

The Presence of Obsolescence: A Note on *Song of the Nightingale*

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Overture

As I watch Joseph Cornell's (1903-1972) collage films, I am met with the same difficult-to-describe feeling I get when I peer into his tiny three-dimensional boxes. I imagine how a nightingale's gift of beauty, her song, will inevitably accompany her death. For the nightingale, as it is for me, the expression of beauty is inherently entangled in loss and pain. I see an artist trying, desperately, to preserve a moment of beauty in his/her time and space. I see an artist faced with the futility of his/her attempt at immortality. Moments pass, and materiality inevitably deteriorates through repetition. *Song of the Nightingale*, my 8mm collage film, explores multiple relationships between presence and obsolescence in order to better understand how Cornell experimented with film as another form of what he called *metaphysique d'éphémère*, or the attempt to hold on to something that will inevitably disappear.

Pieces

I created *Song of the Nightingale* in order to explore what I refer to as the *presence of obsolescence*. I explore this phenomenon through my use of obsolete technology, and by drawing on a story by Cornell called *Maria* (1954) that explores the tension of creation and decay. The title of the film is from a short story Cornell wrote about how nightingales lead short, but beautiful lives because death accompanies their song. In the midst of their beautiful song, they die. The tension of creation and destruction is central to the nightingale's existence. Cornell's story is inspired by Keats's romantic poem, "Ode to a Nightingale," which explores themes of mortality, ephemerality, and

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Editor's note: *Song of the Nightingale* can be screened at <http://liminalities/10-2/nightingale.html>, and also at <http://vimeo.com/96192034>.

death (disappearance) inherently tied to beauty.

Rather than searching for films in second-hand stores as Cornell often did, I searched online for vintage 8mm films to use for my collage film. I bid on several films on eBay and “won” three of the four films including *Camera Magic*, a film presenting 1940s photography tricks which was made by Castle Films; *Deep Sea Adventures* produced by Castle Film’s *Adventures and Animal Movies* series from the 1950s; and a film about Ice Capades called *Gay Nineties* from the 1940s. Each film is in the public domain.

Next, I obtained film-editing equipment including a viewer, splicer, and cement. I ran each film through the viewer to observe them in their entirety and took notes on specific scenes that intrigued me. I found sections that I liked and I began to cut the films. I labeled each clip and hung each with a clothespin from the blinds in my living room.

Assemblage

As I began assembling the film, I selected clips one at a time. I did not want to create a narrative from the found footage that I included. I wanted to create a film that did not rely on readymade inner speech but evoked moods, associations, and oneiric mystery. So, I took the narratives of the pre-existing films apart and began to reassemble them. So, I took the narratives that guide the pre-existing films apart in order to reassemble them along a vertical axis. I wanted to address motifs that Cornell often incorporated in his work such as birds, women, children, magic, and natural history so I tended to select clips that focused on these themes. As I pasted them together, I re-wound the next film, re-watched it up to its current point and picked the next section based on either visual or symbolic qualities that created interesting relationships to the prior clip(s). As a result, the collaged sections began to infect each other and create a series of juxtapositions; a series of moments.

(Surrealist) Moments

Women in bathing suits saunter toward the camera with sly grins. They are overexposed, causing their bodies to fade into their surroundings. They stop and look into the camera as the image cuts to shadows of birds in flight on the sand. The film flickers and jumps, revealing a moment of deterioration. Time and repeated use have damaged the film, leaving scratches and holes in its surface. A child on a beach reaches to the sand and picks up a sea creature. A woman in a swimsuit sits profile with her hand out in front of her. A small man rests in the palm of her hand. She drops her hand and the man is still there. She tricks our perception. She laughs and looks toward the camera. The child continues to poke the spouting lip-shaped creature then straddles it to take a ride.

A single baton twirler does a routine. A caption reads, “The Mirror Trick” as a person’s hands set up a mirror and old still camera to enable the trick.

The baton twirler is multiplied. Five or six of the same woman twirl batons in sequined costumes rotate around the screen clockwise and counter clockwise.

Deep-sea divers follow a blowfish with human looking eyes to show it to the camera. They continuously poke the blowfish with a stick. A stingray slowly glides through the water and makes its way through fish toward the illuminated surface and the woman continues her solo dance.

The women, birds, and fish begin to speak to each other. They become linked or tied to each other. The baton twirler tosses her baton and it flies through the air and descends to the depths of the ocean amongst the fish. Birds turn into fish and female ice-skaters twirl like birds in flight.

Watching

Once I completed the reassembling, I ran the film through an 8mm projector to watch my work. I drew links between the various habitats portrayed: the deep sea, the sky, and a performance space (in this case, an ice rink or stage). I remembered that Cornell often linked women to birds or other women and children (Leppanen-Guerra). Deleuze and Guattari argue that children, animals, and women are, “characters who offer a mode of escape from fixed signification or static binaries” (cited in Leppanen-Guerra 124). They, “allow escape routes within the narrative itself, segues into other scenes within the film” (Leppanen-Guerra 124). Perhaps he not only incorporated these beings to offer a mode of escape from the narrative, but also as an escape from materiality to eternity. Perhaps Cornell used them to break the inevitability of obsolescence, of disappearance.

Obsolescence

As I watched the projected images take life upon the wall in my living room, I noticed something I had not when I ran the films through the viewer. The images were, they are, deteriorating. In my own fight against ephemerality, I decided to convert, (or rather copy) the film to a digital video file. Because I do not have a converter, I opted to project the film and use my digital video camera to record it. This is no simple task. My 8mm projector is at least thirty-years old. As I recorded, the film often malfunctioned in the projector causing the film to skip, slip, and repeat. Transferring the film to video took several attempts. I was never able to get a completely clean run.

Slips in the footage, deteriorated images, external sound, and the sound of the projector are all present in the digital version of the film. Sitney calls these moments *accidents of deterioration* (72). They are inescapable in this process. Cornell embraced these accidents. He welcomed them as a mode of creating his aesthetic. I did as well.

Deterioration

The camera trick footage became particularly significant as I collaged the film because it highlighted the tricks of film in general and collage in particular. Sitney explains, “as an illusionist, the maker of collages always exposes all his tricks. The synthesis he creates is an ad hoc illusion for the viewer who wants to experience the transfiguration of substance into something less tangible” (82). The image of the photographer attaching a mirror to a camera to create the visual tricks along with the captions “Mirror Trick” and “Hook Baited to Fool the Fishiest Eye” became one way for me to acknowledge my process and to be self-reflexive. Like Cornell, I used found footage that is already obsolete. I chose footage from the 1940s and 50s that I feel is aligned with Cornell’s aesthetic. My film, through both subject and form, allows me to be reflexive. I am able to comment to what I am doing as I am doing it. Like Cornell, I find contemporary use in that which is ostensibly obsolete. I make painfully clear the mistakes, slips in footage, and feature the ever-approaching deterioration of film itself.

My repetitious screening deteriorates *Song of the Nightingale*. The film is damaged each time the projector malfunctions. I see that my own attempt to capture the fleeting is undercut by my attempt to see what one has made eternal, which inescapably leads to its disappearance. For me, the relationship between recording and disappearance in film is troubled by digitization through my option to leave in or edit away the evidence of deterioration. However, the digital technology isn’t strictly used as a representational format or simply as a way to show my project to an audience without an 8mm projector. I left in clues of digitization such as the unsteadiness of the video camera and the accompanied sound. In other words, rather than smoothing away the messy materiality of working with the 8 mm film, digitizing added another layer of traces of its own materiality.

An Offering

Cornell’s collage films predate other attempts by avant-garde artists by thirty years. He was experimenting with the possibilities and restrictions of new technology to explore theoretical and aesthetic issues that were already central to his work. I am not experimenting with new technology, but combining the digital with obsolete technology. Even as the viewer, splicer, and projector are obsolete, each technology is once again new to the artist who encounters the possibilities the obsolete technology holds. I admire and employ footage that is kitschy, which marks my film as “retro” or “vintage.” All the while, the films that I collage have undergone five to seven decades of decomposition, of deterioration. Each is blurry, tinted with age, and some frames contain blemishes or holes. Some of the films are brittle and fragile. The presence of obsolescence marks *Song of the Nightingale*. As I transfer the decomposing, collaged film to video, letting the edges show, leaving evidence of my mistakes, featuring accidents of deterioration, I am eerily conscious of the paradox taking place as I offer my film up to the immortality of the alleged indestructibility of the digital archive.

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