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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

“Crow Furnace”

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Dolissa Medina

Committee in charge:

Professor Amy Adler, Chair
Professor Teddy Cruz
Professor Michael Trigilio
Professor Alain J.-J. Cohen

2012

The Thesis of Dolissa Medina is approved, and it is acceptable
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

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VITA

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SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

“Crow Furnace” (30 min./16mm film & video/2012) – An experimental narrative presenting a history of San Francisco as mediated through the element of fire

“Half Shell” (4 min./16mm hand processed film/2010) – An intimate portrait of beauty as experienced through the blurred boundaries where gender and altered sight meet

“The Moon Song of Assassination” (6 min./video/2010) – A “docu-legend” about slain Tex Mex singer Selena Quintanilla

“Kindergarten Prometheus” (5 min./16mm film/2008) – A trance film meditation on childhood and fire

“Cartography of Ashes” – (44 min./16mm and Super-8 film/2006) – A poetic documentary about the fire that destroyed the San Francisco in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake

“19: Victoria, Texas” (4 min./video/2006) – An experimental film about the worst case of human smuggling in U.S. history

“Grounds” (11 min./16mm/2000) – A personal documentary about migration, ancestry, and memory

FIELDS OF STUDY

Print Journalism, History

Filmmaking and Studio Art

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Crow Furnace

by

Dolissa Medina

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Amy Adler, Chair

“Crow Furnace” is a 30-minute long experimental narrative created in the tradition of the found footage genre. It combines live action video with archival and 16mm found footage to present a historiography of the city of San Francisco as mediated through the element of fire. Two protagonists from different times, a Fireman and a Singer, become stranded in a purgatory state after the moment of their death. Realizing they share a destiny of crossed signals, they undertake a quest to solve the mystery of how they passed and how the two of them might be connected. Along the way, they encounter an itinerary of sights and objects that pertain to psychogeographic places in the city’s collective memory. For as they try to solve their individual mysteries, the Fireman and the Singer also bear witness to the larger mystery of San Francisco – a force mediated and activated through the element of fire. In constructing a fictional tale to present history at a mythic level, “Crow Furnace” also aims to make a work about the Myth of San Francisco itself.

Introduction

“Crow Furnace” is a 30-minute long experimental narrative that combines live action with archival and 16mm found footage. The film presents a historiography of the city of San Francisco as mediated through its history of fire. In constructing a fictional tale to present history at a mythic level, I have also aimed to make a work about the Myth of San Francisco itself.

In the following pages this paper will discuss several aspects of the process that went into making “Crow Furnace.” I will briefly discuss my earlier films as they pertained to this thesis project. I will then present an overview of the film’s plot and themes, discussing sources and theoretical frameworks that influenced this work. There will next be a commentary on my filmmaking process and how my film practice functioned during the pre-production, production, and postproduction stages of “Crow Furnace.” Lastly, I will conclude with some observations about the project’s intentions and outcomes, and its implications for my future art practice.

Relevant Preceding Work

“Crow Furnace” is my twelfth project in a film career that has spanned almost as many years. Both in genre and length, it is an ambitious departure from most of my previous films, which can best be described as “experimental” documentaries (this “experimental” term is problematic, but for lack of a better label it will be used here). Like my previous films, “Crow Furnace” utilizes the same stylistic approaches, such as use of found footage

and a blurring of fact and fiction. In this case, however, the story is primarily a fictional one.

This fact/fiction dynamic is part of an important component in my film practice. Whether documentary or narrative, a common thread in my films is that of history and myth, and the way the two can fold into each other. Having worked first as a journalist before becoming a filmmaker, my art practice inhabits both ends of a storytelling spectrum that is affected by the passage of time. A news event happens, the journalist reports a story; the account becomes the basis for history, and ultimately, the inspiration for legend, folklore and myth. Whereas the journalist and historian are both restricted by the ethics, rules, and standards of their professions, the artist has far fewer limitations. It is because of this that I choose to work in the medium of film, exploring ways that sound and image can evoke the transcendent power of mythmaking.

Following is a brief survey of three of my earlier films that have important connections to the production of “Crow Furnace.”

“Cartography of Ashes” (2006)

Conceived as a site-specific outdoor film event, “Cartography of Ashes” (COA) was a 45-minute long experimental documentary that premiered in April 2006 for the 100th Anniversary of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. The film used archival footage and original Super 8 footage of modern-day San Francisco to document the legacy of the fire that took place after the quake. Appropriately, the film

was projected onto the side wall of a fire station in San Francisco and involved collaboration with the San Francisco Fire Department. Strategically, COA was designed with “Crow Furnace” in mind; for in building a creative relationship with the SFFD, it was hoped such a relationship would facilitate future access to department resources, video archives, and other materials needed for to complete “Crow Furnace.” Beyond these motives, COA also functioned as an aesthetic exercise in the practice of storytelling. Utilizing an “Arabian Nights” structure with several vignettes, the film recounted true stories from the great conflagration that destroyed the city once known as Baghdad by the Bay. Each vignette was inspired by a different form of storytelling, such as journalism, folklore, oral history, and balladry. Hence, COA is the direct precursor of this thesis project both in subject matter (San Francisco history/fires) and form (the linear story). Perhaps even more significant, one vignette from COA ended up becoming the cornerstone around which the entire story for “Crow Furnace” was developed.

“Kindergarten Prometheus” (2008)

“Kindergarten Prometheus” is a five-minute long film created at UCSD and composed entirely of 16mm found footage. My most esoteric work, the film exists in the tradition of the psychodramatic “trance film” as defined by P. Adams Sitney in his book, “Visionary Film.” Sitney describes this category of avant-garde as films in which the protagonist “undertakes an interior quest” and “encounters objects and sights as if they were capable of revealing the erotic mystery of the self.” In this film, a young boy wakes up in his bed, looks outside his window, and sees a wondrous

light. He walks down the hallway of his family home and opens a door, only to find himself in female form inside a cave where he has visions of a match being lit. The flame burns brightly over the rock ceiling of the cave. As the boy continues his journey through an open field, he sees visions of birds and hears other children talking about how firefighters should not be feared. The boy wakes up to find himself back in his room. He repeats the action of walking through the hallway, and enters the door a second time to enter into the mouth of an eagle filled with light. The film, which draws on themes of death and “the eternal return,” is consistently met with positive reactions from audience members, who are swept up in the “trance” of this archetypal journey. Following “Kindergarten Prometheus,” “Crow Furnace” aspires to graduate to a more sophisticated level for addressing these same kinds of themes.

“The Moon Song of Assassination” (2010)

“The Moon Song of Assassination” also produced while at UCSD, is my most direct attempt to elevate a real-life news event into the realm of mythology. More accurately, this six-minute film could be labeled a “docu-legend” about Tex-Mex pop music singer Selena Quintanilla, who was shot and killed at the age of 24 by the president of her fan club. An international news story, the murder created a unique cultural moment of massive collective Latino mourning and thrust Chicano visibility into the forefront of mainstream American consciousness. In fact, Selena’s death became a watershed moment for Latinos in the United States, leaving a media legacy that extended far beyond the music industry. Using appropriated news accounts, performance footage, and 60s-era NASA imagery, this densely edited piece aspired

toward the epic – a real life story of apotheosis into the American pantheon of martyred cultural figures. Politically, the film also functioned as a defiant act of “cartomythography” -- a term I coined to describe my practice of mapping space (especially urban space) through mythic storytelling. I explored this conceptual idea in a seminar taught by committee member Teddy Cruz during my first year at UCSD.

Like earlier colonizers, who conquered land by also imposing their religious stories onto pre-existing sacred sites, I aimed to produce a deity creation story for the increasingly Latino face of America. In other words, I sought to mark out the territory of a new map with this film, creating a literal “legend” of iconography for a changing political and demographic landscape. “Moon Song” takes the real life story of a woman and fashions her into a goddess figure, and while it does not directly inform “Crow Furnace,” it is a kindred film in that the two share similar features – namely an aspiration toward epic storytelling through virtuosity in editing, and a desire to highlight forgotten histories of marginalization, power struggle, and displacement.

In summary, “Crow Furnace” combines the subject matter from “Cartography of Ashes” with the mood, tone and themes of “Kindergarten Prometheus,” executing its story through a structure similar to “The Moon Song of Assassination.”

“Crow Furnace” Overview

Plot Synopsis – “Crow Furnace” is a story of two protagonists who are stranded in a purgatory state after the moment of their death. This liminal experience takes place in the city of San Francisco and inside a hotel at the end of Market Street, the main thoroughfare of the city. The two protagonists, a Fireman and a Singer, come

from different times but meet in the afterlife, where they realize they share some kind of destiny of crossed signals. Each saw fragments of the other's death, but cannot remember the way they themselves died. So together, the Fireman and Singer undertake a quest to solve the mystery of how they passed and how the two of them might be connected. Along the way, they encounter an itinerary of sights and objects that pertain to psychogeographic places in the city's collective memory. For as they try to solve their individual mysteries, the Fireman and the Singer also bear witness to the larger mystery of San Francisco – an erotic force mediated and activated through the element of fire.

Partly inspired by the Tibetan Book of the Dead, in which the soul spends 49 days in the Bardo before reincarnation, the story of “Crow Furnace” takes place over seven weeks, as the Fireman and the Singer become the city's newest category of “49ers.” Together they try to solve the mystery of their deaths before time runs out and the Crow Furnace returns. When this happens Place will become Space, as the itinerary they experienced gives way to the insane memory of a totalizing map in the city's collective unconscious. In the end, only one person will escape, while the other is left behind.

Themes – The title “Crow Furnace” takes its name from alchemy, in which birds flying out of a heated vessel symbolize a key shift in the process of transformation. Not unlike the visual coding of alchemical books, the film aims to function on different levels of representation. At its most basic level, “Crow Furnace” is the story of two people in a liminal state who must review clues from the past to understand where they are going. The themes of death, resurrection and transformation

take place at the individual level. At another level however, this is a story about the transformation of cities. The city of San Francisco, which has undergone numerous phoenix cycles (burned and rebuilt a magical seven times), provides not only an ideal history for examining this phenomenon, but as the city of the American West born from gold, it embodies those mythic national qualities I am most interested in exploring, celebrating and critiquing in my work. In this sense, my thesis project aspires to function allegorically -- a structure mirrored in the film itself through the architecture of the hotel's atrium, which looks up onto multiple floors and is reminiscent of Dante's Mountain of Purgatory. As in the journey of Purgatorio, the protagonists of this story must journey upward toward a destination of revelation and release. For a secondary theme of this film is the idea of reaching an end and preparing to cross a threshold. This theme is beautifully illustrated in the actual urban topography where "Crow Furnace" is set, a border between land and water, time and eternity, arrival and departure, and truth and fiction.

Filmic Geography – As stated earlier, the story takes place inside a hotel at the foot of San Francisco's Market Street. Though never named in the movie, the hotel is the Embarcadero Hyatt Regency, a hotel that opened in 1973 and quickly became a favorite location for Hollywood movies. From the eastern windows of the hotel one can see the Ferry Building, prominently overlooking the waterfront. For more than 100 years the building has functioned as a terminal for people being transported to and from the East Bay. Until the 1930s, it was the second busiest transit terminal in the world. This building is marked by a tall clock tower that marks time at the threshold of the city.

The Hyatt Regency hotel has two important exits (excluding its revolving door on a lower level) – east toward the Ferry Building, and south onto Market Street, where the California Street cable car line also converges and comes to an end. A few feet from the cable car line is a subway entrance for the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), a modern-day system of trans-bay commuting that runs under the Ferry Building. Officially opened on September 11, 1972, the BART project coincided with the construction of the Hyatt Regency, which itself was part of a larger development in downtown San Francisco. This Embarcadero Center commercial complex was just one of many that marked the much-criticized “Manhattanization” of the city during the decade of the 1970s. This was the time period also, when arson fires ran rampant in the city, displacing low-income residents for landlord economic gain.

This psychogeographic space of the end of Market Street, where a Ferry Building marks time and sends people to the East (the place of rebirth in many religious traditions), was an ideal mythic location for a story about two souls in a liminal hotel environment waiting to “cross over.” The hotel also played an important role in San Francisco cinematic history, contributing to the popular imagination of the city. But what was most significant for me was a historical coincidence concerning the physical location of the hotel. Although its official address is advertised as 5 Embarcadero, the building actually occupies a large portion of what could be considered the 100 block of Market Street, an address where reportedly, a mysterious fire victim was found in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake. With this connection the seeds of “Crow Furnace” were planted, as hidden patterns of past events revealed themselves, and ghosts began to talk.

Influences

Cinematic Sources - In my opinion, it is impossible to make a film homage to the city of San Francisco without acknowledging the influence of the greatest San Francisco film ever made – Alfred Hitchcock’s “Vertigo” (1958). The story of a man, Scotty, haunted by his obsessive love for a woman, Madeline – doomed to lose her to Death not once but twice, has always appealed to me as a modern-day Orpheus tale. This Underworld journey motif was repeated in other work by Hitchcock’s contemporaries – such as Jean Cocteau’s Orphic Trilogy, most notably “Orphée” (1950), and Marcel Camus’ “Black Orpheus,” (1959) which locates the Land of the Dead in Rio de Janeiro during the time of the Carnival.

A large part of the genius of “Vertigo” is its psychoanalytic treatment of romantic longing, fantasy, and death and resurrection. Like many I am deeply interested in these angles. But as a filmmaker whose artistic identity came of age in San Francisco, I am also personally fascinated by “Vertigo’s” legacy – what that film did for the city of San Francisco, its residents and tourists, and the creative discourse that has since come from it. I myself had the privilege of seeing the film for the first time at the Castro Theater during its 70mm reissue in 1996. A story of obsession set against the backdrop of a travelogue, “Vertigo” remains for me the most formative film of my adult life, a twin memory of a romance I once shared for city I no longer live in, but still long for and remain obsessed with. This myth of a city and its most memorable film still haunts me.

I am not alone in my obsession, and find comfort knowing that other directors such as Chris Marker and Tom Tykwer have been directly affected by this work. Marker's seminal 1983 essay film "Sans Soleil" devotes a key section to meditating on the "insane memory" of the movie and its psychogeographic implications for Time. Tykwer's 1998 film "Run Lola Run," which employs the "ticking clock" trope of my own film, and is set in Berlin (another mythic city with layers of history), alludes to Hitchcock's spirals of time. As artists who work with the moving image, our medium essentially is time. The spiral *is* the 16mm film reel, unspooling an eternal story.

If the likes of Hitchcock, Cocteau and Marker represent the highbrow end of my influences, "Crow Furnace" equally pays homage to a film that occupies the other end of the spectrum. The second key film informing this thesis is the 1974 cult disaster film, "The Towering Inferno." At first glance one might not see a connecting thread between the classic and the campy. But both films invoke the situation of a person or people suspended over the city, trapped by time with the specter of Death looming over them. We are even treated in both films to scenes of bodies falling out of windows, a not-so-unusual motif for the movies (including my own), but one nonetheless that was made especially poignant by the national trauma of September 11. In fact, "The Towering Inferno" re-entered public discourse for a time, as news commentators struggled to find language to describe the unreal horror of an event that would forever re-define America. Furthermore, in an ironic twist, it has been reported that the "The Towering Inferno" actually wrapped its production on September 11, 1973.

This extratextual context for “The Towering Inferno” is an important component of “Crow Furnace,” because in terms of subject matter, I have always been fascinated by epic cycles of urban destruction and rebirth, and the collective trauma this creates. The movie itself is also set in the phoenix city of San Francisco, which serves as fictional home for the tallest building in the world (propaganda for the rapid development happening at the time, perhaps?) The producers of the film worked closely with the mayor and the fire department, and chose two buildings as cinematic stand-ins for the tower. One of those was the Embarcadero Hyatt Regency, with its iconic atrium and glass elevators that were featured prominently in the disaster scenes. Because “Crow Furnace” is a historiography of San Francisco as mediated by fire, one strategy was to include the presence of “fake” fire history as well. It is not surprising an iconic disaster movie about fire would be identified with San Francisco. The movies construct popular imaginations about what a city is, and in this sense, the Hyatt Regency holds psychogeographic importance for this thesis film. “Crow Furnace” not only appropriates sound and images from “The Towering Inferno,” but makes direct references to the movie in the plot as well.

As stated earlier in this paper, San Francisco’s Embarcadero Hyatt Regency was a popular location for Hollywood movies of the 1970s. A brief survey of films that feature the hotel reveals an interesting repeat of motifs: “Time After Time” (1979) is a movie about time travel; “High Anxiety” (1977) is Mel Brooks’ homage to Hitchcock, and “Telefon” (1977) is a film about people not knowing their who they are until their memories are activated by a coded message. And if Wikipedia is to be trusted, the very design of the hotel lobby is itself inspired by a film, a 1935 science

fiction movie called “Things to Come,” which Hyatt architect John Portman used as the basis for his model.

The above films can be considered peripheral to my process, but “Crow Furnace” does adapt narrative elements from other cinematic sources, such as Marker’s “La Jetee,” Hitchcock’s “The Birds,” and Peter Greenaway’s catastrophic Violent Unknown Event from “The Falls” to name a few. The project was also inspired by the complex symbol codings found in the films of Stanley Kubrick, as well as the manic layers, connections, and cross-references found in films by colleagues such as Craig Baldwin (“Tribulation 99,” “O No Coronado!”). Baldwin is a major figure in the collage film movement that has strong roots in the Bay Area going back to Bruce Conner. As an artist, my strongest technical and aesthetic skill is in editing, and I place myself squarely in the tradition of these found footage filmmakers.

Journalistic Source – In addition to the above mentioned film influences, “Crow Furnace” was also deeply inspired by a newspaper report that I came across during my research for “Cartography of Ashes.” Published in the San Francisco Examiner on April 20, 1906, the article was incredibly brief – no longer than five column inches, with a word count of only 180 words. Given its brevity, the article will be cited here in its entirety. The article was headlined “Was C.A. Cooper Burned to Death?”

In the heart of the ruined business section of San Francisco early yesterday morning, a charred corpse was found, beneath the debris of 130 Market Street, burned beyond recognition. But inside the burned coat was a card, slightly scorched but plainly bearing the name "C.A. Cooper." The man himself was burned, his clothes were burned, the entire building was thoroughly consumed. Yet there remained this one, thin card to tell the grim tale to some wife or some friend. The corpse was dressed in clothes, which, though burned to ashes, kept their shape and color well enough to show their owner had been a businessman of good circumstances. There was no place to take the body, so it was left in the street. The throng that fled down the street between the tottering ruins, looked upon it as passively as they did the bricks and stones beside it. But one woman of the many who passed was stricken with grief when she saw it. She stooped down and covered the face with a pure white handkerchief, and then hurried on.

This newspaper article, with its succinct but florid language and literary arc, moved me greatly. The story of a brief encounter between the dead and the living, in which the talismanic power of the handkerchief sealed a final act of humanity, was readymade for a filmic interpretation. "Was C.A. Cooper Burned to Death?" became the fourth vignette of "Cartography of Ashes." Upon visiting the spot of 130 Market Street to film contemporary images, it was clear the address no longer existed. But as far as could be extrapolated, the location put me directly facing the south exit of the Hyatt Regency, where the cable car line came to an end. I became fascinated by these two urban layers of fire history – one fictional, the other reportedly true. Yet because the article was produced in the Hearst Age of yellow journalism, its accuracy could never really be verified. My film was a documentary but I welcomed this gray area of fact and fiction. The notion that the cable car line was nearby also invoked for me the idea of the chance encounter in the public square. Two people who never knew each

other in life shared a brief moment and then were separated. The only evidence left was the white handkerchief.

Years later as the story of “Crow Furnace” began to take shape, I realized the white handkerchief was my blank projection screen. This story, whose simplicity and beauty haunted me, had to function as both preface and Ariadne thread in my film. It would create the zone for my first narrative work.

Theoretical Frameworks

“Crow Furnace” is informed by numerous disciplines, such as urban studies and cartography. Additional frameworks that shaped this project were folklore, mythology and religious studies, which drew from Carl Jung’s work on archetypes, symbol systems, and the collective unconscious. A life-long enthusiast for Jung’s ideas, I am most interested in his volumes on alchemy, the medieval pseudo-science that communicates its process through coded visual language. Aesthetically, I find these alchemical engravings to be quite beautiful. Personally, I am also fascinated by Jung’s interpretation that the lead-to-gold process was in fact a spiritual quest. Each phase of the Magnum Opus -- the Great Work -- marked a new step toward individual perfection. Distillation would occur, opposites would be united, and ultimately, the Self would be revealed to the alchemist.

Given my fascination for signs and symbols, it is natural I would also be intellectually drawn to the clustered disciplines of semiotics, structuralism, and rhetoric. To develop this knowledge base, an independent study was taken up with Jack Greenstein, who contributed toward a better understanding of the taxonomy of

visual communication. Greenstein also introduced me to Angus Fletcher's book, "Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode." This proved to be a critical text that influenced my first year review at UCSD, a foray into video installation. Titled "Fixing the Volatile," a stage in alchemy symbolized by a serpent nailed to a cross, the project was my attempt to introduce symbolic objects from "Crow Furnace" and hammer down my ever-shifting ideas about allegory.

The installation included three video projections between rungs of a ladder, an allusion not only to the fireman's tool but also to Fletcher's "Ladder of Perfection." The term describes a series of vertically parallel ladders, each containing a hierarchal universe for different species of agents that occupy their respective rung. When these ladders are placed side by side, one is able to read horizontally parallel "levels" of symbolism: a paradigmatic/syntagmatic system of correspondences. Like the alchemical dictum, "as above so below," "Crow Furnace" was an ambitious exercise to construct such a macrocosmic/microcosmic universe. Visual examples of this effort included the up/down movement of the elevator and the Singer's vision of snakes and ladders, a children's board game with up/down trajectories.

The Process

Preproduction – In a sense, pre-production on "Crow Furnace" began with research for "Cartography of Ashes" around 2002, although the idea for "Crow Furnace" itself came to me in 1997. The origins of the project go back 15 years, predating my film career. Since that point there has been an obsessive accumulation of books, newspaper clippings and films about all things pertaining to San Francisco and

fire. Officially however, a more methodical pre-production process was initiated at UCSD. Recognizing a need to build up an inventory of “raw material” for this collage project, I began to formally collect 16mm film reels through e-bay and other sources. This was facilitated through the generous support of Russell, Humanities, and other department grants, which helped fund the purchase of the film reels. Most films collected concerned 1970s-era fire safety films and films about San Francisco or California history.

While earlier this paper discussed my film practice in terms of Content (history and myth), issue of Form has not yet been addressed. In my work, which is so often about history, the past, and collective memory, it is no surprise I am drawn to antiquated film technology. The 16mm film is central to my practice for many reasons. As an educational tool shown to many school children, for example, it is an artifact of collective memory. Working in a primarily 2D medium, I also appreciate the 3D tactile quality of the 16mm film reel, which grounds my practice in an actual object rather than just the intangible zeros and ones that comprise today’s video/HD digital data. To physically handle a strand of film and see the magic of analogue cinema reminds me of the need to retain a childlike wonderment when relating to my craft.

While taking a Walter Benjamin seminar with John Welchman, I came across “Old Forgotten Children’s Books,” an essay in which Benjamin writes: “That childlike pleasure is the origin of his library, and every such collection must have something of the same spirit if it is to thrive.” Benjamin writes about the physical condition of these books, the patina deposited on them by unwashed children’s hands, and the moral

stories found in them that are sometimes so graphic as to invite a comic, if unintentional, response.

As Benjamin describes these books, I cannot help but be reminded of contemporary parallels to the educational tools of the last half of the 20th Century -- audio-visual materials that socially conditioned a generation completely different from that of Benjamin's Berlin childhood. These 16mm films dominated the classroom setting between the 1950s until the 1970s, the decade of my own childhood. Perhaps there is a personal fondness for these "ephemeral films" because it was my generation that while still young, witnessed technology's transition to video and the now-ubiquitous pixel. This is not unlike Benjamin's historical milieu; recognizing the political and technological shifts taking place around him, he connected nostalgia and memory with the obsolete, and acknowledged a need to collect and preserve the vestiges of a dying era (it is no coincidence this thesis film uses fire safety films from the 1970s, the time period when the skyline of San Francisco was also rapidly changing, signaling the end of that city's bohemian era). Just as these children's books were "destined for the paper mill," I experience this same fear of loss in thinking about the millions of feet of celluloid that ended up in school district trash bins. But the collector is a unique personality type, and in the collection, resurrection and rebirth is found.

And when this rebirth happens, the organic nature of celluloid reveals its true alchemy of transformation. It should be noted that film stock from the 1970s had a specific photochemical makeup that degraded over time, resulting in what is called a "red shift" in the images. The color red is iconic to firefighting culture; and as the

films were surveyed for this thesis project, equal attention was given to the hue of the images as was to their composition. While not certain what will happen to this dynamic during the color correcting phase of my film, I am looking forward to the aesthetic challenge of deciding which images to keep red and which to change to black and white.

As a result of the preproduction collection process, about 60 films were used to cull images and sounds for “Crow Furnace.” These films will be donated to my art collective, La Caca Colectiva, in San Francisco and Oakland. Founded by myself, Veronica Majano (whose 1998 film about gentrification “Calle Chula,” was also appropriated for this thesis), and Angela Reginato, the three of us share an aesthetic interest in both the archive and the city as subject. Reginato’s most recent essay film about Mexico City, “Polvo,” screened this year at the New York MOMA, Rotterdam, and other venues. My editor for “Cartography of Ashes,” Reginato served as Music Supervisor for “Crow Furnace.” La Caca Colectiva owns a collection of about 400 16mm film reels, ranging from Cocteau’s Orphic Trilogy to “Nanook of the North” to a large set of German newsreels. We make our films available to Bay Area curators and film festivals, and see ourselves as a resource for others who share a love for the celluloid coil.

Production – By Summer of 2010, when production for “Crow Furnace” began in San Francisco, all 16mm film reels, DVDs, and archival videos had been digitized and viewed to assist in the writing of a screenplay. The script had several false starts, including a radically different 20-page draft from June 2009 that was completed for my former committee advisor Cauleen Smith. A second draft, dated October 2009,

more closely resembled some narrative elements of the final thesis, but still retained its actor dialogue and side characters. At a certain point, this approach was abandoned due to concerns over the logistics this kind of script could require in the production phase. I rarely enjoy the scriptwriting or production phases of filmmaking, which might explain why I prefer to work with pre-existing images. As an artist I am much more interested in postproduction processes, such as recontextualizing other people's footage and manipulating found sound and images. And yet for a project of this scope, not having a solid script until the end of the process proved a significant flaw in my workflow. Ultimately, in May 2010 a 2,500 word document was produced for committee member Michael Trigilio. This document functioned as a hybrid treatment/script for the film. A revised version of this treatment, which included actions for the characters, ended up serving as a loose shooting script.

Casting took place in July of 2010, an interesting experience because I had never worked with live actors before, although I had previously directed nonprofessionals. This step was followed by location and wardrobe tasks during a follow-up trip to San Francisco in early August. As hoped, a pre-existing relationship with the SFFD Fire Chief facilitated access to several items needed for the shoot, including an authentic SFFD badge and fireman's uniform. In late August, the live action elements of "Crow Furnace" were shot using a 24p standard definition video camera in order to mimic a film look. I chose to not shoot the actors on film itself, not even the affordable Super 8 format because of the logistics of the production. For example, there were concerns over limited light exposure inside the BART tunnel, as well as other locations where guerilla style shooting made working with a film camera

more complex. In more controlled environments, such as the hotel, a cameraperson and lighting expert were hired. Some elements were shot in both video and Super 8. After a six-day shoot, production wrapped on August 29, 2010.

Postproduction – In September of 2010 I took a leave of absence from graduate school to take a Fulbright fellowship. I moved to Germany for one year to conduct research for an essay film idea about the mythology surrounding the city of Berlin. While in Germany, some time was allocated to working on “Crow Furnace,” especially during the months of January and February 2011. By the Spring of that year a first pass edit had been developed; the project was picked up again in the Fall upon returning to UCSD for the final tenth quarter.

In January of 2012, I aggressively re-engaged in the postproduction phase of the film. At this stage however the story still remained too vaguely structured for its designated form – the result of a delay in writing the narration. As a writer, my voice was adept in the nonfiction world – having been developed over years through the practice of technical and journalistic styles. This paralleled the way I generally worked as a filmmaker, using interview sound bites to structure a film as one might use the journalistic quote to organize a news article. But to create “Crow Furnace” would require an entirely new kind of voice, a writing style not yet developed. The project also required an understanding of the formula for the fictional story. And so ironically, in the postproduction phase of my film, I needed to return to a basic review of genre. This helped me understand the kind of film that was being made, and the corresponding formula needed for that attempt. In this effort, a surprising source of clarity was found in literary theory books, especially books on narratology such as the

immensely helpful “Anatomy of Criticism” by Northrop Fry, which was discovered very late in the process. In addition to referencing these books, a daily writing practice was implemented to cultivate a relationship to this new voice.

In this sense, my post-production phase, which should essentially be the tail end of the process, incorporated elements of both pre-production and production. But it should be noted that when one works in the found footage category, “production” and “post-production” are more or less the same. And so while continuing to edit the visual sequences, I free wrote every day, returning periodically to these pages to highlight words and phrases that might be used to construct the script. A separate notebook was also kept for words and phrases gleaned from fictional sources.

A major text used in this writing/editing/sampling effort was “Polyphilo, or The Dark Forest Revisited,” by architect-turned-author Alberto Perez Gomez. This work of experimental fiction is a re-telling of the enigmatic “Hypnerotomachia Poliphili” from 1499, a treatise on the erotics of architecture set against the quest of a man, Poliphilo, looking for his beloved Polia (i.e. *polis*, the city as female). The original book, richly illustrated with woodcuts and visual codes, is speculated to be an alchemical document. Working in a cut and paste style, Gomez sets his version of the story in the liminal zone of an airport. His writing also borrows from numerous authors and is blended in a collage way not unlike my own practice. At one specific moment in my process, I realized my approach to writing was exactly like my editing of the found footage: collecting, distilling, and reassembling for new context.

Following a test screening in San Francisco in March 2012, it was determined this cut-and-paste strategy for the narration was only partially successful, and that

original language would also be required. So in the final weeks, much of the script was rewritten using music from the sequences as a writing aid. Postproduction of the project concluded in May.

VI. Project Intentions, Outcomes, and Conclusions

“Crow Furnace” is the culmination of a vision that came to me in the Spring of 1997, fifteen years ago when I was 26 years old. I am now 41. The experiences of youth in a city that embraced me are long past. The skyline has changed, the faces are strangers, friends today make their lives more often in the East Bay, where rents have become more affordable. Mission Street will soon be a cemetery for the natives.

I recognize this is the condition of many modern cities; it is the sedimentary nature of history. But in making this film I wanted to articulate why there is no city like San Francisco to relay this story of time. The city of San Francisco is where America came face to face with its end, as well as encountered an eternal return to its beginning. Or as Rebecca Solnit writes, it is the “un-American city where American invents itself.” Today, when I think of our declining empire in the wake of September 11, of the trajectory this nation took between idealism and brute reality, I think of the Fireman and the Singer. He in his 1950s innocence and romance -- which we know was always a fantasy, as with Scotty -- and she in her 1990s dot-com cynicism, a female Orpheus singing to a fading love. Eurydice *was* the City, a city destined to be doubly destroyed.

In making this film, I aimed to use the Romance and Mystery genres, two genres associated with San Francisco movies. From another black bird in the form of

the Maltese Falcon, to the birds of Alfred Hitchcock to my Crow Furnace, the city's winged messengers always reminded me that romance demanded a dark side. This is the secret of San Francisco -- so beautiful in its cable car bells and whistles, but conspiring like a cold-hearted Madeline who I could only possess for a moment. Through this tragic fault, Madeline's real identity as Judy existed on borrowed time. Like the gold rush galleons that sunk into the bay, San Francisco's mystique was destined to always "fast disappear."

Each era had its designated lamenter. For Hitchcock, it was the white male Gavin Elster, who orchestrated his subterfuge on Scotty. For my colleague Veronica Majano, it was the half Salvadoran-half Ohlone Indian teen named Calle Chula, whose name translates into "Beautiful Street." Communities and landscapes are always fast disappearing, and everyone has the freedom to reminisce. But when it comes to "power and freedom," as Elster phrased it to Jimmy Stewart, we all know that some have more power and freedom than others.

As a filmmaker who has been given the privilege to spend three years in a graduate visual arts program, I have been granted an enormous amount of power and freedom. What has come from this time and opportunity has proved invaluable. As I reach this end of a project about the end of many things, I know I could not have made this film still living in San Francisco; the distance of San Diego and Berlin allowed me that critical perspective. And so in the ashes of the Crow Furnace come important life questions and implications for my art practice. For so long, San Francisco has defined me as a person and an artist. I draw inspiration and subject matter from this city, and will continue to do so. While I long to return to live and work there, I recognize the

challenges of the city's current economic reality. I also recognize the dangers of artistic atrophy, and do not want to grow complacent in just one place.

Berlin, which also holds my fascination, is a city to which I now plan to turn my attention. Sharing many parallels with San Francisco, the city lends itself to an extended essay film. Fundamentally, I think my work has always been more about ideas and less about fictional storytelling. This is why I left my comfort zone and attempted to tell a story with "Crow Furnace." And indeed, before this thesis, I had far less confidence in my creative writing abilities. But as I grow more comfortable with a certain kind of voice, I am aware of its implications for my art practice. After a decade of experimental work focusing just on sound and image, I intend to reunite language with the image, using all the tools available to me. The tools have been intellectually sharpened as a result of my graduate level education.

In July of this year I will move again to Germany to begin my post-graduate life. I do not plan to seek the Rhine gold, just a simple Berlin street. Perhaps there, where Walter Benjamin once walked, a green haze will fall upon me, and I will watch in awe as my European Judy step out.