



Still from *Decodings* (dir. Michael Wallin, US, 1988)

AIDS and Gay Cinephilia

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In *Positiv*, the opening short film in Mike Hoolboom's six-part compilation film *Panic Bodies* (Canada, 1998), the viewer is faced with a veritable excess of the visual. The screen is divided into four equal parts, suggesting both a wall of video monitors and also Warhol's famed simultaneous projections. Hoolboom, a Toronto-based experimental filmmaker who has been HIV positive since 1988, appears in the top right-hand frame as a talking head, tightly framed and speaking directly to the camera. At once poignant and wry, his monologue explores the corporeal experience of living with AIDS: "The yeast in my mouth is so bad it turns all my favorite foods, even chocolate-chocolate-chip ice cream, into a dull metallic taste like licking a crowbar. I know then that my body, my real body, is somewhere else: bungee jumping into mine shafts stuffed with chocolate wafers and whipped cream and blueberry pie and just having a good time. You know?" Each of the other three frames is filled with a montage of images from contemporary Hollywood films, B-movies, vintage porn, home movies, ephemeral films, as well as Hoolboom's own experimental films.

These multiple frames feed the viewer a plethora of diverse visual sensations. They include disintegrating and morphing

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Camera Obscura 52, Volume 18, Number 1
Published by Duke University Press

bodies (from *The Hunger* [dir. Tony Scott, UK, 1983], *Terminator 2* [dir. James Cameron, US, 1991], and *Altered States* [dir. Ken Russell, US, 1980]); the terrified, diminished body of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (dir. Jack Arnold, US, 1957); teeming microscopic cells and viruses (from old instructional films); mundane shots of the repetitive medical tests taken by Hoolboom; scratched and bleached-out footage of a family Christmas; and melodramatic reaction shots of horror and pathos (from classic silent films).¹ The imbrication of private and public spheres becomes clear in the film through the way in which the shifting array of images visualize and render into metaphor the personal testimony of the film's talking head. Bodily crisis pervades both the sound and image tracks. Pop culture's diverse iconography of bodily fragmentation accompanies Hoolboom's narration of how he has become alienated from his own body due to the physiological effects of HIV infection. The corporeal fragmentation in these images, the sense of a body in parts, is amplified by the film's formal design: the frame is dissected into smaller frames, and the short film itself constitutes one of six separate parts to the compilation film. Yet these images do more than merely illustrate a monologue performance, for *Positiv* powerfully demonstrates how we come to use popular culture, and popular cinema in particular, to articulate our sense of self. This engagement with the image is neither a simple identification with the visual signifier as a transparent reflection of lived experience nor a mere inhabiting of a subject position, but rather a complex process of identification, appropriation, and negotiation. Hoolboom's film registers how identity and personal memory are continually inflected by the vocabularies of popular culture.

Despite their systematic marginalization by modern technologies of representation, gay cultural producers have consistently turned to the archive of popular culture in search of an affective and aesthetic vocabulary for articulating and sharing lived experience.² However, their attitude is often inscribed by an ambivalence about the possible toxicity of the culture they appropriate. Gay skepticism toward popular culture obviously increased during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, when television

and the popular press consistently pathologized and demonized gay men as “AIDS killers.” But alongside the numerous critiques of AIDS hysteria in popular culture produced by independent lesbian and gay media over the past two decades, one also finds a significant number of experimental films and videos that approach the visual archive of popular culture as a rich source of affect, rather than merely as a site for ideological analysis. This article analyzes and contextualizes a number of these works, including Michael Wallin’s *Decodings* (US, 1988), Matthias Müller’s *Aus der Ferne: The Memo Book* (Germany, 1989) and his *Pensão Globo* [The Globe Hotel] (Germany, 1997), and Jim Hubbard’s *Memento Mori* (US, 1995). The films articulate gay structures of feeling in the first two decades of the AIDS epidemic through the dynamics of cinephilia—that is to say, through their affectively charged relationship to cinema and its history.

In using Raymond Williams’s term *structures of feeling*, I am drawing from the conceptualization Williams offers in *Marxism and Literature*, when he describes such structures of feeling as “specifically affective elements of consciousness” and “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt.”³ Williams understands these structures as historical and contingent, elements of “a social experience which is still *in process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolatory.”⁴ Although it has almost become a cliché to cite the magnitude of the social and psychological upheaval experienced by gay men during the first two decades of the epidemic, it is important to recognize the simultaneous scope *and* diversity of the effects that AIDS has had on gay men. Thus when clinical psychologist Walt Odets argues that all gay men are living with HIV and AIDS, he is actually doing so in the service of articulating the *specific* needs of HIV-negative gay men.⁵ Both seropositive and seronegative gay men must deal with feelings of loss, anxiety, guilt, and isolation, yet in often strikingly different and socially polarizing frameworks. Some of these experiential differences derive from generational distinctions, with more older gay men suffering multiple loss with the deaths of many friends and lovers as well as the loss of a sexual culture they helped to create in the

post-gay liberation years before AIDS. Yet even in their differences, determined by age and serostatus, these experiences resonate with the prior experience of loss endured in the process of gay socialization or coming out, which almost all gay men (and lesbians) share in a heteronormative society. As Odets points out, loss is first experienced early in the protogay child's life as the "unattainability of a real self," since this self is connected to forbidden homosexual feelings (72). This "anticipatory" loss of an authentic and meaningful life inscribes gay male subjectivity with indelible traces of loss and nostalgia. The repeated and varied reinscription of such traces by the experience of the AIDS epidemic has profoundly shaped gay structures of feeling over the past twenty years. Even within those two decades, gay structures of feeling in the West have transformed as the epidemic among gay men has evolved from the dire crisis of the early 1980s through the years of activist empowerment to the current muted optimism that has emerged with the arrival of effective antiretroviral drug combinations.

The films I examine here were made during the emergence of the activist culture of ACT UP and in the decade that followed, a period when gay cultural producers were increasingly attentive to the imperative, so succinctly articulated by Douglas Crimp in 1989, as the need for both mourning *and* militancy.⁶ Our calmer but rather numbed present frequently promotes an amnesia around the not-too-distant past and a disavowal of the continuing psychic toll of the epidemic on gay men. To look at these films now is to be reminded that below the emergent structures of feeling around the current notion of AIDS as a chronic, manageable disease, there are deeper, residual structures of loss. As works of experimental cinema, the films invest form with greater significance than narrative, relying on the expressivity of their distinctive cinematic forms to address their audience, rather than on the conventional identificatory functions of narrative and performance. This is a cinema of moments. Fashioned out of the archive of industrially produced cinema, these moments carry the unmistakable traces of loss and nostalgia that have come to be inscribed in classical Hollywood cinema and, more generally, in

postwar American mass culture. It is this affective relationship to the cinematic archive that renders these films works of cinephilia. Cinephilia becomes the dynamic through which AIDS-related structures of feeling around loss come to be articulated. It is, however, manifested in different textual forms. *Decodings* and *Aus der Ferne* incorporate found footage from ephemeral and popular cinema, whereas *Pensão Globo* and *Memento Mori* appropriate CinemaScope and Technicolor, two specific film technologies indelibly associated with classical Hollywood.

While each of the films analyzed here performs its own distinctive engagement with industrially produced cinema, the films do share a common artisanal mode of production and similar circumstances of distribution and exhibition. The contexts producing these films involve a number of different discursive frameworks. Aesthetic contexts include American underground film, found-footage filmmaking, autobiographical film, and contemporary queer cinema, while cultural ones include forms of AIDS mourning, gay spectatorship, and the cultural space of lesbian and gay film festivals. This article works to extrapolate the indeterminacy of these various contexts since the textual address of the films should be read through the optics of the cultural practices conditioning both their production and reception. Central to these practices is what I am calling gay cinephilia—the set of gay cultural practices revolving around a collectively shared passion for cinema and its history.⁷ While this article concentrates on cultural practices performed by gay men (predominantly forms of spectatorship and filmmaking) and acknowledges the specificities attendant to such a focus, it will also draw, when necessary, from ideas and theories relevant to both lesbian and gay cultural practices.⁸ The specific advantage in deploying the concept of gay cinephilia in the analysis of these films lies in its ability to account for their cinematic meaning and affect in terms of a set of cultural practices shared by both filmmakers and audiences. Moreover, cinephilia is a dynamic that, I would argue, structures the reading practices of gay viewers *and* the formal techniques taken up by gay filmmakers.

The Context for Gay Cinephilia

Over the past two decades, lesbian and gay film scholarship has focused as much attention on the social and psychological relationship lesbians and gay men have to cinema as it has on the representation of homosexuality and queerness within film texts.⁹ Judith Mayne argues that film spectatorship has become “a component of the various narratives that constitute the very notion of a gay/lesbian identity, from coming out stories to shared pleasures in camp, to speculations about the real lives of performers.”¹⁰ Gay spectatorship embodies an array of performative manifestations incorporating social, cultural, and psychological components. First and foremost among them is the issue of gay men’s and lesbians’ psychic engagement in the cinema. Brett Farmer and Patricia White have each emphasized the complexity of these engagements, which include the dynamics of identification, desire, and fantasy. As White notes, for instance, same-sex star crush narratives shared by lesbian or gay subjects involve “a complex negotiation between identification and desire, and between idealization and recognition.”¹¹ Not merely psychological but also social, they facilitate the constitution of lesbian or gay identity through an identification with others who share one’s own preferences. As Farmer elaborates, Hollywood and its products became a “veritable lingua franca” within urban gay male subcultures in the post-war era, providing a “capacious reference system” for gay subcultural appropriation and recoding.¹² Farmer’s comments here indicate the very historicity of gay spectatorship: classical Hollywood cinema facilitated a specific form of spectatorship performed by gay men during this period.

Daniel Harris contrasts this historically marked spectatorship of classical cinema to gay men’s current engagement with popular culture: “In the absence of the gay-positive propaganda in which contemporary gay culture is saturated, film became a form of ‘found’ propaganda that the homosexual ransacked for inspiring messages, reconstituting the refuse of popular culture into an energizing force.”¹³ Interestingly, Harris frames his discussion of gay spectatorship in terms similar to those used to describe the practice of found-footage filmmaking, which has

become a major formal tendency within contemporary experimental filmmaking.¹⁴ These similarities include the treatment of popular culture as found material; the fascination with material deemed ephemeral, refuse, or trash; and the process of reconstituting or reworking such material. His comments suggest the kind of confluence of reading strategies and aesthetic practice that I will be investigating more extensively later in this article.

Al La Valley stresses the processes of fragmentation and reconstitution in his characterization of gay men's textual reading practices of classical Hollywood. La Valley was one of the first critics to emphasize gay men's willingness as viewers to ignore narrative linearity and closure: "They treasured film not so much for its narrative fulfillments as for its great moments, those interstices that were often, ironically, the source of a film's real power."¹⁵ The moment with all its constituent sensory pleasures—gesture, spectacle, and excess—offered gay men a means to resist the typically normative trajectory and closure of the heterosexual romance fundamental to Hollywood narratives. Whereas Harris argues that this form of spectatorship has largely died away as gay men's engagement with popular culture has increasingly shifted to television and popular music, Farmer insists that the "older traditions of gay cinematic capital" remain alive in repertory screenings, television broadcasts, gay video stores, and the abundant discourse on classical cinema in gay publications.¹⁶

Farmer mentions lesbian and gay film festivals as spaces that have enlivened gay cinematic capital with a "wealth of new texts and pleasures."¹⁷ Yet these film festivals have also been a major factor in sustaining the older tradition of which he speaks. In fact, many of the new pleasures to which Farmer alludes are derived from forms established in that older tradition of gay spectatorship. Not only have lesbian and gay film festivals continued to program classical Hollywood films, much as gay-oriented repertory theaters have, but they have also pioneered and developed a newer form of gay film spectatorship: the clip show. Presented by a film critic or academic, the clip show offers its audience a collection of cinematic moments organized around a particular theme and accompanied by a live and often witty commentary. Many of

these shows combine the presenter's own personal narratives and memories with political and subcultural textual readings. Clip shows constitute perhaps the most transparent instance of cinephilia at the festival. They are events in which gay reading practices are transformed into an autonomous text by reworking a form of spectatorship into a new form of attraction or spectacle.

This preoccupation with classical cinema within such counterpublic spaces is not restricted to the recontextualization of its exhibition. Many of the films and videos that have come to be associated with New Queer Cinema appropriate and cite historical forms of popular cinema, especially Hollywood, both explicitly and implicitly. While many of these works, such as Todd Haynes's *Poison* (US, 1991), usurp the stylistic and generic conventions of popular film, others, such as Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (US, 1997), take up specific historical contexts of filmmaking and moviegoing as their subject matter. Explicit quotation of popular cinema frequently takes the form of the found-footage film, which consists predominantly or entirely of existing filmed material. Mark Rappaport's *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (US, 1992), Kaucyila Brooke and Jane Cottis's *Dry Kisses Only* (US, 1990), Cecilia Barriga's *Meeting of Two Queens* (Spain, 1991), and Matthias Müller's *Home Stories* (West Germany, 1990) are only some of the most widely seen of such works to have screened in the film festival circuit. In detaching popular film images from their original context and remodeling them, these works play with the dynamics of gay spectatorship in order to constitute their aesthetic form.

In their support and development of these types of experimental films and videos as a major part of their programming, lesbian and gay film festivals have nurtured a space in which the dynamics of gay spectatorship—including fantasy, appropriation, fragmentation, and reconstitution—continue in a variety of different forms. The lesbian and gay film festival constitutes an important space of confluence for lesbian and gay reading strategies and aesthetic practice, in that many film- and videomakers demonstrate in their work an engagement with cinema that their festival audiences share and sustain. The name of such an engagement, I would argue, is *cinephilia*.

Celebrating the Moment

Only recently has film studies begun to develop a sustained critical discourse on and around the concept of cinephilia. This discourse shares striking similarities to the theoretical frameworks used to describe gay spectatorship. Both entail a rejection or neglect of narrative linearity and trajectory; a fetishistic preoccupation with the moment, the detail, the fragment; and a performativity that contributes to identity formation. However, what appears particularly useful about the discourse on cinephilia for an examination of the experimental work circulating in the lesbian and gay film festival circuit is its applicability across various forms of cultural practice converging in such a space: spectatorship, criticism, and filmmaking.

Paul Willemsen points out that “Cinephilia itself describes simultaneously a particular relationship to cinema and a particular *historical period relating to cinema*.”¹⁸ The concept of cinephilia thus remains crucial to the historical understanding of postwar cinema, especially in the two-and-a-half decades between the end of the war and the late 1960s. The postwar film cultures of Western Europe, which would help produce an international art cinema and a host of new wave cinemas, were grounded in an obsessive attachment to moviegoing. The career trajectories of many important directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut—from fan to critic to filmmaker—attest to the creative energies unleashed by cinephilia. It is no coincidence, then, that the waning of a theatrical market for such international cinema has prompted a return to the consideration of cinephilia by many film critics—most prominently by Susan Sontag. In a much-debated article published in 1996 during the centenary of cinema, Sontag lamented the demise not of the medium itself, but of movie audiences’ intense loving relationship to it, which she claimed had faded away over the last two decades. For her, what has been lost is the notion that “films are unique, unrepeatable, magic experiences.”¹⁹ While one may dispute Sontag’s prognosis for the future of either cinema or cinephilia, her lament does suggest the degree to which contemporary discourses of cinephilia are structured by loss and nostalgia.

Cinephilia has been characterized as a cultish practice, imbued with a religiosity that shapes the kinds of ritual viewing habits followed by its devotees. Roger Cardinal distinguishes the cinephile's panoramic gaze from the single-minded gaze of what he calls the "literary mode" directed toward the obvious gestalt or narrative focus of the film, grounded as it is in a conformity to the continuity system. Cardinal summarizes the cinephile's panoramic gaze in sensuous and spatial terms: "The [panoramic] mode roams over the frame, sensitive to its textures and surfaces—to its ground. This mode may be associated with 'non-literacy' and with habits of looking which are akin to habits of touching."²⁰

Willemen's approach to cinephilia is rather more temporal, focusing on the way it privileges the capture of "fleeting, evanescent moments" in cinema. Cinephiles fetishize a particular moment in a film, isolating "a crystallizingly expressive detail," whether that be a facial expression, a bodily gesture, or some other detail. Significantly, most are grounded in some form of movement. For example, Willemen singles out the moment when the mechanical toy falls off the table in Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow* (US, 1956) as one of his own cherished cinephiliac moments. These are not the conventional memorable moments of cinema that one sees in those compilations dedicated to the magic of movies. Rather, as Willemen argues, "what is being looked for is a moment or given that a moment is too unitary, a dimension of a moment which triggers for the viewer either the realisation or the illusion of a realisation that *what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown*. Consequently you see something that is *revelatory*. It is produced *en plus*, in excess or in addition, almost involuntarily."²¹ In considering the cinephiliac moment as a revelatory supplement or excess to the image, Willemen turns to what one might regard as the first historical flourishing of cinephilia in French impressionist film theory. He acknowledges his intellectual debt to Jean Epstein and his understanding of *photogénie*.²² While Epstein shared the epistemological euphoria over cinema displayed by modernist thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, his notion of *photogénie* emphasized the sensuous aspects of cinema's fragmentation of the world above its potential to produce redemp-

tive forms of rational knowledge. Epstein understood cinema as a nonteleological succession of sensuous, fleeting moments that sporadically pulled the viewer into an intensified relationship to the screen image that defied rationalization. By invoking *photogénie*, Willemsen is interested less in Epstein's attempt to define the specificity of cinema than in its usefulness in describing a potential relationship between viewer and image, what he calls "that momentary flash of recognition, or a moment when the look at something suddenly flares up with a particularly affective, emotional intensity."²³

It is precisely this drive for such revelatory moments in cinema that motors much found-footage filmmaking. While plenty has been written and theorized about the ideological unhinging and resignifying of images within found-footage work, little attention has been paid by the scholars of this work to its sensuous and affective dimensions.²⁴ Found-footage filmmaking bears many of the marks of cinephiliac behavior. Its practitioners tend to act as collectors, scavenging extant film material in search of those "fleeting, evanescent moments." As a form of montage, most found-footage work is, like the cinephile's ethos, fragmentary and nonlinear, resisting, and at times actively working to subvert, the narrative structures of documentary and fiction film. Many works also demonstrate an obsessive return to a particular shot or sequence that holds the artist in its grasp. Found-footage films and videos frequently display a paradoxical tension between the attempt to deconstruct or decode the found image and the desire to draw on its photogenic force. Such a tension can certainly be traced in Michael Wallin's 1988 film *Decodings*, which meticulously and lovingly edits found images from postwar ephemeral film together with a poetic, first-person voice-over to articulate gay male structures of feeling in the age of the AIDS epidemic.

Lost and Found

The use of found footage in *Decodings* constitutes a highly personal and melancholic appropriation of industrially produced film from the 1940s and 1950s. The variety of subjects included

in its shots proves to be as broad as in Bruce Conner's *opus classicus* of found-footage filmmaking, *A Movie* (US, 1958). *Decodings* incorporates images as divergent as daredevil feats, children's play, classroom experiments, extreme weather, religious gurus, and stop-motion shots of seed germination. Yet Wallin's appropriation of these found images from discarded industrial and instructional films does not share Conner's playful postmodern irony toward its mass-mediated material. Through the film's editing strategies and sound-image relations, these abandoned remnants of mass culture come to resonate simultaneously with the psychosexual alienation of growing up gay in the postwar period and the experience of loss in the midst of the AIDS epidemic.

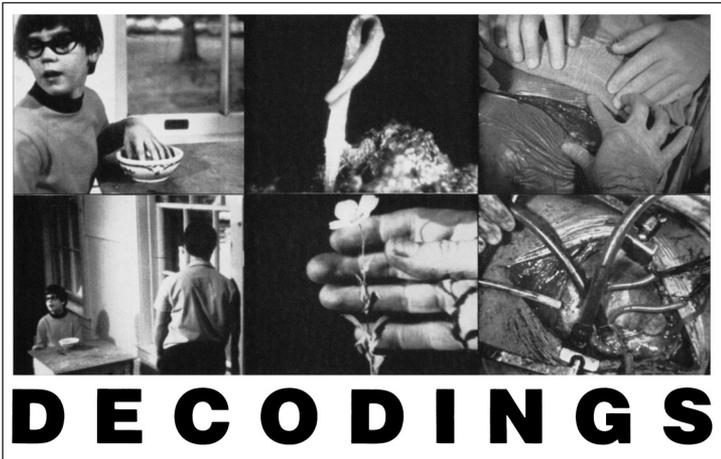
In speaking about the process of making a film entirely with found images, Wallin revealed a distinctly cinephiliac disposition: "I'm very powerfully drawn to the statement a very simple, unadulterated image can make . . . just in terms of the composition in the frame, what occurs in a few seconds in that image, how it can join other images."²⁵ For Wallin, these found images appear to embody an ambivalent attraction—offering a certain pleasure of uncanny recognition, but one that also ignites an affective charge of loss. In another interview, Wallin commented that these industrially produced images had appeared terribly evocative of his own past, filled with "all the resonances and subtexts of things we were forbidden to talk and think about when I was growing up."²⁶

One could argue that *Decodings* is simultaneously a film about but also *not* about AIDS. It makes no explicit references to AIDS, only inferential and allegorical ones in its voice-over text and images. This presence/absence of the epidemic does not function as the form of blanket disavowal that has become increasingly commonplace in gay culture, but rather it serves as an articulation of the continuing and pervasive haunting of contemporary gay male desire by loss and alienation. Through its cinephiliac appropriation of powerfully simple found images, *Decodings* is able to construct an affective address to its audience that does not depend on an empathetic identification with particular bodies represented on screen.

The heterogeneous montage of visual fragments, moments,

and details on the film's image track is mirrored by its complex soundtrack, which combines elegiac music by Shostakovich with an eloquent voice-over commentary. Although spoken by a single voice using the first-person register, the voice-over consistently avoids the linear narrativization and audiovisual suture found in the conventional use of voice-over. Rather, the voice-over shifts between various stories, myths, memories, and observations, constructing associations on micro- and macro-levels of the text, but never resorting to a linear narrativization of either the speaking subject or the profilmic events. The montage of fragments within the voice-over contains its own logic, which is neither wholly subservient to the visual montage of the image track nor determinative of it. Rather than frame or pin down a particular meaning in the other, these autonomous tracks seem to brush up against each other, suggesting metaphoric and metonymic connections and hinting at the disclosure of secrets and other personal meanings while always resisting the closure of a finite meaning. The fluidity of the sound and image tracks implies the very structure of desire itself with all its slippages, displacements, and transformations.

The film opens and ends with the image of a man follow-



Postcard including stills from *Decoding*.
Designed by Michael Wallin

ing a ray of light from the sky, with a quote from Confucius underneath the image: “The way out is via the door: Why is it that no one will use this method?” This framing image and text raise questions of ease and difficulty that the following images and the voice-over subsequently take up in relation to the codes of social behavior. The often tortuous assimilation of heterosexual masculinity emerges as a central concern of the film, through the juxtaposition of images of boyhood camaraderie and homosocial discipline with spoken accounts of the wanderings of Joshua’s “impure” tribe and narratives of autistic withdrawal. While certain archival images in *Decodings* suggest a preoccupation with sexual awakening and bodily contact (boys’ homoerotic horseplay on a beach, stop-motion footage of a seed germinating, and hands folding up a rope and knotting it), other images visualize the social conditioning of the body (a group of blindfolded boys boxing, a mass of people moving in unison on several escalators, and children skipping rope in formation). The vulnerability of the body is also emphasized in images of risk (a skydiver, a daredevil pilot crashing into a house, and open heart surgery) and in images of isolation (a man alone in bed, an autistic child eating a bowl of cereal, and a snow-covered bench).

Although most of the imagery in the film is generically familiar as the visual detritus of postwar American mass culture, Wallin’s editing in *Decodings* produces an uncanny sensation in viewing it. He captures a movement or gesture and, in tearing it from its original context, creates the kind of fetishistic and excessive moment celebrated by cinephiles. In one particular shot, for instance, a middle-aged man enters a bedroom from a hallway, where the camera is positioned. As he walks farther into the room and wearily lies down on the bed, the camera tracks in as though it will follow him but stops short of the door, and soon the door itself shuts. The camera movement in this shot may well foster our desire for contact, but then thwarts it in its arrest. Without the original narrative context, the shot produces a powerful affective charge of alienation and isolation. Soon after the door has shut, the words “The End” appear over the image. Since the shot has been torn from its original location at the close of a film, this familiar titling convention appears jarring, especially since *Decodings*

continues for several minutes more. The title thus suggests not the end of *Decodings* but another end, the end of the middle-aged man's life. Shots of this man have appeared earlier in *Decodings*, at the beginning of the film. The man lies impassively in the same bed, followed by a shot of someone taking a rigorous pill regime, which is then succeeded by another shot of the man leaving a medical building. For an audience and a community familiar with pervasive illness and mortality, these images distinctly resonate with the experience of the AIDS epidemic, as does the simultaneous voice-over with its allusion to dementia: "If the brain becomes disorganized, a person may forget how to eat; he may walk in circles, or become rooted in a single spot."

Although the voice-over commentary in *Decodings* is read by a single, ruminative voice, it is markedly polyvocal on a discursive level, as it casually moves between an ironic imitation of the pseudoscientific discourse of instructional films and the narration of mythical and fantastic tales:

Pseudocutaneous linkage is believed to be involuntary, occurring when the strength of excitatory stimuli overcomes neuronal inhibition. . . . Investigators feel that the linkage reflex represents a primitive attempt on the part of the male organism at attachment and bonding. . . .

Unaccountably, the tribe is now all men. And each century they have grown younger, so that the men are now no older than boys. They have been blinded by the desert sun, deafened by the wind, but they have wandered together for so long that they know each other by touch. Most have now lost the capacity to speak, or perhaps they simply lost the will; it doesn't really matter.

Through such strange, mythical narratives, the film allegorizes and connects two forms of alienation experienced by gay men—the self-estrangement caused in childhood by their failure to assimilate the codes of gender and sexual conformity and also the alienation rooted in illness, loss, survivor guilt, and emotional burnout related to AIDS. These tales of dementia and decimated tribes surviving great loss can be read in a number of ways—there is a veritable openness to them. In an interview, Michael Wallin has commented that he felt that his original voice-over commentary was "too confessional, too obvious," so he turned it over to an old

friend, science fiction writer Michael Blumlein, to refashion it so that it would no longer close down the images, but rather open them up (37).

In his review of *Decodings*, gay filmmaker Tom Kalin contends that the film offers “a reminder of how we become alienated from our skin even as we live in it.”²⁷ The film’s montage of sound and image insinuates a particular doubling of such alienation. The frequently traumatic experiences for gay men around sexual discovery and identity formation in a heteronormative society revisit many of them with the psychic and bodily crisis brought about by AIDS.²⁸ The simultaneously melancholy and nostalgic tone of *Decodings* resonates with an ambivalence felt by many gay men toward the difficult and painful childhood they endured. Moreover, AIDS came to transform gay structures of feeling with a new configuration of sadness and nostalgia around the loss of not only friends, lovers, and family but also of the sexual culture enjoyed in the postliberation era before the epidemic.

This particular resonance carried by the film was highlighted when *Decodings* first screened in New York at the second annual Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival in 1988. The film was programmed with an earlier film by Wallin, *The Place between Our Bodies* (1975), a tender and sexually explicit autobiographical depiction of Wallin’s experience in postliberation San Francisco. Despite the frustration and alienation of what he calls “the endless hunt,” Wallin unexpectedly finds a boyfriend, and the latter part of the film follows an extended sex scene between the two lovers. As reviewers of the festival, both Tom Kalin and Todd Haynes noted the chilling sadness felt among the audience while viewing the ecstatic expressions of two men fucking without a condom.²⁹ The historical dissonance experienced by the audience in seeing *The Place between Our Bodies* would illuminate the somber historical pertinence of *Decodings*, the film that followed it in the program that night.

The Cherished Body of Film

There is a sequence in Matthias Müller’s AIDS elegy *Aus der Ferne* that appropriates that most conventional of shots from classical

narrative cinema—the end title—in a manner strikingly similar to Wallin's *Decodings*. On a television screen, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly are seen dancing together (in *Ziegfeld Follies* [dir. Vincente Minnelli, US, 1946]). Cut to an end title announcing the finality of "The End." An eye blinks in close-up. A montage of different end titles follows. Although they differ in the size and style of their typeface, in their language and the markings of their studio origin, they all appear deeply familiar as the mark of closure for classical narrative cinema. The montage expands to include shots of a young man standing under a glimmering crystal chandelier, another young man (Müller) looking offscreen at a glaring light, a phonographic record revolving on a platter, and further shots of Astaire and Kelly. The footage of the young man under the chandelier bears the distinct traces of a home movie. The grain of the image is coarse; the subject looks directly at the camera with affectionate familiarity; and the roughly framed camerawork appears handheld. A male voice intones on the soundtrack: "This was a false creation, an imitation of life." An anonymous hand then delicately fondles a handful of loose crystals.

This sequence of the film performs a mesmerizing imbrication of images drawn from both the personal and the public archive. The memory of a dead lover (seen in the home movie footage) is refracted through texts and images borrowed from classical Hollywood cinema. The repeated shots of end titles interrupt the queer pleasure of the Astaire/Kelly coupling—one of those particularly treasured Hollywood moments in gay popular memory—with the implication of finality, closure, and death. The words spoken on the soundtrack invoke lines from the theme song to Douglas Sirk's classic melodrama *Imitation of Life* (US, 1959): "Skies above in flaming color/Without love, they're so much duller/A false creation, an imitation of life." In the original film, Earl Grant sings the song over its opening credit shots, in which cut glass crystals fall from the top of the screen and gradually amass at the bottom. The quoted song phrase thus connects the personal cherished images of a lost lover to the lush iconography and emotional vocabulary of Sirkian melodrama, a group of films renowned for their popularity among gay men. But the film's appropriation of the song phrase also recasts its meaning,

suggesting the bittersweet pleasure of memory in the face of irrecoverable loss. The light of the crystals may have the power to induce a cherished memory, but their tangibility serves as a reminder of the lover's absence—a hand is left merely fondling a few crystals in the sequence's final shot.³⁰

As one of Germany's leading experimental filmmakers, Matthias Müller has developed a sophisticated and wide-ranging engagement with found material over the past two decades. A self-confessed cinephile, Müller maintains a formal interest in a wide array of found-footage film, including home movies, classical Hollywood, and ephemeral films. As a gay man, he also demonstrates a particular fascination with Hollywood melodramas. His most well-known film *Home Stories* (1990), a six-minute film entirely constructed out of footage from postwar Hollywood melodramas, has won numerous awards and has screened widely around the global festival circuit. Dubbed "experimental melodrama" by its maker, *Home Stories* contains a rigorously organized montage of heroines from 1950s and 1960s domestic melodramas who are involved in small but expressive gestures and movements—looking out of the window, switching on a light, or even simply turning their head. Framed by a tense, complex soundtrack of found sounds and musical snippets from those same postwar melodramas, the image track gradually builds up a claustrophobic sensation of paranoid anxiety in these women's actions. The film incorporates clips already pregnant with quiet hysteria, but their decontextualization and carefully edited repetition extenuate their excess as moments of cinema. *Home Stories* rises to a climax of collective hysteria when the women hurry down hallways and anxiously shut doors behind them. Ominously, the source of their apparent terror remains nowhere to be seen. *Home Stories* undoubtedly elaborates a shrewd ideological critique of gender construction and the home; in addition it draws much poetic and affective power from the cinematic excess embedded in these narratively insignificant moments from popular cinema. In an interview, Müller has argued that *Home Stories* is in fact a deeply personal film motored by a strong sense of identification and fantasy: "I myself have an affinity to hysteria. I have always envied

those leading ladies for having the privilege of expressing their emotions through grand gestures.”³¹

Like *Home Stories*, *Aus der Ferne* summons the affective and visual vocabulary of classical Hollywood cinema to create a piece of first-person cinema that meticulously builds a personal narrative out of footage shot on Super-8 and snatched moments from home movies and popular cinema. The film opens as a work of recollection and mourning. A voice-over announces, “Death had come to a young man.” Hands gather up and tie together a stack of letters and photographs that appear to be a mixture of personal pictures and what we eventually come to realize are stills of shots used later in the film, including several images from popular film. Typical of Müller’s disposition toward metaphor, the imbrication of the personal and the popular is made concrete in this simple profilmic gesture. Müller himself appears as the film’s young male protagonist, literally descending into memory on the stairs of an abandoned building and entering a basement room aglow with the crystalline memories of his former lover marveling at the chandelier. Presumably frightened by the realization of his own mortality, the young man absconds to a hospital to undergo tests and medical procedures, only to flee once again from the scene when he sees his own blood. Holed up in his apartment, he drifts into sleep, entering the dream realm of Jardim Botânico, Lisbon’s botanical garden.

Intercut with the young man’s entrance into the garden is a shot from Fritz Lang’s *Siegfrieds Tod* (Germany, 1923), in which Siegfried rides into the dark forest of Odenwald where the dragon is guarding his treasure.³² In the mythic narrative, Siegfried discovers the magical powers of the dragon’s blood after he has slain it. While he bathes himself in the magic blood, a single leaf falls from a linden tree onto his shoulder, covering a small area of skin that does not subsequently become invulnerable through contact with the dragon’s blood. *Aus der Ferne* is less interested in the specific national and historical signification of the footage than in the mythology of vulnerability Siegfried invokes, since the following shots show the young man, rather than Siegfried, with the linden leaf on his naked shoulder. Siegfried’s mark

of unknowing and fated vulnerability becomes a fitting motif for gay men's experience of the AIDS epidemic, particularly as many had become infected long before knowledge of HIV existed.³³ Solarized close-ups of male genitalia superimposed on shots of the garden vegetation, which follow the inserted shot of Siegfried, emphasize this allegorical dimension. The young man bathes in a stream of blood that flows over his body and onto the surrounding vegetation. His pursuit of invulnerability is broken by the discovery of an open wound on his stomach, as the mythic dream turns to nightmare. After moving into more urban spaces, the young man finally awakens and reenters the social world.

The final sequence of the film returns to the concern for memory and mourning that had opened the film. The young man gazes at a spinning zoetrope, with its movement casting flickering shadows on his face.³⁴ Superimposed on the shot of the zoetrope are home movie images of children playing and of the deceased lover carrying heavy luggage. A hand suddenly stops the zoetrope. Sheets fly off a stack of paper on a table. Papers blow about on a windy street. A close-up shows a still photograph of the lover carrying the luggage. Wind blows open the pages of a notebook, revealing the words on its cover: "Memo Book." A hand writes text in the memo book. The film ends with a shot of the young man on a train looking out of the window, his face illuminated by the bright sun. Flickering shadows cast on his face by passing obstacles invoke the spinning zoetrope, and perhaps its descendent, the film projector's shutter. This complex sequence epitomizes Müller's visual patterning, which is based on relations of displacement and metaphor. As a nineteenth-century optical toy and precursor to cinema, the zoetrope involves the animation of discreet images into an illusion. Its inclusion in *Aus der Ferne* suggests the animation of memory from an image.³⁵ The hand that stops it suddenly underscores the ephemerality of such illusion. Arrested movement materializes into still images imprinted on sheets of paper, which are then open to the fate of the wind. Images, especially moving images, promise the pleasure of the deceased's presence, but they ultimately can only provide a material reminder of his permanent absence. Müller's affective allu-

sion to the zoetrope and its historical relation to cinema points to the multifaceted cinephilia informing *Aus der Ferne*.

In addition to its incorporation of found footage and its historical references to a cinematic precursor, *Aus der Ferne* is saturated with the cinephilia of Müller's artisanal filmmaking techniques. By working with Super-8, Müller was able to hand-process all of his own footage. Refilming all the footage, whether appropriated or his own, allowed the film stock to be altered in a number of different ways: tinting, bleaching, scratching, solarizing, or slowing the motion of the image. It is not the destructive urge of the iconoclast that drives Müller's manipulation of the film image but rather the transformative ethos of the alchemist. Furthermore, Müller weaves numerous alchemical references into the sound and image tracks of *Aus der Ferne*, most notably with the sounds and images of the four elements.³⁶ Alice Kuzniar adeptly reads this treatment and transformation of the celluloid image as a means of rendering the processes of memory and mourning by mimicking "the movement of the unconscious, or as Freud describes it, the displacements and condensations of the dream-work."³⁷ But it is also important to acknowledge how these treatments emphasize the very materiality of the film itself. However much the gorgeous red- and sepia-tinted footage suggests "a faded, melancholic world brought only momentarily back to life" (209), it nevertheless also testifies to its own material existence as a carefully manipulated piece of celluloid. In the various hand-processed treatments undertaken on its image, *Aus der Ferne* displays an emphatic tension between the aesthetic expression of ephemeral states like dream work and memory and the stark reminder of the film's materiality.

By emphasizing the materiality of the film, Müller sets up one of its most striking metaphors: the film as body. The metaphor is enacted through both the celluloid film strip and the camera. Müller's reshooting and hand-processing techniques demonstrate a fetishistic attitude to the medium. The film materializes as an object to be cherished, but it is one that can be touched and felt, subsequently undergoing a variety of transformations at the hands of its filmmaker. There is indeed a distinct eroticism to

Müller's treatment of the film footage, particularly in the way his transformations of the film appear as imprints on a sensuous surface. Müller has commented, "In my 'bodily films' I have wanted to give the shot a corporeal quality. The 'epidermal' effect of the shot influences one's sensory perception. Besides, you encounter a different relationship to the shot when you process it with your own hands rather than have it developed commercially."³⁸

The film's handheld camerawork also induces a sense of embodied vision in the shots where its particular mobility seems to replicate the movement of the human body. As a staple technique in the avant-garde film tradition that P. Adams Sitney dubbed the "trance film," this effect is enhanced in shots incorporating hands or feet that appear attached to the body/machine that sees/films them.³⁹ Shots of the protagonist's body that do not involve embodied vision nevertheless retain senses of proximity and fragmentation since the camera consistently remains close to the protagonist's body, often shooting in extreme close-up, capturing only a fragment of his body in the frame. By alternating between the embodied vision of its point-of-view shots and the fragmented, claustrophobic shots of the protagonist's body, *Aus der Ferne* fosters a complex identification between the film and the body it represents.

The Color of Gay Cultural Memory

In *Pensão Globo*, Müller returns to the city of Lisbon and to the subject of AIDS. The perspective has shifted from a gay man's experience of mourning a lost friend, and the paranoid fears of infection this incites, to the struggle with illness and the contemplation of mortality by a gay man with AIDS. *Pensão Globo* retains the combination of a dreamlike visual structure and a voice-over interior monologue, read by Müller's friend and filmmaking colleague Mike Hoolboom. Although the fifteen-minute film makes less use of found footage than does *Aus der Ferne*, it nevertheless shares the earlier film's engagement with cinephilia.⁴⁰ *Pensão Globo* constitutes its cinephiliac address through two distinct means. First, the film's editing undercuts the linearity of its rudimentary narrative through the haunting repetition of gesture and action,

placing significant emphasis on the cinematic moment and its emotional texture. Second, the film's lavish use of color recites the nostalgic pleasures of Technicolor cinema in general, and the chromatic stylization of Sirkian melodrama in particular.

The film's narrative structure follows a simple design. A young man with AIDS travels to Lisbon for perhaps his last journey, staying at the Pensão Globo. He spends time in his hotel room, contemplating his own mortality as he recalls painful medical treatment and reflects on his precarious future. His sojourn is filled with the banalities of waiting: looking out of the window, watching television, tossing and turning on a bed. On venturing out into the city, he encounters a seductive stranger who entices him into the secluded domain of the botanical garden. Recalling a similar sequence in *Aus der Ferne*, close-ups of the prickly vegetation jostle with roaming close-up shots of his naked body. The film ends elusively by returning to the hotel room. The young man repeatedly covers his naked torso with a red robe. The chambermaid removes the bed linen in the empty hotel room and closes the shutters. These final small gestures offer succinct metaphors for the closure of his life, his final departure.

Extending the formal exploitation of repetition developed in his previous films, Müller refilmed two sets of images projected onto a screen of frosted glass in order to produce the effect of a fragmented and unstable double exposure. In each scene, two slightly different shots of the same action or gesture are thus nonsynchronously superimposed. This staggered effect splits the young man's body into two, creating a doppelgänger.⁴¹ Since no one image layer is prioritized, the two bodies maintain the same visual density. The body's unity collapses as the film's fragmented layers hover over one another. The slight temporal gap between the two layers of the scene generates a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation, exacerbated by the way the image layers appear unhinged, floating about in the frame.

Kuzniar reads this technique of "pulsating beauty and sadness" as the visual concretization of the young man's mental and physical dissociation brought on by his illness and its treatment (211).⁴² This spectral doubling of the image visualizes the sporadic, dislocated phrases of the voice-over: "Sometimes it's like

I'm already gone, become a ghost of myself." Furthermore, the voice-over replicates the visual doubling in its overlapping repetition of phrases, generating an echoing, hollowed-out voice, doubly disconnected from the body on the screen. Kuzniar stresses the temporal aspect of this dislocation, observing that his lonely present has been emptied of significance by the inescapable psychic oscillation between the past and the future. The voice-over bemoans, "Then the attacks would start. You'd go a few weeks without thinking about it, and then it starts again, and you think it will never end, because you don't know. Waiting. Wondering when it's going to happen, and hoping it will, so it will be over." Temporality compresses as his disposition shifts from sensing that he is becoming a child again to feeling suddenly old. In his acutely perceived mortality, he is haunted by prior fatalities: "I can't go to bed alone. I bring them all with me, the ones who came before."

Peter Tscherkassky posits that this manipulation of linear temporality constitutes a foundational element in Müller's filmmaking: "The flow of time is replaced by simultaneity of happenings that gives depth to the images, from which springs forth the desired ambience." Although his films construct basic narratives, Müller's cinematic practice aims for "the paradigmatic representation of elements" associated with poetic form rather than for the syntagmatic chain of events constructed in prose form. He condenses and rarefies narrative elements connected in his films "like loosely threaded beads." Tscherkassky construes this disposition toward the paradigmatic forms of poetry as Müller's embrace of the cinematic moment and all its affective potential: "His scripts focus on moments designed to capture the synthetic expression of a specific feeling. These moments generally acquire depth, to become *impressions* like those expressed in poetry; they are condensed feelings, glimpses of a state of mind."⁴³ Tscherkassky's comments illuminate the relevance of poetic form for an understanding of cinephilia. Müller's poetic cinema is indeed steeped in the cinephiles's ethos of capturing "fleeting, evanescent moments." Whereas Michael Wallin demonstrates this ethos through his montage of unhinged fragments of mass culture in

Decodings, Müller articulates it in the layering, blending, and superimposition of his paradigmatic style in *Aus der Ferne* and *Pensão Globo*. In the visual excess of their haunting repetition, the young man's gestures and movements in *Pensão Globo* can generate an intensified emotional effect that potentially resonates with the multiplicity of loss experienced by those in the midst of the epidemic. Yet the film's rich metaphorical vein, generated by its narrative condensation and paradigmatic style, provides significant resistance to a descent into the kind of pathetic sentimentality many mainstream AIDS films have produced through their recourse to an affective address.

Visual excess in *Pensão Globo* is not limited to its palimpsestic editing; elements of *mise-en-scène*, namely the use of props and color, also render the kind of aesthetic supplement that pushes attention onto the cinematic moment rather than the narrative trajectory of the film. Both the sound and image tracks accentuate the presence of particular objects in the hotel room: the net curtains by the window, the red lamp and the fan on the table, and the brightly patterned mattress. Shot in close-up, the succulent but prickly cactus leaves in the botanical garden also over-



Still from *Pensão Globo*

whelm the frame. Many of these objects provide metaphors and metonyms for the film's thematic structure. The net curtains and the cactus leaves, for instance, engender differing epidermal metaphors. While the gentle movement of the translucent curtains swaying in the wind echoes the hovering instability of the young man's bifurcated skin as he stands before them, the intercutting between the spiky cactus leaves and the surface of his skin insinuates the epidermal sensitivity and pain commonly experienced by people with AIDS. Yet these objects retain a certain excess, beyond their specific metaphorical functions, which lies in their sensual components of sound, texture, and color.

Müller employs a rich color design in *Pensão Globo* which calls to mind the nostalgic pleasures of Technicolor cinema. Although deep red predominates in the color design (the bed, the man's shirt, the wallpaper, the lamp), other rich, luminous colors abound as well, including the lush green vegetation of the garden and the glowing blue reflection from the television screen. What connotes the postwar film technology in particular is the film's distinct chromatic quality, the result of Müller's hand processing of the film stock; the plastic, postwar color palette appears minimally faded and slightly washed out, as though it had aged gracefully and lost only marginal pigmentation and density.⁴⁴ The lack of any contemporary references, save a bottle of Retrovir (an AIDS drug), furthers the allusion to postwar classical Hollywood. In its costuming, set design, and found footage, *Pensão Globo* exudes the look and feel of the 1950s without ever offering any specific verifying detail.

These historical accents in the film's visual design hint at the more specific cinematic references to be found in the film's use of color. In its lush, expressive use of contrastive colors, particularly the abrasive clash of red and green elements, and in its brooding, low-key lighting, *Pensão Globo* cites the distinctive chromatic stylization of Sirk's Technicolor melodramas from the 1950s, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (US, 1955) and *Written on the Wind* (US, 1956). Sirk's use of color has attracted critical attention throughout the historical reception of his films. François Truffaut highlighted Sirk's employment of "industrial colors that remind

us that we live in the age of plastics.”⁴⁵ Emphasizing the expressionist aspect of his color design, J. Hoberman described *Written on the Wind* as “the original Technicolor noir.”⁴⁶ But it is Thomas Elsaesser who comes closest to articulating the exact qualities of Sirk’s chromatic stylization which Müller appropriates in *Pensão Globo*: “Sirk has a peculiarly vivid eye for the contrasting emotional qualities of textures and materials, and he combines them or makes them clash to very striking effect, especially when they occur in a non-dramatic sequence.”⁴⁷ In discussing a minor scene in *Written on the Wind*, Elsaesser describes how the interaction of color with texture in Sirk’s films can produce a powerfully dissonant emotional effect. In *Pensão Globo*, Dirk Schaefer’s haunting soundtrack supplements the visual expression of texture with its repetitive use of precise sound effects. For instance, at the beginning of the film, creaking floorboards overlay the sounds of the crisp white bed linen as the chambermaid stretches a sheet across the elaborately patterned red mattress. Such especially intense conjunction of color, texture, and sound throughout the film further emphasizes the sensual excess of its scenes above their narrative content.⁴⁸

Müller’s earlier piece of “experimental melodrama,” *Home Stories*, made his preoccupation with the melodramatic mode evident, and his judicious sampling from Sirk’s features in that film hinted at a deeper affection for the director’s work. In fact, Müller submits that *Imitation of Life* is his favorite film.⁴⁹ When asked about his relationship to popular cinema as an experimental filmmaker, he enthusiastically declared himself a passionate moviegoer, mentioning melodrama as his favorite “genre.”⁵⁰ He added that “the films of Sirk are some of the most beautiful that I have ever seen.”⁵¹ Interestingly, Müller’s words of admiration for Sirk echo the phrasing of his countryman and fellow gay filmmaker, Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In his well-known critical commentary on six films directed by Douglas Sirk, Fassbinder concludes with the following line: “I’ve seen six films by Douglas Sirk. Among them were the most beautiful in the world.”⁵² Whether he was deliberately alluding to Fassbinder or not, Müller certainly shares in a similar appreciation of Sirk, as Fassbinder, too, treated

Sirk's oeuvre as a model for making a politically and socially critical cinema that nevertheless retained an emotional address to its audiences.⁵³

The significance of these specific influences and affinities is less about establishing the foundation of Müller's status as an auteur and more concerned with situating his filmmaking practice within the historical context of gay cinephilia and its engagement with Hollywood melodrama. It has become a critical commonplace in lesbian and gay film studies to cite melodrama's privileged relationship to gay audiences.⁵⁴ Brett Farmer adroitly summarizes the foundations of this association: "With its scenarios of sexual and social transgression and its highly stylized mise-en-scène, the melodrama opens a space for queer and otherwise aberrant formations of meaning and desire that 'most Hollywood forms have studiously closed off.'"⁵⁵ Müller's quotation of Sirkian melodrama creates a cinephiliac address that produces a distinct resonance among gay audiences. The nostalgia invoked in *Pensão Globo* by its allusions to Sirkian melodrama is not of the playful postmodern variety, but rather a bittersweet one in which the recognition of loss cuts across the sensual pleasures of melodramatic form. The sensuality of its melodramatic aesthetics allows the film to eroticize a gay male body with AIDS while simultaneously underlining a pervasive loss — not only of numerous lives but also of the sexual culture developed in the post-gay liberation era. Since they are filtered through the prism of a collectively maintained gay cinephilia, the emotional effects of melodramatic form avoid reduction in *Pensão Globo* to sentimentality and pathos.

The Intimate Spectacle

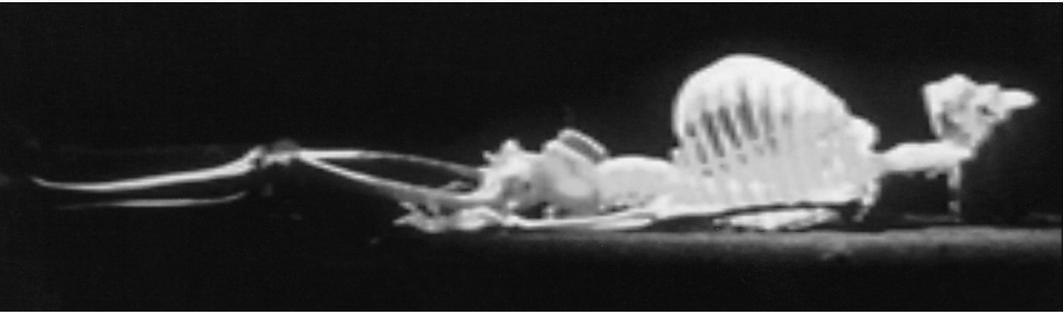
Like *Pensão Globo*, Jim Hubbard's short experimental film *Memento Mori* also explores AIDS-related mortality through an engagement with a film technology closely associated with postwar Hollywood cinema. To shoot the footage for his personal and poetically structured meditation on death and mourning, Hubbard designed his own anamorphic lens attachment for a 16 mm cam-

era. The resulting seventeen-minute film thus bears the expansive aspect ratio of CinemaScope. Expressing the historically accrued double meaning of *memento mori*, the film serves both as a work dedicated to the memory of two deceased loved ones and as a contemplative reminder of mortality.⁵⁶ Images of mourning rituals, including the preparation of ashes and their scattering in a river, are combined with more metaphorically inflected shots: a woman sweeping and tidying, painterly still life arrangements, and seasonal landscape shots of a cemetery. As an artisanal filmmaker like Müller, Hubbard processed the film by hand, allowing him to draw out distinct color temperatures in the seasonal images that provide an overarching temporal structure for the film. The nonsynchronous soundtrack incorporates a montage of simple everyday sounds—a clock ticking, water dripping, a broom sweeping a stone floor—that simultaneously evoke the aural texture of the domestic space and amplify the metaphorical resonance of the images. A single voice (Hubbard's) recites the Kaddish, the Jewish mourning prayer, sporadically across the soundtrack. At other points, the voices of different mourners repeat an untitled elegy by Emily Dickinson, each time with a different tempo and inflection:

The Bustle in a House
 The Morning after Death
 Is solemnest of industries
 Enacted upon Earth—

The Sweeping up of the Heart
 And putting Love away
 We shall not want to use again
 Until eternity.⁵⁷

The decision to use a widescreen image in *Memento Mori* marks a definite departure from Hubbard's previous films. Like Müller, Hubbard established his cinematic practice in the context of narrow-gauge filmmaking. Since the 1960s, 8 mm film formats have offered experimental filmmakers a variety of advantages over 16 mm, as the larger gauge became increasingly pro-



Still from *Memento Mori*

fessionalized with the proliferation of a commercially viable independent cinema. Established as amateur formats, 8 mm and, later, Super-8 film, granted experimental filmmakers an opportunity to work with an extremely cheap format that could be hand-processed and therefore manipulated to a greater degree. In addition, their amateur status and technical limitations provided greater scope than 16 mm film for an aesthetic disidentification with the polished spectacle of popular narrative cinema. The flexibility gained from the handheld mobility of the Super-8 camera, combined with the constraints of its narrow focal range, would provide the perfect medium for feminist and gay filmmakers to develop what Daryl Chin has called an “aesthetics of intimacy”—the exploration of the political construction of the personal by seizing the “home movie” machine.⁵⁸ Patricia R. Zimmermann adds, “This work envisions the potentialities of amateurism for exploration of the self and the private sphere. These amateur formats exorcise familialism from the discursive construct of amateurism; they insist on specificity, difference, and voice.”⁵⁹ Hubbard’s short film *Elegy in the Streets* (1989) provides a perfect example of this tendency in gay experimental cinema. Although the film is actually shot in 16 mm, Hubbard’s use of the camera remains entirely consistent with his earlier Super-8 filmmaking.⁶⁰ This silent film interweaves two strands of footage: intimate, candid shots of Roger Jacoby, an experimental filmmaker and former lover of Hubbard’s, and footage of the collective response to the AIDS crisis as it develops from the mourning

ritual of the candlelight vigil to the militant direct action of ACT UP.⁶¹ Crosscutting between the two strands, the film coincidentally problematizes the ideologically maintained distinctions of public and private, individual and collective, and mourning and militancy.

We can thus read Hubbard's replication of the CinemaScope format in *Memento Mori* as a curious inversion of his earlier experimental appropriation of the "amateur gauge" of Super-8. In its artisanal reconstruction of the widescreen image, the film confiscates a technology of the spectacular, contrasting with the earlier films' reworking of a technology of intimacy. The postwar American film industry promoted CinemaScope, like the other widescreen processes, as an enhancement of cinema's spectacular capabilities. Equating the aesthetic expansionism of widescreen technology with the ideological fantasy of a panoramic "canvas of history," Hollywood promoted CinemaScope through the genre of the historical epic. Blockbuster productions like *The Ten Commandments* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, US, 1956), *Ben-Hur* (dir. William Wyler, US, 1959), *Spartacus* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, US, 1960), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (dir. David Lean, UK, 1962) ensured that widescreen technologies like CinemaScope have come to enter popular memory as a technology of mass spectacle, constructing history through its "sweeping panoramas" and its "cast of thousands."⁶² However, *Memento Mori* deploys CinemaScope's widescreen space for altogether more intimate subjects: the process of personal mourning and the contemplation of mortality.⁶³ In reclaiming a spectacular form of cinema technology, the film counters the pathology performed by the "spectacle of AIDS" circulating in mass culture. Since Hollywood heavily exploited widescreen formats in their battle with the emerging competitor of television, it seems perhaps a fitting irony that in working to construct an understanding of contemporary gay mortality beyond the sensationalist and pathologizing framework perpetuated by the small screen of television, Hubbard would turn to the spectacular technology of CinemaScope. *Memento Mori* harnesses the technology's affective potential (found in its excess), but places it not in the service of generating spectatorial awe, as it had been done in the

historical epic, but rather to provide viewers with a sensual articulation of the sublimity to grief.

Subjectivity and the Popular Archive

Each of the experimental films analyzed in this article exhibits a distinctly cinephiliac engagement with the industrially produced image. *Decodings* and *Aus der Ferne* both focus that engagement on the incorporation of the found image. *Decodings* rescues the obsolete images of postwar ephemeral films for their complex resonance with gay structures of feeling in the AIDS epidemic, while *Aus der Ferne* embeds found images from classical cinema into the psychic landscape of loss and alienation through which its gay protagonist journeys. Cinephilia takes a different form in *Pensão Globo* and *Memento Mori*. Rather than working with found images, these two films turn to specific postwar Hollywood technologies and their aesthetic legacies, namely Technicolor and CinemaScope. While the invocation of these two historically bound film technologies summons the nostalgic aura of a long deceased cinematic era, it brings with it, more importantly, the spectacular dynamics established by Hollywood's exploitation of these technologies. Since both color and widescreen processes were identified as much with spectacle as with realism in the postwar film industry, they offer contemporary experimental filmmakers like Müller and Hubbard a rich and popularly recognized aesthetic of excess from which to draw.⁶⁴ *Pensão Globo* uses the Technicolor style of Sirkian melodrama to forge emotionally intensified cinematic moments that articulate the corporeal and psychic crisis of AIDS-related illness through the hysterical excess of the film's mise-en-scène and cinematography. Although visually more subdued than *Pensão Globo*, *Memento Mori* deals with spectacle and excess through the element of scale, fashioning the widescreen aspect ratio of CinemaScope into a more intimate spectacle of mourning.

In their different manifestations of cinephilia, these experimental films about AIDS mediate the relationship between individual and collective experience through the appropriation of

industrially produced cinema. This work is thus situated at the intersection of two distinct contexts in which the articulation of subjectivity finds its address through explicit recourse to the collective archive of popular culture—gay cultural practices around AIDS and contemporary experimental cinema.

The films examined in this article constitute an element of the diverse cultural practices developed by gay men in response to the psychic burden of AIDS and the losses it has caused. Popular culture has played a significant role here. Pop songs played at gay funerals perform vital emotional and community-sustaining functions; movie and pop memorabilia have become part of the affective material literally incorporated into the AIDS Quilt; and many gay visual artists have turned to “the raw materials of pop culture” to construct an address that moves between individual experience and collective structures of feeling during the AIDS epidemic.⁶⁵

Despite the long-standing efforts of many filmmakers and academics to disavow experimental cinema’s relationship to industrially produced film in order to maintain its status as an autonomous, modernist avant-garde, recent film histories have firmly established the necessity of recognizing the wide range of discursive and material relations between experimental and popular cinema. American underground cinema has long served as the *locus classicus* for this historiographic debate. The only relation to experimental cinema that P. Adams Sitney’s seminal history, *Visionary Film*, allows Hollywood is one of absolute otherness. Sitney historicizes American underground cinema as an avant-garde project defined by its artisanal autonomy and its aesthetic independence from industrially produced cinema—a personal cinema with a romantic commitment to new forms of perception.⁶⁶ In *Allegories of Cinema*, a revisionist history of alternative American film in the 1960s, David James argues that although the desire to create an alternative to Hollywood constituted a foundational aspect to the American underground, it nevertheless retained a complex dialogue with popular cinema, plundering and recasting its forms and its actual images (as found footage).⁶⁷ As James demonstrates, the films of Kenneth Anger,

Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Bruce Conner, and the Kuchar brothers abound with such intertextual dialogues. The work of experimental gay filmmakers like Hoolboom, Wallin, and Müller, with its articulation of sexual identities through the idiom of popular culture, indicates a deliberate affinity with the gay cinephilia of underground filmmakers such as Smith and Anger.⁶⁸

In a survey of contemporary experimental film practice, Paul Arthur summarizes its prevailing ethos in a way that seems particularly apt for the films I have analyzed in this article: “The talisman through which the avant-garde has conducted its sweeping synthesis is the notion of recovering history, enmeshing the prerogatives of personal experience—memory, autobiography, direct observation of everyday life—with the constraints of a socially-shared past, recasting radical subjectivity as the interpenetration of public and private spaces.”⁶⁹ The gay cinephilia of these films emerges precisely as a recovery of history, a means to articulate contemporary gay structures of feeling in the AIDS epidemic through the visual archive that has played a significant role in the constitution and maintenance of postwar gay identities and subcultures. My discussion of these films within the framework of gay cinephilia demonstrates moreover how important it is to examine the relationships between the various practices of gay spectatorship and experimental gay filmmaking. Through its dynamics of appropriation, fragmentation, and reconstitution, gay cinephilia connects the affectively charged labor of two sets of practices too often treated as discrete areas of inquiry.

Notes

I would like to thank Matthew Fee, Amy Shore, Frances Guerin, and Petra Hammerl for their invaluable support and insight with regard to this article. I would also like to express my appreciation to Matthias Müller and Jim Hubbard for their willingness to share details of their filmmaking practices, and to Lynne Joyrich and Patricia White for their intellectual encouragement during the various stages of this project.

The films of Michael Wallin, Matthias Müller, and Jim Hubbard are distributed in the United States by Canyon Cinema, 2325 Third Street, Suite 338, San Francisco, CA 94107 (www.canyoncinema.com).

1. Hoolboom also seizes clips from *L'âge d'or* (dir. Luis Buñuel, France, 1930), *Natural Born Killers* (dir. Oliver Stone, US, 1994), *City of Lost Children* [*La cité des enfants perdus*] (dir. Marco Caro and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, France, 1995), *Rumble Fish* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, US, 1983), *Heavenly Creatures* (dir. Peter Jackson, Germany/New Zealand/UK, 1994), *A Matter of Life and Death* (dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, UK, 1946), and Michael Jackson's music video for the song "Leave Me Alone" (1989).
2. See Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds., *Introduction to Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–11.
3. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
4. 132; Williams's term seems particularly appropriate in this context, since he argues that such structures of feeling are often first made visible in art and literature: "The idea of a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the first indications that such a such structure is forming" (133).
5. Walt Odets, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 14–15.
6. See Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989): 3–18.
7. While the appropriative dynamic in cinephilia would suggest calling it *queer cinephilia*, I have chosen *gay cinephilia* to emphasize its historical significance for postwar gay identity formation.
8. My analysis of gay male cultural production in this article resonates with the conclusions drawn by Joy Van Fuqua's study of two lesbian video makers' use of their own star obsessions with Elizabeth Taylor and Anna Magnani in bearing witness to AIDS. Van Fuqua argues that videos by Jean Carlomusto (*L Is for the Way You Look* [US, 1991] and *To Each Her Own* [US, 1994]) and by

- Joan Braderman (*Joan Does Dynasty* [US, 1986] and *Joan Sees Stars* [US, 1993]) appropriate the “raw material of popular culture” to “document the presumably private practices of AIDS mourning.” Joy Van Fuqua, “Tell the Story: AIDS in Popular Culture” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1996), 88–122.
9. See, for instance, Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 157–72; Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Patricia White, *The unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Daniel Harris, *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture* (New York: Hyperion, 1997); and Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
 10. Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, 166.
 11. White, *The unInvited*, 36.
 12. Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 27.
 13. Harris, *Rise and Fall*, 15.
 14. See Paul Arthur, “Lost and Found: American Avant-Garde Film in the Eighties,” in *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film, 1980-1990*, ed. Nelly Voorhuis (Amsterdam: Stichtung Mecano, 1991), 15–29.
 15. Al La Valley, “The Great Escape,” *American Film* 10.6 (1985): 29.
 16. Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 28.
 17. 28; In developing his notion of “gay cinematic capital,” Farmer adapts Sarah Thornton’s concept of *subcultural capital*, which Farmer describes as “the extensive and often highly developed systems of tastes, knowledges, and competences developed and used by subcultures as marks of distinction and group affiliation” (27).
 18. Paul Willemen, “Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered,” in *Looks and Frictions* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 227; emphasis mine.
 19. Susan Sontag, “The Decay of Cinema,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25 February 1996, 60.

20. Roger Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," *Framework* 30/31 (1986): 124.
21. Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly," 237, emphasis mine.
22. Both the impressionist discourse on *photogénie* and the contemporary one on cinephilia entail a rich imbrication of spectatorship, criticism, and filmmaking practice. *Photogénie* emerged in the film culture of the French *ciné-clubs*, forerunners to the film festival, in that they provided a space in which the dynamics of all three practices came together.
23. Willemen, "Through the Glass Darkly," 126.
24. For the analysis of found-footage filmmaking as a practice of postmodern resignification, see William Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); and the articles collected in the exhibition catalog *Desmontaje: Film, vídeo / apropiación, reciclaje*, ed. Eugeni Bonet (Valencia: Institut Valencia d' Art Modern, 1993).
25. Qtd. in Robert Anbian, "Phelan Filmmaking Award-Winners Interviewed," *Release Print* 11.10 (1988): 17–18.
26. Qtd. in Calvin Ahlgren, "Personal Story Decoded in Bits of Old Footage," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 June, 1989, 37.
27. Tom Kalin, "Identity Crisis: The Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival," *The Independent Film and Video Monthly* (New York), January/February 1989, 29.
28. In the context of HIV prevention and psychotherapy, this return of traumatic experience has been formulated in discussions of the role that self-esteem plays in seroconversion rates among gay men. See Odets, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic*, 61–98.
29. Kalin, "Identity Crisis," and Todd Haynes, "A Gay Kind of Film," *Afterimage*, December 1988, 3. Kalin further observes that, "During both the screenings of *The Place between Our Bodies* that I attended an AZT beeper happened to go off in the audience, a signal not only to a person with AIDS to take medication but also a sign of just how long ago 1975 seems" (30).
30. The relations between sight and touch in this sequence suggest the functioning of what Laura U. Marks terms the "haptic look." See Laura U. Marks, "Loving a Disappearing Image," *Cinémas* 8.1–2 (1997): 93–112.

31. Qtd. in Alexandra Jacobson, "Matthias Müller, der Maximalist," in *Pioniere, Trüffler, Illusionen: Kino in Bielefeld*, ed. Frank Bell et al. (Bielefeld: Westfalen Verlag, 1995), 47; my translation.
32. This is not the only time that *Aus der Ferne* appropriates a classic German film. Arnold Fanck's 1930s *Bergfilme* provides shots for the avalanche imagery, which sets off the expression of crisis at the film's beginning.
33. The linden leaf on the young man's shoulder also suggests his anxiety over discovering a Karposi Sarcoma lesion—for many gay men during the 1980s, such lesions were the first noticeable signs indicating that they were indeed infected.
34. The zoetrope was an optical toy and cinematic precursor invented in the 1830s, but not patented until 1867. It consisted of a thin, slot-pierced metal drum that revolved about its axis by turning horizontally on a pivot. Multiple images of a figure in various stages of movement lined the inside of the drum, such that the viewer could gain the illusion of perpetual motion when she or he looked through the slots as the zoetrope spun.
35. Alternatively, Gabriele Jutz reads the zoetrope and the film's pervasive iconography of revolving movement as a metaphor for life. See Gabriele Jutz, "Die Physis des Films: Techniken der Körperrepräsentation in der Filmavantgarde," in *Unter die Haut: Signaturen des Selbst im Kino der Körper*, ed. Jürgen Felix (St. Augustin: Gardez! Verlag, 1998), 351–64.
36. In both its formal and thematic embrace of alchemy, *Aus der Ferne* bears distinct relation to the Super-8 films of Derek Jarman, a filmmaker who has undoubtedly influenced Müller.
37. Alice A. Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 209.
38. Matthias Müller, "Mes films s'écartent de cette vision des choses," in *Scratch Book 1983/1998*, ed. Yann Beauvais and Jean Damien Collin (Paris: Light/Cone/Scratch, 1999), 306; my translation.
39. See P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde: 1943–1978*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 30–31.
40. *Pensão Globo* incorporates three pieces of found footage: a solarized shot from a home movie in which Müller's mother is nursing him as a baby; a shot of a doctor holding up an X ray; and

a shot of a young man taking a written exam (seen on a television screen). The latter two shots have been taken from Jack Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*.

41. Kuzniar also reads the seductive stranger as a doppelgänger: "The lead character follows his apparition down the streets, perhaps in desire, perhaps longing for death. The two are never shown together in the same frame; instead the editing cuts back and forth between them, suggesting that this angel of death is a hallucination of the dying man (we only hear one set of footsteps)." Kuzniar, *The Queer German Cinema*, 210.
42. Alternatively, Peter Tscherkassky suggests that this technique constitutes an allusion to the classical Hollywood conventions for depicting ghosts where "characters' deaths have been represented by showing their souls leaving their bodies but maintaining the same physical aspects." Peter Tscherkassky "A Poet of Images," in program for XXXVI *Mostra internazionale del nuovo cinema* [Thirty-sixth annual festival of new cinema], (2000): 173.
43. Tscherkassky, "Poet of Images," 173.
44. Curiously, Technicolor has demonstrated a far greater resistance to chromatic deterioration than other postwar film stock, such as Kodachrome.
45. François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 149.
46. J. Hoberman, *Vulgar Modernism: Writing on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 248.
47. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 53.
48. Mary Beth Haralovich notes of Sirk's use of color that "while the realist narrative space provides normal sources for all the colors, *All That Heaven Allows* also uses the ability of color to function as an emphasis in itself: as spectacle, as excess, and as potentially distractive of the primacy of narration." Mary Beth Haralovich, "All That Heaven Allows: Color, Narrative Space, and Melodrama," in *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, ed. Peter Lehman (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), 70–71 n. 42.

49. Müller, "Mes films," 306.
50. While recent film scholarship has argued increasingly for an understanding of melodrama as a mode rather than as a genre, it continues to be regarded by many film buffs and cinephiles (such as Müller) as a distinct genre.
51. Qtd. in Jacobson, "Matthias Müller," 45.
52. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, "Imitation of Life: On the Films of Douglas Sirk," in *The Anarchy of the Imagination: Interviews, Essays, Notes*, trans. Krishna Winston (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 89.
53. Müller has stated that "I feel very close to melodrama. . . . It is very important to me that my films produce a great emotional effect." Müller, "Mes films," 306.
54. See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 141–94; and La Valley, "The Great Escape," 33.
55. Farmer, *Spectacular Passions*, 176.
56. *Memento Mori* is dedicated to Greg Robbins and David Feinberg. Philippe Ariès notes, "Beginning in the eighteenth century, the *memento mori* that had previously been objects of piety became mourning lockets. Their purpose was not so much to help prepare the wearer for death, but to perpetuate the memory of the deceased." See *Images of Man and Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 243–47.
57. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1960), 489.
58. Daryl Chin, "Super-8 and the Aesthetics of Intimacy," *Jump Cut* 37 (1992): 78–81. Chin mistakenly describes *Elegy in the Streets* as a Super-8 film.
59. Patricia R. Zimmermann, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 154. Matthias Müller speaks of his embrace of Super-8 as a redemption of an ideologically circumscribed format: "First of all it was an old, home movie, amateur gauge for fathers whose reactionary films all looked alike in a permanent repetition of themes: family, holidays, Christmas. We had to free Super-8 from

the cliché that it could only be used for individual memory.” Qtd. Mike Hoolboom, “Old Children and AIDS: An Interview with Matthias Müller,” *Independent Eye* 11.2–3 (1990): 90.

Interestingly, Jim Hubbard notes that unlike Müller, “I never had the problem of rejecting familial versions of Super-8. My family never took home movies and very few stills as a matter of fact, so at least in part, my moviemaking is a reaction to a very unreflective family situation.” Jim Hubbard, e-mail to author, 9 August 2002.

60. Hubbard explains that “when I switched from Super-8 to 16 (primarily because almost no one could, or would show Super-8), I deliberately bought a Beaulieu camera because it was completely self-contained and light enough so that I could use it as if it were a Super-8 camera.” Hubbard, e-mail to author, 9 August 2002.
61. Jacoby was himself an important experimental gay filmmaker whose work was infused with cinephilia. His film *Aged in Wood* (US, 1975), for example, involved self-processed, grainy black-and-white footage of three friends (including Ondine) watching *All About Eve* in a darkened theater.
62. John Belton notes “even though CinemaScope remained associated with classical narrative films, it introduced a level of visual spectacle that often threatened to overwhelm the narrative. This threat could be contained only by a shift in terms of the kinds of films that were made—a shift to historical spectacle—which functioned to naturalize pictorial spectacle.” John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 194.
63. Hubbard notes that in addition to Hollywood films like *The Ten Commandments* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, two European widescreen films, Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita* (Italy/France, 1960) and Jacques Demy’s *Lola* (France/Italy, 1960) were also significant influences on *Memento Mori*. Hubbard, e-mail to author, 9 August 2002.
64. Belton notes the specific tension between realism and spectacle in the exploitation of these film technologies: “The ‘greater realism’ produced by the new technology was understood, it would seem, as a kind of excess, which was in turn packaged as spectacle.” Belton, *Widescreen Cinema*, 195.

65. For a cogent account of such memorializing practices, see Simon Watney, "Acts of Memory," in *Imagine Hope: AIDS and Gay Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 163–68.
66. Sitney, *Visionary Film*, vii–xi.
67. See David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
68. Following James's revisionist lead, Juan A. Suárez argues that the underground films of Anger, Smith, and Warhol must be understood in the context of their use of mass culture and their engagement with gay cultural practices. See his *Bike Boys, Drag Queens, and Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
69. Arthur, "Lost and Found," 17.

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Still from *Aus der Ferne: The Memo Book*