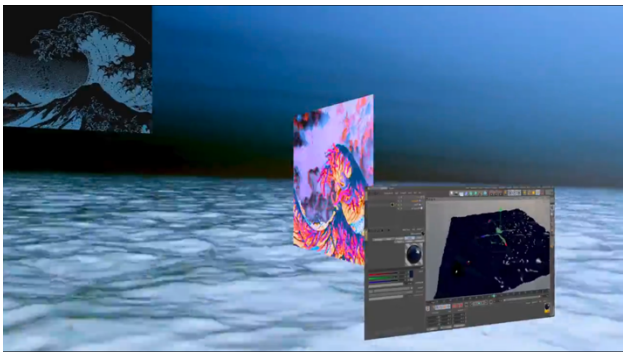

Figure 4.14 Still from *Liquidity Inc.* (Steyerl, 2014)

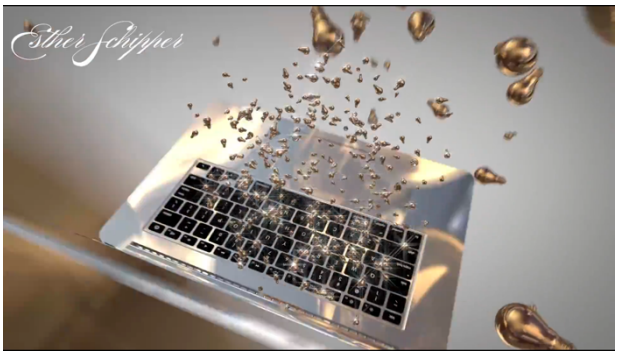

Figure 4.15 Still from *Factory of the Sun*. (Steyerl, 2015)

This aesthetic gap also defines how the performers in each video are composited into their backgrounds. While *Liquidity Inc.,* is initially defined by more traditional seeming documentary footage of Wood's life in MMA, about twelve minutes into the half-hour piece Steyerl introduces a character she refers to as "a crazy weather announcer,"[28] who dominates the

Figure 4.16 Still from *Liquidity Inc.* (Steyerl, 2015)

Figure 4.17 Still from *Liquidity Inc*. (Steyerl, 2015)

[28] Hito Steyerl, "Conversation: Lynn Hershman Leeson and Hito Steyerl," in *Art in the Age of the Internet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 149.

screen time for the remainder of the piece in a chroma-key style reminiscent of *How Not to be Seen*'s early sections, mostly featuring the weatherman figure in front of composite backgrounds, of clouds, water, or maps in clear reference to the most traditional utilization of chroma key technology in nightly news reports. Even when Steyerl blends the weatherman figure with more layered forms of compositing, such as a sequence of Wood sparring, the borders of each image source remain identifiable and fixed, clearly delineated from the world the performers inhabit.

However, in *Factory of the Sun*, the imbrication of the performers with their composited CG environments is considerably more fluid, and makes far more convincing and deliberate use of scale and depth to merge the worlds Steyerl summons. The opening sequence of golden lightbulbs coming together to form objects and then dispersing into either individual bulbs, fragments, or mere specks, forms a motif that recurs throughout the film, as aspects of the environment dramatically decompose and their innumerable uniquely sized shards float throughout the screen, growing larger or smaller as their trajectory carries them along the z-axis, interacting with totally CG environments and those that are inhabited by Steyerl's actors. In one sequence filmed on a shooting range, Steyerl inserts both water and floating busts of Stalin, made of the same gold as the lightbulbs from the opening, which the performer firing destroys with each shot, creating a visual world that mimics the logic of an augmented reality video game, in which real life assets are replaced with CG figures.

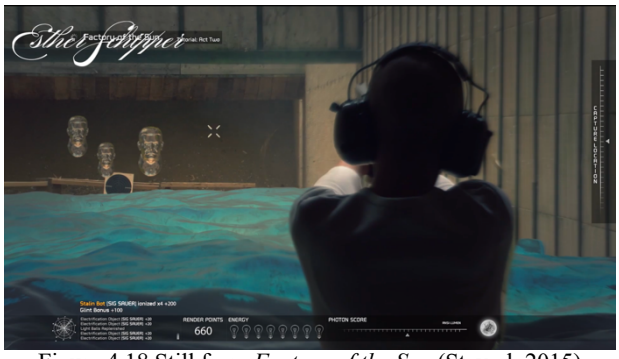

Figure 4.18 Still from *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015)

Figure 4.19 Still from *Factory of the Sun* (Steyerl, 2015)

In general, the logic of inserting human performers into composited environments that I described above for *How Not to be Seen* applies to both *Liquidity Inc.*, and *Factory of the Sun*, despite the latter's more coherent CG world. Again, the contrast between the composited worlds and the performers that inhabit them remains obvious, and grounds the solidity of the connection between the camera and the humans it captures. In *Factory of the Sun*, Steyerl seems to deliberately heighten the contrast even as she uses CGI to more convincingly ape the logics of a world surrounding her performers, by contrasting them to a group of dancers who are fully animated, and both alternates between them and shows them in the same environment. One of the most important distinctions between the two returns to the logic of the bondage performance that closes *Lovely Andrea*, as so much of the live-action footage in the more recent work seems driven by capturing bodily movement—fighting in the case of *Liquidity Inc*., and the near ceaseless dancing of the primary performer in *Factory of the Sun*. In both instances, Steyerl's montage suggests an affinity between the camera and the moving human body, and the former's capacity to capture what makes the latter compelling both in the world and through media.

However, as Steyerl's montage has grown more layered and more virtual, the effects of the human body's coexistence in that world shift in consequential ways. Critical work on these more recent works of Steyerl's have focused less on their reflexivity and questioning of the documentary image, and more towards the idea that Steyerl's work in its diffuse excess forms the only adequate creative response to the structures of contemporary life, whether it be the flows of capital and trade, climate change, neoliberal governance, or the way any of these forces exert

their shaping influence on the art world and its markets and museums.[29] While these assessments often build on earlier critical work on Steyerl that suggests her effort is to represent these forces through the dissolute and counter-indexical image that rejects earlier conceptions of photography, I suggest that considerations of Steyerl's effort to represent contemporary life is wholly compatible with her consistent and programmatic use of digital cameras to capture and represent human bodies precisely *because* of its affinity for affirming the connection between the image and the thing photographed.

Thus reading Steyerl's realist impulses as an experimental filmmaker forges a connection between her work and the others examined in this dissertation. Seen through the model of realism explored throughout, it is through the mechanism of the camera that Steyerl can forge such a powerful imbrication between the human body and the virtual world, neither ignoring its mediation nor severing the connection between sign and referent. Steyerl's works have the grip they do on representing the complexities of the contemporary world through a provocative critical lens precisely due to this realist vein that subtends her virtual image worlds, employing the camera's documentary value in recording and transporting the human body into the necessarily incomplete representations of the capital flows that shape its trajectory outside of the artwork. In using cameras as machines for bringing the moving body into view, Steyerl provides the viewer with a glimpse of their own co-existence with virtuality.

---

[29] See Susanne Gaensheimer, Serge Lasvignes and Bernard Blisteine "Foreword," in *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive, Films and Installations*. Exhibit Catalogue. Germany: Spector Books, 2020), 216-217; Christina Gerhardt and Jaimey Hamilton Faris, "Liquidity Incorporated: Economic Tides and Fluid Data in Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc*." in *Make Waves: Water in Contemporary Literature and Film* ed. Paula Anca Farca (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2018), 11-28; Catherine A. Steinmann, "Visceral Exposure: Melanie Gilligan, Hito Steyerl, and the Biopolitics of Visibility," PhD diss., (The University of British Columbia, 2015). Sven Lütticken, "Postcinematic Essays After the Future," in *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl* ed. Nick Aikens (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 45-62.

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. "The Essay as Form." *Notes to Literature*, Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Aikens, Nick, Ed. *Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl*. Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press, 2014.

Alter, Nora. *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Anton, Saul "The Whole is the False," *Artforum* Vol. 56, No. 7 (March 2018).

Arthur, Paul. *A Line of Sight: American Avant-Garde Film since 1965*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Astruc, Alexandre. "The Birth of a New Avant Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*." In *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Scott MacKenzie, 603-607. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Balsom, Erika. "The Reality-Based Community." *e-flux* 83 (June 2017). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Balsom, Erika. *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

Balsom, Erika. *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea*. Wellington, New Zealand: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2018.

Balsom, Erika. *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013.

Barnett, Daniel. *Movement as Meaning in Experimental Film*. New York: Rodopi Books, 2008.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Barthes, Roland. *Writing Degree Zero*. Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

Bazin, André. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *What Is Cinema* Vol. 1. Translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley, University of California Press: 2004.

Benning, James. "Testing your Patience: An Interview with James Benning." By Scott MacDonald. *Artforum* 46 (September 2007). https://www.artforum.com/print/200707/testing-your-patience-an-interview-with-james-benning-15707. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Benning, James. “The Sight and Sound Interview: James Benning.” By Nick Bradshaw. *Sight and Sound* (October 2013). https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/sight-sound-interview-james-benning. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Bernstein, J.M. “Aesthetics, Modernism, Literature: Cavell’s Transformations of Philosophy.” In *Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Eldridge. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Blaetz, Robin. *Women’s Experimental Cinema: Critical Frameworks*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Burgin, Victor, Ryan Bishop, and Sunil Manghani. *Seeing Degree Zero: Barthes/Burgin and Political Aesthetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

Camper, Fred. “My Writing on Avant-Garde or “Experimental Film.” *Fredcamper.com*. https://www.fredcamper.com/Film/a-gfilm.html. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Cataldo, Jesse. “Review: The Island of St. Matthews.” *Slant* (March 3, 2014). https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-island-of-st-matthews. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Cavell, Stanley. “What Becomes of Things on Film.” *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall 1978): 249-257.

Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Cavell, Stanley. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Cavell, Stanley. *Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, 1979.

Connor, Michael. “Hito Steyerl’s ‘How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File’.” *Rhizome.org* (May 31, 2013). http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/may/31/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen/. Last accessed July 1, 2021.

Cornwell, Regina. “Paul Sharits: Illusion and Object.” *Artforum* Vol. 10 (September 1971): 56-62.

Cornwell, Regina. “Some Formalist Tendencies in the Current American Avant-Garde Film.” *Kansas Quarterly* Vol. 4, Issue 2 (1972): 60-70.

Cornwell, Regina. “Structural Film: Ten Years Later.” *Drama Review* 23 (September 1979): 77-92.

Cornwell, Regina. *Snow Seen: The Films and Photographs of Michael Snow.* Toronto: PMA Books, 1980.

Corrigan, Timothy. *From Montaigne, After Marker*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Danto, Arthur. "The Artworld." *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 61, Issue 19 (1964): 571-584.

Dargis, Manohla. "One of the New York Film Festival's Best Movies Isn't at the Main Event." *The New York Times*. October 6, 2016.

de Duve, Thierry. "Michael Snow: The Deictics of Experience and Beyond." In *Michael Snow: The October Files 24*, edited by Annette Michelson and Kenneth White, 93-122. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020.

de Montaigne, Michel. *The Complete Works of Montaigne*. Translated by Donald M. Frame. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1948.

Demos, T.J. "Travelling Images." *Artforum* Vol. 46, No. 10 (Summer 2008): 408-413, 473

Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991.

Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema.* Berkeley: Tuumba, 2003.

Ebner, Florian, Susanne Gaensheimer, Doris Krystof and Marcella Lista, eds. *Hito Steyerl: I Will Survive, Films and Installations*. Exhibit Catalogue. Germany: Spector Books, 2020.

Eisenstein, Ken. "Hapax Legomena." In *A Hollis Frampton Odyssey,* The Criterion Collection no. 607 (2012): 24-29.

Eisenstein, Ken. "On Tic | Tic On, Optic Antics: The Cinema of Ken Jacobs." *Millennium Film Journal* no. 55 (Spring 2012): 10-12.

Eisenstein, Sergei. "A Course in Treatment." In *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Edited by Jay Leyda, 84-107. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

Eisenstein, Sergei. "Notes for a Film of *Capital*." *October* 2 (Summer 1976): 3-26.

Elder, R. Bruce. "All Things in Their Times." *Cine-Tracts* Vol. 5, no.1 (Summer/Fall 1982): 40-41

Elder, R. Bruce. *Harmony+Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Art Movements in the Early Twentieth Century*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2008.

Elder, R. Bruce. *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006.

English, Darby. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. "'There's Some Leisure in it Too': Kevin Jerome Everson on Labor, Art, and Film." By Dessane Lopez Cassell. *Hyperallergic* (October 24, 2019). https://hyperallergic.com/523764/theres-some-leisure-in-it-too-kevin-jerome-everson-on-labor-art-and-film. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. "Always in the Present Tense." By Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa. *The Brooklyn Rail* (April 2014). https://brooklynrail.org/2014/04/film/always-in-the-present-tense. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. "Of the Ludic, the Blues, and the Counterfeit. An Interview with Kevin Jerome Everson, Experimental Filmmaker." By Terri Francis. *Black Camera* Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fall 2013): 184-208.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. "School is not in Session." By Jarrett Gregory. *Mousse Magazine* 59 (Summer 2017): 206-213.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. "Searching out the Next Vessel." By Aaron Cutler. *Cineaste* Vol. 38, No.4 (2013). https://www.cineaste.com/fall2013/searching-out-the-next-vessel-an-interview-with-kevin-jerome-everson-web-exclusive. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. "Untitled." *Drain Magazine: Black* Vol. 8, No. 1 (2013). http://drainmag.com/kevin-jerome-everson. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. Interview by Jordan Cronk. *Bomb* (April 6, 2017). https://bombmagazine.org/articles/kevin-jerome-everson/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Everson, Kevin Jerome. Interviewed by Deborah Stratman. UIC Gallery 400, April 2, 2016.

Farber, Manny. "Film," *Artforum* Vol. 7 (January 1969): 70-72.

Farocki, Harun and Hito Steyerl. *Cahier #2: A Magical Imitation of Reality*. Kaleidoscope Press, February 2011 (e-book).

Foster, Hal. "Smash the Screen." *The London Review of Books* Vol. 40, No. 7 (April 5, 2018). https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n07/hal-foster/smash-the-screen. Last accessed July 1, 2021.

Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Gardner, Robert, dir. *Screening Room with Robert Gardner: Standish Lawder and Stanley Cavell*. DVD. Cambridge, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2005.

Gehrhardt, Christina and Jaimey Hamilton Faris. "Liquidity Incorporated: Economic Tides and Fluid Data in Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc*. (2014)." In *Make Waves: Water in*

Contemporary Literature and Film, edited by Paula Anca Farca, 11-28. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2018.

Gidal, Peter, and Annette Michelson. "Foreword in Three Letters." *Artforum* Vol. 10 (September 1971): 8-9.

Gidal, Peter, ed. *Structural Film Anthology*. London: British Film Institute, 1978.

Goldsmith, Leo. "Democratic Duty." *Vertical Features*. https://web.archive.org/web/20201024140045/http://www.verticalfeaturesto.com/tonsler-park. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art.* Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968.

Groo, Katherine. "The Maison and its Minor: Lumière(s), Film History, and the Early Archive." *Cinema Journal* Vol. 52, No. 4 (Summer 2013): 25-48.

Gunning, Tom. "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs." In *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, edited by Karen Beckman and Jean Ma, 23-41. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Guynn, William. "The Art of National Projection: Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*." In *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video, New And Expanded Edition,* edited by Jeannette Sloniowski and Barry Keith Grant, 64-80. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013.

Haas, Jeffrey. *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010.

Harakawa, Maya. "Hito Steyerl: Artists Space | March 8 – May 24, 2015." *The Brooklyn Rail* (April 2015): 61.

Harvard University. "Sensory Ethnography Lab." Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences.. https://sel.fas.harvard.edu. Last accessed March 1, 2020.

Hatch, Ryan Anthony. "Hallucinating Networks and Secret Museums: Hito Steyerl on Our Aesthetic Immiseration." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* Vol. 41, No. 2 (May 2019): 119-124.

Homersham, Lizzie. "Hito Steyerl: Duty Free Art." *Art Monthly* 411 (November 2017): 38.

Hoolboom, Mike. "Deborah Stratman Introduction." *mikehoolboom.com*. September 17, 2010. http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=79#essay_495. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Hoolboom, Mike. "The Illinois Parables." *mikehoolboom.com*. http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=79 - essay_490. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Hudson, David. "NYFF 2017: Kevin Jerome Everson's Tonsler Park." *The Criterion Daily* (October 6, 2017). https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5016-nyff-2017-kevin-jerome-everson-s-tonsler-park. Last accessed July 24, 2021

James, David. *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

James, David. *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Jameson, Fredric. "Marx and Montage." *New Left Review* 58 (July/August 2009): 109-117.

Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in French Thought*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.

Jenkins, Bruce. "A Case Against 'Structural Film.'" *Journal of the University Film and Video Association* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1981): 9-14.

Jenkins, Bruce. "The 'Other' Cinema: American Avant-Garde Film of the 1960s." In *Art and Film since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, 188-215. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996.

Joseph, Brandon. *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad in the Arts after Cage.* New York: Zone Books, 2008.

Kase, J. Carlos. "Kitch's Last Meal: Art, Life, and Quotidiana in the Observational Cinema of Carolee Schneemann." *Millennium Film Journal* No. 54 (Fall 2011): 72-83.

Kase, J. Carlos. "Reassessing the Personal Registers and Anti-Illusionist Imperatives of the New Formal Film of the 1960s and 70s." *October* 163 (Winter 2018): 49-70.

Kholeif, Omar, ed. *You Are Here: Art After the Internet.* Manchester, UK: Cornerhouse Publications, 2014.

Le Grice, Malcolm. *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*. London: British Film Institute, 2001.

Legge, Elizabeth. *Wavelength*. London: Afterall Books, 2009.

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Network, Hierarchy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Linden, Liz and Sue Ballard. "Art Writing and Allegory in the Anthropocene." *October* 175 (Winter 2021): 88-108.

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Ex-Cinema: From a Theory of Experimental Film and Video*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Locke, John W. “Michael Snow’s ‘La Région Centrale’: How You Should Watch The Best Film I Ever Saw.” *Artforum* Vol. 12 (November 1973): 66-71.

Lois, Mendelson, and Bill Simon. “Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son.” *Artforum* Vol. 10 (September 1971): 46-52.

Lukács, Georg. “On the Nature and Form of the Essay.” In *Soul and Form*, translated by Anna Bostock, 1-19. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1974.

Lupton, Catherine. *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*. London: Reacktion Books, 2005.

MacDonald, Scott. *A Critical Cinema.* Vols. 1-5. Berkeley: University of California Press 1988-2006.

MacKenzie, Scott. “The Creative Treatment of Alterity: Nanook of the North.” In *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic*, edited by Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport, 201-215. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Mendelson, Lois. *Robert Breer: A Study of His Work in the Context of the Modernist Tradition*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981.

Michelson, Annette. “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* Part 1.” *October* 2 (Summer 1976): 27-39.

Michelson, Annette. “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital* Part 2.” *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 82-90.

Michelson, Annette. “Toward Snow.” In *Michael Snow: The October Files 24*, edited by Annette Michelson and Kenneth White, 1-18. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020.

Michelson, Annette. *On the Wings of Hypothesis: Collected Writings on Soviet Cinema*. Edited by Rachel Churner. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020.

Moir Jr., Michael A. “’The pause before the soufflé falls’: MacNeice, Auden, and the Travel Book as Idyll.” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 39, No. 2 (2016): 162-179.

Monk, Philip. “Around Wavelength: The Sculpture, Film and Photo-Work of Michael Snow from 1967 to 1969.” In *The Michael Snow Project: Visual Art 1951-1993*. Toronto: The Art Gallery of Toronto, 1994.

Montero, David. *Thinking Images: The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema* (New York: Peter Lang AG, 2012)

Morgan, Daniel. “Aesthetic Form and Ethnographic Discourse.” In *Looking with Robert Gardner*, edited by Rebecca Meyers, William Rothman, and Charles Warren, 31-49. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016.

Morris, Errol. “Seven Stories about Lying.” *The New York Times* (August 6, 2009). *https*://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/06/seven-lies-about-lying-part-2/. Last accessed July 1, 2021.

Mouilpied Sancto, Christian de. “Podcast for a Pandemic.” *Performing Arts Journal* 128 (2021): 75-80.

O’Pray, Michael. “Framing Snow.” *Afterimage* 11 (Winter 1979): 57-61.

Osterweil, Ara. *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014.

Pattison, Michael. “Berlin 2016 “The Illinois Parables” and “Invention”.” *Roger Ebert.com*. February 22, 2016. https://www.rogerebert.com/festivals/berlin-2016-the-illinois-parables-and-invention. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Paulsen, Kris. “Rogue Pixels: Indexicality and Algorithmic Camouflage.” *Signs and Society* Vol. 6, No. 2 (Spring 2018): 412-433.

Pesch, Katrin. “Deborah Stratman’s *The Illinois Parables* (2016): Intellectual Vagabond and Vagabond Matter.” In *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality, and Technology*. Edited by Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams, 121-140. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.

Peterson, James. *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde Cinema.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994.

Pierson, Michele. “The Accessibility of the Avant-Garde: Talk About American Experimental Cinema.” *Discourse* Vol. 40, no.1 (Winter 2018): 3-29

Pink, Sarah. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE: 2009.

Pinkerton, Nick. “Short Take: The Illinois Parables.” *Film Comment.* November-December 2016.

Pipolo, Tony. “Irony of Ironies.” *Artforum* (September 25th, 2017). https://www.artforum.com/film/tony-pipolo-on-projections-at-the-55th-new-york-film-festival-71193. Last accessed July 24, 2021

Plante, Mike. “Deborah Stratman.” *Cinemad.* http://www.cinemad.iblamesociety.com/2006/12/deborah-stratman.html. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Rabinovitz, Lauren. *Points of Resistance: Women, Power and Politics in the New York Avant-Garde Cinema 1943-1971*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Ratner, Megan. “Abstraction through Representation: Interview with Kevin Jerome Everson.” *Film Quarterly* Vol. 71, No. 3 (Spring 2018): 58-64.

Rist, Peter. “La Région Centrale.” In *Guide to the Cinema(s) of Canada,* edited by Peter Harry Rist, 188-189. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Rodowick, D.N. *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Rodowick, D.N. *What Philosophy Wants From Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Schonig, Jordan. “Contingent Motion: Rethinking the ‘Wind in the Trees’ in Early Cinema and CGI.” *Discourse* Vol. 40, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 30-61.

Scott, A.O. “Review: ‘The Illinois Parables’ Soothes and Inflames Feeling About America.” *The New York Times*. November 16, 2016.

Sheehan, Rebecca. “Stan Brakhage, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Renewed Encounter with the Everyday.” *Screen* Vol. 53, no.2 (Summer 2012): 118-135

Sheehan, Rebecca. *American Avant-Garde Cinema’s Philosophy of the In-Between*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Simon, Bill. “A Completely Open Space.” *Millennium Film Journal* nos.4-5 (Summer/Fall 1979): 93-100.

Sitney, P. Adams. "Tone Poems: On the Films of Nathaniel Dorsky." *Artforum* Vol. 46 (November 2007): 340-347.

Skvirsky, Salomé Aguilera. *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Snow, Michael. “A Letter to Thierry de Duve.” In *Michael Snow: The October Files 24*, edited by Annette Michelson and Kenneth White, 123-132. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2019.

Snow, Michael. “Conversation with Michael Snow.” *Film Culture* 46 (Autumn 1967): 3-4

Steinmann, Catherine A. “Visceral Exposure: Melanie Gilligan, Hito Steyerl, and the Biopolitics of Visibility,” PhD diss. Vancouver: The University of British Columbia, 2015.

Steyerl, Hito. “A Sea of Data: Pattern Recognition and Corporate Animism (Forked Version).” In *Pattern Discrimination: Appich, Chun, Cramer, Steyerl*, 1-22. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Steyerl, Hito. “Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life.” *e-flux* 30 (December 2011). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/30/68140/art-as-occupation-claims-for-an-autonomy-of-life/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “Conversation: Lynn Hershman Leeson and Hito Steyerl.” In *Art in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Eva Respini, 148-156. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Steyerl, Hito. “Documentary Uncertainty.” *The Long Distance Runner Production Unit Archive* No. 72 (2007). http://www.kajsadahlberg.com/files/No_72_Documentary_Uncertainty_v2.pdf. Last accessed July 1, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “Epistolary Affect and Romance Scams: Letter from an Unknown Woman*.” *October* 138 (Fall 2011): 57-69.

Steyerl, Hito. “Freedom From Everything: Freelancers and Mercenaries.” *e-flux* 41 (January 2013). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/41/60229/freedom-from-everything-freelancers-and-mercenaries/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” *e-flux* 10 (November 2009). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective.” *e-flux* 24 (April 2011). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “Is the Museum a Factory?” *e-flux* 7 (June-August 2009). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/07/61390/is-a-museum-a-factory/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy.” *e-flux* 21 (December 2010). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67696/politics-of-art-contemporary-art-and-the-transition-to-post-democracy/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “Techniques of the Observer: Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation.” *Artforum* Vol. 53, No. 9 (May 2015): 306-317.

Steyerl, Hito. “The Institution of Critique.” *Instituto Europeo Para Políticas Culturales Progresivas* (January 2006). http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en accessed 5/14/2020/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. “The Language of Things.” *Instituto Europeo Para Políticas Culturales Progresivas*. June 2006. http://eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Steyerl, Hito. *Duty Free Art*. London: Verso Books, 2017.

Steyerl, Hito. *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.

Stratman, Deborah. "An Interview with Deborah Stratman." By Mike Hoolboom. *Mikehoolboom.com.* http://mikehoolboom.com/?p=79#essay_116 . Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Stratman, Deborah. "Bio." *Pythagoras Film. http://www.pythagorasfilm.com/bio.html*. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Stratman, Deborah. "Deborah Stratman by Pamela Cohn: Sound, image, espionage, and methods of control." By Pamela Cohn. *BOMB*. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/deborah-stratman/ Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Stratman, Deborah. "Deborah Stratman Uses Illinois History To Examine Ideology, Exodus and Divinity." By Alex Teplitzky. *Creative Capital* (August 13, 2020). https://creative-capital.org/2020/08/13/deborah-stratman-uses-illinois-history-to-examine-ideology-exodus-and-divinity/ Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Stratman, Deborah. "Interview with Deborah Stratman." By Julie Perini. *INCITE!* February 2011. http://www.incite-online.net/stratman.html. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Stratman, Deborah. "The Illinois Parables: Deborah Stratman on her histories of the land." By Erika Balsom. *Sight & Sound Online*. October 10, 2016. https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/deborah-stratman-illinois-parables. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Sullivan, Dan. "Review: The Island of St. Matthews." *Film Comment* (March 5, 2014). https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/review-the-island-of-st-matthews-kevin-jerome-everson. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Takahashi, Tess. "Experimental Screens in the 1960s and 1970s: The Site of Community." *Cinema Journal* Vol. 51, Issue 2 (Winter 2012): 162-168.

Taylor, Paul. *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016.

Testa, Bart. "An Axiomatic Cinema." In *Presence and Absence: The Films of Michael Snow 1956-1991*, edited by Jim Shedden. Toronto: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995.

The Film Group, dirs. *The Murder of Fred Hampton*. 1971; Chicago, IL: Chicago Film Archives. Electronic File. http://www.chicagofilmarchives.org/pres-projects/the-murder-of-fred-hampton-1971.

Turvey, Malcolm. "The Child in the Machine: On the Use of CGI in Michael Snow's 'Corpus Callosum'." *October* 114 (Autumn 2005): 29-42.

Vassilieva, Julia. "Capital and Co.: Kluge/Eisenstein/Marx." *Screening the Past 31: Cinema Between Media* (August 11). http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-31-first-release/capital-and-co-klugeeisensteinmarx. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Vidokle, Anton and Hito Steyerl. “Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time.” *e-flux* 82 (May 2017). https://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/134989/cosmic-catwalk-and-the-production-of-time/. Last accessed July 24, 2021.

Walley , Jonathan. *Cinema Expanded: Avant-Garde Film in the Age of Intermedia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Walley, Jonathan. “The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film.” *October 103* (Winter 2003): 15-30.

Wees, William. *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Wees, William. *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Film*s. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993.

Williams, Jakobi. *From the Bullet to the Ballot: The Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party and Racial Coalition Politics in Chicago*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

Youngblood, Gene. *Expanded Cinema*. New York: Dutton, 1970.

Zinman, Gregory. *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020.