# Chapter 2 – Filmic Ruins

> So obsolescence is about time in the way film is about time: historical time, allegorical time, analog time. I cannot be seduced by the seamlessness of digital time; like digital silence, it has a deadness.
> – Tacita Dean[1]

In 2001, Tacita Dean traveled to the west coast of Madagascar to film the total eclipse of the sun, a project that would later become the film Diamond Ring (2002). By chance, while she was there, she heard of a phenomenon called the "green ray": often glimpsed at sea, the brief flare of green light that shoots up as the last bit of sun dips below the horizon had long been a symbol of good fortune for sailors. Morombe, Madagascar, was an ideal place to sight the elusive ray, which takes place under conditions of low moisture and clear air. Also by chance, Dean had also learned the evening before that Éric Rohmer had faked the effect in Summer (Le Rayon vert, 1986), his cinematographer having waited some two months in the Canary Islands for every sunset before giving up and going home to the magic of postproduction. This made Dean's determination to capture the ray all the greater. Coincidence to coincidence, chance to chance, The Green Ray (2001) came into being. Dean describes the process of shooting:

> The point about my film of The Green Ray is that it did so nearly elude me, too. As I took vigil, evening after evening, on that Morombe beach looking out across the Mozambique Channel and timing the total disappearance of the sun in a single roll of film, I believed, but was never sure, I saw it.[2]

And indeed, the spectator is never sure, either. The film is not displayed on loop, like many of Dean's other works; instead, the 16mm projector is outfitted with a push button that will begin the film at the viewer's volition. Over the course of two-and-a-half minutes, the spectator sees the golden sun sink below the horizon and waits for the fatal instant. But before one knows it, the sun is gone, the sky is dark, the film has ended. *Did I glimpse the green ray?* Time to push the button again.

The sun and the sea are recurring figures in Dean's films: Banewl (1999), Totality (2000), and Diamond Ring feature solar eclipses; Fernsehturm (2001) and Palast (2004) capture a literal sun setting metaphorically over the monuments of the former German Democratic Republic; Disappearance at

Sea (1996), Disappearance at Sea II (1997), Bubble House (1999), and Teignmouth Electron (2000) are films generated from Dean's exploration of the story of Donald Crowhurst, a British amateur sailor who jumped overboard after abandoning a race around the world in a trimaran, taking his chronometer with him in a gesture that cannot help but be read as carrying symbolic weight. The sun and the sea function here as thematic and imagistic concerns, certainly, but they also suggest a certain relation to time. In The Green Ray, the cyclical recurrence of the sun's diurnal movements is interrupted – perhaps – by a brief flash of contingency. This chance occurrence takes place at the meeting of sun and sea and thus fittingly suggests a temporal relation closer to that of the flux of the ocean than the regularity of the sun. Though it is governed by tidal fluctuations influenced by the moon and the sun, in its filmic representations the ocean is figured as a site of unpredictability and chance, of a disruption of linear time in favor of the contingent or the unknown that can act as an allegory of cinema itself. One might think here of the uncertainty of the closing freeze-frame of François Truffaut's The 400 Blows (Les 400 coups, 1959), of the denial of human finitude achieved by the ocean-as-thinking-substance of Andrei Tarkovsky's Solaris (Solyaris, 1972), or even of the photograph of the ocean that finally brings the inexorable zoom of Michael Snow's Wavelength (1967) to a rest, only to open onto another visual field.

*Tacita Dean,* The Green Ray *(2001).*

At the meeting of sun and sea, The Green Ray attempts to capture a rare optical phenomenon that might act as an allegory of film, that medium with a privileged access to the archivization of the chance occurrence and the ephemeral. Dean herself makes this link between the material base of The Green Ray and its subject. She was not alone during the filming, but was accompanied by two others who captured the event on video. Instantly replaying the footage, they insisted that their video proved that there had been no green flash and that they had witnessed, in fact, just another Mozambique sunset. Dean writes:

> But when my film fragment was later processed in England, there, unmistakably, defying solid representation on a single frame of celluloid, but existent in the fleeting movement of film frames, was the green ray, having proved itself too elusive for the pixellation of the digital world.[3]

Video versus film, digital versus analogue, regularity versus contingency: The Green Ray mobilizes a larger problematic concerning the contemporary digitization of the moving image and what happens to analogue film in its wake. It returns to questions of medium specificity in the face of convergence. The film demands an investment in the revelatory capacities of celluloid, its powers of transcription, taking as its subject, Dean says, the possibility of "faith and belief in what you see."[4] She continues, "This film is a document; it has become about the very fabric, material, and manufacture of film itself."[5] Whether or not the green ray can be glimpsed in this film comes down to a leap of faith and a belief in the material of film as having a privileged access to the real.

"This film is a document," but a document of what? Perhaps of a fleeting optical phenomenon, but certainly of a particular moment in the history of film and the desires its makers and spectators invest in it. For this "faith and belief in what you see" is, to be sure, a fantasmatic projection: the spectator fastens on to the ability of celluloid to render legible contingency precisely in the wake of the digital's regularity of ones and zeroes. The investment in the revelatory capacities of celluloid and a faith in its indexical guarantee must be read as a symptomatic response to anxieties surrounding often hyperbolic claims of the ungroundedness and inherent manipulability of the digital. By virtue of approaching obsolescence, film's ability to capture ephemeral moments in the process of disappearance has been highlighted as a quality central to its specificity as a medium. Though the digital is also capable of such an operation, what is at stake in the privileging of analogue film's relationship to contingency is an investment in the medium as linked to historicity and spectrality. These chance moments are not made present for the spectator, but persist as remnants of a lost time, much in the same way that the very apparatus of film currently finds itself as a relic of a now collapsed regime of image registration and apprehension.

It is as much of this moment in the history of cinema that The Green Ray stands as document as it is of the sunset on that Madagascar evening. Though discussions of film's medium specificity as linked to the registration of contingency go back as far as the exclamations of early spectators that what fascinated most in Louis Lumière's Feeding the Baby (Repas de bébé, 1895) was less the title action and more the wind in the trees in the background, the frequency with which this ability has been held up in recent theory and practice as central to an ontology of the analogue moving image demands historicization and contextualization if it is to be adequately understood.[6]

The Green Ray is not alone in regard to such concerns. The contemporary insistence on using 16mm film in the gallery in tandem with explorations of the contingent, the ephemeral, or the disappearing, is striking. Roughly concurrent with cinema's 1995 centennial, the use of celluloid returns as a major feature of moving image art for the first time since the advent of video displaced the film installations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The reentry of 16mm into the gallery in the 1990s brings a host of concerns very different from those at stake in this earlier moment. The 1960s-1970s' baring of the apparatus in conjunction with a phenomenology of spectatorship has shifted to an exploration of history and the obsolescent, marking a profound reconfiguration of the medium's specificity. This can be witnessed not only in Tacita Dean's work, but is also central to artists such as Matthew Buckingham, Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, Stan Douglas, Sharon Lockhart, and Ben Rivers. This employment of 16mm may be seen as part of a larger problematic of obsolescence in contemporary art that could include work as diverse as Jane and Louise Wilson's video installations of disused sites of bureaucratic power (Stasi City, 1997), James Coleman's use of the slide projector (Initials, 1993-1994), or William Kentridge's explorations into early cinema through the vehicle of hand-drawn animation (Seven Fragments for Georges Méliès, 2003).[7]

This chapter will build a theoretical framework in which to consider how best to locate such contemporary practices and their insistence on both the institution of cinema and the material of film as superannuated. Hal Foster has remarked, "There are usually two dynamics at these new technological moments. There are artists who want to push the futuristic freedoms of new media and others who want to look at what this apparent leap forward opens up in the past, the obsolete."[8] This chapter will deal with artists who fit into this second category, who, through practice, engage the opportunity Thomas Elsaesser sees the digital as having provided for film theorists, namely its function as "a zero-degree that allows one to reflect upon one's understanding of both film history and cinema theory."[9]

The Green Ray explicitly invokes discourses of medium specificity, but as is demonstrated by the relationship between the film's muteness and the rhetoric

of analogue exceptionality that pervades Dean's writings about it, this configuration of film's medium specificity has as much to do with the discourses surrounding the medium and its historical emplacement as it does with the inherent qualities of its physical support. In The Green Ray, as is the case for practically all of Dean's films, the artist's writings, which she describes as "asides," function an important textual supplements. The film text itself might eschew narrative, but through this supplementary dimension, the films enter into a series of interlocking stories and journeys that run throughout the artist's practice. But one must also consider the ways in which other kinds of discourses constitute a contemporary understanding of the medium specificity of film. In the case of artists' employments of celluloid, for example, the institutional and economic discourses of the gallery and the museum must be taken into account.

In the contemporary gallery, analogue film is figured as an old medium, a remnant of a cinema now in ruins. It has a privileged link to ephemerality and historicity – qualities that have also found a significant place in discussions of medium specificity in recent film theory. To call something an "old medium" is to assert that this medium has a history; that is, it is to assert that the very concept of what might count as a medium is a profoundly historical category. These works assert the historical variability of film's specificity, but go further than this to posit film's specificity as inextricable from its relationship to the past. While the films under consideration here do not make specific reference to the history of cinema, there is a discernible interest in interrogating the relationship of the film to the archivization of the past, and in doing so at a point in its own history at which it might be considered as antiquated. Film processing labs are closing rapidly and the U.S. National Association of Theater Owners estimates that 35mm projection will be out of commercial cinemas by the end of 2013.[10] Such a situation leads to a consideration of film as an old medium, one that occurs not only by virtue of form-content relationships wherein celluloid is used to deal with aged or disappearing subjects, but also by placing film inside the gallery as an object of aesthetic contemplation.[11] By attaching importance to the film print itself as an art object, film leaves the realm of mass cultural circulation to enter a different economy of consumption.

To raise the question of medium specificity is to situate recent 16mm gallery practice squarely amidst two related but separate discourses that take up the notion of a crisis in the idea of the medium: from media studies, convergence, and from art history, Rosalind Krauss' formulation of a "post-medium condition." This chapter will explore the relationship between convergence and specificity as one of dialectical movement, demonstrating how it is precisely in tandem with an anxiety over the limits of a medium that one finds articulations of its specificity. To speak of medium specificity in this context is not to partake in a disciplinary orthodoxy that tries to demarcate a territory of the uncontami-

nated object of "cinema," but rather to open film studies to the changing contours of its object, foregoing a purity of cinema for the possibilities that may be generated out of its continuing metamorphosis. If one takes seriously Hollis Frampton's claim that "...no activity can become an art until its proper epoch has ended and it has dwindled, as an aid of survival, into total obsolescence," there is an intimate connection between the increasing obsolescence of celluloid and its current configuration within the gallery space – one that suggests a productive transformation of the medium much more than its death.[12]

## Post-medium Post-mortem

Any contemporary formulation of medium specificity must situate the concept alongside the increasing digitization of culture, a condition that sees the notion of the discrete medium challenged by the centripetal motions of convergence. As noted in the introduction, one meaning of the keyword "convergence" is the ability of new media to translate "old" media from one format to another, to transcode all media to a numerical representation of ones and zeros that make media programmable. Friedrich Kittler states the consequences of this quite succinctly:

> The general digitization of channels and information erases the differences among individual media...Inside the computers themselves everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound, or voice. And once optical fibre networks turn formerly distinct data flows into series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other. With numbers, everything goes. Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, storage, transposition; scrambling, scanning, mapping – a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium.[13]

The movement of convergence, however, may not be confined to the level of technology alone. Rather, one must recall Henry Jenkins' conviction that convergence designates a broader cultural shift that involves a larger reconfiguration of media systems on a global level, encompassing the ways in which content now achieves possibilities of circulation heretofore unknown.[14] The new presence of cinema in the gallery cannot be understood outside of this reorganization spanning across all sectors of culture.

If, for media studies, anxieties over the formerly clear boundaries of media take the form of questions of convergence, in art history, the dialogue is framed in a slightly different, but certainly related, manner. In her lecture-turned-book, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition,* Rosalind Krauss outlines the state of the medium in contemporary art, tracing the fallout

of the exhausted modernist paradigm of medium specificity. If digital convergence is one reason discussions of medium specificity have receded, another is the term's inevitable invocation of the specters of modernism, formalism, essentialism, and of Clement Greenberg – perhaps the most influential theorist of medium specificity of the twentieth century. Very much in line with the *locus classicus* of medium specificity arguments, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1874 *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry,* Greenberg argued that with modern art, each medium should engage in a process of distillation and self-criticism, to undergo a radical reduction so as to reach the medium's essential qualities. In short, this trajectory involved the pursuit of excellence through limitation.[15] The notion of more firmly entrenching a medium in its area of competence demonstrates Greenberg's commitment to a centered, autonomous work that would form a monad capable of resisting ever-insidious mass culture. This programmatic prescription of autotelic pruning led to an emptying of the medium of anything extraneous to its essence, a movement that would find its apogee and breaking point in minimalism.[16] By the mid-1960s, modernist unity begins to fracture, leading to a dispersed notion of "art in general" and an increasing interest in inter- and multi-media.

Krauss' elaboration of the "post-medium condition" – a term that, with a revealing parapraxis, might quickly flip to "postmodern condition" – details what happened next. This notion begins as a critique of the essentialist unity of the modernist medium in the name of fragmentation, self-difference, and an undoing of the autonomy of the work of art. Film is central here, since it provides a model of a medium with an aggregate nature, finding its conceptualization in the amalgamation of parts that make up the term "apparatus."[17] By the late 1960s, the essential unity of the modernist medium had become untenable and led instead to a conception of the medium "as differential, self-differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support."[18] At first, this was a welcome change. Krauss' seminal 1978 essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," happily problematized the unity of the modernist category of "sculpture," linking art theory to a broader poststructuralist critique of essence and identity in order to break away from a conception of the medium as rigidly and ahistorically defined.[19] Though not named as such, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" provides an early formulation of what would later become known as the "post-medium condition." But as time went by, what began as a progressive critique of modernist essentialism would become, in Krauss' view, a default position that consolidated the generalization of the aesthetic and permeation of art by kitsch that are the hallmarks of advanced capitalism. If in "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" the breaking apart of unity was accorded an important political and conceptual task, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the situation would change drastically.

Nearing the end of *"Voyage on the North Sea"* and in the articles on "reinventing the medium" that follow, the changed status of fragmentation in Krauss' thought becomes clear.[20] In "Reinventing the Medium: Introduction to PHOTOGRAPH," a 1999 essay on James Coleman, she writes:

> It is at this historical juncture that the taboo against specificity comes to seem less and less radical and a desire to rethink the idea of the medium as a form of resistance to late capitalism's utter generalization of the aesthetic – so that anything from shopping to watching wars on television takes on an aestheticized glow – seems less and less impossible.[21]

This desire to recuperate the unity of a medium and the possibilities for self-reflexivity therein must be read against the pervasiveness of installation art in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the increasing spectacularization of contemporary art and the museum space. At stake here is an attempt to revive a critical practice thought to be neutralized by the once-productive contaminations of high and low, inside and outside.

If, in the 1960s, Allan Kaprow could triumphantly proclaim that, "Young artists of today no longer say, 'I am a painter,' or 'a poet' or 'a dancer.' They are simply 'artists.' All of life will be open to them," by the 1990s, this attempt to reinject art into everyday life had shifted to the postmodern complicity of art, capital, and mass culture.[22] The "postmodernism of resistance" has been co-opted by a movement of capital that functions not according to principles of unity and identity, but instead according to fragmentation and difference – those very keywords poststructuralists once championed as providing a philosophical corrective to the centuries-old hegemony of binary, rationalist thought.[23] In 1966, Godard dedicated his MASCULINE FEMININE (MASCULIN FÉMININ: 15 FAITS PRÉCIS) to "the children of Marx and Coca-Cola," but now one might say that today's children are borne of Deleuze and Starbucks – alive amidst paradoxical flows of deterritorialization, personalization, and niche marketing.[24] Krauss' repugnance at such a configuration is palpable, to the point that she has spoken of not being able to maintain her earlier methodological commitment to poststructuralism and has made blanket statements as problematic as calling "the international fashion of installation and intermedia work" a situation in which "art *essentially* finds itself complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital."[25] Krauss' response to such a situation is a call to "reinvent" the medium.

How might one situate the relationship between 16mm gallery practice, medium specificity, and obsolescence in relation to the twin debates of convergence and the post-medium condition, both of which speak of specificity's undoing? These conditions have led to the relative denigration of the term "medium specificity," relegating it to nothing more than a specter of modernism

with little relevance for the contemporary moment. Writing on Tacita Dean in an essay whose title misleadingly suggests a particular concern with the medium, Michael Newman proposes that,

> The issue is no longer how to distinguish mediums from each other or different uses of a medium within a given state of technological development (as in the relation between cinema and artists' films in the 1960s), but rather of *whether a medium as such is even possible* in the context of the technological transformation – specifically the digitalisation of media as a whole.[26]

Paul Arthur, speaking as a part of a round table on obsolescence and American avant-garde film, voices a similar position:

> When you have first-generation film purists like Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow, Jonas Mekas, Ernie Gehr, Bruce Baillie, Andrew Noren, Peter Hutton, and Gunvor Nelson all working in video; and you have younger-generation filmmakers like Peggy Ahwesh and Scott Stark who move back and forth between digital and film; and you've got Stan Brakhage willing to commit his precious hand-painted films to VHS for distribution, it seems to me that the notion of medium specificity is somewhat vitiated.[27]

Both of these proclamations miss how the twin phenomena of the post-medium condition and convergence might lead not to the obliteration of specificity but rather back to a rethinking of the concept that would free it of its modernist shackles and render it relevant to the contemporary moment. Today, it is precisely these admixtures of film and video, these dispersals of cinema beyond what is considered to be its "normal" bounds, that necessitate rethinking how medium specificity might operate.

Instead of shoring itself up from contamination in an essential purity, it is now possible to see the medium as delimiting itself precisely in relation to the aggregate mixtures it enters into with other media. This phenomenon is not new: as Tom Gunning describes it, "[C]inema has always (and not only at its origin) taken place within a competitive media environment, in which the survival of the fittest was in contention and the outcome not always clear."[28] But certainly, the contemporary moment brings this "battle of the images," to use Raymond Bellour's term, to a rather exacerbated degree unknown during the decades when the constitutive heterogeneity of the cinematic apparatus was relatively reined in by the hegemony of the cooperating systems of representation and exhibition that find their canonical formulation in Jean-Louis Baudry's "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus."[29] The entrenchment of this situation in 1970, when Baudry published the essay, was so firm as to appear as mythologized nature. As such, the political imperative of the time

was to dismantle such unity, to make evident the work of the apparatus and thereby provoke an Althusserian "knowledge effect."[30]

With the erosion of this hegemony, the situation has changed. Now, in a horizontally integrated industry, one confronts the aggregate character of the cinema everywhere, reaching as far as the marketing of fast-food tie-ins or the downloading of companion short films online.[31] The objective now becomes less a destruction of unity – for fragmentation is presumed to be the point of departure – and more a salvaging of the remnants of an object become precious, recollecting (assembling again and remembering) the cinema through an interrogation of its elements. This is to insist first on the historical variability of film's medium specificity rather than on an enduring essence, and second on the gallery as a space where an interrogation into the cinema's component parts and conventions might occur. If an artist chooses to move back and forth between film and video, this should not be taken as a mark of indifference to the medium, but rather as an effort to engage the medium most suited for the work, thereby necessarily engaging its specific qualities. It is common for artists who use 16mm in the gallery to engage in a certain medium promiscuity: to draw but two examples from artists who will be discussed in this chapter, Tacita Dean works in drawing, photography, books, found objects, sound, film, and video; Matthew Buckingham works in film, video, photography, slide projection, sculpture, installation. Far from vitiating the notion of the medium, such cross-medium practices provide a new way of thinking about medium specificity, one that sees it as in a constant interaction with the flows of convergence.

This dialectic of convergence and specificity calls for, following Bellour, the necessity of "grasping all the arts as part of one single ensemble and analyzing each work in terms of its mix of different art forms, particularly in terms of media, or the artist's choice of confining oneself to one mechanism alone."[32] The contemporary climate of convergence makes possible an understanding of medium specificity that does not rely on the old fiction of the purity of media, but instead begins from the premise of interpenetration and contamination. It begins from the notion that, as André Bazin acknowledged over fifty years ago, film is and always has been an "impure art."[33]

Bellour has written, "The most twentieth-century form of art, [the cinema] is at once more crowded-in now than ever and more alone in its splendour."[34] It is a formulation that points to the tendency to see articulations of medium specificity appear precisely during those moments when limits or boundaries are being compromised and/or drawn. It is an understanding of medium specificity that sees it as produced out of an historical situation of heterogeneity and conflict. Even Bazin, so often mistakenly held up as an example of the presumed essentialism of classical film theory, emphasized that, "...we must say of the cinema that its existence precedes its essence; even in his most adventurous ex-

trapolations, it is this existence from which the critic must take his point of departure."[35] As the cinema's existence changes, so will conceptions of what is specific to it. Once again, it is best to follow Bazin's advice: "So let us stop appealing to precedents from the origin of cinema and *let us take up again the problem as it seems to confront us today.*"[36]

## Indexing the Past

*Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij,* Untitled *(2001).*

Jeroen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij's Untitled (2001) is a silent 35mm film consisting of a single ten-minute-long take of the Karet Bivak Cemetery in central Jakarta. The static frame captures no more movement than the continual rustling of the trees and a tiny lone figure wandering through the middle ground about halfway through. The stillness of the cemetery is overlooked by the high-rise buildings in the background, evidence of the rapid development affecting the twenty-three million inhabitants of Indonesia's capital city. The unbroken continuity of the long take is riven by a temporal discontinuity within the image, as tradition and modernity meet from background to foreground. Indeed, the cemetery would have been demolished to make way for new construction long ago, but owes its continued existence to housing the grave of Ibu

Fatmawati Sokarno, who was both the wife of Sokarno, the first president of Indonesia, and the mother of Megawati Sukarnoputri, who served as the first female president of the country from 2001-2004. Sokarno lobbied for independence from the Netherlands and presided over the country during the first turbulent years of national sovereignty, with his wife reportedly sewing the first Indonesian flag. As the image of the gravesite of this first first lady, Untitled invokes not only the contemporary geopolitical resonances of globalization but the history of colonialism as well – all within a meditation on finitude. This is a concern the film shares with de Rijke and de Rooij's Bantar Gebang (2000), another single ten-minute take, this time of a slum near a garbage dump on the outskirts of Jakarta.

Untitled recalls the travel genre of early cinema, a form of filmmaking that promised its viewer not simply visual pleasure but also knowledge or possession of the faraway lands depicted onscreen. However, instead of supplying its viewer with any sense of possession or understanding, Untitled withholds information or facts in favor of a brute encounter with time. Recalling the experiments in filmic duration undertaken by Andy Warhol between 1963 and 1965, throughout the ten minutes of Untitled, details proliferate, yielding more and more visual data that never resolve into a stable meaning. Rather than using the extension of time to provide the viewer with an increased understanding of the subject, as Untitled progresses, the possibility of knowledge is increasingly undermined. As curator Jessica Morgan has written, "Knowing that the artists are Dutch, we assume a post-colonial interest on their behalf. The impenetrable flatness of the image, however, suggests that this observational investigation of a former colony remains a halted quest for understanding."[37]

Key here is an investment in the powers of registration possessed by the film image. De Rijke and de Rooij insist on the employment of celluloid, a choice one must take seriously and pursue to its fullest implications.[38] The artists refuse to overwrite the time of the apparatus (the spooling of film through the projector) and the time of reception (the experience of the spectator) with the time of narrative, a strategy that Peter Gidal sees as central to Warhol's Blow Job (1963). For Gidal, narrative – however fragmentary it might be – obliterates time: "the real substance of what's being shown on film is overtaken by what it 'stands for' or 'represents.'"[39] For Gidal, this means that radical filmmaking must trouble film's representational capacity by insisting on the materiality of the image; it should *document nothing*. De Rijke and de Rooij's intervention is to follow Gidal's call to insist on the time of reception while still maintaining an investment in the referentiality of the image, something structural film's investigations into medium specificity occluded in the emphasis on film as material. For Ina Blom, de Rijke and de Rooij's "self-effacing structures serve to deflect attention from the work and onto the context or conditions of viewing itself," putting the

filmmakers very firmly within lineage of structural film.[40] However, as much as de Rijke and de Rooij engage this legacy, they also break apart from it by insisting on the historicity of the film image. Untitled puts forth a notion of cinema as an archive of chance, registering mute contingencies, pointing to a referent that it can never quite summon to presence. One can see this pointing to the profilmic real, but the film's blockage, its "halted quest for understanding," also points to the unrepresentable forces of global capital, extending from colonial domination to today's transnational flows of labor, information, and power. The Real is summoned by the image but cannot be spoken by it.

This notion of the medium as linked to both contingency and historicity invokes the concept of indexicality, a category that has come to achieve crucial importance in recent film-theoretical discussions of the analogue-digital transition. Against the much-feared capacity for manipulation that resides in the binary basis of digital media, the idea of analogue film as an indexical sign invokes a testimonial power and a sense of historicity that are seen to be weakened – if not obliterated entirely – by new media. As Mary Ann Doane has ventured, "One might go so far as to claim that indexicality has become today the primary indicator of cinematic specificity."[41] This is to suggest a very different relationship to the category of medium specificity, which has traditionally been paired with an emphasis on the autonomy of the work of art. Greenberg's suggestion that the medium engage in self-criticism so as to further entrench itself in its area of competence is a turning away from the outside world towards self-referentiality.

By drawing attention to the material attributes of cinema – the surface of the filmstrip, the single-frame articulation, sprocket holes, zoom, pan – 1970s structural film located film's specificity in the materiality of the apparatus turning in on itself, not in its ability to register a trace of pastness. With structural film, medium specificity is grounded in film's ability to become about itself, achieving autonomy from that which would contaminate it. Now, on the contrary, film's medium specificity lies in its ability to point beyond itself, in the assertion of its radical *lack* of autonomy by indexing the past. Recent theory and practice have shifted to see this inscription of time as central to a historicized ontology of the cinema. Just as Tacita Dean asserted that the material of celluloid had a privileged relation to capturing chance occurrence in The Green Ray, Untitled mobilizes a conception of filmic specificity that has to do with a registration of duration that will allow for the materialization of contingency.

Even if photography's truth claims have always been questionable, the contemporary desires invested in the revelatory capacities of celluloid must be taken seriously as symptomatic of the current state of technological change and the anxieties that surround it. Dismissing them as factually erroneous does not reduce their affective resonance, as they participate in a fetishistic regime of

belief rather than knowledge. The concept of disavowal has a long history in film theory, invoked in the 1970s as a way of conceptualizing the spectator's willingness to suspend disbelief and invest in the impression of reality.[42] Now, however, the complex machinations of disavowal structure a quasi-mystical investment in the powers of the analogue image: "I know very well (that photographs have always been doctored and the digital can also tell the truth), but all the same (I am drawn to analogue images, for the force of time present within them, I can't explain it, it just *feels different*)..." A knowledge of how the image is produced forms the ground of a complex structure of disavowal and belief that must be taken seriously and understood historically.

For Doane, indexicality is a profoundly historical category that designates "the promise of the rematerialization of time" – an intense desire provoked in part by the abstraction of the subject's relation to time following the standardizing processes of industrial modernity.[43] If the late nineteenth century witnessed a profound reconfiguration of the subject's relationship to time, the emergence of networked electronic communications in the 1990s and 2000s may be seen as another such shift. Paul Virilio hyperbolically speaks of the "globalization of time, more precisely, the advent of universal, REAL TIME that has recently abolished the primacy of local time," while Geert Lovink quotes Jean Baudrillard as proclaiming that "'Time itself, lived time, no longer has time to take place,'" and continues to explain that, "In this pathology of postmodernity, the Internet is no doubt the epiphany of the real-time power."[44] Electronic media allow for an asymptotic approach to the simultaneous, linking disparate spaces across global networks in the perpetual present of online communication. Data is encoded in a regularized series of ones and zeros very different from the photograph's enigmatic status as a "message without a code."[45] In relation to such present-tense mapping, it is understandable that the cinema's alignment with the archivization of traces of pastness and chance events will be seized upon as central to its specificity, for it offers a temporal regime and a system of signification at once older and different. Though the new media dream of being everywhere at once, all of the time (a desire driving the narrative of contemporary techno-thrillers such as The Bourne Ultimatum [2007]), and might be able to capture amateur footage of an event even before the arrival of news crews, the promise of cinema is a promise of historicity. It is a pact to bear witness to the haunting of the present by the past. As Philip Rosen has written, "The indexical trace is a matter of pastness. This already makes it appear that the image is in some way 'historical.'"[46] As such, discourses that attempt to minimize the analogue-digital difference through a rhetoric of perceptual realism are misguided since they wrongly assume that the most important power of photography is that of spatial semblance.[47]

The question of spectatorial affect is central here. Just as Dean saw The Green Ray as being about faith and belief in what one sees, it must be underlined that though the category of indexicality is used to designate a particular regime of the sign linked to the materiality of celluloid, its mobilization cannot be confined to this material level alone. For, following Bazin and Barthes, the power of the index must be understood as a relation to the spectator bound up in time, desire, and finitude. Heidegger suggested that, "The essence of technology is nothing technological," meaning that technologies cannot be understood in terms of their functionality but must instead be understood in terms of their culturally produced meanings and usages.[48] The same is true of indexicality. The index is a matter of discourse as much as of the mute registration of the real. It is the *pathos* of the index, the affect of the trace that is now summoned by the film image. Cinema's specificity once lay in the illusory presence of the objects onscreen, perhaps most embodied in the apocryphal story of credulous early spectators recoiling at the oncoming train.[49] Now, however, one witnesses a shift – from presence to absence, from life to death. Tombstones populate the visual field of Untitled, but the film's eerie stillness equally lends the work a sense of mortification. The film's taciturnity directs attention back onto the conditions of viewing, inducing a reflection on mortality. Not just the temporality of the image, but the apparatus itself contributes here to the sense of the stubborn resistances of the past, the persistent fascination of the ruin. Becoming quiet, becoming venerated, 35mm film is employed here as a reminder of novelty grown old. It evinces the sadness of acknowledging that all that once was modern will be tempered by time's senescence.

In the 16mm film For Bas Oudt (Voor Bas Oudt, 1996), de Rijke and de Rooij train their camera on the quivering wings of a butterfly in a Dutch zoo for ninety seconds before ending abruptly, dedicating the result to Bas Oudt, their former teacher at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam. Shot with a boroscope, a lens possessing powers of extreme magnification usually used for scientific purposes, the film captures a fleeting moment that Vanessa Joan Müller has linked to *vanitas*, a genre of Northern European still-life painting with a strong relation to death. Latin for "emptiness" and "vanity," *vanitas* is related to the transitory and the lack of meaning in earthly life. Traditionally, a *vanitas* painting would depict objects such as rotting fruit, drooping flower petals, skulls, or watches – all of which testify to the impermanence of things. Müller writes, "The butterfly is reminiscent of the impossibility of eternity and of eternal entropy. It celebrates the transitory moment and also reflects in this transitoriness the passing time documented by the shortness of the film."[50] Thus, the film both archives the passing moment and insists that it has been lost forever, now available only as a flickering specter. The filmic image takes over from the *vanitas* genre of painting as the *memento mori* of modernity. The thematics of ephemerality and loss

are here mobilized at the level of form and content, making the deceptively modest Voor Bas Oudt into a powerful meditation on both the materiality of film and the passing of time.

In the films of de Rijke and de Rooij, one finds a relation to temporality and to history that stands against a notion of easy image consumption and the delivery of information able to be apprehended in an instant. Any security of interpretation is undone. The butterfly of For Bas Oudt passes by too quickly, while the graveyard image of Untitled lasts and lasts but never yields to the viewer's gaze. De Rijke and De Rooij have described the contemporary situation of image consumption and easily given meanings with vitriol: "Images are being used as garbage. People don't even look at them... It is also our task to protect the images we make from over-exposure, and our public from their self-imposed visual bulimia."[51] While one might question the self-imposition of this bulimia, the point is well taken. Once the province of shock and distraction, once aligned with the speed of the modern city, here cinema is mobilized as a site of aesthetic contemplation. If Barthes saw cinema as rushing by too fast, as lacking the "engorgement" of time one finds in photography, one must see the slowness of a film like Untitled as rendering unto cinema something of the contemplative temporality of stillness Barthes prized so much in photography.[52]

This strategy is compounded by the strict regulations de Rijke and de Rooij impose for the screening of their films. Unlike most moving image artists, the duo insists that their films be exhibited in custom-designed spaces at particular screening times. The projector is enclosed in a soundproof booth and any potential distraction is minimized. Describing these rooms as "minimal sculptures," de Rijke and de Rooij are interested in the vacancy resulting from the span of time between projections, when the room will be white and empty.[53] In a visual culture – both inside the gallery and out – that is predicated on the perpetual availability of images, this withholding is crucial. With screening times posted outside of the room, the viewer is expected to sit, wait for the film to start, and stay until its end. T.J. Clark has put forth that "one kind of corrective to dogma is looking itself, pursued long enough."[54] To propose such a relationship between the duration of perception and a politics of the image is to reconfigure the maligned name of contemplation. If absorption was once a quality of bourgeois aesthetics to be overthrown in the name of distanciation, in the contemporary media environment, its valence has changed. Through his sustained examination of Poussin's Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake (c.1648, National Gallery, London) and Landscape with a Calm (1650-1651, Getty Museum, Los Angeles) – which, interestingly enough, is also a consideration of the *memento mori* – Clark forges a chronopolitics of image consumption for the digital age, specifically around the refusal of easily apprehended meaning. He writes,

> ...our present means of image-production strike me as...an instrumentation of a certain kind of language use: their notions of image clarity, image flow, image depth, and image density are all determined by the parallel (unimpeded) movement of the logo, the brand name, the product slogan, the compressed pseudo-narrative of the TV commercial, the sound bite, the T-shirt confession, the chat show q. & a. Billboards, web pages, and video games are just projections – perfections, perfected banalizations – of this half-verbal exchange. They are truly (as their intellectual groupies go on claiming) a "discourse" – read a sealed echo-chamber of lies.[55]

If *Screen* theory insisted on viewing cinema as a language, the more recent turn to Peircian semiotics in theories of indexicality shows what might be gained by expanding our apprehension of the cinematic image beyond a linguistic framework: a conception of the image as never exhausted by linguistic meaning and at times resistant to it.

In Untitled, de Rijke and de Rooij combine two temporal strategies: the exploitation of film's indexicality and an insistence on long duration. Using these two elements together, the artists engage in *kenosis* – an emptying of meaning – that questions the violence that underlies the assumption of easy understanding. By positing the possibility of unknowing through an insistence on the mute facticity of the filmic image, de Rijke and de Rooij revive a Warholian interest in obstinate stupidity within an inquiry on the vicissitudes of cross-cultural understanding and global image circulation. In his text on the neutral, Barthes has written, "[A]s we know, Nietzsche linked meaning and power: meaning (fruit of, called by interpretation) always a blow of force. → In radical terms: no solution to arrogance other than the suspension of interpretation, of meaning."[56] De Rijke and de Rooij reject the easy availability of the billboard, the commercial, and the logo in favor of a different relationship to pastness, historicity, speed, and attention. This is, however, a new place for cinema: it is a position suffused with slowness, sadness, and death. It emerges as a contestation of the frenetic montage aesthetics of contemporary mass media, using the controlled environment of the gallery against mainstream commercial filmmaking. But one might also view such usage as a quiet outcry against the politics of image consumption *within* the gallery walls, using film against the flashy overload of installation-entertainment. The artists stake out a small place for a different kind of filmmaking between the spectacular poles of mall multiplex and blockbuster exhibition.

## A Little History of 16mm

"Every move a picture, every man his own movie director, every lawn a movie studio, and every home a movie theater."[57] So begins the first mention of 16mm film in the *New York Times*, on 9 January 1923. Kodak introduced the gauge that year in an attempt to bolster amateur filmmaking, expanding markets from commercial exhibition to enthusiasts who would require cameras, film stock, and projectors to support their new hobby. For indeed, as Haidee Wasson remarks, though the name of 16mm may refer to the measurement of the filmstrip, "it was more accurately an expansive network of ideas and practices."[58] The ideas and practices formed around this cheaper, more accessible alternative to the industry standard of 35mm stock have, throughout various points in its history, included not only amateur filmmaking, but also other venues of non-theatrical exhibition, such as classrooms and film societies.[59] But perhaps above all, 16mm has been the favored gauge of experimental cinema. The smaller gauge and ease of operating the camera facilitates the sense of a personal cinema of single authorship, held against the great orchestrations of Hollywood production methods. Moreover, 16mm provided the avant-garde with an economic choice. Though by no means cheap, the format provided a viable choice for filmmakers and exhibitors working under strained financial circumstances while retaining an excellent image quality.

With some exceptional employments of 8mm and 35mm, 16mm has become standard gauge for gallery filmmaking.[60] Though 16mm was not invented until 1923 – well into the industrialization of cinema – its affiliation with an artisanal mode of production makes it a favored material support for a return to the modest origins of the medium. This is exemplified by the 16mm work of Matthew Buckingham, who uses the medium to interrogate microhistories of modernity, including that of the cinema. Beginning with Amos Fortune Road (1996), in which Buckingham moves between the present of a young woman's summer in New Hampshire and the enduring past of slavery, the artist marks out an interest that unifies his broad body of work: he encounters traces left by the past and narrativizes them according to the exigencies of the present. Installations such as Subcutaneous (2001) and Muhheakantuck: Everything Has a Name (2003) use film in conjunction with an interest in the "little history": the narratives that get left out of the official story, the fragmentary slices of the past that persist into the present in the form of heavily cathected traces.

The notion of the "little history" is equally a reference to Walter Benjamin's 1931 text, "Little History of Photography."[61] Here, Benjamin returns to the beginnings of photography, looking at long-exposure portraiture to attempt to understand the fascination of the medium prior to its large-scale industrialization.

He brings together a certain notion of historiography with the proposition of the "optical unconscious," a term used to designate the new realms of visibility opened by the camera. The historiographic impulse of the "Little History" is to return to a moment in the past in an effort to recover the utopian potential that was held therein but dissipated by the passage of time. This unsettles any notion of historical necessity, reintroducing the centrality of contingency and posing the possibility of alternate, unfulfilled futures – but it also imparts a sense of finitude and the horror of time's impassive march. This constellation of hope and death, history and subjectivity – glimpsed everywhere throughout the writer's oeuvre – accounts for the importance of photography.

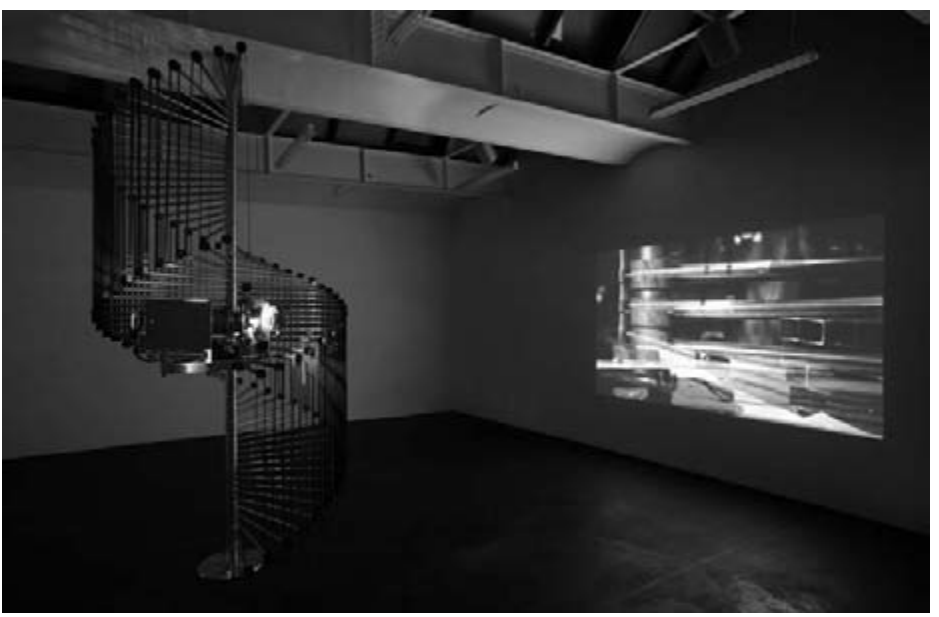
Benjamin posits a homology between what he views as the historiographical imperative and the medium-specific characteristics of photography, with contingency emerging as a category vital to both. The advent of technological media, while compromising tradition and taking part in the dissolution of *Erfahrung*, or long experience, also provided a new opportunity to interrogate the past and negotiate the relationship between subjectivity and modernity. Discussing a photo Karl Dauthendey took of himself and his fiancée, Benjamin remarks that in old photographs,

> the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.[62]

This tiny spark of contingency, conceptualized in the preceding section according to the notion of the indexical trace, is here linked to a new way of understanding history. To rediscover in the image the forgotten future so that what is found there might be put in the service of the present: this emerges as a paramount concern in two Buckingham film installations that deal explicitly with narratives of film history and with film as a medium intimately bound to historicity, Situation Leading to a Story (1999) and False Future (2007).

In Situation Leading to a Story, Buckingham returns to the culture of amateur filmmaking initiated by the advent of 16mm. As the viewer enters the gallery, no image is visible – a 16mm projector occupies the room and a male narrator can be heard through speakers. Not the image, but its machinery: in this, the first work for which the artist specified installation instructions, the projector appears as sculptural object before the viewer is introduced to the image. While it is not divested of its utility, still functioning to emit an image, this becoming-sculpture of the projector puts forth the technology as an object of aesthetic contemplation, much like Simon Starling's Wilhelm Noack oHG (2006) and Rodney Graham's Rheinmetall/Victoria 8 (2003). While Starling references the thwarted utopia where modernism and industry might meet through

a Moholy-Nagy-inspired projector, Graham has described his installation as "two obsolete technologies facing off," the projector and the typewriter.[63] In all three works, the projector remains in use but acts as more than just the material support for an artist's film. Framed by the gallery walls, it emerges from its normally hidden position in a soundproof booth to command the viewer's attention as a sculptural form in its own right, distinctly aligned with the outmoded. In Buckingham's installation, one must leave the room and reenter around the corner in order to gain access to the image, suggesting a process of work to find the image, a labor of access.



*Simon Starling,* Wilhelm Noack oHG *(2006).*

Over jerky, hand-held black-and-white footage of a garden party from decades ago, a voice-over tells a story of finding four rolls of 16mm on the street in Manhattan. Each roll was labeled with a single word: "garden," "Peru," "garage," and "Guadalajara." The image track of Situation Leading to a Story consists of this 16mm footage, reprinted, as Buckingham's voice-over explains, so as to be able to be projected at sound speed without making the motion look jerky. Buckingham's final comment on this printing process, "Later I wondered if I'd slowed it down too much," might merely be indicative of a perfectionist's dissatisfaction, but it also invokes the eerie slowness of found-footage films like Angela Ricci-Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian's From the Pole to the Equator (Dal polo all'equatore, 1987) and Bill Morrison's Decasia (2002), which ex-

ploit optical printing as a way of instilling an increased fascination with the aged celluloid image. But despite this commonality, Situation Leading to a Story must be distinguished from such works, for it not only makes use of found footage, but also directly interrogates the processes of finding and making sense of such images of the past. As Mark Godfrey suggests, "It could be said that Buckingham provides a metacritique of the indulgent use of found imagery in recent art practice in Situation, and by taking found film as a site, relinquishes a formalist investigation for an institutional one."[64] Whereas Decasia presents a kind of fantasia of the archive, with footage drawn from organizations all over the world according to formal interest, it is not just the fetishized material of celluloid that figures in Situation (although this is very much at play). Rather, one witnesses an investigation into the different uses and functions of 16mm film throughout its history and the particular challenges that this body of often orphaned images poses today. The artist plays archivist-detective with this footage: he dates it according to the codes found along the edges of the filmstrip (a practice Kodak instated in 1916), grapples with the onset of vinegar syndrome, and attempts to find its owner based on the name and address on the box that contained the reels.

*Matthew Buckingham,* Situation Leading to a Story *(2007).*

The particular "situation" of an artist finding discarded film leads to a "story," or to be more precise, to many stories. For throughout the twenty minutes of the film, Buckingham weaves a polyphony of voices and temporalities that criss-cross modalities of discourse from histories of exploitation, to film preservation, the detective story, and the poetic meditation – none of which engage what has emerged as the "official" history of cinema. No studios, no stars, no auteurs. The film labeled "Peru" documents the construction of a tramway in the Andes Mountains. This leads Buckingham to relate the story of how the Cerro de Pasco Copper Corporation (CPC), owned by a group of New York industrialists, polluted and devalued the land in its 1912 consolidation of a monopoly over mining in Peru. In the years that followed, the CPC entered into a series of clashes with revolutionary governments, striking workers, and American anti-trust laws that led to the eventual nationalization of the corporation in 1972, when it was purchased from its American owners at a price overvalued for mines that had nearly been sucked dry. This story stands next to information about the introduction of the 16mm camera, which we learn was first available only as a package including tripod, screen, splicer, and projector, appearing only five years before Ford's Model T car and costing only seventy dollars less. As the voice-over states,

> Despite the relatively high price, there were 500,000 home-movie makers in the United States six years after the camera was introduced. As a guide and inspiration to these new hobbyists Kodak published a book titled *How to Make Good Movies*...The book also advises the reader to "make your movie camera the family historian," and later makes this enigmatic warning to filmmakers: "your movie camera exists to preserve life, not to destroy it."

"To preserve life, not to destroy it." While the second clause of this sentence is rather enigmatic, indeed, film's mandate to preservation emerges as central to Situation Leading to a Story, spanning across public and private domains so as to archive instances of colonial exploitation alongside the leisure time of the bourgeoisie. The preservation of life – rather than the creation of fictional spectacle – is here put forth as the forgotten vocation of film, echoing Jean-Luc Godard's contention in Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988-1998) that the cinema betrayed itself by turning away from its ability to document the world and towards stories of a girl and a gun.

In Situation Leading to a Story, the voice-over posits that this mandate is explicitly in conflict with narrative:

> Narrative is a chain of events in cause and effect relationship occurring in time and space. The plot of a narrative is selected from the events of a story, which, in turn, have been selected from experience, ordering time and erasing contingency. But in home movies a minute is really a minute, there is no condensation or ordering of

> time, no selection of plot from story, just a few hyper-quotidian moments, banal activities performed only because there is a camera there recording them.

Buckingham seconds Doane's assertion that while the early cinema allowed for "the ceaseless production of meaning *out of* contingency," with the development of narrative, cinematic time is "troped," made plastic by the development of editing, and subverted to the needs of the storytelling.[65] Amateur filmmaking provides Buckingham with a place to excavate the persistence of an earlier temporal economy that had not yet abolished the time of the apparatus with that of the diegesis.

Situation Leading to a Story unfolds how this archive of past contingencies enters into relations with the present moment. The voice-over mediates the viewer's experience of these images in the light of the present condition of 16mm film and the historical distance of the moment of recording. There is an interrogation of the impossible desire to recover the moment of inscription, when trace and referent would be united in an experience of presence. This recalls archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai's notion of the "Model Image," a theoretical fiction that posits the image at the moment of creation.[66] Usai's description of the task of film history with regard to this Model Image might very well be that of Situation Leading to a Story:

> The ultimate goal of film history is an account of its own disappearance or its transformation into another entity. In such a case, a narrating presence has the prerogative of resorting to the imagination to describe the phases leading from the hypothetical Model Image to the complete oblivion of what the moving image once represented.[67]

Stumbling on this footage on a street corner, Buckingham must reconstitute its history through narrativization and imagination, so as to telescope "then" and "now" to produce an alternative film history. Buckingham playfully uses the French *maintenant* to describe the fantasy of recovering the moment of inscription, for it links the category of the "now" to the hand of the camera operator. As the voice-over states, *maintenant* is "derived from the Latin *manutenere*, to support or sustain, which in turn comes from *manus*, or hand, and *tenere*, to hold. *Maintenant*: to hold in the hand, hand-held." The hand holding the camera becomes a metonym for the body present before the event. The desire for presence but the simultaneous acknowledgement that its achievement would require reversing the passage of time – an impossibility – is what suffuses the film image with its particular commingling of desire and melancholy. When not transported into the otherworldly fantasies of narrative film, the viewer remains caught between this desire for the rematerialization of the past and his or her firm emplacement in the present, ever fleeing into the future, farther and farther

away from the distant event captured on film. There is no illusion of presence, but merely a lingering trace.

As if to compensate for not being able to recover the moment of registration, Buckingham instead seeks to find the man whose name was written on the box of film. Since he cannot unearth the filming body, the *main/tenant*, the hand that held in the now, perhaps he can at least recover the *main jettant*, the hand that threw the film away, and somehow take account of the time of the film's oblivion. After finally tracking down one Mr. Harrison Dennis through a quest spanning from New York City to Ossining, the narrator calls the man on the telephone only to find that Mr. Dennis doesn't remember throwing away any reels of film. The narrator wishes to describe the films to him, to tell the story of where he found them and how he tracked down their possible owner – in short, to describe the situation that led to this story by communing over the collective memory found in these reels, the stories dormant in the moss of time that has grown over these images. But Mr. Dennis has no interest and is eager to get off of the phone, bringing the detective story of ownership that runs throughout Situation Leading to a Story to a conclusion.

It is, however, a conclusion that lacks fulfillment. Tacita Dean has written that Situation Leading to a Story "is about revelation: revealing the intimacies of the anonymous other."[68] However, one must note that, just as with de Rijke and de Rooij's Untitled, there is an acknowledgment that this revelation both will and will not take place. Yes, film will grant access to the past, reveal the visible, but it will never fully render it present, always imbuing it with a certain spectrality, tempering the pleasure of resurrection with the ache of loss. In this context, another remark of Dean's is perhaps more apposite than the one she addresses specifically to Situation: "Obsolescence has an aura: the aura of redundancy and failure."[69] While the notion of aura will be reprised in the pages that follow, one must see Buckingham's exploration of the history of 16mm as an attempt to engage such failed futures so as to ignite new hope while simultaneously giving rein to the sadness of disappearance. Redundancy and failure are not cast away, but cultivated and mined for their generative potential. In this way, Buckingham recalls Benjamin's ambivalence around the Dauthendey portrait as well as his assertion that the pathos of his *Arcades Project* is that "there are no periods of decline."[70] To reject the notion of decline is to refuse a teleological conception of history as a narrative of progress, to dislodge the sense that the present that exists is the only one that could be, and therefore to reintroduce the centrality of contingency. For, if Guy Debord wrote that, "It is a particular society, not a particular technology that has made cinema what it is. Cinema could have been historical analyses, theories, essays, memories," Buckingham responds that yes – cinema could have been all of these things.[71] But in

the margins, it might have been so all along. And with some effort, perhaps it still might be.

Buckingham has publicly discussed his interest in Benjamin:

> There's a notion that can be found in Walter Benjamin's writing that is central to what I try to work with. Benjamin describes the vanishing point of history as always being the present moment. This formulation of history – thinking about the present moment as the point where history vanishes – is a way of reversing the received notion of history as vanishing somewhere behind us, vanishing into a nonexistent time, a time that no longer exists...We are restaging those events here and now in order to think about what's happening here and now, to think about the present.[72]

*Matthew Buckingham,* False Future *(1999).*

This impulse is particularly evident in Buckingham's 2007 16mm installation, False Future. Here, the artist explores the story of a man named Louis who invented cinema. But no, not *that* Louis, brother of Auguste, but instead a little-known pioneer named Louis Le Prince who managed a panorama company before trying his hand at the creation of moving images some five years before the Lumières. He produced at least three films, each eight seconds long, before mysteriously disappearing on a train leaving Dijon bound for Paris in 1890. Some suspected Edison. Like the disappearances of Amos Fortune Road and

Situation Leading to a Story, here once again Buckingham insists on the story of a person disappearing *with* a trace. For even if Le Prince was never found, he left behind his films, one of which is remade by Buckingham to form the image-track of False Future. As the subtitled French voice-over relates, out of the 129 frames that originally comprised Le Prince's view of the Leeds Bridge in Leeds, England, only twenty survive – roughly one second of projected film.

Instead of the great showing at the Salon Indien by the Lumières in 1895, here we learn of a false start of cinema, a beginning that wasn't. The title comes from the French verb tense the "*faux futur*," used in historical narration to anticipate the events of the past as if they were yet to occur.[73] This is a false future for it returns the listener to a present of the past to look forward to a future that has in fact already been played out and is hence no longer a true future. Much like the desire in Situation to return to the present of inscription, here too Buckingham investigates the affects of historicity. Buckingham returns to the birth of cinema not as an easy return to origins but as an attempt to show the difficultly of easily determining such origins and to consider the ways in which the history of cinema might have gone differently, to remember something of the great potential the medium held at its beginnings. What would have been? What might have been if the history of cinema had begun differently? Begun earlier?

The voice-over questions,

> If Le Prince had survived, filmmaking might have begun five years before it did. In those five years what moving images might have been made? Which ones would have been preserved? Would we now be able to see motion pictures of the court-martial of Captain Dreyfus, or of the U.S. overthrow of indigenous rule in Hawaii? The Elephant Man's funeral? The massacre of the Lakota at Wounded Knee? Or nine inches of snow falling on the city of New Orleans in February 1895? But perhaps there are other ways to think of what might have been.

False Future is this other way. Buckingham suggests that it is not so much the capturing of landmark historical events that is important, but rather the registration of the banal, the quotidian. After opening the possibility of thinking about the historical function of moving images differently, the voice-over describes in detail the extant fragment of Le Prince's film of the Leeds Bridge. We receive a kind of inventory of occurrences: "These twenty frames show six horse-drawn vehicles travelling in opposite directions. One wagon is loaded with enormous bundles. Others carry passengers. On the far side of the street fifteen people pass each other on the sidewalk. One disappears around a corner. Two men cross the middle of the street diagonally," and so on. One can count and one can list, but this ekphrasis will never exhaust the image, nor will it ever approximate its fascination, for it lacks its power of deathly resurrection. The excessiveness of description here is an inscription of failure. But just like the

failure glimpsed at the end of Situation Leading to a Story, this failure is paradoxically generative: it testifies to the specificity of cinema. It is what cannot be spoken by such description, by the *studium*, that accounts for the desires and anxieties invested in the film image.

False Future is a reopening of possibilities that had been closed down, a reactivation of a mode of filmmaking dependent on the registration of contingency over time. Even the installation specifications of the piece speak to Buckingham's desire to return to this other origin in the hope of setting in motion another future. The film is projected onto a large white sheet, which the voice-over tells us was the memory Le Prince's daughter had of briefly glimpsing his working quarters before being ushered out. The gallery is turned into a space of experimentation and labor from the late nineteenth century, setting up a laboratory of image-making that bypasses the stability of the movie theater, most often thought of as the site of cinema. False Future is a resurrection of hope and possibility at a time of tremendous anxiety over what will happen to the medium in the years to come, releasing a utopian hope for celluloid film as it faces obsolescence.

## Ruinophilia

Linking together a discussion of medium specificity with obsolescence and the work of Walter Benjamin inevitably invokes Rosalind Krauss' triangulation of such topoi near the end of *"A Voyage on the North Sea."* As Krauss puts it,

> That the cynical element gains the upper hand over the course of time goes without saying. But Benjamin believes that at the birth of a given social form or technological process the utopian dimension was present and, furthermore, that it is precisely at the moment of obsolescence of that technology that it once more releases this dimension, like the last gleam of a dying star. For obsolescence, the very law of commodity production, both frees the outmoded object from the grip of utility and reveals the hollow promise of that law.[74]

The entirety of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* involves an investigation of the material culture of nineteenth-century Paris, an era vanishing by the time Benjamin began writing. It is through an examination of the detritus of capitalism that Benjamin would probe the debris of history and bring it into contact with the present, where it could attain legibility in the now-time [*Jetztzeit*] of recognizability. In this sense, Benjamin's historiography manifests a great likeness to Baudelaire's description of the ragpicker, cited in the former's essay, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire":

> Here we have a man whose job it is to gather the day's refuse in the capital. Everything that the big city has thrown away, everything it has lost, everything it has scorned, everything it has crushed underfoot he catalogues and collects. He collates the annals of intemperance, the capharnaum of waste. He sorts things out and selects judiciously; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaw of the goddess of Industry.[75]

But rather than making the found objects useful once again within the context of Industry, the ragpicker-historian embraces obsolescence as the dialectical other of capitalism's imperative to novelty, finding within this other side of the proverbial coin the possibility that new relationships might be illuminated and the profane redeemed.

This understanding of obsolescence is in many ways the primary theoretical grounding of Krauss' call to "re-invent the medium," perhaps the dominant way of considering medium specificity in contemporary art theory. This return to medium specificity emerges against the backdrop of the rise of installation art throughout the 1980s and 1990s, which, as noted above, Krauss sees as a disturbing transformation of the post-medium condition. The critique of the medium moves from an indictment of modernist essentialism to an uncritical indulgence in late capitalist fragmentation. What is most at stake for Krauss in this return to the medium is the generation of recursive structures, wherein certain elements of the work engender rules that will govern the structure of that work. By "recursive," Krauss refers to a circular structure, whereby the work refers back to itself in a reflexive manner, and then makes use of particular conventions and limitations of the medium to generate parameters that will dictate the form of the work.

Following Theodor Adorno much more than his dear friend Benjamin, this notion aims at a reinvention of autonomy as the pathway towards imagining a new and different conception of collectivity.[76] Here, the work is sealed off into a spiral of self-interrogation that shores it up against the onslaught of kitsch – perhaps an outdated term, but one that Krauss takes from Greenberg: "Kitsch is vicarious experience and fake sensations. Kitsch changes according to style but always remains the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times."[77] As Krauss explains, "In order to sustain artistic practice, a medium must be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their subject, will be wholly 'specific' to it, thus producing an experience of their own necessity."[78] This experience of necessity will not only provide a standard by which to judge the work's excellence, but will also ensure that it forms a monad capable of resisting contamination. It is acknowledged that this unity can only be partial, or at best provisional, for the medium as it is now conceived refuses the transparent self-

identity once accorded to modernist media. It cannot fully double back in a perfect self-enclosure, for it is made up of aggregate parts and is acknowledged to be self-differing. Nevertheless, it is the task of the artist to produce the greatest possible recursivity, to aim at autonomy even if it cannot fully be achieved.

The notion of reinventing the medium is explicitly linked to technological obsolescence, as it involves staking a claim on disused commodities as ground for producing a renewed autonomy of art precisely through that which once compromised it – as Krauss notes, photography was, after all, the serpent that entered the Eden of artistic autonomy.[79] Now, over and above – or *because* of – a support's anchorage in mass culture and its ties to circulation, the successfully reinvented medium withdraws a particular technology from mass culture and forges for it an aesthetic system, sublating difference and shoring itself off from the world through self-interrogation in order to fulfill what Krauss sees as the desired function – namely, a commitment to an enduring modernism. James Coleman is the exemplary artist here, as he makes use of a slide projector and audio voice-over to produce narratives after the manner of the photo-novel. For Krauss, it is key that both the slide projector and the photo-novel "point directly to an internationalist commercialization of culture in advertising on the one hand and a degraded form of literacy on the other."[80] By forging self-reflexive systems out of such outmoded mass cultural forms, Coleman glimpses the utopian energy that may be released at the moment of technological obsolescence, following Benjamin's claim regarding the redemptive powers of the disused commodity. However, Krauss notes that Coleman's ability to invent a medium also depends on the fact that the use of slides has "*no* aesthetic lineage and...is so singular as a support that to adopt it as a medium is immediately to put a kind of patent on it."[81] Here, one witnesses an *ex nihilo* invention of a medium, as the artist appropriates a mass cultural technology fallen into disuse to generate recursive structures and "patent" the medium outside of any historical understanding of its conventions.[82] This seals it off not only through self-interrogation, but also through a certain ownership, as an invented medium may only be practiced by one.

Here one finds a major difference between artists investigating the specificity of film as an old medium and Krauss' notion of reinvention. Crucially, *film has an aesthetic history*, and a rich and varied one at that. Moreover, the interrogations into medium specificity one finds in gallery film concertedly take up this history. Works like Situation Leading to a Story and False Future interrogate alternative film histories. The Green Ray and Untitled may avoid overt reference to film history, but they do take care to locate themselves within a historical tradition of reflections on the medium and its changing contours over time, whether it be in Dean's interrogation of the analogue-digital transition, or de Rijke and de Rooij's desire to situate their work amidst traditions of dura-

tion-based experimental filmmaking. Recursivity is not what is at stake in this conception of medium specificity, even if the illuminated oblong windows of Dean's Bubble House mimic the film's frame or the lighthouse of her Disappearance at Sea references the mechanism of projection.[83]

Rather, the conception of medium specificity put forth in these works is radically anti-autonomous, interrogating the history of the medium and its historicity, its function as archive and social technology. For Jacques Rancière, essentialist conceptions of medium specificity such as Greenberg's erase the relation between images, the social, and the history of criticism. A medium is thus not a "proper" means or material (i.e., flatness for painting) but instead a space of conversion that articulates relations between visibility and intelligibility, seeing and saying.[84] While Krauss rejects both the unity of the support and its status as the sole determining instance of the medium's essence, she remains prey to Rancière's quite valid criticism. For there is little place for the social and for the history of criticism here; instead, the invention of the medium rests on the production of a formalist unity that presents itself as a novelty without history that is not unlike the commodity form itself – new, desired, and subject to private ownership.

Krauss' call to reinvent the medium follows the Benjaminian type of the collector, he who orchestrates "the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful."[85] Though aligned with the possibility of redeeming these fallen objects, what must be emphasized is that, like so many of the figures that populate Benjamin's writing, the collector is a character marked by a profound ambivalence. The collector detaches the object from its utility, but in doing so removes it from history. Torn from context, the collected object enters a spatial organization frozen in time. Calling the collection a "paradise of consumption," Susan Stewart describes it as "replac[ing] history with *classification*, with an order beyond temporality."[86] By insisting that the medium is reinvented *ex nihilo* without aesthetic lineage, Krauss puts artists such as Coleman and Kentridge in such a position, seeing them as redeeming superannuated technology through their care, attention, and artistic insight, but disallowing any consideration of the ways in which they engage the respective histories of the various media they invoke. Benjamin describes the "most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects" as "the struggle against dispersion," a notion mirrored in the emphasis Krauss places on the formation of a recuperative unity.[87] From the scattered remnants of the world, the collector forges a coherent system and imposes it onto the heterogeneity of objects so as to forge a new, totalizable system.

In opposition to the collector, Benjamin places the allegorist. While acknowledging that, true to the antinomic patterns of his thought, "more important than all the differences that may exist between them – in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector," the allegorist is the "polar oppo-

site" of the collector, retaining the historical specificity of the detritus he or she encounters but wrenching it from the continuum so as to make it enter relationships – in the manner of cinematic montage – with other elements.[88] Michael Newman has emphasized the centrality of the figure of the collector to Tacita Dean's work, making use of Benjamin's theory of collecting to do so.[89] While one cannot deny the collector's impulse that underlies works such as Four, Five, Six, and Seven Leaf Clover Collection (1972-present) and Die Regimentstochter (2005), allegory rather than collection emerges as a more apposite figure to describe the majority of the artist's work, for it resists the freezing of historical contingency into the synchronic time of the collector's structure. Rather, allegory allows for an understanding of the passage of objects through time, as well as the historical and affective resonances that this entails.

The ruin is a central trope throughout Dean's work, but figures especially strongly in Bubble House, Fernsehturm, Kodak (2006), Palast, Section Cinéma (2002), and Teignmouth Electron, all of which document physical ruins of varying sorts through the ruined medium of film. Less than the "rescue" of which Newman speaks, something that might be conceptualized as the collector's struggle against the dispersals of time, these films engage the pathos of the ruin and the inevitability of entropic passage into relic, tracing the contours of the dispersal rather than arresting it. The irreversible motion of time cannot be stopped, and Dean does not attempt to do so. Rather, these ruins are examined not in an attempt to halt decay but to interrogate how the disjunctive temporalities that reside therein might produce a different understanding of the present.

The allegorist is the reader of ruins, the excavator of the remnants of the past in the light of the present. Unlike the collector, the allegorist does not attempt to defeat time but instead interrogates nonsynchronous temporalities, confronting head on the admixture of hope and dread that Benjamin read in the Dauthendey portrait. In the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin writes that "Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things," and it is precisely this relationship – and not solely that of the collector – that must be summoned to deal with the ways in which 16mm gallery practices mobilize notions of history and obsolescence.[90] Here, the history of cinema is not a totalizable system, that great dream of the collector in which every object would have its place and every place would have its object. Rather, the cinema has been scattered, its legibility as a coherent object fractured. It is amidst these ruins that the allegorist wanders, producing provisional readings of what this constellation "cinema" might be, probing to which anxieties it might respond, or which desires it might elicit. This distinction between collection and allegory gets to the heart of how cinema has been reconceptualized in recent gallery-based employments of analogue film. While celluloid certainly functions as a technology of preservation in this

context, it would be naïve to see the fact of filming as having saved these objects from the ruination of time. For cinema itself is, in Dean's conception, a fragile ruin; it is fit to capture such objects for it shares in their stature. There is an acknowledgment that the desire to preserve for posterity is always haunted by a destructiveness that lurks at the heart of the desire to conquer finitude.[91] Cinema can reanimate life, but only as a ghostly apparition shot through with absence. Death cannot be vanquished. Cinema, once "substitut[ing] for our gaze a world that is better in line with our desires" and satiating the spectator with its illusory plenitude, is now truly "death at work," "death twenty-four times a second."[92]

Nowhere does this changed status become so visible as in KODAK, which effectively functions as an elegy for 16mm film, the very material that makes the work possible. Here, Dean turns her camera on the Kodak factory in Chalon-sur-Saône after learning they were to halt production of 16mm and produce only X-ray film. Using both black-and-white and color, Dean explores the luminosity of celluloid through languorous takes. What appears at the beginning of the film as a fully functioning factory has, by the film's end, been emptied of workers, some presumably soon to be without jobs. Industry has gone, but Dean has stayed; with a gesture that might metonymically stand in for her practice as a whole, here one glimpses the artist-as-lingerer amongst wreckage. The last shots of the film show disused celluloid on a dirty floor, the vibrant purples seen earlier in the film now grey and brown, ready to be swept into the garbage. In KODAK – to say nothing of NOIR ET BLANC (2006), a four-and-a-half-minute film shot with the remaining five rolls of Kodak film the artist had acquired before it became unavailable – the history of cinema as art and industry is held up as one of ruination. Yes – cinema can save, it can rescue. But throughout Dean's work, its fragility is underlined.[93] Cinema does not stand outside the system of novelty and obsolescence, transcending the realm of objects with the promise of preservation. Rather, like the Bubble House, abandoned by a French owner convicted of embezzlement before its construction had been completed, the cinema too is exposed to the rigors of time's passing, abandoned by many while its project remains unfinished. The technology of preservation is now in need of preservation itself. In Dean's employment of 16mm, a ruined medium serves as medium for examining ruins rather than constructing a collection safe from the degradation inherent in time.

In films such as KODAK, PALAST, and FERNSEHTURM, the latter two of which focus on the decaying monuments of the former German Democratic Republic, thinking history outside of a narrative of progress is central. In PALAST, Dean languidly documents the Palast der Republik on the bank of the Spree near Museum Island in Berlin, slated for destruction by German parliament in 2003.[94] The building, constructed between 1973 and 1976, was once the seat of the

Volkskammer, the East German parliament, but also housed art galleries. Its architectural style was typical of the DDR, marking a major change from the building that had stood on the site until the Second World War, the Berlin Stadtschloss, a baroque palace that had formerly housed the monarchy. The East German government decided not to rebuild after the war, declaring the Stadtschloss a remnant of Prussian imperialism and thereby making way for the construction of a monument to the socialist future. Throughout the Dean's film, the sun sets on the Palast, its bronze-mirrored windows emitting a golden hue. On the soundtrack, cars and pedestrians pass down the nearby Unter den Linden. The changing states of light emerge as a major concern here – another reason that the artist insists that her films must be seen on film rather than as video transfers – but Dean differentiates her work from the formalism of a filmmaker like Nathaniel Dorsky by insisting on the historical dimension of her project.

*Tacita Dean,* Palast *(2004).*

The Palast, considered by many to be an eyesore, here attains a fading glory that surpasses both its contamination by asbestos (coincidentally discovered just prior to Germany's 1990 reunification) and the Bundestag's 2007 decision to rebuild a replica of the Stadtschloss on the site, thereby overwriting history with a simulation of it. As Dean puts it, "Berlin needs to keep evidence of that other place, that country, and its corrupt mismanagement of a utopia that has now

been crossed out as a mistake in the reckoning of history."[95] The failure of utopia: a familiar theme from the work of Matthew Buckingham, it reemerges here as an attempt to make sense of Berlin's recent past. This is not a romantic overvaluation of a lost epoch, but a call for the necessity of remembering history's failures as well as its successes, for it is these catastrophes and defeats that, unacknowledged, haunt our present. East Germany is one such failed utopia, but the cinema itself is another. They might be left to oblivion, hit with the passive violence of forgetting, but in Tacita Dean's work, both are excavated with care.

Palast is closely linked to a film from several years earlier, Fernsehturm. This forty-four-minute film shows (once again) the sun setting over a monument to the DDR often said to be a blemish to the cityscape. As the television tower slowly revolves, convivial groups eat dinner and look out at the panoramic view of the city below, with snatches of conversation here and there making their way onto the soundtrack. Constructed between 1965 and 1969 in Alexanderplatz, the center of the former East Berlin, the 365-meter-high tower was a symbol of a socialist vision of a space-age future that has since turned into a tourist attraction and a remnant of a fallen regime. It is a 1960s imagination of the future that was devastatingly never to come true. As Dean writes in a text entitled "Fernsehturm*:* Backwards into the Future," "The revolving sphere in Space still remains our best image of the future, and yet it is firmly locked in the past."[96] The film's strange motion, initially appearing to be a slow pan, in fact results from the revolutions of the tower, inducing a parallax effect. The unusual movement of the film finds a counterpart in its temporal complexity. The 360-degree rotation of the tower and the diurnal cycle suggested by the setting sun bring forth a notion of eternal recurrence, but the film also stages a collision between the city's present, its past, and its unrealized futures that suggests a much more fragmented and irregular temporality than that of the cyclical return. East Germany's nation anthem, *Auferstanden aus Ruinen* – "resurrected from ruins" – proclaimed in its opening lines that the country was "faced towards the future" [*der Zukunft zugewandt*], but the collapse of the dream of this other future has now left in its wake phantoms of past trauma and no way of conceptualizing an alternative to the contemporary status quo. As Nabokov suggests, it is from the inability to know the future that the past emerges as such a source of fascination, for otherwise one would have nowhere left to turn but inwards on the hollow vacancy of the instantaneousness of the present.[97]

Dean describes the tower as a "perfect anachronism," and yet one must caution against assertions such as Tamara Trodd's: "While Dean thus makes films which engage with the work of remembering the past, her work emerges from an engagement not so much with obsolescence *per se* as with the anachronistic *tout court*...Ruined and battered as they are, these objects are not so much obsolescent or simply outdated, as forever moored outside of time."[98] It must be

remembered that anachronism is a concept far from achronism, which would denote a state of timelessness, a place outside of time. Rather, the Oxford English Dictionary defines anachronism as, "An error in computing time, or fixing dates; the erroneous reference of an event, circumstance, or custom to a wrong date," and "Anything done or existing out of date; *hence*, anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or, if it existed, would be, out of harmony with the present."[99] Anachronism describes the coexistence of multiple temporalities that are found within the ruin, while obsolescence highlights the inevitability of entropic dispersion that is the underside of novelty, leading to disappearance. Obsolescence and anachronism are both at play in Palast, Fernsehturm, and across Dean's body of work – but nowhere is there a removal from the vicissitudes of time.

Trodd is intent to argue that the emphasis on failure found in Dean's practice makes her work incompatible with the imagining of utopia, since the only collectivity that can be imagined is either failed, temporally confused, or fictionalized.[100] However, in an age that has lost its ability to imagine alternative futures, opening the possibility of past contingencies still serves to dislodge the necessity of our present. The utopian hopes that Trodd ascribes to an earlier generation of filmmakers (1970s figures such as Michael Snow and Anthony McCall) were themselves unachieved. And moreover, it is in the nature of utopia to always lie elsewhere – perhaps in the past, the future, or even in fiction – for if it were present, it would no longer be utopia. Thus, utopia and failure are by no means opposed concepts as they are deployed in Dean's filmmaking, but must be seen as working together, much as they do in the work of Matthew Buckingham.

In contemporary German culture, the term *Ostalgie* (an English rendering of the term might be Eastalgia) has gained currency to describe a nostalgia for the former East Germany. Epitomized by films such as Goodbye, Lenin! (2001) and Sun Alley (Sonnenallee, 1999), *Ostalgie* offers up the DDR as so many signifiers to consume. In the words of Mattias Frey, the films "fetishize and indulge in blithe pastiche" of that country's material culture.[101] In such films, nostalgia functions much as it has been famously elaborated by Frederic Jameson: as a predominant symptom of the waning of historicity associated with postmodernism.[102] However, if one sees nostalgia not merely as an unproblematic longing for the past satisfied through consumption, but takes up its etymological origin to see it as an affective tissue that also involves pain, it loses something of its reactionary value and comes closer to describing what is at play in Dean's Palast and Fernsehturm. Instead of engaging in the reenactments of *Ostalgie* films, Dean reflects on the DDR through the ruin – that is, through the present.

Though Giuliana Bruno asserts that we live in an age "repelled by ruination," Andreas Huyssen sees an obsession with ruins as becoming pervasive over the last fifteen years, a time that – Huyssen does not make this connection, but it should be noted – witnessed both the flowering of the Internet and wireless technologies in a burst of technological novelty, as well as increasing desperation following the collapse of the USSR that there can be no alternative to global capitalism.[103] As Huyssen writes,

> This contemporary obsession with ruins hides a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures. At stake is a nostalgia for modernity that dare not speak its name after acknowledging the catastrophes of the twentieth century and the lingering injuries of inner and outer colonization. Yet this nostalgia persists, straining for something lost with the ending of an earlier form of modernity. The cipher for this nostalgia is the ruin.[104]

Though Michael Newman's notion of "rescue" is persuasive in relation to some of Dean's work, Fernsehturm and Palast, in their remembrance of the failed utopia of the DDR, engage in something much closer to Huyssen's "nostalgia for ruins" – and more specifically, in a nostalgia for the ruined dreams of twentieth-century modernity. Like de Rijke and de Rooij's "halted quest for understanding," like Buckingham's inability to access the moments of inscription or abandonment, the fantasy of presence and preservation here withers within the vertigo of time. The aim of these films is not to unproblematically resurrect the socialist dream advanced by these architectural structures, but to emphasize the necessity of conceiving of history as a succession of ruins of failure as much as of monuments to success, to look at the spectral traces of the past. The ruin has the passage of time engraved on its very surface, thus bearing witness to the movements of change and stasis with a fragile persistence that is becoming increasingly rare as digital novelty triumphs.

The "seamlessness" Dean sees as characterizing the digital must be opposed to the heterogeneous temporality of the ruin and the desires it engenders. Svetlana Boym asserts that, "The early twenty-first century exhibits a strange ruinophilia, a fascination with ruins that goes beyond postmodern quotation marks. In our increasingly digital age, ruins appear as an endangered species, as physical embodiments of modern paradoxes reminding us of the blunders of modern technologies and technologies alike..."[105] Boym makes the link explicit whereas Huyssen does not: this contemporary "ruinophilia" is linked to anxieties around digitization and tied inextricably to failures both technological and social. A sort of reaction formation, it is amidst an overproduction of novelty that the superannuated fascinates. In examining the contemporary proliferation of digital devices that function as so many bodily prostheses, one's gaze drifts back to the cinema, which suddenly appears different. Artistic practices such as

de Rijke/de Rooij's, Buckingham's, and Dean's produce a meditation on the medium's specificity precisely at such a juncture, emphasizing its relationship to nonsynchronous temporalities and the ability to produce an affectively charged experience of the past. Very different than conceptions of film's specificity throughout the twentieth century, now cinema lies in ruins and, as such, is invested with the curiosity and care that the ruin elicits. This can be dismissed as nothing but nostalgia, or as the product of a dangerous romanticization, but to do so would be to show disinterest in the attempt to understand precisely why and how the analogue and the obsolete fascinate in the way that they incontrovertibly do. In these practices, the cinema is seen as an apparatus that cannot be absolved of its sins, but that must be dismantled and reassembled, anatomized and examined for its successes and shortcomings – like all the failed utopias of the twentieth century. Transfigured by the light of technological change, it now takes on something it was once said to destroy – aura.

## Analogue Aura

Like an angel at apotheosis, the now-seraphic cinema gains an ethereal halo within the gallery. Salvaged from the ruins of twentieth-century mass culture, in which it had figured as an agent of image proliferation and circulation, within the white cube the cinema is aligned with preciousness and rarity. The preceding sections have grappled with the ways in which the recent employment of celluloid within the gallery reconfigures medium specificity in the light of obsolescence to see film as closely linked to disappearance, the historical trace, and the failed utopia from which hope for the future might be gleaned. This becoming-precious of the ruined cinema has taken place on the planes of technology, rhetoric, and artistic practice. However, no inquiry into artists' uses of celluloid would be complete without examining how the institutional and economic determinations of the gallery – foremost among them the prevalence of the limited-edition model of distribution – intervene in the contemporary conceptualization of 16mm film in the gallery. If the cinema is liberated from utility to enter over into the disinterestedness of aesthetic contemplation, it simultaneously enters a new circuit of exchange and commodification: the art market.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin famously states that, "what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura," and specified film as the primary agent in this liquidation.[106] The decline of aura is described as a "stripping of the veil" from the object that "extracts sameness even from what is unique."[107] Linked to cult value and the artwork's former emplacement in ritual, in the

"Work of Art" essay, the aura is defined in an antithetical relationship to film, which replaces a unique location in space and time, a "unique apparition of distance, however near it may be," with a proliferation of copies that allows the masses to bring things closer by way of their reproduction.[108] Cult value is replaced by exhibition value. When the aura is discussed in relationship to film, it is in the context of the "false aura" of the commodity, epitomized for Benjamin in the close-up of the movie star. What was once the preternatural halo of genuine aura has now been replaced by the "putrid magic of its own commodity character," the very same transcendence of sensuousness that Marx attributed to commodity fetishism.[109]

Nonetheless, even in the final, 1939 version of the "Work of Art" essay, a time by which so much of Benjamin's writing had been infiltrated by a profound pessimism stemming from totalitarianism's sweep across Europe and by which so many of the utopian hopes for film had already been dashed, Benjamin retains an investment in the revolutionary potential of the medium of film. This investment must be understood as twofold: first, film's destruction of aura has a positive valence, for it liquidates the categories of bourgeois aesthetics, a notion encapsulated in Benjamin's discussion of Dada; and second, the shock effects of film might help negotiate the traumatic effects of modernity, since its tactile visuality allows access to another nature than accessible to the naked eye, the "optical unconscious."[110] The task at hand is to evaluate how these two investments in the medium appear today.

To take up the first postulate, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it must be said that film has not so much aided in the destruction of traditional aesthetic values as it has been recuperated into them, thus neutralizing Benjamin's first hope for the medium. When the historical avant-garde made films such as Entr'acte (1924) and Un Chien andalou (1929), the aim was, among other things, to utilize technological media to critique the increasing autonomy of the work of art. By drawing attention to art's institutional framing, the historical avant-garde thereby aimed to reintegrate art into the praxis of everyday life.[111] In the 1960s, when the Fluxus group included films in their Fluxboxes, once again the goal was to intervene in the ideological status of the work of art by insisting on the multiple as a form of artistic production.

The contemporary situation sees an inversion of Fluxus' use of the film print. For Fluxus, film was a way to bring art to the level of the quotidian and the reproducible, to defeat its autonomy and uniqueness. Now, however, the limited edition is used to elevate the film to the status of an art object, recuperating it into the economy that it once compromised. This becomes possible at this historical juncture in large part due to the increasing obsolescence of the medium. As Whitney Museum curators Chrissie Iles and Henriette Huldisch put it, while the use of the film limited edition is not new, "...it is significant that

many younger artists choose to work in a mode that treats film as object. This trend has everything to do with the ready availability on the consumer market of digital recording and editing devices that assert the medium of film as a precious, non-commercial material."[112]

In a similar vein, differentiating between experimental film and artists' cinema as modes of production, Jonathan Walley writes that, "Simply put, artists' film regards the film print as an art object in a way that avant-garde cinema does not."[113] Sharon Lockhart's Pine Flat (2006) is a 138-minute 16mm film heavily indebted to James Benning (and indeed lists him as a creative consultant on the film). It features portraits of children amongst the landscape of the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in a succession of twelve static long takes. In its quietude, long duration, attention to the registration of contingent details, and the care taken in examining the fleeting moments of childhood in a small town, Lockhart's film resolutely fits the strain of gallery-based 16mm production that has been examined throughout this chapter. Exhibited both as a looped installation on multiple 16mm projectors and in a traditional theatrical setting, for distribution the work was issued by Lockhart's Los Angeles-based gallery Blum and Poe in a boxed edition of six, comprised of nineteen photographic prints and each of the twelve shots on a different reel of film. The object was priced in the six figures.[114] Issuing editions of this kind either including supplementary materials such as still photographs or offering them for sale separately has become standard practice within the art world.

Scott MacDonald, who reports that an edition of Lockhart's thirty-two-minute film, No (2003), was available from the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York for $30,000, is hopeful about the possibility that the popularity of the limited-edition artist's film will lead to an increased interest in collecting 16mm prints of experimental films: "...*No*, and Lockhart's films in general, are often evocative of the films of James Benning, Morgan Fisher, and other filmmakers whom Lockhart herself considers her mentors. It is only a matter of time before the work of these mentors is accorded a similar level of financial respect that Lockhart's films receive."[115] Perhaps; and it would be well deserved, indeed. But MacDonald's reasoning here is faulty, for he proposes that work of aesthetic similarity (here, the relationship between Lockhart and her mentors) should logically command a financial similarity. Rather, what is at stake is not an aesthetic criterion of value, but rather the vast difference in the distribution models espoused by these two sectors of film production. Experimental cinema has historically depended on a licensing model based on depositing prints with a distributor such as Canyon Cinema or Film-maker's Cooperative that then rents the prints according to a per-screening fee. These fees can vary greatly, but often come in at between three to five dollars per minute of projected 16mm film. By contrast, the economy of artists' cinema makes use of a purposeful scarcity, most often

striking an edition of three to five copies of a given work (plus artist's proofs) so as to imbue the physical object of the film print with the pull of rarity. This allows for an entirely different price bracket, leading to Tacita Dean's Michael Hamburger (2007) and Darmstädter Werkblock (2007) to be offered for 80,000 and 60,000 euros, respectively, at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, in Spring 2009. Going against the capacity for reproducibility inherent in the medium, the willful restriction of the number of prints available according to the limited-edition model prohibits excessive circulation of these works, artificially rendering back to film a quality of auratic distance. It becomes a privileged experience to be present before a de Rijke and de Rooij film, to share a room with it for a particular duration of time. In this respect, the becoming-auratic of film is of the same variety as the false aura of the movie star – a perfidious halo that smacks of the "putrid magic" of the commodity. One must sound a cautionary note against the manner in which the enforced scarcity of the limited-edition model of distribution contributes to the values of preciousness and antiquation one sees attached to celluloid film within the gallery.

However, it remains to account of what happened to Benjamin's second investment in the medium of film, specified above as linked to the possibilities of the optical unconscious and the creation of alternative temporalities. Though film has been thoroughly recuperated into the ever-redoubtable categories of bourgeois aesthetics, this second wager of film's potential might find itself ratified, rather than compromised, by the contemporary situation of film in the gallery. As Miriam Hansen has noted, understanding aura merely as a category of traditional aesthetics that might be falsely resurrected through technology rests on a reductive reading of Benjamin. Instead, Hansen excavates Benjamin's use of the concept to recover its multivalent meanings, emphasizing that in fact, aura – of a related but different variety – is equally at play in the optical unconscious, particularly in the Dauthendey portrait discussed in the "Little History."[116] This conception of aura is intimately linked to the indexical trace, the disjunctive temporalities that reside therein, and the relationship these qualities set up to the viewing subject – all of which are exploited in the variety of gallery-based 16mm practices discussed here. Hansen explores connections between auratic distance and the sorrow of lost time, seeing the defining elements of the aura as "its sudden and fleeting disruption of linear time, its uncanny linkage of past and future – and the concomitant dislocation of the subject."[117] In short, in this conception the aura is no longer defined in an antithetical relation to technological media, but takes on a much more complex relationship to it. The affective complex that has been discussed throughout this chapter as central to the idea of the medium put forth in contemporary gallery film is here named aura.

Thus, if, through its emphasis on the film print as rare object, gallery-based 16mm practice partakes of the false aura of the commodity, in its meditations of history, time, and desire, it nonetheless partakes of this other aura – an aura that is historically specific and linked to an investigation of nonsynchronous temporalities and the contingent. Retrieved from the teleological narrative of history, the cinema emerges as a superannuated technology, a ruin to be explored so as to perhaps release, as Benjamin saw the Surrealists as having discovered, "the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded.'" As he wrote, the Surrealists "bring the immense forces of 'atmosphere' concealed in these things to the point of explosion. What form do you suppose a life would take that was determined at a decisive moment precisely by the street song last on everyone's lips?"[118] Such a life would be impoverished, indeed, for it would reside solely within the perpetual novelty that is endemic to the motor of capitalism's market. It would see the past products of this system, no longer tinged with the gleam that coats the ever-same presented as ever-new, fall into total oblivion. Instead, Benjamin advocates for an artistic practice, a life, informed by the complex affects that reside within the discarded objects of mass culture, for it is in them that history resides.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, one witnesses the dissolution of a certain phase of image production and apprehension that had dominated for a century – the traditional cinematic *dispositif*. While Hollywood's products maintain a worldwide visibility, available in more formats and locations that ever before, in the theories and practices discussed throughout this chapter, one glimpses a palpable act of mourning for a lost image-regime and a lost relationship to time that it made possible. As such, the notions of deathliness found within the concept of indexicality reference not merely a haunting of the Real, but are also symptomatic of the presence of another specter, that of analogue film. The concept of indexicality thus indicates both death *in* the image and a death *of* the image. The prominence the concept has attained in recent film theory is a kind of love at last sight, whereby the desire of the critic to resurrect this lost object parallels the pathos of the index's ability to point to a lost past. In *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Christian Metz begins by outlining the changed relation between theorist and film that would be spurred by the use of psychoanalytic semiotics as a critical methodology. Previous criticism, based on notions of aesthetic taste, constituted cinema as a love object and are described as beset by a sort of "siege psychosis": the task was to "to surround and protect [the film], according to the cocoon principle."[119] In such a scenario, cinema and its theoretical discourse remain firmly on the side of the imaginary, caught in the thrall of cinephilia. Metz figures the advent of psychoanalytic semiotics as the intrusion of the symbolic that breaks the mother-child dyad of critic and film, after which the critic should "not have forgotten what the cine-

phile he once used to be was like, in all the details of his affective inflections, in the three dimensions of his living being, and yet to no longer be invaded by him."[120] While certainly, discussions of indexicality have not forgotten the lessons of 1970s film, there is a clear desire to protect the cinema once again, a renewal of this "siege psychosis." This is a kind of cinephilia that is far from that of the Tarantino-esque video store clerk, but rather one that invests in the material of celluloid as evincing a privileged link to time, history, and finitude.

In the films of Matthew Buckingham, Tacita Dean, and Jeroen de Rijke/Willem de Rooij, one finds these same preoccupations at work. The return to medium specificity here must be understood as a reaction formation to the forces of dissolution and fragmentation that pervade today's climate of convergence. Unlike artists such as Matthew Barney or Doug Aitken, who turn towards the language of blockbuster cinema, these artists take up what is at stake in the passage of cinema into the gallery as a marginal form, a cast-off of mass culture, an old medium. The interrogation they stage into the medium-specific qualities of film does not seal off the work into a modernist spiral of recursivity, but rather fastens onto the radical lack of autonomy found in the film image, its inextricable link to a trace of pastness and the haunted quality that results. The dialectical movement visible here is not merely between specificity and convergence, but also between the material limits of the medium and its placement within the institutional and discursive determinations of a larger *dispositif*. For the material base of the image certainly matters to these artists, but not for its own sake; rather, what is interrogated here is the way in which the constraints of materiality interact with the medium's ability to engage with the social and the historical. Central to this tension is the important role fears of obsolescence play in the current conceptualization of the medium of film. For when Tacita Dean obsessively attempts to grab hold of the green ray as it flashes up on the horizon, she is equally attempting to grab hold of film itself, to register its contingencies as it slips away.