Courtesy of the artist.
Cinema immemorial: “EMPIRE” and the experimental machinima of Phil Solomon

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ABSTRACT
Phil Solomon’s “EMPIRE” (2008/2012), an installation made in the videogame space of Grand Theft Auto, raises issues of memory and materiality as they pertain to the medium specificities of film and digital media. As a remake of Andy Warhol’s Empire (1964), the work addresses concerns pertinent to structural film of the 1960s and 1970s, including, on the one hand, the material fragility of film as a physical medium, and, on the other, the immaterial endurance of an idea of cinema. “EMPIRE” expresses structural film’s contradictory approaches to materiality in digital terms by using a videogame object that is temporally ‘indefinite’, as indicated in the work’s accompanying wall text. Additionally, as part of the series In Memoriam (Mark LaPore), “EMPIRE” is a work of mourning. As such, its indefinite running time offers a meditation on the temporality of memorials and the capacity of film, photography and digital media to realize the process of memorialization.

We shall live in this photograph forever. (Casares [1940] 2003)

Structural film, that realm of the avant-garde more or less explicitly concerned with the physical properties of celluloid, has straddled two divergent approaches. The first, rooted in structural film’s affinity with conceptual art, is a kind of aspiration to immortality – the structure, often derived from mathematical formulas, games, puzzles and other patterns, being what survives. Of his landmark flicker film Arnulf Rainer (1958–1960), Peter Kubelka has proposed, ‘With this film I have done something which will survive the whole film history because it is repeatable by anyone. It is written down

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in a script, it is beyond decay’ (Kubelka 1987: 159). Hollis Frampton, meanwhile, envisioned an eternal cinema, a total cinema that, comprising every film ever projected, would exceed the capacity of the human to comprehend it. In ‘A Lecture’, he writes, ‘Our rectangle of white light is eternal. Only we come and go; we say: This is where I came in. The rectangle was here before we came, and it will be here after we have gone’ (Frampton 1983: 194, original emphasis). The second, opposite approach pursues the medium's entropic drive, as in George Landow/Owen Land's Film in Which There Appear Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles, Etc. (1965–1966), which foregrounds, in title and on-screen, the wear a print endures over multiple events of projection. In a more recent example, David Gatten’s Films for Invisible Ink series (2008–2010) similarly records the physical traces of projection onto the films’ ample stretches of clear leader, and the films thematize this machinic historiography alongside other forms of inscription: telegrams, love letters, the fog of photographic chemicals and other missives intended to travel vast distances in time and space. Structural film encompasses these two diametric strains: it endures in concept, in its scripts, or one could say its codes, but in material form it inevitably decays. The cinema machine either lasts – immemorial, infallible, inhuman – or it stutters, breaks down and falls to ruin.

In certain circles, the various pronouncements of the death of cinema accelerated with the late twentieth-century turns to video and later digital technologies. The latter was immediately taken up in terms of its immateriality, and, by extension, its medium immortality; where digital images could be replicated exactly, at least in theory, celluloid, by comparison, seemed fragile and prone to degradation. Film’s supposed indexicality, its physical proximity to reality, was perhaps too real, in the sense that it was vulnerable to the physical conditions of projection, the very scratches and dust particles mordantly celebrated by Landow’s film. Yet digital technologies, too, came to belie this initial rhetoric, their immaterial endurance tested by manifestations of glitches, errors and lossy compression, not to mention the devastating effects of computer viruses, system failures and hard drive crashes.1 Amid the massive efforts by Google, film studios and research libraries to digitize their media collections, film archivists maintain the practice of preserving films on celluloid, a faulty although more tangible medium, its material transparency deemed preferable to the black-box opacity of digital storage devices. If digital media are not material in the same sense of celluloid, they nevertheless comprise a different kind of material specificity that is also prone to unforeseen vulnerabilities.

Do the divergent approaches to materiality in structural film still hold in the context of digital media? How does the notion of materiality – overdetermined, perhaps, by the spectre of indexicality – operate differently in digital film-making, the immateriality of which can appear to both foreclose the perishability of celluloid and, simultaneously, be more prone to sudden disappearance? Phil Solomon’s installation “EMPIRE” (2008/2012), a remake of Andy Warhol’s proto-structuralist film Empire (1964) made in the video game environment of Grand Theft Auto IV (2008, hereafter GTA IV), expresses structural film’s contradictory approaches to materiality in distinctly digital terms. By transforming the unwavering view of the Empire State Building into a digital monument with an ‘indefinite’ running time (as described in the installation’s wall text), “EMPIRE” enters the ghostly time of the memorial, untimely or immemorial, and initiates the work of mourning that fixes it into steady view.

The In Memoriam (Mark LaPore) series, for which EMPIRE forms the coda, consists of four films: Crossroad (2005), Rehearsals for Retirement (2007), Last Days in a Lonely Place (2008) and Still Raining, Still Dreaming (2008–2009). Crossroad, previously entitled for David Gatten and later untitled (for David Gatten), was originally made as a get-well offering for the then-ailing Gatten on the occasion of LaPore’s visit to Solomon. Playing Grand Theft Auto III: San Andreas (2001) on the PlayStation 2,

which Solomon had purchased for a course on postmodernism he was teaching at the University of Colorado, the two delighted in roaming through the game’s ‘sandbox’ architecture, foregoing the mission-driven logic of the game to explore its aesthetic possibilities, which were enhanced especially by ‘cheats’ LaPore researched online to alter the game’s physics. Eventually they recorded a five-minute machinima (a portmanteau of machine and cinema used to refer to movies constructed within videogame environments) featuring the game’s avatar, C.J., in two scenarios: running through a dense thicket and standing in front of a house where the figure breathes heavily in the rain, a bouquet of flowers spinning enigmatically in the air before him.

It was to be their last meeting. Several weeks later, LaPore committed suicide on the fourth anniversary of 9/11 and Solomon delved deeper into the videogame world to search for traces of his departed friend: ‘So now I was inspired to revisit GTA: San Andreas, searching for clues and poetic signposts; in effect, I was looking for Mark’ (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 202). The next two films in the series, Rehearsals for Retirement and Last Days in a Lonely Place, were completed in GTA III’s San Andreas, an imaginary terrain that blends together elements of Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas. With the last film, Still Raining, Still Dreaming, and the various versions of “EMPIRE”, Solomon shifted to the HD clarity of GTA IV’s Liberty City, or New York City. Although multiple versions of “EMPIRE” exist, including a 48-minute, prerecorded theatrical version that screened in 2012 at the Views from the Avant-Garde programme at the New York Film Festival, I will address its first iteration as a gallery installation, exhibited in 2008 at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, where it was displayed for the duration of a week or 127 hours. As the In Memoriam series has been discussed at length elsewhere, I will treat its memorializing imperative through a consideration of “EMPIRE”, which forms, in itself and in its expansive temporality, an immaterial memorial. It is as much a memorial in film as a memorial to film: an immemorial that opens the series to issues of endurance, decay and vanishing.

1.

In Adolfo Bioy Casares’s novella The Invention of Morel (1940), the narrator falls in love with a woman, but no ordinary one. Rather, this woman, Faustine, appears only as an image, a recording that begins again every week as the result of a holographic, indeed cinematic, machine set up on an otherwise deserted island. Faustine, the flesh and blood woman, is no longer there, but the narrator desires her all the same, and he gives up his own life to join her hermetic, illusionistic world. He falls in love not with a woman, but an image, and likewise transforms himself into an image, memorizing her movements and then turning on the machine to record himself into her actions. Entwined with her image, he writes himself into ‘the eternal week’: a memory, but for whom? (Casares 1940: 98, footnote 2) The machine irradiates and burns his body, and he slowly dies as it plays its recording back to him. Morel’s invention has offered a lethal exchange: the narrator’s life for the fantastical image of union he desires. ‘We shall live in this photograph forever’, Morel declares, although after the narrator’s presumed death, there is no one left to view it.

What does it mean to memorialize something and to give the memorial the form of an image? Many artists and philosophers have commented on the way in which film and photography serve as memory aids, tokens of frozen time and faces that produce both familiar and unfamiliar resemblances. Both Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes turned to a scene in Marcel Proust’s The Guermantes Way (1920/1921) in which the narrator, Marcel, sees his grandmother in a cold, objective manner like that of a 2. Cheats are programmed actions in video games representing a range of ludic possibilities, from enhancing player strength or endurance – adding extra lives or advantageous weaponry, for example – to non-functioning alterations of the environment, such as spontaneous dancing, levitating cars or rain called forth at will. This latter type of cheat is the one most frequently used by Solomon.

photographer. This ‘mechanical’ image, as Barthes describes it, is that of ‘an involuntary and complete memory’ ([1980] 1981: 70) divested of the love that overwrites the likeness of those close to us with the ‘idea that we have always had of them’ (Proust in Kracauer [1960] 1997: 14). For Proust, ‘every casual glance is an act of necromancy, each face that we love a mirror of the past’ (Proust cited in Kracauer [1960] 1997: 14). To look without affect, in such a casual manner, is to see in the mechanized terms of photography. Kracauer observes the distancing effects of such looks, writing, ‘Photography, Proust has it, is the product of complete alienation’ ([1960] 1997: 15). Cinema, too, produces a similar abstraction of, or separation from, the world: it ‘alienate[s] our environment by exposing it’ (Kracauer [1960] 1997: 55).

Barthes, meanwhile, returns to the photograph with a difference, to the ‘disorder’ he senses within it and the affective wound it inflicts upon him. In Camera Lucida he writes: ‘I wanted to explore [photography] not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think’ ([1980] 1981: 16 and 21, emphasis added). This affect – ‘what I didn’t want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted’ – takes for Barthes a decidedly different approach than classical phenomenology, which ‘had never […] spoken of desire or of mourning’ ([1980] 1981: 21). Indeed, Camera Lucida gradually reveals itself as a mourning work on the loss of Barthes’s mother, whose image, despite the many photographs printed in the book, is not revealed. Barthes describes it, however, in a photograph of her at the age of five, posing with her brother in her childhood home. This Winter Garden photograph, as he calls it, depicts his mother from a time before he knew her. He recognizes her in her child’s countenance with ‘a sentiment as certain as remembrance’ (Barthes [1980] 1981: 70). For the reader of Camera Lucida, then, there is a double displacement: the image that Barthes does not recognize from his own memory and the photograph that he refuses to reproduce in the pages of this book. Such affective residues, however irreducible, are ineffable, ghostly traces that haunt the entire text. Like the sacrifice Casares’s narrator makes to enter the image with his beloved Faustine, becoming an image himself, the Winter Garden photograph is for Barthes alone, its traces illegible to all but him. For all others, the photograph would be of the order of Kracauer’s alienating view: dispassionate, affectless, machinic.

The connection between indexicality and mourning in film and photography, however, is put into question by the In Memoriam series, which produces not an indexical image of something that used to be there, but a simulated, immaterial world. Here indexicality, in the photochemical sense, does not exist the way it does with the material of film and photography; GTA IV is an invented, digital world that only approximates our own. Yet the affective resonances associated with these older forms of indexicality become present through the work of mourning that infuses the series. Despite their smooth artificiality and the fact that they were designed by programmers with whom Solomon had no interaction, GTA’s landscapes still suggest for him an intimate proximity to, coupled with a profound longing for, what is no longer there: in other words, the person that Solomon mourns in the series title, the film-maker Mark LaPore.

Arguably Solomon’s method is photographic, for unlike his previous work, in which he dipped footage of his own home movies in chemical baths to produce an effect of ‘purposeful decay’ (Solomon 2006: 217, original emphasis), here the view of the found digital object is presented without apparent manipulation. It is automatic, like Kracauer’s cold machine. Rather than painting over or otherwise altering the videogame elements, as, for example, in the case of the erased figures in Cory Archangel’s Super Mario Clouds (2002), Solomon records what is already present, namely the movements of his avatar and the landscapes through which he passes. To the extent that he animates the game space by way of his avatar, he limits his actions to what is already available in the game and its encoded cheats. Animation here does not invoke the
range of aesthetic possibilities that the practice typically involves, such as the frame-by-frame construction of movement in a cel or stop-motion animated figure, or the wholesale creation of entire landscapes; indeed, animation of that sort is located at the level of a videogame’s 3D design. For his part, Solomon does not make radical alterations to the image. Instead, he plays the game as it is given to any player, running it through a console and recording the image off his computer. He treats it as a found object, indeed a found production set, shooting the pre-designed mise-en-scène more or less in the manner of a conventional cinematographer.

The person mourned, Mark LaPore, was the co-film-maker of Crossroad, which was then called Untitled: it was not yet formed, not yet the work of two mature film-makers, but a record of play of ‘boys of summer’, as Solomon described it in his programme notes at the Wexner Center. Before it became Crossroad, Untitled screened in several programmes, first in a memorial screening dedicated to LaPore at the Rotterdam Film Festival in early 2006, organized by Mark McElhatten, and in June of 2007, at Chicago’s Onion City Experimental Film and Video Festival, where it won first prize. The film became a kind of crossroad for Solomon, the virtual site of his last encounter with LaPore, and the place where their paths split off, what he called a ‘mythical place’ (Solomon, Price and Sutherland 2013: 3). From the house next to which C.J. stands in Crossroad, Solomon embarked on a journey through the remaining three films and installation. Rehearsals for Retirement travels widely through the GTA III landscape, with aerial views of a murky forest or a car diving into an ocean, skidding across the surface before it slowly sinks. Last Days in a Lonely Place is shot in black and white, depicting in steady long takes the empty spaces of a burned-out city, its most haunting image that of a car crashed in front of a blank cinema marquee. Still Raining, Still Dreaming shifts both in imagined geography and in image resolution to GTA IV’s simulacral New York. In HD clarity, it carefully tracks the movements of shadows as they fall across city streets and windy parks.

The memory of LaPore inscribed in the series is one imaginatively projected onto this world that, owing to its digital constitution, otherwise refuses intimacies of recognition such as ‘the naïve disposition of [Barthes’s mother’s] hands’ (Barthes [1980] 1981: 69). Still, there are traces of LaPore, significant to his friendship with Solomon: the night-time view of the Griffith Observatory and other elements borrowed from Nicholas Ray’s Rebel without a Cause (1955) in Last Days in a Lonely Place comes from their time attending Ray’s lectures as undergraduates at SUNY Binghamton. The film’s title, moreover, combines Ray’s In a Lonely Place (1950) with Gus Van Sant’s Last Days (2005), another film in which Solomon and LaPore shared an interest. In an e-mail that LaPore sent to Solomon shortly before his death, he cited one of Ray’s rhetorical questions from his Binghamton days: ‘How do you make a film about nothing?’ LaPore joked, ‘I saw Last Days, truly a film about nothing, I loved it’ (Solomon 2012: n.p.).

The films bear stylistic citations of LaPore’s work as well. Still Raining most explicitly references his spare and poetic ethnographic cinematography. Like LaPore’s Kolkata (2005) and The Glass System (2000), it features many of the late film-maker’s measured glances into shop windows and the observation of light as it passes slowly across an abandoned room. GTA III’s C.J., too, bears similarities to LaPore. In Solomon’s darkened lighting scheme, C.J. became little more than a silhouette, a figure that ‘takes on attributes of LaPore’s lanky frame’ (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 204). Within the narrative of the video game, furthermore, C.J. is already marked as ‘a character in mourning’, a man who travels to San Andreas to avenge his mother’s death. He is an incomplete, shadowed figure that might also be filled by Solomon in his shared work of mourning (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 203).

The elegiac tone of the In Memoriam films has been frequently observed. Writing on Crossroad and Rehearsals for Retirement, Michael Sicinski remarks, ‘How could one
look at these images and see anything but loss, the very absence of the phenomenal world and its variegated textures’ (Sicinski 2007: 31)? Sicinski links the personal loss of LaPore to the loss of a world that is now but a smooth simulation, a digital diegesis haunted by a referent it can only approximate. These markings of personal and ontological loss are strewn throughout the In Memoriam films’ largely depopulated settings of city and country: forests of flat, dense trees, planes swooping in on the horizon and a near-constant rain that falls across an ocean or within the dark recesses of a train tunnel.

Seeking LaPore, mourning LaPore, Solomon described how ‘the film that we had completed seemed to be both his gift to me and an oddly prophetic memorial’ (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 202). Both gift and memorial are present in the series’ invocation of memorial rites (different from funerals in that the body of the deceased is not present), from Crossroad’s first shot of a bouquet of flowers, to the hearse that drives solemnly through Rehearsals for Retirement and Last Days in a Lonely Place and finally, to Still Raining, Still Dreaming’s closing fade-out on a cemetery. These literal evocations of death and memorial might have influenced Sicinski’s view of a videogame world suffused with loss, although they also function symbolically as markers of that which is no longer there, whether LaPore, in the case of Solomon, or the real-world referent in the case of Sicinski. Similarly, Solomon has remarked on the evocative function of detail, which signals a disaster through what remains: ‘destruction is not in the foreground of the frame, and in most cases, the viewer doesn’t directly see it. Instead, we are in the shadow of destruction, and literally in its light’ (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 207).

Such ‘poetic signposts’ converge in the memorial edifice of “EMPIRE”, a structure that stands, or stands in, for the memory of things past. Paradoxically, memorials invoke precisely that immediate presence that cannot be regained: what can only be represented through a symbol, an edifice, an archive or an image that stands for the thing lost. Indeed, memorials make explicit what is at stake in all forms of representation: the substitution of signs for absent referents. Memorials are displaced sites of mourning, reminders of a mourning work that is always incomplete because the things lost can never be restored. They store these memories outside of the mourner, replacing the personal nature of memory with the objective, externalized edifice of history. Memorials bear, redirect and transform memories, holding them in perpetuity as long-lasting temples to the unassimilable: towers, statues, graves that never extinguish, gravestones that last even a lifetime after the names engraved on their surface have eroded.

As a type of memorial, “EMPIRE” is distinctly different from the rest of In Memoriam. First, because it is exhibited as an installation, the work stands apart from the theatrical space for which the other films are designed. Second, it is not a prerecorded film. At the Wexner Center, the work was installed using a PlayStation 3 console in a gallery coincidentally adjacent to an Andy Warhol retrospective, where its source film, Empire, screened. Unlike the recorded machinima of the In Memoriam films, all of which were screened in the film/video theatre or the looped projection of a preview of Solomon’s American Falls (2000–2012) installed in another gallery, “EMPIRE” ran ‘live’, that is, from the game console itself. Solomon had previously e-mailed the curator Chris Stults a complex series of instructions explaining how to position the GTA IV avatar atop a high-rise building with a view of the Empire State Building (called Rotterdam Tower in the game) closely approximating that of Warhol’s Empire. What the viewer saw, then, was what was in the game itself: nothing recorded, only the perspective of a still avatar, purposefully left alone so as to take in this view.

As a live view of game play, “EMPIRE” takes the question of indexicality further than the machinima construction of the In Memoriam films. While Solomon has clearly indicated that the object of loss is LaPore, I want to consider seriously the status of the game in this matrix of mourning that Solomon has constructed. GTA is no
6. John P. Powers suggests that the problem of digital indexicality is what constitutes medium specificity in Solomon’s machinima:

This disconnect between a material world that compels belief by virtue of its indexicality and a theoretical world that attempts to approximate it by way of an intangible abstract code is thought to be the defining feature of digital video, its essence, and so Solomon’s films effectively make a medium-specific argument. (2011: 86)

As with analogue film, however, we should be careful to distinguish between digital video as recorded by a camera and digital video rendered by 3D modelling and animation. Tom Gunning reminds us that we should not accept the reductive claims of medium specificity along the lines of indexicality when he provides a review of the key debates surrounding film indexicality’s relation to cinematic realism and polemically recontextualizes them within the area of digital media in (2012). ‘Moving away from the index: Cinema and the impression of reality’, in Koch, Gertrud, Patenburg, Volker and Rothhöfer, Simon (eds), Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema, Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum, pp. 42–60. This logic of indexicality is something that Phil Rosen also examines at length. As he argues, the recognition of the referent’s incidental object; as Sicinski argues, it appears to have elegiac tendencies on its own. Additionally, the playing of the game, combined with the making of a film, echoes the scene of Solomon and LaPore’s last encounter. Rather than seeking something, or someone, in the image as Barthes might have it – an arrangement of flowers, a man’s lanky frame or some other detail – part of what constitutes the index is the videogame itself. Seen from the perspective of Solomon’s last evening with LaPore, each subsequent exploration of the game both recapitulates that experience and at the same time underscores its irretrievability. In this way, the game is the still-present object that inevitably points to the absence of the one who made it significant in the first place. With the ‘indefinite’ and possibly limitless running time of “EMPIRE”, moreover, the game’s presence is hyper-present. Instead of a sense of something missing – as in the case of the photograph’s indexical mark of a vanished presence – we are overwhelmed with the hyper-present virtuality of this videogame view. How, then, might we square this urgent presence, conceived in the form of a long-lasting and potentially limitless digital memorial, with the work of mourning to which the In Memoriam films and “EMPIRE” purport?

To play the game is to do the work of mourning, but play in the sense of Solomon and LaPore’s roaming, delight and improvisatory film-making, rather than the game’s narrative drive to complete quests. While Barthes works through his grief over the loss of his mother in looking at photographs of her, anchoring much of the images’ power in their indexical proximity to her, here Solomon uses a videogame to seek out affective rather than physical traces of LaPore. In GTA IV, the assumed indexical relation between the world and its photochemically imprinted image, or even between the world and the light-sensitive receptors of a digital camera, is supplanted by a simulacrum that, in itself, does not purport to indexicality but rather iconicity.6 While we might assume that the affective residue of photographs, tightly braided into film and photography’s indexical relation to the world, would be absent in a digital animation, the In Memoriam series argues otherwise, in part because the films of In Memoriam, and “EMPIRE” especially, redistribute the index in the videogame itself. If we understand the videogame not as image but object, enduringly present as the lost object (LaPore) is enduringly absent, Solomon’s method remains essentially photographic in the manner that Barthes and Kracauer describe and in doing so he retains, in a material and affective sense, the touch of the index, its ghostly sensation of presence.

2.

Warhol’s eight-hour Empire has a reputation for being notoriously unwatchable, outlasting most viewers who attempt to view it in its entirety. Its fixed and unmoving frame, trained on the Empire State Building over the course of a single night, led many of its early commentators to suspect that it was, at best, an apperceptive exercise, and, at worst, a cruel prank. Much of the writing that exists about the film tends towards hyperbole, due no doubt to the fact that few have actually watched the entire film. It screened only rarely, was pulled from distribution in 1972 and only became available again when the camera original for the film was discovered in a film laboratory in 1992 (Angell 1994: 15–19).

Chief among the complaints lodged against Empire was the notion that the film was, as Gregory Battcock described (in a manner that echoes LaPore’s praise of Strange Days), ‘simply, a big nothing’ (Battcock 1966: 39).7 In the span of the film’s eight hours, very little ‘happens’ in the conventional cinematic sense. ‘Nothing’ also characterized the authorial labour on the part of Warhol. Radically dissimilar from the intimate, poetic works of the New American Cinema, in Empire, it seemed, there was
purposefully no expression. It was as if, as P. Adams Sitney described, Warhol ‘simply turned the camera on and walked away’ (2002: 349). Yet for some, the nothingness of the film prompted reflection on its temporality and audience endurance. For Sitney, Empire concerned the iconic skyscraper less than the perceptual work of the viewer. In what he called an ‘appercive cinema’, the viewer, ‘[b]y sheer dint of waiting […] would alter his experience before the sameness of the cinematic image’, thus giving rise to an awareness of her own watching, and perhaps exhausted, self (2002: 351). By challenging the limits of viewer endurance, Empire forces its spectator to confront the very limits of her perception and her own tedium with an unchanging image. As Stephen Koch surmised, it is ‘less a challenge than a taunt’ (1974: 60). With Solomon’s “EMPIRE”, the automatism of the single, fixed view and its extended, week-long running time at the Wexner Center could appear to also fall under the same critique of ‘nothingness’ and authorial disaffection.

Yet when Warhol was given Film Culture’s Sixth Independent Film Award in 1964, he was praised for giving room, and especially time, to examine actions and objects that might otherwise be taken for granted. As the award statement described, ‘We watch a Warhol movie with no hurry. […] A new way of looking at things and the screen is given through the personal vision of Andy Warhol’ (Film Culture, 33, Summer 1964). Here, Battcock and Sitney’s torturous ‘nothing’ is replaced by the rich plenitude of various somethings: haircutting, eating and the Empire State Building are named specifically in the award statement. Similarly, Solomon’s “EMPIRE”, far from ‘nothing’, is filled with incidents and details I will soon describe.

More recent appraisals of Empire also challenge the notion of the film’s ‘nothingness’. Douglas Crimp observes how ‘the perspective of the building kept reversing itself’ due to the shifting registers of natural and artificial light in the film, eventually becoming abstract (2012: 140). Attenuation, for Crimp, becomes a kind of erasure: ‘staring at it for such a long time makes it possible literally to lose sight of it’ (2012: 140) and as the film’s ten reels, which begin at approximately 8:10 p.m. on 25 July 1964, descend into night, with the floodlights turning off in the middle of reel nine (around 1:50 a.m.), only a few lights remain in the darkness: four on the building’s needle, a few at the base of the tower and a brighter light at the top of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building that blinks at regular intervals throughout. The film describes a kind of reverse gestalt over its extended duration; as J. J. Murphy remarks, ‘The points of light give only the suggestion of the image we’ve seen previously, so the film becomes about memory – trying to remember the previous skyline from a series of dots of light’ (2012: 33). Thus, as the building disappears, the film appears.

As with Hollis Frampton’s Lemon (1969), in which the light that shines on a lemon becomes the film’s central ‘actor’, revealing and disappearing its bulbous object, Empire places emphasis on the actions of light and the material processes that condition our apprehension of images. In its photochemical composition, Empire is insistently filmic. In the darkness of night, for example, the lights of neighbouring buildings blink like constellations and filmic events become pronounced – light flares, processing stains, splotches, printed sprocket holes, even the suggestion of animation when white dots twinkle around the building in the sixth reel. Perhaps the most significant filmic element that emerges is the slight flicker that appears when the film, originally shot at 24 frames per second, is shown at silent speed, sixteen frames per second, as indicated by Warhol. This flicker marks the disjunction between the film’s shooting time, which is roughly six and a half hours, and its running time of eight hours. Thus, while Empire might seem to exacerbate the slowness of ‘real time’, it is in fact of an entirely different temporal order, one elongated through the work of the projector, a time that is distinctly irreal. As Amy Taubin writes, ‘the films unwind at a pace that is out of sync with the rhythms of the viewer. This disjunction – between the body clock of the person as image and the person watching heightens the viewer’s alienation from power and its trace in the photograph is contingent on some previous knowledge of how the medium works. Therefore, knowing how the camera apparatus works is crucial to constructing a sense of reality’s immediacy, its presence, but also, paradoxically, its pastness (2001, Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
hours and eleven minutes long (see Angell 1994: 15).


What I am calling the irreality of Warhol's film is distinguished from the aesthetics of long takes and deep focus described variably in André Bazin's description of Italian Neo-Realist aesthetics and the more recent 'slow cinema' discussed by Nick James (See Bazin, André (1971) 2005, An aesthetic of reality: Cinematic realism and the Italian school of the liberation,' in Gray, Hugh (ed. and trans.) What is Cinema? Volume 2, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 16–40 and James, Nick (2010), 'Passive aggressive', Sight and Sound, 20:4, April, p. 5).

11. In addition to Staehle's Empire 24/7, Empire makes range in location and film and digital media uses, from Elaine Sturtevant's Warhol Empire State, refilmed from the perspective of 1972 to Igor Krenz's Palace (2006), an eight-hour video of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, Poland, and part of a project that challenged a local Jackass-inspired to sit through the entire duration (only one did). Douglas Gordon, the heir apparent to Warhol's feats of duration, has tackled Empire as a source and subject in numerous projects, including Empire (1998), which uses a mirror image of a neon sign that says 'Empire' from Hitchcock's Vertigo (1958) and Bootleg (Empire) (1998), a shaky, handheld version that lasts two hours. The Hirshhorn

the image’ (1994: 21). Like the alienating effect of photography for Kracauer, Warhol's cinema compounds an already estranged relation between the body of the spectator and the machine of cinema by temporal means. Empire's irreality 'makes us aware of the image as 'other' and therefore unknowable' (Taubin 1994: 21).

The irreality of Warhol's film is not limited to celluloid effects, however. There have been many remakes of Empire, including those that use digital technologies, like Wolfgang Staehle's Empire 24/7 (1999–2004), an online video stream of digital photographs of the building. However, Solomon's "EMPIRE" produces a distinct form of irreality with its machinimatic digital technologies. It remakes, or rather relocates, Warhol's film through a simulacrum of time and space, shifting the terrain from film to the digital medium of the videogame. Because, at the Wexner Center, "EMPIRE" ran live from the game console with an 'indefinite' duration, its mode of display indicates both the variability and ambiguity of the temporal dimension in both versions of the work.

The irreality of "EMPIRE" is accomplished not by slowing the footage as in Warhol, but by the game engine's compression of time, which fits a 24-hour cycle of game time into 48 minutes as experienced by a viewer. The accelerated passage of time is less noticeable than one might presume as it is marked by the shifts in light, the movement of shadows and the changing position of the sun – chiefly, what appears as background – rather than in the more immediate objects of gameplay such as cars and the characters with which one typically interacts. As with the In Memoriam series, however, Solomon is less interested in playing the game as the designers intended, completing missions and advancing towards a goal, than playing with the game, and paying particular attention to its environmental details, 'its desires to be of the real world that fell short in very interesting ways' (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 202).

From the vantage of "EMPIRE", above the fray of the city, we can observe the passage of the game's irreality, although no less regular, time. In the 2012 recorded iteration of "EMPIRE", for example, the moon appears twice in the same place (like the doubled moons and suns that crowd the sky in Morel's fantastical cinema), one full and the other gibbous, during the course of a single night, suggesting a monthly lunar rotation that never moves, a digital world without seasons. Sped up and stuck in place, the time of "EMPIRE" is closed off, 'airless', and ghostly (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 203) and at its centre stands the Empire State Building with storm clouds wrapped around its needle, the fulcrum of this silent, sealed world.

"EMPIRE" thus creates a hermetic, perpetual present that, in merging real time with game time, edges out the possibility for a past or a future. Its duration is indefinite and infinite, measured not against any of our clocks, but its own. It leaves no room for our time, our history or our memories. The exclusion of the human is already suggested in the dramatically depopulated spaces of the In Memoriam films; from the lofted view of "EMPIRE", although we see lights that flash on in the buildings of lower Manhattan and planes and helicopters flying in the distance, there is little to suggest human presence. In one example of the game's 'falling short' of reality, the streets – which have been empty during the day – are suddenly dotted with headlights at night. The viewer too is denied entry into this world: although "EMPIRE" was installed using the PS3 game console, it was closed off to the normative mode of videogame interactivity. Unlike a work such as Feng Mengbo's Long March: Restart (2008), which allows visitors to play the game, Solomon explicitly forecloses viewer participation. The game apparatus, then, addresses a player who does not need to be there, or, like LaPore, is there no longer: 'the controller was buzzing even when no one could hear or feel it' (Solomon 2012). Thus, while in the In Memoriam films the playing of the game was the work of mourning, with "EMPIRE" that work was accomplished by setting up its particular view and then allowing the installation to run, with an absent player, on its own.
The hermetic world of “EMPIRE”, moreover, conveys a sense of evacuation and aftermath. Although the camera perspective in “EMPIRE” casts everything at a distance, the sense of missing people is suggested in the debris that flies through the air, the same that floats through the final shot of Still Raining, Still Dreaming. Upon closer inspection, these are bits of newspapers, printed and sometimes photographic scraps that float through the skies of GTA IV.

What is the purpose of these mysterious remains, so painstakingly rendered in their appearance and yet seemingly inconsequential to the game’s driving narrative? Are they mere details that, like the carefully lettered Chinatown shop windows seen in Still Raining, Still Dreaming, are meant to serve the game’s overall effect of verisimilitude?

In his consideration of descriptive detail in Flaubert’s A Simple Heart, Barthes asks, ‘[W]hat is, ultimately, the significance of this insignificance?’ (1989: 143) In its aesthetic capacity, the detail serves to uphold the narrative structure of the text, producing an ‘effect of reality’. Without such elements, he suggests, the work would succumb to ‘the vertigo of notation’ (Barthes 1989: 145). He observes, however, a tension between the status of the detail in fiction and history: in the former, it functions to maintain the effect of reality in a narrative, whereas in the latter, it is the ‘real’ itself, self-evident and unfettered by such narrative imperatives. (Among the examples Barthes gives for this ‘real’ are ‘monuments and historical sites’ [1989: 146].) The detail both maintains and threatens to exceed the narrative.

Thus, whatever the GTA IV designers’ original intentions, the paper remains are details that both reaffirm the game’s environment of verisimilitude and, in the reframed, photographic view of “EMPIRE”, threaten to exceed it. They, like the punctum that disrupts the coherence of a photograph’s studium, are both a part of the semiotic order of an image but also an unstable element within it. In Solomon’s work, the paper debris is made all the more noticeable for the proximity and speed with which it flutters before the camera, signalling a kind of ‘disorder’ that Barthes may have recognized precisely as punctum, an eccentric presence that snags the smooth surface of the digital image and compels us to take a closer look. Disorder or disaster: in an otherwise depopulated world, these are, perhaps, clues to a catastrophe that is imperceptible save for its shredded paper remains set loose into the air.

The most noticeable absences in the sweeping, southerly view of “EMPIRE” are, of course, the two towers of the World Trade Center. From the vantage of the years in which Solomon made In Memoriam and “EMPIRE”, the now empty skyline could not but point to what was missing from view. For Solomon, the historical trauma is compounded by his loss of LaPore, whose death coincided with the fourth anniversary of 9/11. Both dimensions, historical and personal, converge in the view afforded by “EMPIRE”: looking out onto a familiar sight, we see a skyline that registers what is there no longer. “The end of the world; the end of my world,” Solomon has said (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 207). 9/11 is a peculiar type of icon, one that signifies by way of erasure. Although we may recall, variously, the billowing smoke, the emergency digits of the numerical date and the anticipation of the towers’ fall, the most enduring image is the absence of what was previously there, the empty (at least until recently) skyline where the towers once stood.

In “EMPIRE” this erasure appears in the form of a glitch, an unanticipated malfunction in the operation of the video game world: as airplanes cross the sky, they pass behind the Empire State Building and fail to reappear on the other side. The glitch is located in the game’s code; Solomon’s intervention is merely to position his avatar in a place where it can be observed. In this case, the glitch can be seen as analogous to the chemical stains that appear in Warhol’s Empire, a constitutive error that draws our attention to the medium at hand. Glitches, like these stains, are medium specific; the pixelated choking of a digital image or the programming

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Museum and Sculpture Garden exhibited Staehle’s Empire 24/7 and Gordon’s Bootleg (Empire) in its ‘Directions: Empire(3)’ exhibition from 10 November 2011 to 26 February 2011.

12. I borrow the distinction between playing a game and playing with a game from Peter Krapp’s Noise Channels (2011: 77).

13. The 2008 installation version of “EMPIRE” at the Wexner was kept silent, while the 2012 Ann Arbor and New York Film Festival versions included soundtracks of distant traffic sounds. The two later versions, which are truer machinima works in that their actions are recorded, both last 48 minutes, and differ in the slight angle of their perspectives and the events that transpire. The New York Film Festival version is notable for beginning and ending with a rainstorm, concluding just before an airplane is about to meet the side of the Empire State Building.
hiccup of a malfunctioning physics engine points to the computer medium in which the image is generated.

Yet Solomon's glitches also evoke more than the digitality of GTA. When understood in the context of the work's sense of historical and personal loss, such glitches indicate the logic of the traumatic event. As Cathy Caruth contends, this logic produces 'a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory' (1995: 7). It is as if the game itself, on the level of its code, had succumbed to the force of trauma by disrupting the laws of physics. In a kind of traumatic repetition, it sends countless planes along a devastating, skyscraper-bound path similar to the one that led to the Twin Towers. Through the hermeneutical gap of the glitch, the game fails repeatedly to recover them on the other side of the building.14 Caruth continues: 'The force of this experience would appear to arise precisely, in other words, in the collapse of its understanding.' Thus in "EMPIRE", rather than depicting outright the images of 9/11 – in part because GTA offers nothing but accidental echoes of the event, and also because Solomon refrains from animating the footage he records – the work is concerned with the event's traumatic remains, seen in the floating bits of paper that resemble the airborne ticker-tape in the aftermath of the disaster, or, at the level of the game's physics generator, the momentary system breakdown that occurs each time a plane fails to come out the other side. "EMPIRE" not only describes, as a digital image, the losses that preoccupy Solomon but as a machine, as an encoded game engine, it also convulses with a shock that could be understood as traumatic.

As the 'other' New York tower, the Empire State Building is a different kind of icon, one that shifts in relation to the visibility of the World Trade Center. Jockeying for the title of tallest building in the world, or at least the city, the histories of the two sites have always been entwined. Chris Stults observes, 'It's telling that both Warhol's and Solomon's Empire State Buildings exist in a skyline without the World Trade Center. As Warhol's film was created in a time of expansion, Solomon's video shows a time of contraction' (Stults 2008: n.p.). Since its construction in 1931, the Empire State Building has been a symbolic locus of American hegemony. Made of stone and steel, it was built to last as a testament to American ingenuity, pride and superiority; it was a figure of the nation itself. Mark Kingwell remarks,

> If the city calls out to all of us, as it surely does, with its siren songs of possible wealth, fame, or recognition – the twinned stories of arriving and moving up – the Empire State Building is the tower from which the signal is delivered, and the light guiding us back to ourselves. (2006: 19)

Its very name, derived from George Washington's evocation of New York's status as 'seat of the empire', indicates its vertical aspiration and influence. From 1931 the Empire State Building served as an important broadcast station for local television and radio, although most transmitters moved to the top floors of the World Trade Center during its construction from 1968 to 1972. After 2001, however, the Empire State Building once again became the preeminent cluster for antennae and transmitters.

Warhol was fascinated with the Empire State Building, which he famously referred to as a star (Mekas 1972: 151). His interest, however, was also informed by Empire's shadow side, a connection to death he explored in the Death and Disaster series (1962–1967). In the screenshot Suicide (Fallen Body) (1963), for example, he used an image from Life magazine depicting Evelyn McHale after her suicide fall from the building on 1 May 1947.

With her body cradled in the twisted metal top of a limousine and her face relaxed in an expression resembling slumber, McHale appears uncannily serene, a casualty of the vertiginous ambitions of the American empire and one of the dozens of bodies
that, since the tower's construction, have fallen from its heights. Warhol might have been drawn to the McHale image for its ambiguity between sleep and death. As John Giorno, the subject of Sleep (1963), described, Warhol's greatest fear was dying in his sleep (Murphy 2012: 21). Empire, then, can be seen as a vigil, a wakeful night to guard against the death that lurks within Sleep.

Following the destruction of the Twin Towers, Kingwell observed that the Empire State Building 'became visible for the first time in decades' (2006: ix, original emphasis). In the aftermath of 9/11, until the construction of the One World Trade Center in late 2012, the Empire State Building re-emerged not only as the tallest skyscraper in the New York City skyline (and thus, a possible target) but also as a symbol of American perseverance, if not its diminished world stature. It was a ragged survivor on the day of the attack, and earlier too, when on 28 July 1945, a United States Army Corps B-25 bomber, lost in the fog, crashed into its 70th floor. The coloured floodlights at the top of the building, installed shortly before Warhol filmed Empire (Angell 1994: 16), have since become its most enduring aspect.

As Warhol observed, 'If you build buildings with lights outside, you can make them indefinite, and then when you’re through using them you shut the lights off and they disappear' (1975: 157). The lights that illuminate Empire and “EMPIRE” memorialize and make tangible, and in so doing immemorialize and make intangible, make irreal or indefinite, the building on which the camera fixes its gaze. Unlike those of its predecessor, however, the lights in the digital image of “EMPIRE” never go out. In a message to Stults, in which he laid out an early idea of “EMPIRE”, Solomon described the time at which the work would begin, suggesting that it might start 'from mid-afternoon storm to mourning has broken' – a notable parapraxis (Solomon 2008). The morning, of course, comes and goes, repeats in different mornings, followed by different afternoon storms. For Solomon, the work of mourning may have broken, but the memorial edifice that he constructed is unending.

3.

Aside from Warhol’s film, the most prominent cinematic depiction of the Empire State Building is Merion C. Cooper’s King Kong (1933), released just two years after the building’s completion. A cautionary tale against the lust for spectacle and profligacy, it details the exploits of a zealous film-maker and entrepreneur, Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong), who travels to a remote and savage island to make a picture featuring the giant ape playing opposite the ingénue Ann Darrow (Faye Wray). When shooting goes awry, Denham drugs Kong and brings him back to the Broadway stage in New York where, inevitably, Kong breaks free, kidnaps Darrow and climbs to the top of the Empire State Building. With planes shooting at him from all sides, he gently sets Darrow down and falls to his death.

The experience of seeing King Kong as a child had a profound effect on Solomon. He remarks:

Going to see King Kong as a kid, without my parents, and not running screaming out of the theater when I got frightened, was an absolutely crucial growth experience for me, and it created a lifelong desire to go into movie theaters and have something scare me, on one level or another. (Solomon and MacDonald 2005: 219)

As Solomon described to me, the moment of Kong’s death was particularly arresting. The scene was moving not because Kong succumbed to the airborne attack but...
Merian C. Cooper,
Ernest B.
Schoedsack
(uncredited), King Kong (1933).
simply because he ‘let go’. Denham rushes to the scene and immediately understands: ‘It wasn’t the airplanes’, he says, ‘it was beauty that killed the beast’. In a gesture of great tenderness, an expression of his extraordinary burden, Kong puts his beloved aside and sacrifices his life.

**King Kong.** Warhol and Solomon share a common vantage point on the Empire State Building. All three are positioned roughly at the middle of the building, where the top can be glimpsed and the bottom fades into a mass of lower structures. An additional, if unconscious, echo of Kong can be located in a remarkable shot from *Rehearsals for Retirement*: CJ stands with shoulders slumped and bouquet in hand, while a plane flies ominously overhead in the sunset sky.

Like Kong astride the Empire State Building, battling the planes with Darrow in his massive palm, we begin to understand that these flowers as a gift: from LaPore and Solomon to Gatten, and later, held by his shadowy avatar, from LaPore to Solomon. The gift that remains is ‘beauty’, in Denham’s words, or in Solomon’s, ‘a virtual tenderness’ (Solomon and Zemka 2008: 205).

For Jacques Derrida, the gift of any gift is one of time: ‘the gift only gives to the extent that it gives time […] the thing must not be restituted immediately and right away, there must be time in between, it must last – there must be waiting, without forgetting’ (1992: 41). The long takes of the *In Memoriam* films lead to the monumental “EMPIRE”, which, as a monument, endures, waiting without forgetting. This endur-ance comes from the lack of specificity of the installation apparatus. In effect, any game console and unlocked version of *GTA IV* could be used to mount “EMPIRE”, whether in a gallery or in one’s home. As a concept, or as an array of code – both Solomon’s written instructions and the game engine – the work persists beyond any single installation arrangement, the ‘indefinition’ of its time indicative of this precarity, but of also this potential multiplicity, of the many possible times of “EMPIRE”.

If, returning to the question of indexicality, we take the index of “EMPIRE” to be the videogame itself, less an image than an object, then this digital work produces an affective resonance similar to, but constitutively different, from the forms of indexicality associated with photochemical representation. Yet this is only part of the picture. We can only consider the game as an index when it is understood as part of the structuring absence of the primary lost object, or lost person, LaPore. If the index marks something or someone who is there no longer, the game’s insistent presence, in its material multiplicity and temporal expansiveness, can never compensate for LaPore’s undeniable absence. What it produces, however, is something of the order of Derrida’s gift: not a substitute, but an image that points to an infinite elsewhere. This image, however impossible it may be to realize in actuality, assists in the work of mourning, offering, like Morel’s invention, a fantastical kind of photograph, one in which we might imagine ourselves and our lost ones together, in a world of irreducible time.

Warhol’s *Empire* gives a gift of time, too, but it produces impatience, perhaps because its eight-hour running time is unendurable for most viewers. Koch laments: ‘nothing could possibly tolerate it – and here’s the point – but a machine, something that sees but cannot possibly care. The film completes Warhol’s Duchampian dehu-manization of the cinematic eye’ (1974: 61). Yet where Koch reads *Empire* as a cold, machinic eyesore, Solomon’s machine-cinema, his machinima, does precisely what the human cannot do. It is possible, although for most people very uncomfortable, to sit through the entirety of Warhol’s film. With “EMPIRE”, however, no such possibility exists. The work constructs what Proust called ‘the immense edifice of memory’ lasting well beyond the capacity of any individual ([1913] 2003: 47). Hence we glimpse another world, one not just possessing a simulacral similarity, but its own irreal temporality that extends far beyond our own. In a videogame in which dead bodies vanish without a trace, “EMPIRE” produces an image that, without changing the real nature of the loss of LaPore, imagines the restoration of that which has been

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17. This scene of King Kong’s ‘letting go’ is also included in **Solomon’s American Falls**.
Genevieve Yue

lost. It promises, in its ‘indefinite’ duration, a time without foreseeable end. In doing so, it resolves structural film’s divide between the infallible idea of cinema, written in a line of code, and the machines and buildings that inevitably break down due to the ravages of war or simply those of time. With “EMPIRE”, there is a sense that this image, with or without us, will last.

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