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Rep Diary: Motion(less) Pictures

By Genevieve Yue (/author/genevieve-yue) on March 14, 2014

The widespread adoption of digital projection systems officially ushered in an age that redefines the physical basis of "motion pictures." The visual phenomenon described by the term puts the emphasis on the endangered medium of film—translucent strips of celluloid or acetate stocks made up of discrete, still images, which pass before a projector lamp. Yet as several works shown in Anthology Film Archives' recent "Motion(less) Pictures" program demonstrate, motion pictures in a literal sense have another tradition grounded in the animation of still photographs.

Film has long explored the illusion of movement created through the rapid sequencing of still frames, from cel and stop-motion animation to, in the first film shown in the series, Chris Marker's 1962 short *La Jetée*. Other films in the program animate images through more unusual means, whether by alternating between stereographic views to produce the sensation of movement in Ken Jacobs's *Capitalism: Child Labor* (from 2006) and *Nymph* (2007), or, more literally, by burning photographs on a hotplate in Hollis Frampton's 1971 *Hapax Legomena 1: (nostalgia)*.

La Jetée

As with the above works by Jacobs, this avenue of cinematic exploration has continued to expand and even thrive in digital video that recapitulates the illusion of movement constructed by film free of its material basis. Within Anthology's program, Lucy Raven's 2009 *China Town* and Peter Bo Rappmund's *Vulgar Fractions* from 2011, are the two works most closely concerned with the types of movement that can be created through the sequencing of still images.

For the making of *China Town*, Raven assembled over 7000 images to track the movement of copper from its pit-mine extractions in the western United States to its manufacture into light-bulb filament wire in China. In her photography, she frequently stands at a panoramic distance to survey her subjects: dusty explosions in wide frame as they bloom, rust-colored, in bulldozed pits; the passage of a train on the horizon, shortening not in one fluid movement but in segmented jumps; or an immense, mostly empty turbine room filled with blue cylinder generators, each of them neatly numbered, in a plant powered by the Three Gorges Dam. Much of the movement we perceive is attributable to the position of Raven's camera, which moves slightly between exposures, each frame a slight adjustment to the view.

China Town

In closer views, more frequently of interiors or people at work, the rate of Raven's photography often quickens enough for the scenes to spring to a kind of stilted life. In one sequence, set in a tunnel illuminated by orange light, chunks of rock hurtle by on a conveyor belt, monitored by a female worker in a hard hat. The blur of the stones produced in the low-light conditions offer, instead of motion pictures, pictures of motion. In another shot, a woman stands inside a money booth at a casino, trying to gather in her arms the dollar bills fluttering around her. Even with these faster sequences, where the intervals between frames are shorter, there is still a sense of halting unevenness. Though somewhat smoothed over by the film's soundtrack, which was recorded without interruption in the field (Raven made separate sound recordings), the motion of an excavator chewing into the pit face or a group of men inspecting the giant tires of their equipment still appears as if rendered in flipbook form.

The effect is both jarring and hypnotic. Raven's method of "photographic animation," as she has called it, maintains the overall sequential coherence of the activity, but the broken-up movement makes us keenly aware of the gaps cleaving the action being portrayed—or, in other words, everything that's missing from view. The presentation mimics the physical apparatus of film, whose 24 frames per second (or in some cases 16 or 18 frames) are broken by the blade of the shutter, momentarily filling the screen with darkness in the spaces between frames. China Town's gaps, on the other hand, are only virtual, occurring not in its shutterless digital projection but as part of its manner of production. And while the intervals between film frames typically pass too quickly for most viewers to detect any absence, the missing spaces are in some ways the most salient feature of Raven's work. China Town invokes film mechanics to reflect on the ways film and digital media create meaning in both what appears on screen and what is implied by the unseen interval.

China Town

In this way, Raven brings the structural underpinnings of her motion pictures to bear on a political economy. Through its photographs, China Town depicts, in similarly sequenced stages, the transformation and transportation of raw copper as it circulates globally. Yet with both Raven's technique and the industrial process she describes, the pronounced emphasis on the intervals between frames suggests how much of the story we might be missing, or how much Raven herself was barred access to the sometimes politically sensitive sites she was attempting to document. As with Roman Polanski's Chinatown, another film about the movement of an industrial resource, we know there is another story lurking within the gaps of the one we're given. One of these accounts, not expressed explicitly in Raven's film but indicated by the history of the Nevada mine of its earliest scenes, is the informal name "Chinatown" once used to describe the surrounding areas, where many Chinese laborers lived and worked.

Vulgar Fractions uses the same technique of animating still frames, but for markedly different aims. Instead of China Town's concern with gaps in filmic and industrial production, Rappmund uses these spaces to convey long stretches of historical time. The movie traverses the borders of Nebraska to investigate the various ways cartographic lines are rendered in the landscape, whether with wire fencing, tombstone-like markers, signs inscribed as "witness posts," or simply the edges of forests and fields. Shot in stunning photographic tableaux that are like aestheticized topographical surveys, Vulgar Fractions is attentive to the subtle waving of flaxen grasses as well as the decay gradually worn onto a stone edifice. The intervals

between photographs vary, as they do in *China Town*, but here the frames, snapped from a tripod-steadied camera, vary little. In some cases, the changes between frames are so slight so as to be imperceptible, save for the time-lapsed passage of time. Adding to the sense of desolation, there is little evidence of human inhabitants, save the weathervanes, a smashed and half-buried television monitor, and other traces left behind in what appears as a forgotten, if not entirely abandoned, land.

Vulgar Fractions

In one sequence of stills, *Vulgar Fractions* cuts from a wide shot of a gray hillside dotted with deer to a hazy close-up of a doe. The movie abruptly shifts registers, sacrificing its crisp HD resolution for a blurry detail. As the photographer of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* learned through grainy magnification, getting close-up to your subject does not render it any clearer. Rather, the deer in the center of the frame becomes all the more difficult to perceive. Instead of a sharp, refocused still in the manner of the other close-ups in *Vulgar Fractions*, we're shown a fuzzy, distorted portion from a previously displayed image, one we'd had no reason to question. The blown-up image ends up revealing the inadequacy of the camera for fully conveying, or "capturing," what it sees. Seen in this light, *Vulgar Fractions* becomes an invitation to consider not only the gaps suggested between stills, but areas of obscurity contained within the image, as well.

Raven and Rappmund's works suggest that any image, and not just those held on screen at an unusually slow frame rate, is suggestive of the gaps that surround it, though we are not typically aware of their presence. Through these uses of photographic animation, we're given more room to imagine what happens in the spaces between frames. In the process, we're confronted with our *own* compulsion to see, and perhaps even to possess, the ungraspable images that pass before us.

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