

Palimpsest, Figuration, *Non Spectant*: again+again

Prologue

Guy Maddin – *Workbooks (Audition 1)*, 2005 | 5:00

"Ignorant armies of sketchy people clashing in the night."

Into Appearance

Kelsey Braun - *Explorations of Surface and Decay*, 2011 | 8:00

"Exploration of Surface and Decay is a meditation on the transformative properties time produces on our surroundings. Found rust, scratches, and other marks, unknown materials dried on to, and dis-colouring surfaces such as paint, wood, and metal, are extensively filmed and woven together to create an entirely new landscape, and a reference to the esthetic qualities of film. As with the imagery, the integral aural component seeks an observation of plane, interacting with the video to establish a heightened sense of tactility. "

Cecilia Araneda – *What Comes Between*, 2009 | 5:37

"What Comes Between is an examination of personal memory and loss rooted in the filmmaker's birth place – Chile – and her departure from that country long ago. The work is a collage film created with found footage from personal and historic sources, and original hand printed and tinted footage. "

Isiah Medina – *Semi-Auto Colours*, 2011 | 6:10

"Kids in the West End of Winnipeg learn to count to One."

Aubriand (Carol O'Brien) – *Time Away*, 2007 | 7:00

"Three guides accompany us on a road trip away from time... and towards the transformative end of the road, space... "

Over Appearance

Heidi Phillips – *Skydive*, 2011 | 5:00

"A metaphoric reflection on risk and the faith that it demands, using found archival footage to create a story of jumpers who contemplate whether God will be their parachute. Artfully scored and edited, the film creates a thoughtful space, suggesting a move towards the unknown. "

Mike Maryniuk – *Asleep at the Wheel*, 2005 | 3:00

"Using found footage of road trips from the 60's, Maryniuk has crafted a psychedelic tribute piece to a friend who passed away in a car accident. Maryniuk's techniques included hole punching and reassembling, bleaching, painting, scratch animation and boiling the film. "

To Erase, To Overwrite, To Return

Sabrina Ratté – *Transit*, 2011 | 4:00

"À travers diverses manipulations, une carte illuminée de Paris est devenue un paysage électronique qui oscille entre l'organicité de la lumière et la rigidité des transitions."

"An illuminated map of Paris becomes a landscape through various image transformations."

Kandis Friesen + Nahed Mansour – *Tape #158: Document 2B*, 2011 | 7:03

"Tape #158: Document 2B rephotographs original footage which was shot for a unrealized documentary and was found at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The filmmakers added an imagined translation to the untranslated footage, challenging notions of authenticity, authorship and collective memory."

Vincent Chevalier – *So...when did you figure out you had AIDS?*, 2010 | 5:45

"So... when did you figure out that you had AIDS? consists of home video footage recorded when I was 13 years old in which I play the role of "a man dying from AIDS" on a daytime talk show. The video predates both my HIV

diagnosis and entrance into art academia by six years. The video serves as a foundational work within my art and identity histories, as it predicts themes of performativity and representation that I would later come to explore."

Excursus on the theory of the palimpsest 1

The palimpsest exposes the synchrony of the scene of writing to diachrony by exposing structure to dissolution. That is to say: writing on the palimpsest is haunted by the erasure of the prior text, this erasure is precisely what introduces time (in the sense of erasure, of the text no longer being legible) into writing. Writing is thus placed into the analytic of finitude, described by Foucault in *The Order of Things* as the foundation of being on the principle that being is not infinite (345). Derrida, whose early work makes continual reference to the palimpsest (e.g. the discussion of the mystic writing pad in "Freud and the Scene of Writing"), would appear to accept this analytic, but with serious reservations which can be grouped under the rubric of *différance*. Diachrony is extended by *différance* to an unreachable horizon; while not quite infinite, writing's finitude is constantly deferred – an applied infinite, or rather, an enigmatic surplus.

again+again

This program, prepared as part of Platform Centre for Photographic + Digital Arts' year-long investigation of the *palimpsest*, explores how the conceptual axioms surrounding the palimpsest are deployed in contemporary experimental film and video in Canada. As the brief excursus above suggests, the concept of palimpsest – a paper, parchment or other writing material designed to be reusable after any writing on it has been erased (OED) – is more generally used to describe spaces of inscription. When applied to film and video, however, the question becomes more complicated. What is the scene of inscription, of producing marks, of erasing marks, of re-marking when it comes to film? This is one of the questions to which the films and videos in this program address themselves.

again+again is divided into two parts with a prologue and an epilogue. Guy Maddin's *Workbooks (Audition 1)* (2005) serves here as a sort of overture to what follows. Part of a series of six films in which we find, to cite Maddin's description, "ignorant armies of sketchy people clashing in the night", *Audition 1* presents us with Louis Negin performing the role of Doctor Fusi. The effect is that of deliberate archaicism: the 16mm footage is deliberately grainy and scratchy, while the recording of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* sounds like an old Victrola playing a badly cared-for 78rpm. What is particularly notable about Maddin's film here is the nervousness of the editing. Rapid jump cuts not only lend the film its appearance of being found or rediscovered footage (about which we will be discussing presently), but add to the sense that Dr. Fusi/Louis Negin is under some considerably traumatic distress.

What is the source of this distress? Following Maddin's prologue, we begin the first part of the program "Into Appearance", inaugurated by Kelsey Braun's *Exploration of Surface and Decay* (2011), a deliberately abstract beginning to the program *per se*. Following from Maddin's play of trembling shadows and flashes of illumination, we have Braun's deliberately slow suture of disjointed audio and image track. Starting off in darkness, the viewers are invited to explore a variety of mottled, rusted surfaces over which the camera moves at speed. We begin in darkness, with the absence of figuration, and travel over spaces of inscription, but these spaces are notable for the evidence of time that marks them. Nothing has been written on them, but they have been written. This paradox confronts the viewers before the screen goes blank again and silence falls.

To be broken by a single voice: “The first thing I remember is the step between.” Cecilia Arenada's *What Comes Between* (2009) is a meditation on the perforated barriers between personal memory and public trauma. As with Braun's film, the edit is foregrounded but, unlike *Exploration of Surface and Decay*, the materiality of film is emphasized by means of laborious hand-processing. Whereas Braun's film rigorously evaded figuration, Arenada's film is more ambiguous. On the one hand, there are personal and found images (still and moving) of historical documents, specifically of violent anti-democratic repression in Pinochet's Chile and its effects on the filmmaker's family and their eventual status as refugees in Canada. In a sense, History (as trauma, as forced dislocation and displacement) becomes a primal scene that can be symbolized only obliquely. Historical displacement reveals itself through figural displacement by means of image refraction and the editing cut.

The question of the cut is paramount in Isiah Medina's *Semi-Auto Colours* (2011). In contrast to Arenada's images that seem to be arrested in formation, in this film the images are subjected to a rigorous analysis by means of editing. What this analysis reveals is the degree to which images, even of West End kids “learning to count to One”, are mediated, that their figuration depends on historical factors (as with Arenada) but also with the image repertoire that is available. There is a strong sense that the people in the movie have incorporated images that are not their own. (Note how often they are pictured wearing headphones, as though being unplugged from the steady drip of images and sound, however momentarily, would be felt as an intolerable privation, perhaps expressed in the neurotic repetition of the placeholding “fuckin”). Using the edit as an interrogatory tool, Medina causes a stutter in the image, which, as Alain Badiou quoting Mao is fond of repeating, “One divides into Two.”

Or Three. (As in Lacan's matheme “one plus one equals three”). This is precisely what happens in *Time Away* (Aubriand/Carole O'Brien, 2007). Whereas the previous films have posited a unitary POV (however attenuated and constantly in a state of negotiation and re-surfacing), Aubrian's film explores a bifurcated – or rather, *trifurcated* – situation of neither-nor. If we postulated that the palimpsest brings diachrony – the temporal – to the synchronic scene of writing, what to make of a film whose avowed aim to transpose time onto space as a means of escape, that is, to “take the time...away”. Figuration starts to become eclipsed as the camera moves from the South American valleys and heads into the mountains, where snow and light obscure the road altogether. What is happening here? If the trajectory of the first part of the “Into Appearance” has been the gradual, painful emergence of graphemic figuration, what to make of Aubriand's reversal of a-temporal figurelessness? Have we reached a palimpsestic limit?

Excursus on the theory of the palimpsest 2: The Analytic of Finitude

The analytic of finitude is, as noted, Foucault's term for the philosophical emphasis on the horizon of what is possible as the truth of what is possible. Being becomes being for “man”, the human subject that is subject and object of truth:

At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of man's existence, we discover a finitude – which is in a sense the same: it is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language; and yet it is radically other: in this sense, the limitation is expressed not as a determination imposed upon man [sic] from outside, (because he has a nature or a history), but as a fundamental finitude which resets no nothing but

its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitation. (343)

Thus, this sense of finitude is dependent on the human subject which is the predication and subject of limit as being itself. Foucault does not name him, but the principle target here is clearly Kantian critique, with its postulation of what thought (pure reason) can do and *what lies beyond its purview*. What Foucault adds to this Kantian postulation is the emphasis that this analytic of finitude is human-centred and is only possible if the finite human subject is posited as a precondition.

To be deferred, then, does not open up writing to the infinite, but retains finitude as *différance*. Thus, figures must be erased eventually, which means that the palimpsest is a universal condition that governs all figuration, all writing.

again+again

If the first section of the program dealt with the precarious emergence of appearance (as figuration, as grapheme), the second section, consisting of Heidi Phillips's *Skydive* (2011) and Mike Maryniuk's *Asleep at the Wheel* (2005) and titled "Over Appearance", asks the question as to what to do with this precarious emergence. Phillips and Maryniuk both seem to suggest: run with it. In both films, the central motif is one of movement. (Perhaps we are seeing the Deleuzean history of cinema in reverse, from the time-image of the first section being superseded by the movement-image). At the same time, the principle of the palimpsest becomes clearest here: film itself – and these are films, not produced digitally – is foregrounded as the space of inscription. But as a *fugitive* space.

Phillips's *Skydive* sets up the motif of flight quite literally: using found footage, the film explores the miracle of flight based solely on faith and hope - "God will be your parachute." Werner Herzog's discussion of the miracle of the flying nun further admonishes our tendency towards scepticism as a consequence of our dereliction, of our being "tramps in the gutter of a broken nation." Furthermore, the found footage and audio in *Skydive* are of uncommon richness and detail: the skydiving women whose parachutes blossom like petals in a breeze is perhaps one of the most sublime moments in the program as a whole. However, there is a strong undertow: this is a film, after all, that rhapsodizes about mass suicide, and the crashing aircraft that closes the film suggests that the oneiric beauty of the majority of the film is a kind of dreamwork or pre-figuration that obscures fatal consequences – that this film can be regarded as a dream of death.

This sense of danger is further explored in Maryniuk's *Asleep at the Wheel*. On the surface, this section of the program is a marked contrast to the often introspective character of what has preceded it. Instead, *Asleep at the Wheel* makes a brisk homage to road movies on the 1960s, complete with an upbeat surf-rock soundtrack that brims with *joie de vivre*. Found footage and hand-processed 16mm combine to produce an extroverted sprint, combined with the painted admonition to WAKE UP. But the context of the film itself has a sombre note, given that it is a tribute to a deceased friend of the filmmaker who died in an automobile accident. As with *Skydive*, *Asleep at the Wheel* takes a dive at the end and falls back to earth.

Excursus on the theory of the palimpsest: Found Footage, Distortion, *Non Spectant*

Of the seven films so far discussed, four of them use found footage. (They are: *What Comes Between*, *Time Away*, *Skydive* and *Asleep at the Wheel*.) Of the four, Araneda, Phillips and Maryniuk expose this footage to hand-processing: by manipulating the exposure of particular segments of film, montaging separate sequences together, hole punching, bleaching, scratching, painting or boiling the

film, etc. (The found footage in *Time Away* is left pretty much as it is and put into service of directing the trajectory into figuration.) However, it is important to note how the found footage is deployed. In the case of *What Comes Between*, not all of the found footage is physically altered – most notably the newsreel images of Pinochet's repressive apparatus, that is, the armed guards, the men and women being led away to their unspeakable fate. (The notable exception to this is the Eisenhower footage concerning the “military-industrial complex”.) This suggests an interesting question as to why the use of found footage is treated in such a way, as though, contrary to what one might typically expect, it is not politics that is the Real of Araneda's film, but rather the inscription of politics that represents the cinematic Real. Hence its distorting factor on the more straightforwardly figurative elements of the film.

In the case of *Skydive* and *Asleep at the Wheel*, the question is more perplexing as politics does not appear to have any role in them whatsoever. And, as such, the manipulation of the footage is different. In the case of *Skydive*, the image is not distorted so as to render it partially illegible (as it is at moments in *What Comes Between*), but rather the hand-processing emphasizes the fact that this is *found footage*, which is to say, footage that was for whatever reason discarded. In a sense, this is an aesthetic choice rather than, say, a psycho-political necessity, but this would be to frame the question in too deflationary a manner. Perhaps we can say that the distorting factors are themselves both the figuration of the traumatic content of *Skydive* and *Asleep at the Wheel* and the distortion of the trauma itself.

A characteristic dénouement in H. P. Lovecraft's stories (texts which to stand to contemporary philosophy as Borges's texts stood with regard to philosophy of the 1970s and 1980s) occurs when the protagonist uncovers an ancient or alien text or work of art to discover that either the text is written in his own handwriting or that the work of art bears his own likeness. This generally results in the protagonist going mad, committing suicide or ending up as a excrementally amorphous blob on a crypt floor. Re-discovery is often considered to be a restoration, as in revealing what was scraped from the palimpsest and bringing it into play with what is henceforth inscribed there. But what is this task reveals something that we don't want to see, that we are not meant to see. What happens when we ignore the injunction *Non Spectant* – Do Not Look. (As opposed to the more neutral *Non Vident* – Do not See)?

again and again

The final section of the program is titled “To Erase, To Overwrite, To Return”, which gives us three possible responses to the problem of trauma that we now postulate as being at the heart of the thematic of the palimpsest. What to do when the revealed figure is unbearable to sight? Erase figuration itself, as happens in Sabrina Ratté's *Transit* (2011). This is far and away the least figurative of works in this program, but it is also the most perfect example of the palimpsest in the program. Ratté has taken a map of Paris and applied digital image alteration techniques to completely obscure the original traces, leaving only the striations of greyscale digital feedback in their stead. These are carefully composed, to be sure, but the combination of their a-figurativeness, their sense of processural depletion (combined with Roger Tellier-Craig's *komische*-influenced soundtrack) emphasize less the textural quality of the image as a generalized erasure. *Transit* flattens figuration to the point of obscuring even the space of inscription. In short, there is no longer any “there” there.

A different tack is taken in Kandis Friesen and Nahed Mansour's *Tape #158: Document 2B*. In this video (not, one should note, a *film* as in the majority of the works we have previously examined,

but a *video*) is a repurposed video tape discovered at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives showing an interview with three elderly people in a rural setting. One woman in particular holds forth on her tendency towards rebelliousness and the importance of self-expression. She is indeed formidable (I wouldn't much like to get on her wrong side!) and her son, also present, holds certain unspoken grudges against her. In short, we are in a fairly unremarkable family scene, albeit on haunted by a potential slippage in veracity: the two women in the interviewed trio are sisters, but at times it is asserted that they are twins, a fact which escapes their initial introduction. (It must also be added that they do not bear all that much resemblance to one another.) Questions asked by the unseen interlocutors are rebuffed: "My hair turned white, and I forget." To forget, to erase. However, a crucial feature of *Tape #158: Document 2B* is that the spoken testimony, spoken in German and subtitled into English, is *false* – the subtitles bear no connection to what the three women are saying. The desuturing of audio and image that we noted in Braun's *Explorations of Surface and Decay* makes a reappearance, but here it is motivated to produce a mistaken figure, indeed, a willfully mendacious mark. As this video is part of a project of memorialization, the original testimony of the three elderly people is overwritten. Less overtly than *Transit*, *Tape #158: Document 2B* evades the traumatic surface of the palimpsest by covering it up again without reference to what lies beneath.

To erase, to overwrite, to evade. However, sometimes it doesn't work. We now turn to the last film in the program: *So...when did you figure out you had AIDS?* Originally videotaped in 1996 when the artist was thirteen years old, it was rediscovered by the artist shortly following his HIV diagnosis. While this context necessarily frames our reactions to the video as a particularly sick serendipity, the video itself as an uncanny quality to it. The camera constantly veers off in a jerky manner, as if unwilling to be a part of what is being videoed. Added to this is the sheer extremity of the performances: the young girl playing the role of the talk show host asks us not to wet ourselves as we watch the proceedings and at time admonishes her guest, forgets his name and screams at the audience. The young Chevalier's own performance is equally bizarre. At times mimicking the standard AIDS tropes and narratives that, by 1996, were all too familiar for daytime television, Chevalier also acts out inappropriately, his voice alternating between a dry whisper (appropriate to someone acting the part of a terminally ill man) to hysteric shrieks. Indeed, the term "hysteric" is apt; bracketing the gendered implications of hyste-ria, we can say with Lacan that the hysteric's desire is the desire of the Other, which is to say, it is a mode of evasion of the Real of the split subject's desire. Hence the most disturbing moment in Chevalier's film when the person with AIDS (played by the filmmaker) dies in the course of the show. There is a sudden cut in the video, the screen goes blank, and the talk show host begins to perorate before being interrupted by the dead person returning to life with an disruptive Woody Woodpecker laugh. In a sense, the traumatic Real of desire is revealed in this tasteless moment: the stupid, brutal fact of human mortality.

Excursus on the theory of the palimpsest: Death Does Not Signify

From one perspective, there is no significance to death, that is, death is asignifying: "We may never encounter Thanatos; its voice is never heard..." (Deleuze 117). But can death be the subject/object of figuration? As we have learnt over the course of the last few films and videos, death itself cannot be figured – it is the source of the *Non Spectant* injunction. However, it functions as a distorting factor, one that potentially extends the chain of figuration beyond the horizon of finitude. (In this sense, and in only this sense, we can assert the paradox that death is the foundation of infinity.) To conceive of the palimpsest, then, is to conceive of death. Which is why it is elusive: each

figuration is distorted by the traumatic surplus of its predecessor and, by extension, its successor. It is fitting, then, to return to the Prologue of this program, Maddin's *Workbooks (Audition 1)*. The hysteric panic evinced by Negin/Dr. Fusi, the sudden cuts and arrests in the camerawork, the decayed quality of the audio attest to the traumatic confrontation with death that underlies the requirement *both erase and to reinscribe and refigure*. This is, perhaps, what gives Maddin's images their profligate fecundity – that the palimpsest must be scraped off and refilled presents us with a task of thought, writing and figuration that infinitely extends itself by means of cuts, interruptions, distortions and arrests. Disruption ensures not continuity, but *continuation*.

Tom Kohut holds an M.A. in English at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario), where he specialized in the twentieth century avant-garde. He is an independent curator and critic, writing on film, literature, new media and sound art. He currently lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba and maintains the website The New Ennui ([thenewennui@blogspot.com](http://thenewennui.blogspot.com)) where he writes on political aesthetics.

Works Cited

- Deleuze, Gilles and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty and Venus in Furs*. Trans. James McNeil. New York: Zone Books, 1991.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. Unidentified. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.