

knowledge of what had happened and why. In *Chile, la memoria obstinada*, the country is transformed into a haunted house, an uncanny world that is at once familiar—easily recognizable as daily life—and strange, as the unseen specters of the horrors and the unsettled ghosts of those murdered and disappeared hover over all. As the two generations of Chileans begin to recall their experiences and talk about their lives in the aftermath of the coup, there is a sense of the possibility of release from the belated trauma that keeps returning and is silently structuring their lives.

Throughout these last two chapters, I show the ways in which each filmmaker uses the film medium in an attempt to find a new ethics of recorded image and speech that can acknowledge the risks of representing histories such as American slavery, the European Shoah, and the Chilean coup while confronting the transhistorical enormity of their impact. Despite the acknowledgment of the gaps between event, memory, and words spoken, artists and historians continue to try to speak into the silence and emptiness of those gaps. In the end it is the task of the artist and thinker, who must always take the risk of failure, to try to say something into the nothing.

What distinguishes these experimental approaches from most of the mass-produced spectacles of catastrophic historical events we have become so familiar with is that they are no longer guided simply by the naive promise of a better world that will come if we surround ourselves with constant reminders of our crimes. Rather, these films create an ethics surrounding the use of memory and experience that insists that our understanding of the past, each time it returns, continues to deepen and become more complex. It is an ethics that insists that history cannot be disconnected from our experience of the present and gives us the agency to intervene in that present in order to actively imagine our future.

## 1. Shards: Allegory as Historical Procedure

Method of this project: [literary] montage. I needn't *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*

Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. Now I feel nothing; it has stopped, has perhaps sunk back into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will rise again?

—MARCEL PROUST, *Swann's Way*

*Switches on tape recorder.* KRAPP: Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. (Pause) The eyes she had! (Broods, realizes he is recording silence, switches off. Broods. Finally) Everything there, everything, all the—(Realizes this is not being recorded, switches on.)

—SAMUEL BECKETT, *Krapp's Last Tape*

The incorporation of recorded sounds and images into artworks has shifted the ways in which artists have understood the movement of time and the uses of memory. In these works, physical objects—specifically audiotape and motion picture film—produce new perceptions of the relationship between the past and present and the construction of history. I briefly trace a shift from an interplay between the ephemeral

and subjective apprehension of the past as suggested by Proust's notion of involuntary memory in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time) to one complicated by an engagement with a moment that has been turned into an object by being recorded and stored in one moment in time and then experienced at another. This is just what occurs in the films *Eureka* by Ernie Gehr (1974) and *Dal polo all'equatore* by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi (Italy, 1986).

Samuel Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* (1957), which features the tape recorder as mechanical repository of memory, stands in between Proust's literary representation of involuntary memory and Gehr's use of actual cinematic artifacts to create a historical memory as a multiplicity of temporal moments experienced simultaneously and linking past and present. Further, Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, placed in relation to these works, suggests possibilities for ways in which objects, once thought meaningless as a result of the passage of time, can be reactivated to produce new meanings in another moment. Allegory, as Benjamin maintained, opened the possibility for a new historical practice that comes out of a relationship between subjective memory and the interpretation of the physical apprehension of objects in the present. In his conception of historiography, the past is understood through a doubled reading in which the meaning of an event is created as a relation between its occurrence in the past and its significance to the present. The use of physical objects—the detritus, documents, and artifacts that remain—works to embody such a relation as they signify the shifting meanings and value that an object had in the past and has in the present. This was Benjamin's conception of how to move the emphasis of historiography away from representational reflectionism or the individual psychological identification with past people and events toward an active process of understanding the past in terms of the present situation, which is always in transformation. Benjamin's idea was to move away from a totalizing representation of history as it progressively moves into the present. This notion of history as active process rather than an epistemology engages history as a creative force that holds the possibility for political and aesthetic intervention in the present.

In both Proust's early-twentieth-century novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* and Beckett's midcentury play *Krapp's Last Tape*, the main characters are artists who at the end of their lives are examining their pasts to understand the relationships between the passage of time and their creative processes. For Proust, memory is an experience that happens to one. It is an uncontrollable operation in which the power ("magnetism") of a "dead moment" may or may not travel up to consciousness. How, when, and why this occurs, one cannot control. Proustian involuntary memory is a chance experience that is plastic and can be shaped in any way necessary to produce an aesthetic experience of the present. Such memory as a referent for the real is tenuous at best and only gains substance when re-created through aestheticized means—for Proust's Marcel, the process of writing is the "search for lost time." For Krapp, however, an artist who lives in an age of the mechanical reproducibility of moments in time through photographic and audiographic devices, memory becomes an object

that can be reproduced and made to occur at any time and at will. In the tape recordings of his own voice, Krapp hears himself in past moments. He switches on the past to be replayed exactly as it was the moment it was recorded. Krapp is forced to move between an indexical imprint of a past moment as it was occurring and his own perceptions and understanding of it in the present. Throughout the play, Krapp switches on his tape recorder, listens, turns it off, rewinds the tape, and listens again. Through the accumulation of recorded tapes over the years, he is able to move voluntarily across time, selecting memories at will.

For Krapp, memory is not an autonomic experience that is attracted to the magnetic field of the present, as Proust suggests in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. Rather, memory is substance, endless ribbons of ferrous-oxide-coated tape that bursts into voice when Krapp commands his machine to move the tape across the electromagnetic sound heads of the tape recorder. Unlike the narrator in *Swann's Way*, who encounters memory in the smell and taste of a bone china teacup and sculpted "scallop shell-like petites madeleines," Krapp is first encountered sitting at a table with old cardboard boxes and recording tape hanging out of them like so much debris that has been thrown out. Krapp himself is in the middle of it all, a human ruin, disheveled, unshaven, clothes in tatters. He eats a banana, throws the peel on the floor. This is not a room; it is a garbage dump. Like a garbage collector, Beckett's Krapp can be seen as the embodiment of Walter Benjamin's figure of "the ragpicker" (which Benjamin found in Baudelaire), who is the most provocative figure of human misery:

"Ragtag" [*Lumpenproletarier*] in a double sense: clothed in rags and occupied with rags. "Here we have a man whose job it is to pick up the day's rubbish. . . . He collects and catalogues everything. . . . He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by industrial magic." (*The Arcades Project*, [J68.4], 349)

#### Mechanical Memory

In the play, Krapp begins to pick through the boxes, looking for tape spools through which he can resurrect a past. This garbage constitutes Krapp's memory. Nothing else exists except Krapp's deteriorating body and his boxes of tapes. Only when he picks a tape, plays it, and the recorder revivifies it is there something else—another moment of time.

The spools of tape are transformed from so much garbage to a time machine in which the past moment, recorded on the tape, is superimposed on the present moment. The present multiplies. No longer is the inert tape a metaphor for the linear passage of time—beginning at the head of the tape, ending at its tail—rather, the past of its recording and the moment of its being listened to come together to form a

present that is at once made up of discrete elements *and* their composite. In the following scene, Krapp puts on a tape, switches on the machine, and listens to himself speaking thirty years earlier:

Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check in the book, but it must be at least ten or twelve years ago. . . . Hard to believe I was that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the Aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins*) And the Resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins*). (*Krapp's Last Tape*, 15-16)

Here we watch Krapp in the present, listening to his voice from thirty years earlier, commenting about a tape he made twelve years before that. The tape has produced a juxtaposition of three moments in time simultaneously. This is produced not by the subjectivity of a chance memory à la Proust but through the intervention of a mechanical object. Although Krapp's interpretation of what he hears is as subjective as Marcel's interpretation of a memory that he involuntarily recalls, Krapp's ability to hear and rehear—endlessly—exactly what he said thirty years ago makes his memory at once involuntary (Krapp has to hear whatever is on the tape, like it or not) and ephemeral, but also connected to the world of material referents. While in the tape recorder and playing, the spool of tape is part of a machine that produces meaning and has value. But the moment Krapp rips the tape from the recorder and throws it to the floor to join the banana peel, the tape spool returns to its status as detritus. The spool becomes indistinguishable from any other one, and its value indiscernible from anything else around it.

In the shift from the chance operation of involuntary memory to mechanically reproduced memory, Beckett is able to produce a life history as a scene of multiple temporal moments simultaneously. The past and present are not a progressive movement from one to another but coexist as a constellation of moments that together constitute the present. As the play unfolds, we experience the present of Krapp listening to his tapes, the present of the moment of the tape's recording, and the present of the play's performance.

*Krapp's Last Tape* shows not only how mechanical reproduction changes spatial and temporal possibilities for relationships between past and present but also how objects shift in meaning and use value from one moment to the next. As we will see, mechanical reproduction produces an object of memory and also a commodity whose use value shifts in its passage from blank tape or film to valued archival material to useless garbage.

Benjamin (as does Beckett) asks his readers to contemplate the possibility that the relationship between past and present can be revealed in objects whose value as commodity and meaning in the present moment have been lost, but then found once again in the dialectical relationship between what meaning the object held in the past (when it had commodity value) and the contemplation of why it has lost its value in the present. A renewed interest comes from the relationship between the different meanings

the object had in the past and the ones it has in the present. That is to say, an object's present meaning is produced through a superimposition of the different meanings of the same object from two different points in time. This allows the reading of an object as simultaneously past and present and is what Benjamin defined as "allegorical representation."

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin tries to develop a mode of historiographic imagination in which the archaeological examination of antiquated, discarded, or forgotten objects can become the means for finding historical truth through the process of understanding why and how they lost value through the passage of time. Benjamin suggests that to explore what an object from the past means in the present is to turn that object into a text that has at its center an imagining subject who finds new possibilities for its meaning. Like the shifting meanings of commodities in relation to their changing value over time, the subject's changing position over time also transforms the meaning of the object. For modern artists, the use of discarded, mechanically recorded images and sounds has allegorical possibility because they remain unchanged while the original context for their existence passes out of visibility. The temporal untranslatability of the object becomes the embodiment of present meanings and is generative of new possibilities for significance. In his exploration of the antiquated objects that he found for sale in the twentieth-century replicas of nineteenth-century Paris arcades, Benjamin wrote of these objects as being meaningful and at the same time having no meaning at all.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin demonstrates this process of allegorizing objects of the past as an activity of working through the conceptual problems of integrating the changing meanings of an object as it passes through time. He describes this as a creative act that is embodied in the complex figure of the *brooder*, who like the allegorist is someone

who has arrived at the solution of a great problem but then has forgotten it. And now he broods—not so much over the matter itself as over his past reflections on it. The brooder's thinking therefore bears the imprint of memory. . . . The brooder's memory ranges over the indiscriminate mass of dead lore . . . like the jumble of arbitrarily cut pieces from which a puzzle is assembled. (*The Arcades Project*, [J79a,1; J80,2], 367-68)

The brooder sifts through the random detritus of the past, tormented by his own inability to remember what any of it means. He attempts to decipher dead knowledge, now fragmented and meaningless, with little value to the present and with no guarantee that the bits and pieces will add up to anything. Nonetheless, the brooder is still intent on the activity of making some structure of meaning out of its chaotic mess.

The relationship between the figure of the brooder and the artist who works with found, discarded objects, trying to reactivate their meaning for the present, becomes irresistible. Identifying the political potential of art in his own time, Benjamin makes the case for surrealism as the embodiment of the generative and even revolutionary

possibilities within aesthetic practice. Writing about André Breton and the French surrealists, Benjamin claims that they were

the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded” in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to become extinct. . . . No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can suddenly be transformed into revolutionary nihilism. (*Reflections*, 181)

Benjamin argues for the deeply political nature of an art practice like surrealism as a field on which irrational and noncontiguous connections between decaying, valueless objects and transforming historical conditions release energies that spark new forms of awareness.<sup>1</sup>

Although not usually associated with traditional surrealist cinema, the films I discuss in this chapter, particularly *Eureka*, *Dal polo all'equatore* (From Pole to Equator), and *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America*, show how certain avant-garde film practices parallel Benjamin's conception of surrealist allegory. Each of these films is the result of the artist's active and creative engagement with the cinematic materials from the past that have lost the value they had in the period when they were made. As brooders and cine-ragpickers, the filmmakers engage lost images, contemplating the strips of film with the hope that they can once again come to have meaning for the present. As the films aesthetically activate these images, they begin to signify from both moments in time—often simultaneously. For Benjamin and these contemporary filmmakers, this aesthetic activity of rereading, rethinking, and reworking such material holds the possibility not only for a new way of exploring the past but also for a politically engaged artistic practice.

The invention of the motion picture at the end of the nineteenth century created the possibility of recording moving photographic images from which identical reproductions can be created, allowing them to exist indefinitely and in many different places at the same time. As film has reached the end of its first century of existence, early motion pictures can begin to be seen as a form of fossil or ruin that, like Benjamin's arcades or Beckett's audiotapes, is ripe to be read allegorically, in that films can produce a simultaneous relationship between the moment of filming and a later moment in which they are viewed. At the end of the twentieth century, it is no coincidence that works of cinema begin to appear that use the discarded and lost cinematic objects from the early part of the century. These contemporary works of cinema use mechanically reproduced images from another time, which, when projected for those who have no connection to that time, produce new possibilities for a re-membering of the past in the present. The artist is able to reinscribe new meanings onto old, once-discarded images by producing two simultaneous images out of one. Of the allegorist, Benjamin writes:

Through the disorderly fund which his knowledge places at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if it fits together—that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. The result can never be known before-hand, for there is no natural mediation between the two. (*The Arcades Project*, [J80,2; J80a,1], 368)

The allegorical use of archival and discarded film in the so-called found-footage film has been a central genre of cinematic exploration for the American avant-garde in the postwar period. Practiced by many of its most important filmmakers, much of this work consists in the reediting of such material, making new films out of old footage, or incorporating the old findings into the filmmakers' own material shot in the present.

The American surrealist and collagist Joseph Cornell worked closely with several of the most important figures of the postwar avant-garde and, according to P. Adams Sitney, “exerted a considerable influence on” Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, and Jonas Mekas, as well as Stan Brakhage and Larry Jordan, both of whom were also involved in the production of some of Cornell's films (*Visionary Film*, 347). Cornell's first found-footage film, *Rose Hobart* (1939), uses footage from the Hollywood tropical adventure film *East of Borneo* by George Melford (1931), starring the actress Rose Hobart. Cornell focuses on Hobart's expressions and gestures in relation to the exotic jungle environment. That Cornell later added *Tristes Tropiques* to the film's title—a clear reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss's 1955 book of the same name—gives the remade film an even stronger allegorical bent.<sup>2</sup> Other major figures who began working with found film materials that can be linked to this tradition include Bruce Conner (*A Movie* [1958], *Cosmic Ray* [1961], *Report* [1963–67], *Crossroads* [1976]) and Jack Smith (*No President* [1968]). Like Cornell, Smith and Conner were collagists, known largely for their work in other media, who came to use film as a way to engage elements of mass culture. Smith, a performance artist and central figure of the postwar New York avant-garde theater, appropriated elements of Hollywood B films to create alter egos and to worship his personal movie star idols Yvonne De Carlo and Maria Montez. In *No President* Smith used a found documentary on the life of Wendell Willkie in an extraordinary allegory for the tumultuous 1968 U.S. presidential election.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the late 1950s, Bruce Conner, a San Francisco-based collage artist associated with the West Coast beat arts scene, began using found materials from dramatic films, newsreels, documentaries, and industrial educational films to create a series of short montage films that recontextualize film footage to create bleakly ironic allegories of the emerging militarist and consumer culture of postwar America. Ken Jacobs has been known primarily as a filmmaker with a large and tremendously variegated body of work. He began collaborating with Jack Smith, who was the featured performer in Jacobs's early films such as *Little Stabs of Happiness* (1959–63), *Blonde Cobra* (1959–63) and *Star Spangled to Death* (1957–2003). In another area of his work, Jacobs's use of found film emphasizes the reexamination and reworking of footage from early cinema to reveal other possibilities for

perceiving the footage (see chapter 2 for my detailed reading of his *Urban Peasants*). For example, refilming Buster Keaton's short film *Cops* (1922), Jacobs masks off certain sections of the film frame, drawing attention to other areas of the image that generally go unnoticed. He works to reveal other possibilities for perceiving the footage. As he writes of his own film, *Keaton's Cops*:

We become conscious of a painterly screen alive with many shapes in many tones, playing back and forth between the 2D screen-plane and representation of a 3D movie-world, at the same time that we notice objects and activities (Keaton sets his comedy amidst actual street traffic) normally kept from mind by the movie star-centered movie story.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in one of his most influential films, *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), Jacobs uses a ten-minute found film of the same name from 1905, which has been attributed to D. W. Griffith's cameraman Billy Bitzer. Rephotographing each frame separately, Jacobs extends the film to over ten times its original length, making his version 110 minutes long. Beginning by presenting the film as it originally appeared, Jacobs then repeats it, showing different permutations of the original, this time emphasizing the material and nonrepresentational elements that make up the image. By enlarging aspects of the frame, allowing the film to lose its registration in the gate of the projector, and slowing down its movement, Jacobs turns the rephotographed film into an exercise in the dissolution of narrative emplotment of the film's images to reveal other possibilities for cine-narrative based on the abstract and purely temporal elements of the cinematic experience. As Jacobs has written of his film:

I wanted to show the actual present of film, just begin to indicate its energy. . . . I wanted to "bring to the surface" . . . that multi-rhythmic collision-contesting of dark and light two-dimensional force-areas struggling edge to edge for identity and shape . . . to get into the amoebic grain pattern itself—a chemical dispersion pattern unique to each frame, each cold still . . . stirred to life by a successive 16–24 f.p.s. pattering on our retinas. (New York Filmmakers Cooperative, *Catalogue 7*, 270–71)

### Eureka

Starting his work as a filmmaker in the late 1960s, Ernie Gehr began making films that, like those of Ken Jacobs, were rigorously materialist in the ways they explored the elements of the film medium and its apparatus—the camera, lens, light, film stock, and the illusion of movement. In a search to find an ontological basis for how meaning is made in cinema, Gehr engaged the cinematic apparatus, not simply as a tool to represent something else, but to look at how the medium is activated by the world around it. Like *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*, Gehr's early films such as *Reverberation* (1969), *History* (1970), and *Serene Velocity* (1970) explore the more sensual aspects of the cinematic

experience by moving away from the purely representational possibilities of the medium to explore the energy of light from the projector, the power of the illusion of perceived motion, and the granularity of the photographic emulsion. Unlike Jacobs's films, however, Gehr's early films may seem more visceral than intellectual, working toward the possibility of creating an ecstatic or sublime experience of the pure materiality of the medium. The works in this period by both Jacobs and Gehr can also be seen as an integral part of the minimalist anti-illusionist aesthetics that were central to modernist art practices in the painting, sculpture, dance, music, and theater of the late sixties.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly all of Gehr's films evoke a consideration of the past as integral to the movement of time, particularly in his films that document the changing urban landscape of New York City and San Francisco, such as *Reverberation*, *Still* (1971–74), and *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1991). With *Eureka* (1974), a new strain in Gehr's work can be identified in which his exploration of the material elements of the cinematic continues, but alongside the simultaneous exploration of the representation of specific historical events and their temporalities. Along with *Eureka*, his films *Untitled, Part One* (1981), *Signal—Germany on the Air* (1982–85), *This Side of Paradise* (1991), *Cotton Candy* (digital video, 2001), and *Passage* (2003) can be included in this group, each of which takes up specific events or identifiable historical moments. (See chapter 4 for my reading of *Signal—Germany on the Air*.)

*Eureka* employs many of the same elements as *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son*. Both use a short film from the earliest period of cinema; both films are rephotographed, and through this, their durations are extended. But the effects of the two films differ in crucial ways. *Tom, Tom* works to reveal new aspects of the footage by abstracting it. Jacobs creates an entirely new set of images that are no longer representational, focusing the viewer on the most physical aspects of the footage: its grain, black-and-white tonal range, graphic elements, and movement through the projector. *Eureka*, on the other hand, is allegorical. It maintains the representational elements of the original imagery, which is seen throughout the film. But because it is slowed down, the meanings of the representations can be read multiply, between past and present, both as a historical artifact and as a commentary on the present. In this sense *Eureka* can be seen as an emblematic work of a new form of cinematic brooding.

The film uses found footage from an extinct genre of early cinema known as *actualities* (Figure 2). They were nondramatic films that often depicted exotic and rarely seen phenomena from all over the world as recorded by the motion picture camera. These protodocumentaries were popular commodities—and profitable for their producers—that were used as both entertainments and propaganda. Shown widely at the turn of the century in theaters and amusement arcades, actualities had a dual attraction as a demonstration of the new technology of cinema and a chance for viewers to see places, objects, and events they had never before seen.<sup>6</sup> The creation of *Eureka* came about when Gehr found such a film in a box of discarded 16 mm films. He recalls that the unattributed reel of film was undated and untitled, and suspects it was shot between 1903 and 1905; he calls it "The Market Street Film."<sup>7</sup> In this film, a

camera was mounted on the front of a streetcar, and filming commenced as the trolley trundled down Market Street in San Francisco until it reached the car's terminus, the Embarcadero ferry launch on the shore of San Francisco Bay. The original strip of film that Gehr used was about five minutes long when projected at eighteen frames per second. As the car moves forward toward its destination, we see a view of the daily life of San Francisco's main area of commerce before the great earthquake of 1906. The film presents a deep-focus image of the length of the entire street. Our gaze is directed into the illusionistic depth of the screen as the car and camera move along the length of the street (Figure 3). As in quattrocento perspective in Renaissance painting, the viewer, through the lens of the camera, is placed at the center of the image. The vanishing point of this two-dimensional image is the center of the screen. In the original footage, the view of San Francisco is seen as an integrated whole connecting the mode of representation produced by the trolley and camera with the activity of what was then a modern urban marketplace. As the camera glides smoothly along the trolley rails, we see a vision of urban modernity in the image of well-dressed men and women moving along the sidewalks and going in and out of stores. The emergence of the mechanical age is visible in the mixture of the horse and wagon with cars and trucks.

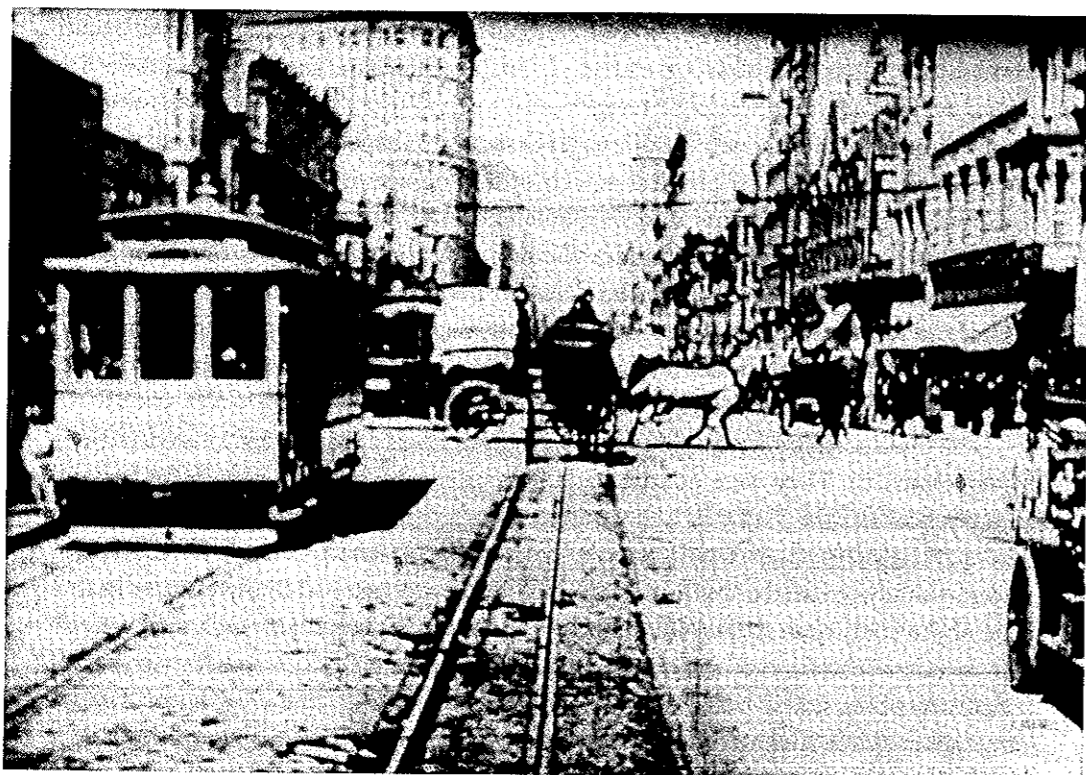


Figure 2. *Eureka* (Ernie Gehr, 1974). Photograph courtesy of Ernie Gehr.

In this footage, the camera itself embodies the shift from the nineteenth-century urban flaneur to a mechanical eye that produces infinitely reproducible "virtual" gazes for anyone with the money to buy a movie ticket. In the Benjaminian archetype, the flaneur is the seemingly unencumbered bohemian poet wandering through the spaces of the cityscape observing the goings on and turning them into poetry or paintings. "In the *flâneur* the intelligentsia pays a visit to the market-place, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer" (*Reflections*, 156). For Benjamin, the flaneur is at once the unencumbered observer and an integral part of the commodification of the culture he observes, as he tries to find a way to turn his observations into a salable commodity. Significant to a notion of twentieth-century flânerie are the cinematic and televisual apparatuses and the commodification of a nonambulatory "virtual" movement in which, instead of walking, the flaneur pays to sit in a seat as the cinematic images move him or her through the city.

In the original Market Street footage of *Eureka*, we see elements of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century flânerie. The camera-trolley takes on the role of the nineteenth-century urban flaneur in what appears to be an unmotivated stroll down an urban street (but is actually highly motivated in direction and function). It is also producing a



Figure 3. *Eureka*. Photograph courtesy of Ernie Gehr.

commodity: the film, which will later be sold as a demonstration of the new mechanical apparatuses of the trolley car and motion picture camera. The footage is also an example of what Anne Friedberg has called a *mobilized virtual gaze* that repositions spectatorship in ways unique to the twentieth century. She has suggested that this kind of “flâneurie of cinema spectatorship offers a spatially mobilized visuality . . . [and] a temporal mobility” (*Window Shopping*, 3). That is, no longer bound by the limits of physical space and real time, the cinema viewer can visually wander through any space, in any time, at any time. In *Eureka*, this temporal mobility allows us to see in the present not only what San Francisco’s Market Street looked like in the past but also Gehr’s allegorizing intervention in the footage as he produces a direct superimposition of past and present.

If the authorless footage produced by the fixed camera on the streetcar is a kind of cyborgian flâneur, producing a commodified, recorded memory, then Gehr embodies the figure of the brooder and allegorist, who seventy years later, while sifting through the detritus of early film footage, looks for the possibility of new meanings for this footage in the present. In *Eureka*, Gehr uses the reproducibility of the film image to rephotograph each frame several times, extending the strip of film—and the trip down Market Street—from six to thirty minutes. Gehr slows down the movement of the image, rephotographing each frame four to eight times. Impressionistically, rather than systematically, slowing down the movement of some frames more than others, Gehr subtly emphasizes movements and relationships between elements in the frame as they interest him. He creates something that looks like a choreographed dance between the objects in the frame and an archaeological analysis of a found object. Like Krapp, who listens to a single section of tape and then rewinds it and listens to it again and again, Gehr wishes to examine the image in each frame—as projected—as a way to explore lost time. As he slows down the movement, viewers are able to see the micro-events occurring around the camera in ways that were not obvious before. Moreover, through this slowing down, we are also aware of the original strip of film, which allows us to examine images of an array of periodized objects such as cars, horses, and wagons, men, women, and children, all in the clothes of that time. As Benjamin suggests in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”:

The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement, but reveals in them entirely unknown ones. (*Illuminations*, 236)

At the same time, the slowness produces a gap between past and present in which we are able to see the distance between then and now. As Gehr explains:

Working with the energy of film implies working with the present, the moment in which the film is being projected on the screen. But the image takes you back in time to something that isn’t there any longer. (J. Skoller, “Sublime Intensity,” 19)

The foregrounding of the present moment of the viewer’s gaze through the slowing down of the image denaturalizes it and pulls the viewer out of the image of the past and into an acute sense of the present, which is the experience of the strip of film moving through the projector. This produces at once a reflexive experience of real time and one that is an image of time. Gehr, however, has complicated this idea even further by producing an actual image—the actual being the experience of a virtual image of the past in the present. As Gehr says of *Eureka*:

The slowing down, it’s a tension for me between still photographs and movement. It’s almost like robotic movement. It’s still and it’s moving, it’s still and it’s moving. . . . It’s on the verge of existence and nonexistence in a way. It’s an era that is a century old, and no matter how much I slow it down, it’s not there, it’s not on the screen. There are just these fragile indications, light and shadows, these splatterings of grain that give you some photo-memory of what was once there. (J. Skoller, “Sublime Intensity,” 19)

The start-and-stop pulsing from the slowing down of the image also produces another form of movement on the screen in addition to the forward movement of the camera-trolley. The gentle start-stop pulse also shifts our gaze from illusionistic depth to the material surface of the screen.

The trace of daily life from a day in 1905 is also moving across the screen in concert with the camera moving into the frame. One becomes aware of this simultaneous movement into the screen and across it, as a moment during the industrial revolution in which the intersection between human beings and the machines they have created appears to diverge. Each seems to have a life of its own. The relation between man and machine is key to Gehr’s work, and to this film in particular. Gehr has said that his own work to some degree has proceeded from

acknowledging existence; not just the existence of people, which of course is very important, but also the existence of objects, including cinematic phenomena: the character of film, the ribbon of film that carries all these images, the character of the projector, the energy it sprouts out. (J. Skoller, “Sublime Intensity,” 18)

This is a robotic flâneur with its camera-trolley eye moving unswervingly and observing the chaotic swarming of human beings, horses and wagons, cars and trucks, all of which are moving in all directions, forward and backward and in and out of the frame. This contrast reveals the entropic nature of urban society. It is a symphony of graphic movement, and only the machines—like the streetcar locked firmly in its tracks and the movie camera with its film locked in the camera gate, with loops properly formed, moving at approximately eighteen frames per second—seem able to bring order to this image. *Eureka* affirms Benjamin’s supposition that “evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an

unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man" (*Illuminations*, 236–37).

What is seen by the repeat printing of each frame, which produces the slowing stop-start motion of each one, is of a "different nature," creating an image of time not seen by the naked eye. There is a sense of being able to observe something for a moment that is normally unseen. What has become inert through the passage of time springs to action through Gehr's intervention. This is an experiential dynamic in which the image seems to come to life as if from a cryogenic stillness. This stillness into movement reveals an essential quality of cinema's illusionism. In a persistence of vision as successive still frames hold on the retina, the stillness of each frame, a frozen moment of time, thaws.<sup>8</sup> In *Eureka* the frozen moment of each frame becomes an image of the dead. When it moves, the image is momentarily reanimated and produces an image of the present. The people are moving mechanically, reanimated for a moment in the present, then freezing again, mortified, returning to the past. Gehr's frame-by-frame reprinting process short-circuits the phi phenomenon (the other physiological phenomenon of the human brain that creates the illusion of the continuous movement of successive still frames).<sup>9</sup> By repeating each frame, Gehr makes that sense of temporal elision impossible and opens the gap between the past of the original film and the present of Gehr's rephotography. What is so moving about this experience is not so much the reanimation of a past moment but the awareness of temporal space that opens between the past and present moment of our viewing.

*Eureka* is a film without sound. The images move on the screen as silent apparitions embodied in the light, but with no solidity. The people and objects in the image, long dead or destroyed, hover silently in the present, the full color palette of their past now limited only to pure white, translucent grays, and inky blacks—a soundless trace of lives lived. As Benjamin wrote, "Living means leaving traces" (*Charles Baudelaire*, 169). For the viewer in the theater watching *Eureka*, soundlessness is the sound of the trace. At the same time we see the deterioration of the original strip of film. Scratches, gouges, and dirt particles interrupt the image. We see firsthand the effect of time as it has corroded the original film strip. The scratches on the film imply past projections, suggesting past moments when people gathered together to watch these same frames pass in front of the light of the projector. This history (deterioration) of the original film strip has been preserved, revealing it as a document and archive of the film's existence. In the presence of the strip of film, the slow changes that occur can work to challenge our attention; the length of time it takes to watch the film at once produces boredom—real time passing—and the hallucinatory sensation of obsessive visuality in which one feels an amplified awareness of the act of perception. Such sensation is a heightened sense of the present moment, which is placed in a dialectical relationship with the elemental pastness of the original strip of film. The binaries past/present, still/motion, life/death, and thought/sensation become blurred in the experience of *Eureka*.

The possibility that actively thinking the present through an object from the past will produce new meanings of the present is most important to Benjaminian allegory.

Rather than using antiquated objects to produce a mythic present, giving the illusion of a redeemed past, as in messianic notions of history, the materiality of the object in decay produces the present as a cumulative ruin.

*Eureka* is allegorical in that it represents neither past nor present but is rather a field on which references to both moments in time can be produced by the viewer. Even without knowing the specific street shown in the film, it is possible for one to sense in the image that the relationship between what was new in 1905—the motion picture camera, the moving trolley car, the chaotic bustle of the modern urban street—expresses a utopian desire to embrace modernity as something progressive. This desire is embodied in the turn-of-the-century city represented through the progressing image of the camera-trolley moving—inexorably—forward. This movement forward might be seen as the figuration of redemptive history, a transcendental infinity embedded in the vanishing point deep in the image. In Gehr's rephotographing of the footage, however, the illusion of eternal progress is belied by the actual surface of the deteriorated image, which alludes to the dystopian reality of the highly technological urban present with its crumbling infrastructures and gross economic imbalances. Not only does this kind of visual allegorization reveal the coexistence of the past in the present, but in other terms, it releases what was *virtual* in the present of that past—the unrealized collective fantasy of the *potential* of urban modernity as the fulfillment of an earlier utopian desire. The perception of the coexistence of an *actual* and *virtual* within the same image is how Gilles Deleuze has defined the cinematic "time-image":

The image has to be present and past, still present and already past, at once, and at the same time. . . . The past does not follow the present that is no longer, it coexists with the present it was. The present is the actual image and *its* contemporaneous past is the virtual image, the image in the mirror. (*Cinema 2*, 79)

Because the film image is the movement of time, Deleuzian time-images not only contain the visible imprint of the past as a series of successions into the present but also function as images of the present of that past which existed as virtual—as a force or even potential—and inheres in the present of the image of that past. In the rephotographing and slowing down of the *actual image* of the decayed film strip of a long-past moment, *Eureka* produces a gap between the two moments in time from which its *virtual image* is sensed rather than seen. This kind of time-image creates the possibility for an allegorical reading that not only constructs the past in terms of the needs of the present or finds the past in the present but also allows the use of what was potential—that which remains unrealized in one moment—to coexist in relation to what is actual in another moment.

The film's title itself, it could be said, refers to yet another relationship between the actual and the virtual "Eureka" was exclaimed by the prospectors who found gold in the California gold rush that led to the growth of the city of San Francisco, and by extension, the actualization of the image of the street through which the camera-trolley



moves (Figure 4). Gehr has created an aesthetic object in which one can experience the possibility of an image that exists simultaneously in the past and the present *and* in relation to the actual and virtual of the composite image he creates. *Eureka* is a time-image that embodies Benjamin's notion of history as wreckage by showing us the present in the deteriorated image of the past's ruined promise for the future. At the same time, in Deleuzian terms, it releases as its virtual image the not yet realized utopian promise of modernity that the past held for the present.

### *Dal polo all'equatore*

The 1986 film *Dal polo all'equatore* (From Pole to Equator) by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi also uses images from early cinema actualities as allegory. *Dal polo*, however, looks at ways in which early filmmakers produced the image of the racial and ethnic "other" of European colonial adventurism and occupation. Although some of the formal strategies used to allegorize such long-discarded film footage—optically step printing each frame to slow it down—are similar to those in Gehr's *Eureka*, *Dal polo* is a much more historically ambitious and politically problematic work. Unlike



Figure 4. *Eureka*. Photograph courtesy of Ernie Gehr.

*Eureka*, which uses a single shot to make the entire film, *Dal polo* is a montage film of hundreds of shots from different sources edited together to make a single historical allegory. The filmmakers found the original footage in an Italian film lab. The footage comes from a "found" film of the same name, as well as other footage from an archive of the early Italian cinematographer and film collector Luca Comerio.<sup>10</sup> Not a well-known figure in the history of Italian cinema, Comerio is described by Gianikian as a "pioneer of Italian cinema and the cameraman of the King" (MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 3, 279). The footage for *Dal polo* was shot between 1899 and 1920. The subject matter of the footage is largely images of colonial ethnography and conquest: safaris, big-game hunting from polar bears to hippopotamuses, military parades, indigenous ceremonies, missionaries "teaching" native children, theatrical spectacles using indigenous people and animals, and carnage from military campaigns. The original silent film, also called *Dal polo all'equatore*, has no exact date. Based on Comerio's found letters to Mussolini while the filmmaker was trying to secure a job at "the new Institute Luce, the institute for Italian fascist documentary," Gianikian places the film in the late 1920s at the end of Comerio's career (279). The original film comprises four sections and is 57 minutes long, nearly half the length of the subsequent 1986 version, which comprises ten sections and is 101 minutes long. In their version, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi have used three sections of the original version, and the remaining seven sections were found in Comerio's archive. The new film is a multifaceted historical project. It is at once an archaeology, recovering lost documents from an early period of Italian cinema, and an experimental form of historiography, using changing notions of the spectacle of an exoticized other as the basis for an allegorized historical narrative of European colonial conquest.

The major formal intervention in *Dal polo* is that of slowing down the image through rephotographing each original film frame several times. As in *Eureka*, this technique allows the viewer to see each frame for a longer period and emphasizes its material reality as a photographic image degraded by the passage of time. Both films work to denaturalize the indexical quality of the image as recorded reality, which, given the feeling of unmediated immediacy and the signifying power that these images have, is difficult to do. The multiple printing of each frame emphasizes surface scratches, missing and faded emulsion, mold that has grown on the image, and remnants of color tinting. The slowing down of the movement also works to distance the images from their original intention as commodifiable spectacles of an exoticized other and allows them to be examined as an artifact or document of colonialist cinema. Also like *Eureka*, *Dal polo* produces a new image that creates an awareness of the multiple temporalities of its production. Here one is able to see an image of the original exposure made by Comerio's camera and the image that has been made from Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's rephotography. As Scott MacDonald writes about the film:

The result transforms the original material . . . so that viewers not only see the original imagery and its original intent (to testify to the superiority of white, European

formal  
rationality  
allegorizing history  
narrative in colonialist  
style

civilization) but *see through* the imagery to the human beings looking back at these cameras from within their own complex cultures. (*A Critical Cinema* 3, 275)

Here MacDonald implies that the film creates a critique of the earlier images through a rehumanizing of the people filmed by allowing the viewer to see their images more slowly. It is not, however, that one is able to see through one image to another as if there were a true nature of the people photographed that was contained in the image to be seen under the right circumstances; rather, the slowing down retards the movement of the spectacle allowing space for thinking about what is being seen. There are time and space—distance—in the viewing to consider the image's allusiveness and for the possibility of forming an allegorical reading based on the present moment in which one watches the images. As Deleuze suggests, "The cinema does not just present images, it surrounds them with a world" (*Cinema* 2, 68). That is to say, the images are not autonomous from the historical moment in which they are seen. Rather, they are magnetic, pulling the world of the present around them as an integral part of how they are understood. This recalls Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image" as a productive way of thinking about what happens to archaic images in the context of the present. He writes, "For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent" (*The Arcades Project*, [N2a,3], 462). What is understood in these images is not merely based on what is seen *in* the image but is part of a dialectic that also includes what is known by the viewer and brought to the image, something that is always in flux and transforming. In his refutation of the notion of "timeless truth," Benjamin continues, "Truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known" ([N3,2], 463). *Dal polo* does not emphasize the arrest and fixing of the image in a specific constellation of meanings; rather, the film opens the image up to transformations of its meanings by releasing them into the flow of time.

Through the process of reprinting, the image is marked by the present—literally shining the light of the optical printer in the present onto the film strip from the past—to produce an image of both past and present. Neither moment in time is obliterated by the other, but forms the possibility of a tension between the two. As Benjamin suggests, "To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions—there the dialectical image appears" (*The Arcades Project*, [N10a,3], 475). Benjamin's notion of historical materialism is a process that "blasts" the object of history out of the linear progression of pastness into the present through the recognition of its pressure on the present. *Dal polo* is a film that could have been made only at the moment when the image of the colonial past is seen as a catastrophic inheritance of the present. This is the moment when Comerio's images come to have significance and can be seen "as an image flashing upon the now of its recognizability" ([N9,7], 473). For Benjamin, the

object pulled from the context of its pastness and placed in confrontation with the present becomes an image in which the forces and interests of history permeate the object and can be read.

At an earlier moment in time, Comerio's original film had been seen as insignificant and had been rejected by the Cinematheque in Milan when Comerio's nephew offered it for sale. In 1981 Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi found Comerio's original film in a closet in an old film lab in Milan. In the postcolonial context of the 1980s, they began their project by analyzing the frames of Comerio's film and were

irritated and disturbed by Comerio's sanctification of imperialism, colonialism and war. We wanted to make a film on the violence of colonialism as it plays itself out in different situations and spheres. . . . We are interested in an ethical sense of vision. A project is usually born from our reading film images. (MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema* 3, 276, 281)

In doing this, the filmmakers reedit the footage to make new relationships that reflect their contemporary critique of such sanctification. In their film, they order the images so that they become a veritable condensed catalog of European colonialist violence and objectification. The film begins with a long sequence in which, like the original footage in *Eureka*, the camera is mounted on the side of a train as it moves through the countryside, presumably carrying it and everything else that is on board off to discover other worlds. The slowed-down and tinted image emphasizes the dreamlike quality of being transported into the unknown. Like the condensation in dreams, the film cuts to a ship in the Arctic in the emptiness of vast icescapes and then, just as suddenly, cuts to the Caucasus, India, Siam, Africa, and so on. Throughout we see the slaughter of whatever is encountered, mainly animals on land and at sea. In most cases the filmmakers use shot-reverse shot cutting between white hunters with rifles, looking. In the reverse shot an animal is killed. The hunter sees and then kills polar bears, walruses, wildebeests, zebras, hippos, gazelles, lions. The film emphasizes the gaze of the hunters in relation to their uninhibited display of power and brutality. The use of shot-reverse shot in these cases becomes part of a circle of gazes in relation to the domination of the animals and of the indigenous people as well, who are often seen looking on while assisting the hunters. This circle of looks implicates the camera, filmmaker, and viewer in a web of brutalization that goes beyond the killing to the act of seeing. The slowing down of the image forces the viewer to contemplate the act of seeing as an integral part—both literally and metaphorically—of the act of killing (Figure 5).

The catalog continues with images of coercive subjugation of native people by white colonialists. We see native people in colonial military uniforms marching in formation, sherpas carrying supplies and weapons, and missionary nuns training native children to sing and march in line. Often these images are placed in relation to shots of "uncolonialized" people unaware that they are being filmed in the act of performing their daily activities or religious customs. The placement of the shots in relation

to one another emphasizes the judgmental quality of the camera's gaze, through which composition sexualizes and exoticizes the subjects' often semiclothed bodies. At times colonists interact with them, usually to ridicule their behavior and customs.

Cinematically, the slowing down of the images foregrounds their graphic qualities and allows the viewer to examine the process of colonization and acculturation by showing in detail how people were placed into rigid formations such as queues or military lineups and made to march. The slowed-down image and its graphic quality emphasize how people were placed in matching uniforms, stripping them of their culturally specific dress. In one scene, we see the orderly rows of small black schoolchildren, all with shaved heads and white smocks, gesturing in unison to a missionary nun standing over them (Figure 6). The high-contrast black-and-white film renders them as graphic contrasts moving across the flat surface of the screen and turns them into objects of some grand plan—as if they were pieces of a large board game. By the end, the film takes on a fablelike quality of inevitability as this cataloging of violence begins to show images of the Europeans turning on themselves. We see the high-tech warfare of the battlefields and trenches of World War I. These are scenes of soldiers marching through fields and snowdrifts. We see images of endless dead bodies strewn



Figure 5. *Dal polo all'equatore* (Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, 1986).



Figure 6.  
*Dal polo all'equatore*.

about the fields and bodies piled up around trenches. Here the chickens have come home to roost. We see the Europeans in massive military formations, fighting one another. Uniformed soldiers and their generals stare into the camera and salute. The last two images of the film emphasize the Europeans' specious victory over nature: an aerial shot of sheep herded into formation spelling out in Italian "Long Live the King!" and then a scene of a bourgeois family in their garden standing around a table laughing as they cajole a dog to attack a rabbit that one of the men is holding up by the ears. The shot is rephotographed so that the film strip is sliding through the gate of the optical printer, showing the repetition of each frame rather than continuous motion, creating a sense of the endless repetition of violence, aggression, and domination. The members of the group are seen looking on in passive pleasure as the rabbit is being terrorized by the dog. This short coda, which is quite different from the main body of the film in both the content of the image and the way it is rephotographed, can be seen as a summary of the act of looking that has gone on throughout the film by the cinematographer and the viewers, implicating and warning the viewers of their own (passive) role in perpetuating the spectacle of violence. This coda is a dialectical image, a metaphor for the activity of watching this film, as it brings together an image of the past domination as spectacle with the viewer's experience as spectator in the present.

In a critique of the film, Catherine Russell, in her important book on experimental film ethnography, argues, however, that *Dal polo's*

lack of any information, narration, or titles . . . is an important means of deflecting the scientism of conventional ethnographic practices. . . . [This, however, reduces the film] to sheer image and spectacle [which] always runs the risk of aestheticization, of turning the Other into a consumable image [and so] fails to realize the dialectical potential of the archive. (*Experimental Ethnography*, 61–62)

Russell points out that, except for the opening titles, which are a poetic dedication to “Comerio, pioneer of documentary cinema who died in 1940 in a state of amnesia,” *Dal polo all’equatore* eschews the contextualization of other kinds of information about the footage—for example, who is in the image, where or when the images were shot. The film contains no voice-over narration or intertitles giving information about the images or other interventions such as an authorial analysis about ways to read these images, what they mean, or how they functioned in the past and in the present. The images are not, according to Russell, “rendered textual, [they are] merely ephemeral and mysterious . . . as a form of nostalgia that incorporates, rather than allegorizes, the gaze of imperialism” (60). She contends that without verbal and textual intervention on the part of the filmmakers, their interventions—the reordering of the images, the slowing down of the image movement, the restoration of the film’s original color tinting and the added music track—“engage in deliberate aestheticization of the colonial image bank . . . to create a sensual, affective viewing experience . . . that privileges the pleasure of the image over its role in constructing history and memory” (60). In this critique, Russell privileges language over image as the basis for creating an allegorical critical analysis of images, as if a “sensual affective viewing experience” can result only in a manipulated seduction, simply privileging pleasure. Here Russell tends to perpetuate the old and ultimately moralistic mind/body binary in which the rationalist function of critical analysis can take place only within the logos of language and textuality. For her, the sensual pleasures of sight and sound are to be regarded as seductive and passive. This leaves out the possibility that sensual pleasure can also heighten awareness and produce thoughts and emotions as part of a process of critical thinking. Although Russell rightly points out that “we have to make a . . . distinction between an aestheticization of otherness and a politics of representation” (189), she presumes a dichotomy between the aesthetic and the analytic. By insisting on such a split, Russell limits notions of critical thinking to linguistic forms of intervention. This ultimately reduces and may even obscure the possibility of multiple strategies for generating critical cultural discourse in a medium like film—in which affect and sensation are central to meaning making. I argue that *Dal polo* is indeed an allegorical film, but it allegorizes using purely imagistic means, directly confronting the sensuous possibilities of the visual. While *Dal polo* uses similar formal strategies to refigure the images as do the earlier “structural films,” it goes a step further. The film heightens the signification of the content through what the cultural theorist Kobena Mercer has called “the experience of aesthetic ambivalence” (“Skin Head Sex Thing,” 169) to produce an even more complex critical reflexivity that takes into account not only the intention of the author but also the affect and shifting subject position of the viewer.

With his notion of ambivalence, Mercer offers another, more nuanced critical model for spectatorship that takes into account those aspects of aesthetic experience that generate multiple and often contradictory thoughts and emotions that relate not only to the object viewed but to the larger subjective experience of both the artist and

the viewer. In his essay “Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary,” discussing the nude photographs of black men in the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial series *Black Book*, Mercer contends “that the articulation of ambivalence in Mapplethorpe’s work can be seen as a subversive deconstruction of the hidden racial and gendered axioms of the nude in dominant traditions of representation” (181). By emphasizing the viewer’s position as subject in relation to the photographs, the images of black men in highly aestheticized poses produce multiple and contradictory readings depending on who is viewing. On the one hand, the images produce an ambivalence as historical signifiers of high art—they are part of a tradition of highly aestheticized nude portraiture shown in art museums and galleries, as well as in their appropriation in commercial art and advertising. On the other, these are signifiers of low culture, which includes the degraded forms of racist stereotyping of exoticized images of sexual otherness associated with pornography and the lower classes to which the image of the black male has traditionally been relegated. In the photographs, Mapplethorpe reverses and blurs these distinctions by elevating the images “onto the pedestal of the transcendental Western aesthetic ideal” (188). Mercer maintains that it is through a complex structure of feeling—that of ambivalence—that “far from reinforcing the fixed beliefs of the white supremacist imaginary, such a deconstructive move begins to undermine the foundational myths of the pedestal itself” (188). Mercer himself speaks as a gay black man who experiences the feeling of ambivalence, looking at images that are horrifying in the ways they work to stereotype black male sexuality but at the same time are sexually stimulating images of a homoerotic ideal. He maintains that the production of this ambivalence also creates a Benjaminian “shock effect” prompted by the “promiscuous textual intercourse between elements drawn from opposite ends of the hierarchy of cultural value” (189).

In *Dal polo*, the deliberate aestheticizing of the images of exoticized “other” bodies and places from the Comerio footage—wordless and left free of commentary—can also produce a “shock effect” on the contemporary viewer. The privileging of the visual, and with it, the cinephilic pleasure of the intense beauty of the slowed, color-tinted, grainy, and degraded film images in relation to their horrifyingly stereotypical content, is precisely what produces a critical ambivalence toward both the aestheticizing nature of the film image and the fascination with the othering it produces. *Dal polo* raises, in some viewers, the possibility for contradictory impulses, that of a desire for a sublime experience of the “pure image” and the realization that one may be finding pleasure in the dehumanizing representations in such imagery. The film, then, creates a dialectical relationship between a fascination with the possibility of a wordless sublime of its images, something so characteristic of the modernist aspiration of pure vision, and a sense of uneasiness—if not outright revulsion—in the face of such racist signifiers. The desire for the sensual gaze opens the viewer to the push and pull of the body, to the sensuality of the cinematic. For the critical viewer, the self-consciousness that he or she may be experiencing pleasure from such horribly stereotypical imagery implicates the viewer in the questionable morality of such images and opens the

possibility for critical awareness. It is in this sense that the beauty of these reprocessed images sets up a condition of ambivalence in the viewer.

The film sets up the conditions for the viewer to share the same fascination for such exoticized imagery and to occupy the position of the gaze of the colonial filmmaker. While the viewer is looking at the same images as the earlier filmmaker, however, he or she is not living and thinking with the same worldview. The political struggles against racism and colonial domination throughout the last fifty years have challenged many of the earlier discourses around colonial and racial representation. Arguably, this has made it harder for contemporary viewers to look at such imagery without it being surrounded by a greater critical awareness of how such imagery may be distorting and degrading. The film produces anxiety because the viewer inhabits two contradictory subject positions at once. The possibility that the viewer can make use of the image to substitute his or her own fascination with that of the filmmaker's can be seen as a form of fetishism. The racist image becomes a fetishistic disavowal of the viewer's anxiety over his or her own pleasure in the objectified, sexualized, or racialized other. In *Dal polo*, the viewer is able to do this through the objectivizing gaze of the original filmmaker, which is safely located in another time. While, as Mercer suggests, calling something fetishistic "implies a negative judgment, unavoidably moralistic" (179), he also argues for "fetishism's 'shocking' undecidability" (190), which works to unfix overdetermined relationships between subject and object and also the limiting binarisms of good versus bad images of otherness. As Mercer has suggested of the Mapplethorpe photographs—which I think can be read in relation to the treated colonial images of *Dal polo*—such a contradictory position "destabilizes the ideological fixity" of the viewer and "begins to reveal the political unconscious of white ethnicity" (189), at once affirming and denying racial difference in the contradictory experience of the images. The question of whether or not the intense signifying of such images without verbal contextualizing undermines or reinforces racial stereotyping is undecidable. By removing the fixity of contextualization of language from these "difficult" images, they become unruly and indeterminate. This is the power and danger in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's experiment, since "indeterminacy means that multiaccentual or polyvalent signs have no necessary belonging and can be articulated and appropriated" for any ideological purpose (191). This moves the responsibility of enunciation away from the author to the viewer, and depending on the social identity of the viewer, the images are read variously.<sup>11</sup>

As becomes clear, allegorization happens not only through the author's intervention but also as an act of spectatorship. The entire film is an allegory for the present since the images can only be read from the shifting subject position of the viewer—filling the images with his or her knowledge and experience. Throwing the allegorizing impulse onto the viewer may create the risk of a so-called wrong reading, as Russell fears, but it also opens the possibility for new and more-complex relationships between the past and present that are not just limited to the temporal location of the filmmakers.

In this way *Dal polo* moves beyond the presumption of the indexicality of the film

image, that one can see through the image to reveal "the real" behind its spectacle, thus finding a truth that could redeem such repulsive images. Instead the film moves toward a different means of critique using what can be seen as a critically engaged confrontation with the image, since meaning is

not something that occurs "inside" the text (as if cultural texts were hermetically sealed or self-sufficient), but as something that is experienced across the relations between authors, texts, and readers, relations that are always contingent, context-bound and historically specific. (Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing," 169–70)

Rather than perpetuating the notion of the fixed, autonomous text that can be critiqued only by linguistic intervention, correcting a misguided reading with the presumption of a singularly correct way to understand such images, *Dal polo* is unsettling, throwing its images and the viewer into the movement of history with its ever-changing discourses, and their social, political, and aesthetic contexts. The experience of the film produces a complex structure of ambivalence from which we are never free. Such ambivalence unsettles the viewer, not allowing us to stop questioning our relation to the imagery and the meanings of what is being seen. It causes us to question not only our own experience but also the experiences of others: other viewers, the filmmakers, the societies of the past and the present. In *Dal polo*, one is never allowed the complacency of the enlightened reading that allows the viewer to occupy a historically or morally superior position to our past.

#### *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America*

Using literary tropes as deconstructive methods for critiquing of images from the past has been a major strategy of contemporary film and video artists, who are returning to the archive to explore past film images of the colonial other in light of the recent explorations of postcolonial history, theory, and culture. As in *Dal polo*, much of this work examines and rereads lost or ignored representations and artifacts of the colonial past through contemporary political discourse. These works use a range of allegorizing strategies to reveal the deeply embedded ideology of Euro-American cultural and racial supremacy contained within them. The aim is to show how such distorted and racially biased imagery has become naturalized as a part of our collective and individual psyches and to produce alternative critical readings. Three paradigmatic films are *The Gringo in Mañanaland* by Dee Dee Halleck (1995), *Corporation with a Movie Camera* by Joel Katz (1992), and *Ruins* by Jesse Lerner (1998). In these works, the filmmakers use tropes of authenticity and personal experience as a strategy to question the reality and accuracy of such naturalized imagery to reveal the ideological distortions of these representations. Such works create a rhetoric of distorted history versus true history by creating true/false dichotomies between the self-serving ideology of the original films and what is understood by the filmmakers to be a more accurate image

of that past. Central to these strategies is the notion that a true or more authentic image of history exists outside competing ideological constructs and can emerge through the representation of the *authentic* experience of the oppressed other. In contrast to such works is *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America* by Craig Baldwin (1991), which, in an opposite strategy, questions the idea that there can be a historical real in any image and that history is a series of transforming narrative constructions competing for hegemony as historical reality. Baldwin is concerned not only with revealing a real behind such distorted imagery but also with examining the forms that are used to narrativize them.

Each of these films can be seen as allegorical in the ways it uses literary tropes and devices such as irony, parody, satire, and revisionist historical narratives to reinscribe new ways of understanding such images in the present. Lerner's *Ruins* deconstructs old educational films about the Mayan ruins of Mexico in which American and European anthropologists and art historians are seen and heard interpreting the meanings of the ruins. The film parodies the ways that anthropologists produce a sense of authority and facticity by using discourses from their academic disciplines to objectively naturalize what the film argues is merely a class- and culturally biased reading of these artifacts. To deconstruct this material, Lerner creates a fictional Spanish-speaking character dressed in traditional Mexican costume to answer and correct the white anthropologist's culturally biased interpretations. Lerner invokes the discourse of authenticity by creating an aestheticized, fictional rhetoric of racial and national authenticity to expose the fiction of the earlier film's linguistic and visual authority. Openly creating his own fiction, Lerner uses an actress who replies in Spanish as a sign of legitimacy in the face of the English-speaking foreigner. Lerner uses the fiction of authenticity to question the pseudoscientific authority of the white anthropologists by showing that their conclusions were erroneous because of their cultural biases. If *Ruins* takes up and critiques the use of film images within academic discourses, then similarly Katz's *Corporation with a Movie Camera* catalogs the different possibilities for allegorized critiques of industrial film images produced by U.S. corporations. *Corporation* attempts to show the ways such companies used the industrial film "genre" as a way to promote imperialist corporate expansionism. As Katz writes:

The moment in history when the movie camera made its debut—the industrial revolution just settling in for the long haul, Colonialism's grasp at its height—determined that the camera's gaze was generally understood to be synonymous with that of the white male from the industrialized nation. ("From Archive to Archiveology," 100)

The cinematic detritus left by such relationships has been used as a major form of evidence in recent studies of the concurrent development of the motion picture apparatus and the industrial revolution, both of which were an integral part of colonialist expansion.<sup>12</sup> These ruins of once-commodifiable images are being taken up again for study. As a way to promote the reuse of such material, Rick Prelinger, a film archivist

who specializes in the preservation and sale of what he has termed "ephemeral films" (in which he includes advertising, educational, and industrial films) writes:

Produced for specific purposes at specific times, and rarely just to entertain, ephemeral films illuminate almost every aspect of twentieth-century life, culture and industry. History as evidence and intention both reside in these often obscure and unintentionally humorous documents. As artifacts of past efforts to sell, convince, train, educate (and often miseducate), ephemeral films record continuing efforts to manufacture and maintain social control. ("Archival Footage")

In *Corporation*, Katz shows how the films were used both to promote investment in the corporations that were expanding their businesses into underdeveloped countries and to create the new markets for the products that came from such places. He focuses on bananas as an example of these early corporate advertising campaigns. The United Fruit Company used film to advertise the virtues of the banana as the company developed its huge banana plantations in Central America. *Corporation* contains clips of these films, with titles such as *Bananaland* (1928) and *Journey to Bananaland* (1953). The former, intended for corporate investors, shows the development and productivity of the plantations, and the latter persuades the U.S. consumer to buy the product. In his film, Katz shows how often the same footage is used, recontextualized by a different narrative for each purpose. Like the ones seen in *Ruins*, most of the films were produced from the 1920s through the 1950s and Katz parodies them by re-creating the unselfconsciously used "voice-of-god" narrators and by using actors in period costume to reenact scenes in exaggerated ways that expose their overtly imperialist ideologies.

In other sections of *Corporation*, Katz uses the first-person "I" and lyric poetry to again invoke the discourse of authenticity as a way to allegorize images of a colonial past. He shows contemporary Latin American and Afro-Caribbean poets reciting testimonial poems (often performed in Spanish), which claim the colonial past, as seen in the archival films, to be part of their own distorted cultural inheritance. The poems authorize Katz's present-day reinterpretations of the images from the earlier films. The poets speak back to the images by proclaiming solidarity with the voiceless victims of the barbarity of the colonial past. Their performances are meant to redeem this distorted past, giving posthumous voice to their ancestors by reinscribing the meanings of the images through their own knowledge and interpretations in the present. Like Lerner's use of a Spanish-speaking actress, Katz's use of the ethnic identity of the poets authorizes the truth value of their texts as a rhetorical trope giving the sense that theirs is a more authentic interpretation of the images. In these performances, Katz also invokes the authority of their high-culture aesthetics as poets. Both strategies work to produce a corrective rereading of the images. Katz juxtaposes the crude, ignorant representations of other cultures by corporate-produced industrial propaganda films with their vulgar and racist stereotyping (the low) with the literary language of lyric poetry

and its deliberately aestheticized use of metaphor, distilled language, and the earnest self-consciousness of the subjective "I" of the lyric poem (the high). In these ways, Katz and Lerner create the impression that the performers are producing a truer narrative of past events than those created in the archival films.

More overtly historiographic in intent, Dee Dee Halleck's *The Gringo in Mañanaland* uses the history of popular cinema as a way to understand the popular image of the colonized other of Latin America. The tape is a montage of dozens of clips from mostly North American films of different genres—Hollywood dramas, comedies, musicals, cartoons, newsreels, industrial and educational films—from all periods of film history. While the history is more impressionistic than chronological or analytic in the scholarly sense, the film was created out of a much larger project, which was the making of a database of images of Latin America: "Over seven thousand films were identified from over sixty archives. From the entire list approximately six hundred films and film segments were chosen for video transfer. It was from these selections *The Gringo in Mañanaland* was created."<sup>13</sup> Again the authority of this critique is produced through the discourse of personal experience—this time the filmmaker's own—as she frames the film by her testimony of her own misrecognition between her lived perceptions of Latin America and the movie images she saw as a child. The videotape begins with Halleck speaking directly to the camera:

When I was twelve years old, my father got a job at a nickel mine in Cuba. It was 1952, the open-air company theater showed Hollywood films, many were about Latin America some were even about Cuba. *The Cuba in the movies wasn't the Cuba where I lived*. This film is a look at that other Latin America, the place in the movies. It's still there, at the movies, in our schoolrooms, on our TV sets, in our heads.<sup>14</sup>

This introduction sets up the following images from the past as allegories for the ways in which North America thinks about Latin America in the present. *The Gringo in Mañanaland* is a catalog of evidence of distorted views, the critique of which is authorized by filmmaker's experience (the real) versus the ideological desire of those who made the films (the distorted). The film is a kind of cine-bibliography of short archival clips organized around a series of intertitles that thematize them in relation to possible narratives of the imperialist project: "Arrival," "The Past," "Paradise," "Ambition," "Technology," and so on. Once allegorized in this way, the film no longer needs the benefit of ongoing textual narration or systematic explication. The filmmaker seemingly causes the "archive to expose its own secrets and agenda, propelling the film into a meta-level of inquiry on history and representation" (Katz, "From Archive to Archivalology," 102), as if the "true meaning" of such images lay in waiting to be coaxed forth. The intertitles from the earlier film, which were made to read one way, in this new context are read in an opposite way. We see an intertitle from a film about the United Fruit Company that reads: "The United Fruit Co. with its Yankee enterprise has transformed trackless wastes into a veritable Garden of Eden." Around the intertitle are

images of untouched jungle being cut down, as well as ones of Fred Astaire in the film *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945) dancing around a woman as he strips her of the scarves that clothe her. The film goes on to ironically juxtapose images of Carmen Miranda dancing with bananas from Busby Berkeley's *The Gang's All Here* (1943) and U.S. Boy Scouts eating bananas from an educational film about the nutritional value of bananas, with newsreel images of the nearly slavish working conditions on Central American banana plantations.

*Ruins*, *Corporation*, and *Gringo* all use renarrativization as an allegorizing device to "see through" the images in order to reveal their underlying ideological formulations. Through their allegorization, the images are now revealed as a symptom of distorted ideas rather than indications of a captured reality as the original films laid claim. But paradoxically, these cine-allegories still depend on a notion of an underlying truth of a historical past hidden behind the distorted spectacle of the image, replacing past truth claims with new ones. This implies that there *is* a "real" to these found images that can be uncovered and represented properly—or, more accurately, closer to the desire of the filmmakers.

In contrast, *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America* by Craig Baldwin (1991) begins with the idea that in an image-saturated postmodern culture, the real of the image has receded so far into representation that it is no longer grounded in a notion of an originary reality. That is to say, in *Tribulation 99*, the film image is not simply an indexical sign of a real event but an image of an image of an image, ad infinitum. The media theorist Jean Baudrillard has distinguished between representation and simulation, suggesting that "whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 6). He identifies "successive phases of the image" as it moves from representation to simulation. These might also be seen in relation to the movement of archival film images used in the four films discussed here as a way of distinguishing shifting notions of allegorization in the postmodern. The image

- masks and denatures a profound reality. . . it is an evil appearance—it is the order of malfeasance [e.g., the original films from which the images were taken];
- masks the absence of a profound reality. . . It plays at being an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery [e.g., *Ruins*, *Gringo*, and *Corporation*, which attempt to expose and uncover "false representations" of the original films];
- has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum. It is no longer the order of appearances, but of simulation [e.g., *Tribulation 99*]. (6)

In *Tribulation 99*, Baldwin gives up the idea of such true versus false representation and takes up the problem of simulation as the realm of pure sign. He no longer sees the archival image as simply referencing an original event, but suggests that these images stand in relation to other images. Rather than trying to see through the image

to some essential truth, Baldwin transforms the archival imagery into pure simula-cra, obscuring—as much as he can—any notion of the truth of the event through the overlaying of narrative upon narrative. This too is a cinema of revelation, but rather than presuming that there is a historical truth to be uncovered and redeemed, this is the revelation of the machinelike workings of historical narrative construction (Figure 7).

As in Halleck's *The Gringo in Mañanaland*, in *Tribulation 99*, Baldwin allegorizes the past by mixing archival newsreel and documentary footage (which are often the same in both films), as well as all manner of "ephemeral" films with dramatic films, cartoons, and television shows from different periods throughout the history of cinema and television. Unlike Halleck, however, Baldwin refuses citation, thus cutting the images off from historical reference. He neither gives the titles or dates of the footage nor invokes any discourse of authority in relation to an authentic term for how these images might be "correctly" read. Rather, the images can be seen as sheets of images moving by so quickly that they become a surface of textures, historical figurations, and references that, at times, signify something recognizable to the viewer and, at other times, are a blur of unrecognizable or misrecognized signifiers. Most often, one



Figure 7. *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America* (Craig Baldwin, 1991). Future U.S. president Ronald Reagan sells "Faultless Starch" on a TV commercial. Photograph courtesy of Craig Baldwin.

is able to read the genre from which the images come even without knowing the specific film or period in which it was made.

The freewheeling use of such film footage, which allows signification to occur on many levels, links Baldwin as much to the earlier ironic, Dadaesque, and morally ambivalent films of fellow West Coast filmmakers of the sixties and seventies such as Bruce Conner and Robert Nelson as to the more politically engaged didactic rereadings of such footage of his contemporaries Halleck, Lerner, and Katz. Like *Tribulation 99*, many of Conner's most overtly political films also use found footage to obliquely comment on the excesses of American conformism, imperialism, and violence. Like Conner, Baldwin uses a mixture of black humor and paranoid fantasy to allegorize the detritus of popular imagery, revealing the darker side of such excess. *Tribulation 99*, however, as are Baldwin's other films, such as *RocketKitKongoKit* (1986), *O No Coronado!* (1992), *Sonic Outlaws* (1995), and *Specters of the Spectrum* (2000), is clearly critical of specific political positions and often expresses solidarity with others. On the other hand, Conner's films, such as *A Movie* (1958), *Cosmic Ray* (1961), *Report* (1963–67), *Marilyn Times Five* (1968), and *Crossroads* (1976), and Nelson's films *Oh Dem Watermelons* (1965) and *Bleu Shut* (1970) often express political ambivalence by ironically aestheticizing and making dark humor from some of the most horrific imagery, such as the atomic bomb blast in *Crossroads* or stereotypes of African Americans in *Oh Dem Watermelons*. Unlike Conner or Nelson, Baldwin also articulates his practice as a filmmaker in more overtly political and pedagogical terms in which making art is also a form of cultural activism. As he says in an interview:

I hate to describe myself as a moralist, but there really is this drive behind the film, not only to make something that's beautiful-slash-ugly, but also to raise consciousness. That's my missionary zeal or whatever. Filmmakers are driven to develop strategies to get information across. If you can do it visually, so much the better. . . . What I try to do is not only talk about the development of the problem but the intellectual process of the filmmaking. . . . That's not some a priori, top-down, overdetermined, overproduced thing. It's an authentic response from the margin. But it also has the critique, which is more trenchant, because it uses the very images against themselves. (Lu, "Situationist 99")

*Tribulation 99* operates on the presumption that in this era of media saturation, meanings from the formal elements of film genres are gleaned by the viewer more quickly than any specific content. The popularity of *Tribulation 99* outside the United States seems to be an indication that the ability to recognize film and television genre forms typically transcends content specificity. Over these images, Baldwin creates a narrative, fashioning it out of multiple narratives, referencing other literary genres such as conspiracy narratives, religious mythology of the apocalypse, and science fiction.

Using the history of U.S. imperialism in Latin America, particularly the Cold War period, which, already represented on film, is historicized in a multitude of ways,



each with its own emplotting of events, Baldwin's appropriation of these films becomes an extremely productive stage for critiquing the U.S. government's Cold War claims of Soviet-sponsored domino theories of communist infiltration of Latin America. Structuring the film in a series of ninety-nine "rants," each with its own emplotted event, Baldwin parodies such institutionalized government conspiracy theories by threading them through contemporary apocalyptic conspiracy theories about aliens from outer space taking over the planet, and apocalyptic religious doomsday predictions made popular by religious and right-wing fringe groups. In *Tribulation 99's* reductio-ad-absurdum emplotment, in which every unexplainable event now connects to every other, the history of Latin American anti-imperialist and revolutionary independence movements is recast as the "Quetzal Conspiracy," an invasion from outer space leading inescapably to apocalypse. This is led by space aliens who have taken human form to infiltrate civilization, destroy the human race, and take over the earth (Figure 8). In this parody, using an *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* scenario, all the leaders of twentieth-century Latin American independence movements from Arbenz and Allende to Castro and the Sandinistas are actually humanoids made by the space aliens to carry out the goals of the unseen alien force. All mysterious political conspiracies from the Kennedy assassination to Watergate become interconnected and explained by the alien invasion of Earth. The film is a vast catalog—using both visual evidence and a barrage

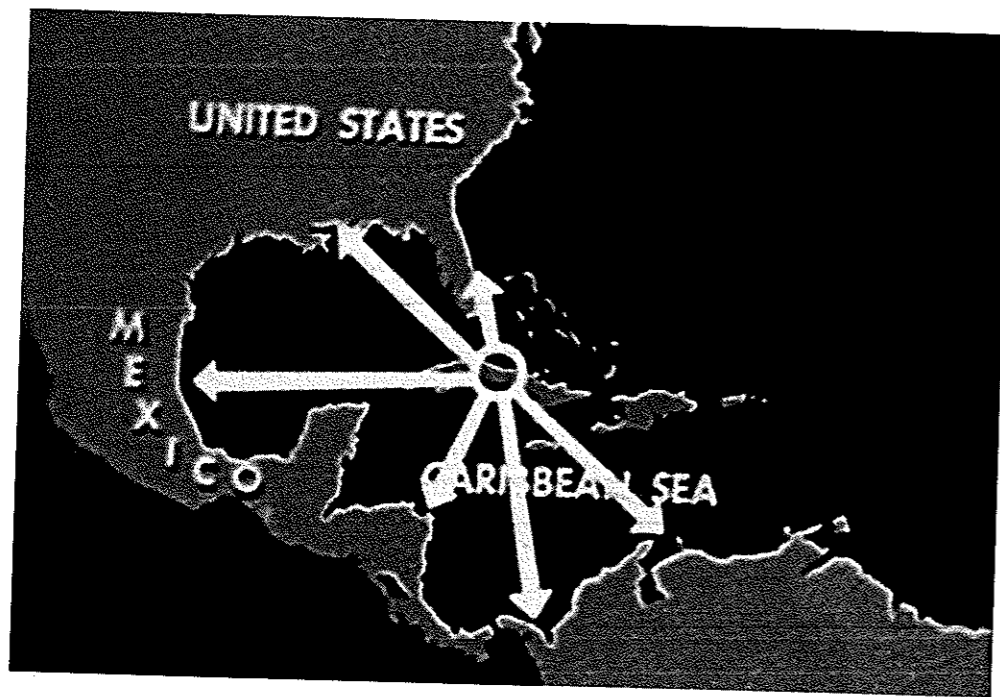


Figure 8. *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America*. Rant 27, "The Gathering Storm": Cuba, ground zero of the "Quetzal Conspiracy," leading inescapably to global apocalypse. Photograph courtesy of Craig Baldwin.

of verbal facts and statistics—of evidence of this invasion. We learn that some U.S. leaders who supported moderation or peaceful coexistence with such movements have been taken over by the space aliens. The name "the New Jewel Movement of Grenada" proves that the socialist leader Maurice Bishop was actually an "Atlantean plant" of a "rampaging gang of psychic vampires," since the movement's very name is a reference to the "evil power crystals," the energy source of the alien invaders' flying saucers (Figure 9). The truth is revealed about why the CIA's Operation Mongoose failed to assassinate Cuban leader Fidel Castro when the manic narrator—an actor playing the character of a retired air force colonel—explains that "after thirty-three assassination attempts entailing two thousand people and fifty million dollars, they are horrified to realize that you can't kill something that is not alive."<sup>15</sup> This is contextualized by images from James Bond movies mixed with newsreel images of recognizable figures such as CIA operative E. Howard Hunt and Castro himself until all lines between historical fact and fictional fantasy are blurred. Thus the blurring becomes an allegory for what Baldwin and others often see as the conspiratorial hysteria of much U.S. foreign policy. Like historical writing, Baldwin's fiction can only be rendered through emplotment. As Hayden White suggests:

Every narrative discourse consists, not of one single code monolithically utilized, but a complex set of codes the interweaving of which by the author—for the production of a story infinitely rich in suggestion and variety of affect, not to mention attitude towards and subliminal evaluation of its subject matter—attests to his talents as an artist, as master rather than servant of the codes available for his use. (*The Content of the Form*, 41–42)

In *Tribulation 99*, Baldwin foregrounds the aesthetic nature of historical narrative and his own creative virtuosity by showing the multiple possibilities for making stories out of events, by the endless montaging not only of "found" images but also of "found" narratives from every genre. By inducing the viewer to read form before content, Baldwin reduces the authority of the empirical truth value of the images to tropes of genre. In this way, the film itself becomes a metacommentary on the history of narrative figuration in cinema. White theorizes:

If there is any logic presiding over the transition from the level of fact or event in the discourse to that of narrative, it is the logic of figuration itself, which is to say tropology. This transition is effected by a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary fictions or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot structure of one or another of the genres of literary figuration. (*The Content of the Form*, 47)

In *Tribulation 99* the dialectical image occurs in a battle of genre forms that are smashed together through image montage and image-sound juxtaposition, creating a kind of



Figure 9. *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America*. Rant 6, "The Isle of Doom"; (top) Grenadian socialist leader Maurice Bishop, actually an "Atlantean plant," and (bottom) part of a rampaging gang of psychic vampires. Photograph courtesy of Craig Baldwin.

delirious overflow of signifiers of historical figuration from past and present. In doing so, the film reverses the relationship of narrative form to content of traditional historiography in which the truth effect of events that actually happened obscures the artifice with which an event is explained. For example, it is true that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. How or why is solely a product of competing narratives. In elaborating the ways this truth effect is produced, White shows that traditional historians must make what amounts to a leap of faith that what is created as historical narrative

is less a product of the historian's poetic talents, as the narrative account of imaginary events is conceived to be, than it is a necessary result of a proper application of historical "method." The form of the discourse, the narrative, adds nothing to the content of the representation; rather it is a simulacrum of the structure and processes of real events. (*The Content of the Form*, 27)

Instead, it can be argued that *Tribulation 99* attempts to expose the process of the narrative figuration of historical accounts that are normally hidden in traditional historical narratives. Here the film takes on a formal reflexivity that links it to earlier political modernist strategies in which "the reflexive structure of the text . . . is mapped onto a series of formal negations organized according to the opposition of modernism to realism" (Rodowick, *Crisis*, 52). This form of reflexive materialism within avant-garde film has for the most part been defined by focusing the viewer's awareness of the materiality of the medium's artifice as theorized and practiced most thoroughly by British and American structural/materialist filmmakers.<sup>16</sup> *Tribulation 99*, however, can also be seen to embody the Brechtian project of epic theater, which, in a counterconstruction of materialist film practice, attempts to bring together both an awareness of material artifice *and* the historical aspects of specific social and political conditions.<sup>17</sup> Like Brecht's epic theater, *Tribulation 99* uses recognizable historical events to provoke the viewer to think about the rhetoric behind U.S. policy toward Latin America. At the same time, Baldwin calls into question traditional forms of such critique by getting rid of many of the hallmarks of historical writing such as dates and other contextualizing references, which can be organized in any way to validate or criticize policy. This makes it impossible to produce the sense of authority provided by the discourse of scientific historical inquiry. Baldwin deliberately trades the scientific discourse of historiography for the aestheticism of the novel through the imaginative mixing of different narrative tropes in a single overarching plotline. By pitting his artistic text against the scientific, Baldwin, in White's terms, "directs attention as much to the virtuosity involved in its production as to the 'information' conveyed in the various codes employed in its composition" (*The Content of the Form*, 42). By doing so, he shows that historical events represented in his film have meaning only in relation to the forms in which they are narrativized. Also, by using so many different narrative scenarios, he shows how any event can be understood according to any ideological need. Any event can be connected to any other, as long as the events can be emplotted in a way that

the "real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (24).

*Tribulation 99*, as do nearly all of Baldwin's films, displays the excess of a desire for narrative fullness and closure. The events on which Baldwin's films are based are all *supersaturated* by emplotment, and as such, the multiplicity of possible narratives precipitates out of the transparency of the truth effect of historiographic discourse, producing a sense of swoon, of being overwhelmed by the sheer buildup of images, information, scenarios, and possible scenarios that characterize the "society of the spectacle."<sup>18</sup> In the end, the buildup of multiple scenarios begins to produce what becomes narrative entropy, in which narrative chaos ensues. As a strategy, this can be seen as a kind of "alienation effect," which is an attempt to break the viewer's habituated acceptance of linear cine-narrative transparency as he or she is forced to confront the constructed nature of historical narrative in which lines between fact and fiction are inevitably blurred in the search for a consistent coherency of the events.

The film itself begins to fly apart as it arrives at its final moments. Rant 98, "The Final Deluge," can be seen as a metaphor for what the film has done with historicity itself as it describes the last moments of civilization, when the buildup of plutonium "by-products [like narrative emplotments?] reaches critical mass, the dam melts down, the isthmus is flooded. The Atlantic and Pacific merge, radically altering prevailing ocean currents. Hot radioactive water is swept into polar seas. The ice caps melt, engulfing the continents." In *Tribulation 99*, Baldwin treats historical narrative itself as ruin, its own authority undermined by the pure accumulation of possible formulations or rationalizations, each vying for hegemony. Out of this multiplicity of single scenarios, we experience a function of narrative that is "not to represent, but to constitute a spectacle." According to Roland Barthes, "Narrative does not show, does not imitate. . . . 'What takes place' in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; 'what happens' is language alone" (*Image, Music, Text*, 123-24). What links *Tribulation 99* to earlier materialist avant-garde film practices is how it strips away the transparency of illusionist authority to reveal the process of representation and signification. In the case of structural/materialist film, there is a stripping away to the very material of the apparatus—light, duration, film stock, apparent motion, et cetera. These elements are often foregrounded in *Tribulation 99* through the use of generational degradation of the film strips, which become copies of copies, or the repetitive use of images, light flares, flash frames, black frames, and other techniques. But its most subversive action is in the delirious play of multiple signifiers as a strategy to strip away the reality effect of historical narrative to its pure textuality.

This is not to say that the film is without its political urgency or that it has traded an awareness of pure textuality for the agency of historical knowledge. Behind the layers of ironic parody can be found a coherent critique of the contradictory and often incoherent U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. *Tribulation 99* also shows how fear and paranoia can be mobilized for political ends through the complex and contradictory narrativizing of actual events in the world. What makes the film so effective as a

metahistory of U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America is the recognition of the ways in which citizens can become disempowered and reduced to mere spectators rather than knowledgeable members of a society who are able to participate in the creation of a policy that represents their wishes. As satire, *Tribulation 99* shows how the confused (or bemused) cynicism around politically charged events becomes possible as such events are narrated by the media and government and are then appropriated and commodified for any purpose from mass-media entertainment to religious and political indoctrination. At the same time, the film acknowledges the uselessness of history with its cause-and-effect constructions that explain everything and question nothing. Like much postmodern narrative, *Tribulation 99* emphasizes the play of the signifier—one among many. With its overflow of images, this is a maximalist strategy, as opposed to the minimalist stripping away of signifiers as in earlier forms of political modernism.<sup>19</sup>

On the face of it, there is a great aesthetic distance between a film like *Eureka*, whose emphasis on the materiality of the cinematographic trace produces a silent evocation of two simultaneous moments in time, and *Tribulation 99's* self-conscious and multiple recontextualizing of historical events through the juxtaposition of literary trope and image. But like all forms of historical allegory, the films discussed here, *Eureka*, *Dal polo*, and *Tribulation 99*, all begin with the idea that historical representation is essentially an aesthetic activity, if one sees allegorizing as an active and creative transformation of temporal relationships. While Benjamin advocated allegory as an essential part of his notion of historical materialism, he also warned of the dangers of aestheticizing politics, which can only "culminate in one thing: war" (*Illuminations*, 241). This has been and continues to be demonstrated in the commercial and propagandistic uses of film. With this danger in mind, I have argued here that these artists have taken on the challenge of reclaiming the aesthetics inherent to the allegorizing of cinema's mechanical memory in order to produce new possibilities, new knowledge, and a critical awareness through the act of reimagining, or, more accurately, the act of reimagining.