A Note on Hallucinatory Film

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ABSTRACT

Comparisons between hallucinatory films of the 1960s and 2000s show a conversion of the earlier utopian signifiers from benign fields of intoxicating color that celebrate and induce psychic bliss, into high-definition alarm bells for a world imploding from accelerated hyperconsumption. Paranoid, conspiracy-driven 70s commercial cinema, which appropriates editing techniques from earlier experimental films, marks a threshold of disenchantment. The entropic model of 60s hallucinatory works by Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann, and others, where film material and abstract imagery are modified analagous to the intensification of bodily pleasures, is digitally exacerbated in high-definition videos of Heather Phillipson, Ed Atkins, and Benedict Drew as if collapsing under environmental and psychic degradation. This later work maximizes hallucinatory HD properties through relentlessly overlaying imagery of interpenetrating, deflating, and exploding bodies that are avatars of overindulgence, the nightmarish uncanny descendants of 60s utopian intoxications. (MH)

KEYWORDS: experimental cinema, hallucinatory film, HD video, hyperconsumption, visual uncanny

In some recent artists' videos an optically replete and hyperreal digital uncanny revives hallucinatory qualities of psychedelia to other ends than its original 1960s acclamatory utopian goals. Even twenty years ago the ease of image editing and processing technologies

had changed beyond anything that could have been anticipated thirty years previously. Now HD video's new threshold of verisimilitude has provoked artists to undermine illusionist representations in a kind of digital entropy where glitches and brutal montage embody flaws emblematic of a damaged social and mediatized world. Here the inherent entropy of psychedelic profusion shifts up a gear into video ruins. There is a kind of stasis to the image-pattern symmetrical profusion of psychedelia. It aspires to a fixed state that neither evolves nor narrates, but which suggests a self-contented perfection that is inherently entropic. It is this entropy of experience (the anger in Heather Phillipson's *True To Size, part 2: Fire* at the short-circuiting of sensibility by an escalation of coerced consumption, or the unattainable futures—because they are destroyed on arrival—of Benedict Drew's *Not Happy*) that draws new video makers to hallucinatory imagery. We are left with something like Reza Negarestani's rot, "the decaying object, indeed, is an evanescent yet lingering ontological register that is less than a thing but more than nothing" (Negarestani 411). Or Bataille's "The 'catastrophe' is the most profound revolution—it is time 'unhinged'; the skeleton is the sign of this, at the outcome of rot, from which its illusory existence emerges" (Bataille 77).

Hallucinatory film from the 1960s reveals the optimism of collective utopian ideals of the counterculture, enthusiasm for drug-induced experiences, recognition of alternative communities and ecstatic sexualities, and the relishing of innovative visual treatments by intervening in the materiality and technology of the medium. Consider, for example, Bruce Conner's use of step printing (repeating each frame five times) in *Looking for Mushrooms* (1959-67/96) or the use of hand-painted modifications by Stan Brakhage in *Eye Myth* (1967) and by Carollee Schneeman in *Fuses* (1965). The exhilarating effects of using outdated film stock, the recourse of impoverished filmmakers like Jack Smith (*Flaming Creatures*, 1963) and Ron Rice (*Chumlum*, 1964), led to material modifications of unpredictable color and visual interference that were welcomed as a characteristic of the new marginalized film

underground. Tony Conrad's direct intervention in film stock by the alternation of sequences of black and white frames in *The Flicker* (1965) questioned audience (consumer) passivity by inducing quasi-hallucinatory physiological responses. These experiments were also encouraged by what might seem the opposite of community, for this emerging counterculture placed a strong value on self-awareness and self-fulfillment that was justified as enacting greater responsibility towards one's own inner life and wellbeing as a form of resistance to the contagion and homogeneity of consumerism. This acknowledgement of the significance of subjective inner worlds/visions was additionally legitimized by the precedent of Beat literature and enhanced by the revelations of hallucinogenic drug experiences. Alan Watts would write of his first experiences with LSD as enhancing his sense of simultaneity of self and environment—"to become aware of the mutuality of one's own form and action and that of the surrounding world" (127-53).

We could say that the aesthetic qualities of 60s–70s hallucinatory film are developed synchronous to the social ideals of the counterculture. Here is intensified sensory experience of film as a utopian compensation for elusive goals of social revolution; accelerated bombardment of abstract motifs and superimposed figurative and non-figurative forms as an "authentic" consumption experience, and critical evaluation of intensifying commodity consumerism; the seductiveness and speed of changing imagery that celebrates transitory experiences and experimental lifestyles (whether responsible or intentionally irresponsible choices) as alternatives to goal-driven or future-oriented sacrifices of one's parents; the low-budget, handheld cinematic analogies of drug experiences (Storm de Hirsch, *Peyote Queen*, 1965), of collective actions, or the utopian allure of non-US/Euro cultures (Jud Yalkut's *Kusama's Self-Obliteration,* or Chick Strand's *Anselmo*, both 1967); and the celebrations of alternative lifestyles and sexualities (Wallace Berman, *Aleph*, 1958-76, and Jerry Abrams' *Eyetoon*, 1968). With Schneeman and Brahkage, the emphasis on hand-manipulated film,

with painted and collage elements, adds to the quotient of authenticity as material realizations of intensely personal, autobiographical experiences.

Much of this ends with the disenchantments of the 1970s, whose multiple causes and signs could be generalized as disappointments following the protests of May '68, and include prolongation of the Vietnam War, the Kent State shootings of 1970, the FBI's lethal elimination of Black political activists and leaders, and the resignation to the intrinsic repressiveness of the State. Think of the surge in conspiracy movies like Peter Watkins' *Punishment Park* (1971), Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974). Each of the last three incorporates sequences that borrow from the editing processes and image/sound saturation of earlier experimental film and sound works (think of John Cage's early tape pieces like *Williams Mix*, 1952-53) to invert the optimism of those antecedents into representations of intense paranoia. Borrowing the kind of rapid and discontinuous scene sequencing used in early films by Bruce Conner, *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Parallax View* have their lead characters (respectively Malcom McDowell playing the thug Alex and Warren Beatty playing reporter Joe Frady) ideologically reconditioned by crude image and caption bombardment as if Watts's fuller, non-judgmental engagement with a world of multisensory stimuli were to be inverted into a technique of right-wing mind control. In *The Parallax View*'s brainwashing sequence, given its incorporation of numerous iconic counterculture photographs that show violent protests and benign hippie lifestyle moments alongside scenes from Nazi rallies and American presidential campaigns, Pakula invites scepticism on the ownership of the affect and meaning of those images. He might as well be providing a re-evaluation of Herbert Marcuse's 1937 essay, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," which explains how serviceable representations of alienation, violence, and alternative lifestyles can be for an oppressive society that needs its citizens to feel excused from any compulsion to

undermine or resolve the political and economic contradictions that provoked those disaffecting experiences in the first place.

Deterritorialized in this way by commercial cinema after the reversals of the 1970s, perhaps the techniques and imagery of the earlier hallucinatory film can be taken as symptomatic of a covert and insidious social conditioning that triggers schizophrenia and immobilizes agency. The frequently superimposed and diverse abstract forms, the brightly colored, "all-over" patterned and Rorschach test imagery emphasizing the flatness of the screen, the complex formal structures, and use of flicker and optical distortion to induce hallucination, become signs of an unmoored subjectivity, of a bad trip of escalating narcissistic, immobilizing paranoia.

By contrast, how can we explain the kind of depictions of hallucination in some recent HD videos and films? Instead of the 60s–70s model referring to trance states that idealize a present through intensifying images of embellishment or utopian transformation, we find depictions of psychic collapse, severance, disconnection within multiple ambiguous identities. Digital software that enables seamless editing and the most complex layering of imagery is often used to exaggerate ruptures in the continuity of things or to generate the experience of being overwhelmed with imagery that at once looks hallucinatorily real and blatantly synthetic. This is achievable with HD rendering. In such videos montage is no longer used to create image flows, but to increase the sense of rupture and alienation.

The hyperreal technology of HD video is effective in representing artificial environments and disembodied existence. Rather than the evocation of a drift through a benign milieu, there's the performance of fictions taking place in artificial worlds, as if these fictions are futuristically ahead of us, or have already displaced the "once-real world" without us noticing, or even caring to notice. I am thinking here of the Peter Eisenman building, in which I often teach (The Aronoff Center, University of Cincinnati), an icon of

deconstructionist architecture, where students walk the hallways carrying elaborately detailed models of imaginary buildings and urban planning schemes, as if appending fictional extensions to a designer's hyperbolic fantasy environment.

There are still hallucinatory films being made that depict a relatively ecstatic engagement with the world. One example would be Pipilotti Rist's immersive projected videos—*Related Legs (Yokohama Dandelions)* (2001), *Supersubjectiv* (2001)—of a pantheistic integration of body, nature, and urban environment, where dissolving and intensely-colored imagery is often accompanied by hypnotic electronic music. Another is Erinn Hagerty's film *Parabola* (2016), comprising complex abstract patterns and a voiceover exploring adolescent memories in male and female narratives of sexual awareness. Hagerty's overlapping hallucinatory imagery, made using a multiplane camera, certainly evokes patterns from animations of the 1960s, but here it references the fading away of adolescent innocence. The benignity of Rist's and Hagerty's works has appropriately been realized using older technologies of medium-definition video, 16mm film, and the multiplane camera. They choose not to explore the uncanny hallucinatory qualities of HD video processing used by some American and British artists like Jacolby Satterwhite, Seth Price, Heather Phillipson, Ed Atkins, and Benedict Drew.

Satterwhite's polymorphous self-representations use HD video to render a hallucinatory realm of desirous movements in which multiple images of the artist interact erotically with each other, with biomorphic and abstract forms, and with depictions of futuristic objects. In these weightless environments it is as if Satterwhite imagines new kinds of cell fusion where human tissue can merge with that of inorganic things. Family experiences of illness underpin this work. Satterwhite underwent chemotherapy for childhood cancer, and his mother suffered from schizophenia. In a work like *Reifying Desire Three* (2012), a virtual world overflows with visual information that includes digitized renderings of his mother's

line drawings. These were designs of objects and inventions she intended to sell, although her illness made this increasingly unlikely. Satterwhite's video work imagines these kinds of fundamental difficulties resolved in what he calls "an unlimited sci-fi surrealist paradise." He incorporates movements that derive from vogueing routines, while mimicking performed and involuntary actions, such as sexual intercourse, or giving birth: "I think we're in the age of the remix. There's no such thing as originality any more. Now it's just about how you use the information around you to generate your individuality . . . Virtual space for me is a queer arena for my body to perform in" (Miller, Ravich, 2013). Likewise, Satterwhite's sound comprising electronic club music enhances the sense of a utopian representation, where all past problems of illness and identity are resolved.

But this deliriously heterogeneous fantasy world of Satterwhite's is relatively harmless and habitable, compared to the inhospitable virtual environments generated by some of the London-based artists. The intensified color (Phillipson), hallucinatory detail (Atkins), and digitally enhanced surfeit of threatening imagery (Atkins, Drew) are driven by anger at relentless consumerism and the lulled acceptance of inauthentic categorizations of objects. These artists invert the visual tropes of earlier hallucinatory films to speculate on a world at the cusp of implosion from the consequences of the entitlement to self-fulfillment and unlimited pleasure that those 60s films depicted. Such recent HD videos amass montaged imagery, flicker, transparency, chromatic complexity, and acoustic disorientation to show that these vast quantities of data and material reality should not be uncritically welcomed, as they can neither be comprehended nor contained.

Near the start of Phillipson's video, *True To Size,* is this observation that is antithetical to Satterwhite's immersion in auto-eroticism and consumption: "We're deep in the mediation of ever more subtly-inserted technologies of co-created desire enacting the latest phase of designed living through algorithm." Phillipson does overwhelm viewers with montages of

wildly disparate, digitally modified media, including hand drawn, designed, and photo-based imagery, without any attempt to hide the processing seams. Phillipson's surfeit of imagery and language is sometimes hard to assimilate. Her spoken narrative is intricate and often charged with a barely contained fury directed at the imbrication of political power with the social damage left blithely in the wake of ruthless commerce and internet traffic. The kaleidoscopic color and rapidly superimposed imagery reprise devices of 60s films, only to move them from signifying the celebration of hallucinatory states to ringing a consumerist and ecological alarm bell.

Atkins speaks of his use of avatars developed by the military industrial complex as restoring the inherent terror masked by their typically innocuous use in security videos. The figures in these HD videos, including *Ribbons* (2014), are depicted as flawed hyperreal entities where digital glitches undermine their vivid hallucinatory appearance, which is made the more uncanny by their direct address to the viewer in fractured dysfunctional utterances and song. Drew's *Not Happy* (2014), the bleakest of these representations, repeatedly alternates the blurry image of an avatar's exploding head with scenes of luxurious domestic interiors and montaged text that berates an unstaunched desire for more and more goods. Drew's HD video effects of high-resolution glitch and turgid color imagine representations of the end of the world. The angry irony of these text enunciations, like that of a relentlessly cruel comedian, is common also to Atkins's and Phillipson's work, and sharply separates the hallucinatory qualities of these pieces from any conceptual resemblance to the utopian imagery of 60s–70s precedents. Drew's interjected captions that overlay degraded pulsating static, reveal a sardonic desperation: "THE TROUBLE IS WE ALL WANT TOO MUCH / AND WE ARE NOT PREPARED TO SACRIFICE ANYTHING / NOT YOU PEOPLE… I MEAN THE OTHER PEOPLE / YOU PEOPLE ARE ALL BRILLIANT." The ending of *Not Happy* resembles a ferociously antipathetic digital version of Brakhage's films as the caption

ITS AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD introduces unassimilable microsecond montages of flashing image noise, sidebars of fluorescent color, a black and white shot of open-heart surgery, and the distressed avatar head, to close with the hand-scrawled message "We are done for" before the final caption: "AND ITS ALL OUR FAULT."

There is a new kind of pixel depth to HD that enables this hallucinatory probing of frontiers of obliteration. After Fredric Jameson's postmodernity of flattened affect and dispersed fragments of meaning, we have the post-postmodernism of irreversible environmental and bodily destruction, a digital acceleration towards what Price sometimes refers to as "debris" (Price, 2017, 114-31), or as "wreckage" (Price, 2005, 22). Rather than exclusively working in HD, Price's manipulations concern the material histories of analogue, film, and found internet footage to better excavate his understanding of how digital effects now dominate contemporary video production. Considering these rapidly evolving video technologies as a series of incomplete histories, Price sees the work as a "ruin" where "[y]ou're making objects that always point elsewhere, that refer to other structures. And these structures are incomplete. They're tokens, icons of transmission" (Price, 2007, 22).

Such states of incompletion (now tracked image to image by riveted artists) result from a violence to visual and sonic material through digital fracture, reduplication, and circulation, whose residue is increasingly the only access to discerning and feeling the violence enacted on what now passes for information, and the communities torn apart by that indecipherable dissonance.

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