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Idola Theatri: No Idols Where None Given

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

Kelly Suzanne Donahey

Thesis Committee:
Professor Bruce Yonemoto, Chair
Professor Connie Samaras
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Professor Catherine Liu

2017

DEDICATION

To

those of you reading this now.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who has laughed and ranted with me through this process. And everyone who will continue to do so as we make incursions into the utter disaster that is the art world.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Idola Theatri: No Idols Where None Given

By

Kelly Suzanne Donahey

Master of Fine Arts in Art

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Bruce Yonemoto, Chair

What follows must, of necessity, be a manifesto of reply. The form of the text is an experiment in the capacities of montage, a composition of fragments. It is written as complement to the thesis exhibition of the same title staged at the University Art Gallery in May of 2017. Thus the text is deeply invested in associative meaning, entanglement, and the capacity of the reader to make knowledge from its form. The method employed is in active resistance to logical sense.

CHAPTER 1

There is Only One Chapter: The Essay As Montage

On March 22, 2017 a young filmmaker addresses the question of fact and fiction in documentary. His film has reconstructed an historical practice as contemporary event. It concludes with an imagined spectacle, not a dénouement in the proper sense but a moment of reconstitution. In his statements the young filmmaker is critical of a trend in the documentaries of recent memory, the collapse of the boundary between fact and fiction. “There is a line,” he says.

Hours before, on the downtown streets outside of the theatre, a “march for science” has been held. A protest against the “alternative facts” of the executive branch of government, the protestors hold placards: “I believe in facts not fiction.”

For both the young filmmaker and the demonstrators “fiction” is that which is not fact. Not quite a binary opposition; fact is solid, fiction diffuse. And yet what is “fact” which is so solid that it bears the weight of this enmity? The protestors say that it is reality. The young filmmaker is not so certain yet he says, perhaps without meaning to, that fact is truth.

Nearly a year before, in a theatre on the other side of Los Angeles, a young artist with a Masters in area studies and another in art leads a discussion with an established filmmaker after the screening of his film. The established filmmaker has fabricated archival footage in order to give voice and image to colonial practices that cannot be seen or heard. An event has been manifested through fiction in order to reconstitute a history. An inquiry into the constitution of authenticity. Facts are manmade through a fallible operation. The mode that the established

filmmaker questions is one of mastery in the production of truth. He calls it “postmodern historiography.”

The young artist has seen the film many times. It is the reason that she has asked the established filmmaker here to speak. His film is about artifacts, objects made by the hands of men. The young artist only wants to speak of aliens. She believes that the composition of history is proof that there are no such things as facts. “It’s all fiction,” she says. “None of it is real.” Again, she speaks of aliens.

I can barely keep myself from surging out of my seat as I watch. Again and again the established filmmaker tries to explain to the young artist that there is a line between fact and fiction. Again and again she does not hear him and speaks of conspiracy theories about aliens that visit the ruins that are the subject of his film. The established filmmaker hangs his head in disbelief. I cannot tell whether the young artist believes herself, yet she persists.

“There are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization.”¹ Published on April 30, 1999 Werner Herzog’s *Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema* can now be easily found on the internet. A condemnation of Cinema Verité, Herzog insists that “it reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants... Fact creates norms, and truth illumination.”²

Moments into the young filmmaker’s documentary a mechanized female voice asks if the

¹ Werner Herzog, “Minnesota Declaration: Truth and Fact in Documentary Cinema,” *Walker Art Center: Magazine*, April 30, 1999, <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/1999/minnesota-declaration-truth-and-fact-in-docum>.

² Ibid.

blind pinky rats of the scientific laboratory dream. This question recalls Herzog who often speaks of dreams, of reverie, of consciousness. It is a question of metaphysics, of ontology. The young filmmaker's documentary does not quite know this. "In the context of computer and information sciences, an ontology defines a set of representational primitives with which to model a domain of knowledge or discourse."³ This ontology is epistemic. In Herzog's most recent documentary he asks whether the internet dreams of its own existence. Does this State of abstraction have consciousness?

"I advocate a filmic procedure that doesn't treat the images like raw material that the montage melts down, and instead considers the singularity of each shot. The montage itself should be this consideration: What is the value of a shot? What does it say, also alongside and beyond what I want to convey through it?"⁴ What do images demand? What do images desire? What do they reject? Can montage be a mode of consciousness?

I have long conversations over video chat with a friend who is also a young art historian in China. She is working on the concept of "the image." We spend a great deal of time trying to work out a shared ontology. I take screen captures of us smiling. Do I mean a metaphysics? Indeed I mean the fundamental concepts of "being, substance, time and space, causation, change, and identity"⁵ but also, to borrow both a phrase and its emphasis from Ann Laura Stoler, I mean

³ Tom Gruber, "Ontology," *tomgruber.com*, last modified January 26, 2012, <http://tomgruber.org/writing/ontology-definition-2007.htm>.

⁴ Harun Farocki, "Die Bilder sollen gegen sich selbst aussagen (The Images Should Testify Against Themselves)," in *Harun Farocki: Another Kind of Empathy*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Carles Guerra (Berlin: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2016), 100.

⁵ *OED Online*, s.v. "metaphysics," last modified June 8, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117355?redirectedFrom=metaphysics>.

that these concepts formed within a “*lived epistemic space*.”⁶ I have not quite found the state of consciousness through which to see the image as my friend knows it. She thinks that I have gotten close. I have only done so through a medieval ontology appropriated from images that “suspend belief in sensory experience,” rejecting the linearity of cause and effect.⁷ I reanimate the operation of the sacred, the concept of stillness as a vital immortality. The image is animate in our relation; “a manifestation of *mana*,” it tells me what it knows.⁸ Medieval philosophy once used logic to prove the existence of god. Why? To illuminate the image in a spotlight. “Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown.”⁹ Like a terrorized opossum the image freezes, it plays dead, eventually it starves. The god is forgotten. It decomposes and leaves a void.

Hostile mental states are what imperial formations have long tracked... What is so striking is how far and wide they sought to measure desires in adults and to educate desire in the young. Because imagining what might be was as important as knowing what was, these archives of the visionary and the probable should command our attention. Marked by erratic movement in verbal tense, the conditional could powerfully reshape an immediate response as it recursively rewrote the present and refigured events that had long passed. The portent-laden future of revolt and betrayal is always on the dangerous horizon. Resplendent in the feared, the unrealized, and the ill conceived, such visions provide traces of agitations of a peculiar kind—not events but the anticipation of them that in turn prompted infeasible policies for implausible arrangements that could neither be carried out nor sustained. If historians “tell of things that have been,” and poets “of things as might be,” the history of colonial imaginaries and the violence of their effects

⁶ Anne Laura Stoler, “Epistemic Politics: Ontologies of Colonial Common Sense,” *The Philosophical Forum* 39 (2008): 349, accessed June 8, 2017, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9191.2008.00303.x.

⁷ Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Art* (New York: Westview Press, 2004), 59.

⁸ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 14.

⁹ *Ibid*, 11.

should encompass both.¹⁰

I tell of things within the borders of the United States of America.

Just last year, in an overcrowded conference room, a young Byzantine scholar argues that the weaponry rendered in a Byzantine folio is pacifist. He mobilizes Object Oriented Ontology; he is desperate to get away from human consciousness. The young scholar quotes Bruno Latour and I am reminded of a joke about a man who has decided to go ice fishing very early morning. As he begins to drill a hole he hears a booming voice from above: “There are no fish under the ice.” Assuming that he has imagined it, he begins again and again he hears the voice. This happens several times until finally he cries out, “God is that you?” A moment passes and the voice replies, “No, you’ve wandered into an ice rink.”

Using the text around the images, the young scholar argues that the Byzantine ontology expressed within the folio is object oriented. He does not grant these objects their own identity but he means the fundamental concepts of “being, substance, time and space, causation, change.”¹¹ He argues that these objects, or rather images, have will independent of their human makers. He uses the text to fix them within an episteme. Do they have a voice? Do they exist beyond the edges of their definition? He does not let them speak. They suffocate within the Word. Why? “Christianity is a metaphysics of the hangman.”¹² Even icons die. The young scholar makes no mention of Christianity, of animism, he does not address the divine. Has the

¹⁰ Stoler, “Epistemic Politics: Ontologies of Colonial Common Sense,” 356.

¹¹ *OED Online*, s.v. “metaphysics.”

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 500.

god of the Byzantine text merely vanished? “Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?”¹³

Regardless, philosophy has found a known quantity to fill the void.

“All those aspects of the object that can give rise to a mathematical thought (to a formula or to digitalization) rather than to a perception or sensation can be meaningfully turned into properties of the thing not only as it is with me, but also as it is without me.”¹⁴ I am told by a friend in Comparative Literature that Quentin Meillassoux has gotten outside of human consciousness in his book *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Meillassoux has constituted an ontology through mathematical proof. Am I an object too? The philosopher Alain Badiou draws heavily on the set theory of Georg Cantor. So too do Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari work out (excise?) the human through mathematics. Philosophers no longer need existence to give arguments their form; they merely account for truth. The idea that my most essential being can be indexed with no excess makes me feel like tearing off my flesh. Even numbers have names which grant them an element of imprecision. Even formulas have extremities.

“I seek God! I seek God!” cries the madman of Nietzsche’s parable amidst a crowd of non-believers. “We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers.” “There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us---for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.” The madman falls silent. “I have come too early,’ he said then; ‘my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-82.

¹⁴ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 10.

yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars---and yet they have done it themselves.”¹⁵ God is dead, yet no one has told the atheists.

In May 2002, the exhibition *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art* was staged at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in Karlsruhe, Germany. I never saw the exhibition; I have its catalogue, its text. It begins with an essay by Bruno Latour who addresses the question of the artifact, that which is made by the human hand, and truth. My friend in Comparative Literature hates Latour. “He is a terrible philosopher.” “It is anthropological theory,” is always my reply. My friend would like to drag objects from their epistemes to theorize their existence. There is no egress from human consciousness in Actor-Network Theory, no exit from manmade forms. The human hand must write the number. Latour begins his essay with a discourse on the *acheiropoietos* of sacred icons, yet he insists “the same is true of science. There too objectivity is supposed to be *acheiropoeite*, not made of the human hand.” Might it be possible to argue that the more evident the human hand within images, “the better is their grasp on reality,” their claim to truth.¹⁶ He would like “the closure of the critical mood” that revels in iconoclasm. “It is not that critique is no longer needed, but rather it has, of late, become too *cheap*.” “Conspiracy theory costs nothing to produce, disbelief is easy,

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 181-182.

¹⁶ Bruno Latour, “What is Iconoclash? Or is there a World Beyond the Image Wars?,” in *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, ed. Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 18.

debunking what is learned in 101 classes in critical theory.”¹⁷ “I believe in facts not fiction,” is this the bargain of neoliberal education?

As the established filmmaker shook his head in disbelief, the young artist’s artwork sat in a room only a few dozen yards away. Taking artifacts from the museum of anthropology, she has transferred them to the museum of art. No longer classified through labels of identification, the young artist has adorned the artifacts with colorful Post-it notes on which she has written and crudely drawn. Still, they are arranged in neat rows and sets. She would like to debunk the hands of the anthropologist in the construction of truth. “The facts of artifacts are not real,” her intervention says, “their classifications are as arbitrary as my non-sense. I have been critical by moving them from one mausoleum to the next; *I have made them art.*” Do the hands of their makers have no access to truth? “Down with transcendence!” the hand of the artist replies.¹⁸

“Quand les hommes sont mort, ils entrent dans l’histoire. Quand les statues sont mortes, elles entrent dans l’art. Cette botanique de la mort, c’est ce que nous appelons la culture.”¹⁹ — “When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death, it is that which we call culture.” In transcribing the spoken narrative of Alain Resnais and Chris Marker’s “*Les Statues Meurent Aussi*,” I have moved the French into English too precisely. I have acquiesced to the literal and the language has lost its sense. “On their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning. The concept is replaced by the

¹⁷ Ibid, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid, 11.

¹⁹ *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, directed by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Ghislain Cloquet (1953; France: Présence Africaine Tadié Cinéma, 2004), DVD.

formula, the cause by rules and probability.”²⁰ Language becomes a formula when the text can be analyzed through a dataset with no loss of intent. The telltale sign of International Art English, also known as artspeak. What Marker and Resnais mean by “culture” is more so the proper noun of “Western Civilization,” of France. The statues, petrified behind glass, terrorized into sets, become fixed. “The dread objectified in the fixed image becomes a sign of the consolidated power of the privileged.”²¹ Is this the colonizing consciousness? Is there ever merely a colonizing hand?

A young artist tells me that my montage means, “representation is violence.” Within an installation comprised of five videos and two audio pieces, there is a line of text in three of the films. She tells me that these are declarations that tell her what to see. I tell this to an established filmmaker and he giggles uncontrollably. I tell this to an established painter and she laughs. When the young artist speaks I hear poststructuralist theory, hypostatized. The mode through which young artists see the world of art. “Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown.”²² There is no excess to “Death of the Author” once anthologized into *Art in theory, 1900-2000: an anthology of changing ideas*. I was told to buy this anthology on the first day of an Introduction to the Theory of Contemporary Art; “Unlike most theory classes for artists, you will be reading primary sources.” The medievalist in me recoiled. When I notice that the editor has banished Theodor Adorno from the discourse of postmodernism to “The Moment of Modernism,” near Clement Greenberg, whom artists in the contemporary art world

²⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid*, 16.

²² *Ibid*, 11.

still hate, something is ahistorical about this history. A facile reading of Adorno's "Commitment" often elicits the same alignment. These readers also think that Adorno loathed poetry, and call him a racist for critiquing popular jazz. Adorno had to go somewhere though, to make room for several texts written by the artist's collective, "Art & Language." The editor of the anthology was a member of this group. Is this the hypostatization of poststructuralist theory? Or the postmodern reified?

I argue with my friend in Comparative Literature about the dangers of reading philosophy in translation. He says that it is only necessary to read literature in its original language; I know that French has two words for the reader. One who engages in the act of reading, and one who is an authority in a field; the second comes from the university and the Church. A reader in the Catholic sense is a member of the clergy who acts as an intermediary between the laity and the Word of God. In English "le lecteur" is robbed of (his?) authority. From "La mort de l'auteur," the theological is somewhat removed. Still, the Author is there. I wish that someone would retranslate the essay and "reverse its myth." Which myth? The French reads, "la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur";²³ the English, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author"; Google translate, "the birth of the reader must pay for the death of the Author."²⁴ Following the etymology of the French, "se payer" implies an act of submission. "Payer" has formed from the latin "pacare," to make peace, to appease. The phrase, "Tout se paye, s'expie" (all is paid for, expiated), is written in the primary definition of the

²³ Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," *Monoskop*, last modified February 20, 2016, https://monoskop.org/File:Barthes_Roland_1968_1984_La_mort_de_l_auteur.pdf.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 148.

reflexive form.²⁵ Is it a coincidence that “s’expier” means to atone? How much do you know about the history of the Catholic church? On that note, one would be ill advised to read Arthur Danto’s “The Artworld” without first reading Saint Augustine of Hippo’s *The City of God Against the Pagans*. There is a desire for the unknowable in Barthes, the transcendence of the aesthetic; this used to be called art. Danto despised aesthetic theory.

“Science in its neopositivist interpretation becomes aestheticism, a system of isolated signs devoid of any intention transcending the system; it becomes the game which mathematicians have long since proudly declared their activity to be. Meanwhile, art as integral replication has pledged itself to positivist science, even in its specific techniques. It becomes, indeed, the world over again, an ideological doubling, a compliant reproduction. The separation of sign and image is inescapable. But if, with heedless complacency, it is hypostatized over again, then each of the isolated principles tends toward the destruction of truth.”²⁶ Aestheticism, here, an ideology of objective reality. “Down with transcendence!” the neopositivist artist (and scientist) says.²⁷ Is this the reified aesthetic? This is why Harun Farocki makes films about thought as an industrialized mode. Can montage break through the botany of death? Create an ontology of the image, an excess beyond the Word.

²⁵ *Le Robert Dixel Mobile*, s.v. “payer,” Apple App Store, accessed June 8, 2017, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/dictionnaire-le-robert-mobile-4-en-1/id1018216485?mt=8>.

²⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 13.

²⁷ Latour, “What is Iconoclasm?,” 11.

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