Secrets, Enigmas, and Operative Images

Screenings to accompany Laura U. Marks's course VES 186, A Deep History of Arts of the Secret

Wednesdays, 7:15 (unless otherwise noted), Carpenter Center Lecture Hall, 24 Quincy St., Harvard University

**Wednesday, September 5 Enigmas**

Arnait Video Collective, *Charlie Pisuk* (Canada, 2011, 17:00. DVD)

Kindly citizens of Igloolik, Nunavut submit to a survey about their friend and relative, referred to as Subject #112. The questions are based on the Barratt Impulsiveness Scale, which assesses attention, self-control, and motor stability and is used to evaluate substance abusers, psychiatric patients, and prison inmates—groups under heavy surveillance that in Canada include a high proportion of Aboriginal people. The survey’s Procrustean logic produces an enigmatic idea of Charlie Pisuk. Q: “He is carefree: always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never?” A: “Yes, he cares about everybody…but sometimes he doesn’t care.” (LUM)

Todd Haynes, *The Velvet Goldmine* (U.S., 1998, 118:00. 35mm)

Imbued with the spirit of Oscar Wilde and enveloped in glitter, makeup, and an intoxicating soundtrack from the likes of Roxy Music, T. Rex, and Venus in Furs, *The Velvet Goldmine* celebrates masculine peacocking and sexual ambiguity. Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), a glam-rock amalgam of David Bowie and Marc Bolan, fashions himself as the antithesis of Iggy Pop-like American cock-rocker Curt Wild (Ewan MacGregor). The decadent, yet somehow innocent, story of Slade’s rise and abrupt disappearance are set against the politically dark present tense of 1984, when an investigative journalist attempts to track Slade down. The question arises, does one need a kernel of authenticity in order to sustain creative artifice? Or, perhaps, a mysterious talisman? (LUM)

**Wednesday, September 12 Lost in Folds**

David Rimmer, *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (Canada, 1970, 9:00. 16mm)

A hallucinatory universe emerges from a few seconds of film. Inspired by a scrap of stock footage in which a factory worker lifts large sheets of cellophane, Rimmer maximally unfolds its trippy implications through a rigorous iteration of filmmaking processes including positive-negative reversal, superimposition optical printing, strobing, and colorization immerse the viewer. Soundtrack by Don Druick. (LUM)

Alain Resnais, *Stavisky* (France, 1974, 120:00. 35mm)

“There is no unique forger, and, if the forger reveals something, it is the appearance behind him of another forger” (Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*). The baffling ambiguity or “incompossibility” of Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad* (1960) returns in seemingly friendlier form in *Stavisky*, based on real-life arriviste, mogul, and swindler Serge Stavisky. In the politically polarized France of 1933-1934, suspicion that higher-ups in the government had protected Stavisky built to a complex scandal that nearly brought France to civil war. Interestingly, the film originated with actor Jean-Paul Belmondo, who commissioned Jorge Semprún to write a script about Stavisky; and indeed Belmondo gleams, positively deflecting light, as the charming confidence man. *Stavisky*’s queasy feeling that financial and political institutions rest on imaginary foundations resonates as much as ever. A lavish, haunted film, exquisite as a lily carved in marble. (LUM)

**this program” engines for generating surfaces**

**Wednesday, September 19 Afrofuturist fabulations**

The Otolith Group, *Hydra Decapita* (U.K., 2010, 32:00. HD video)

In 1997 the Detroit techno band Drexciya, in the liner notes to their CD *The Quest*, speculated that African peoples may have survived the Middle Passage to construct an underwater civilization. Maybe the pregnant women who were thrown overboard during that harrowing journey did not perish but gave birth, to children with gills who could live underwater. This mythological island under the sea features in Parliament's song "Deep": "We need to raise Atlantis from the bottom of the sea, dancing 'til we bring it to the top." The sublime dream of an aquatic civilization born of murdered enslaved Africans could make a ripping science-fiction movie, but *Hydra Decapita* refrains, showing almost nothing but the hieroglyphic surface of dark waves. It asks, could an extraterrestrial civilization have populated Earth in interplanetary liquid flows? Anjalika Sagar's beautiful, throaty voice sings a terrible story, John Ruskin's description of John Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* of 1840. The sound of this voice is as close as *Hydra Decapita* gets to any kind of redemption. (LUM)

John Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History* (U.K., 1996, 45:00. DVD)

One of the founding films of Afrofuturism, *The Last Angel of History* surveys the movement in which Black diaspora musicians, writers, and artists argue that ever since the Middle Passage, African diaspora people have been doing science fiction. Led by a steampunk time traveler called the Data Thief, it focuses on how Sun Ra, Lee Scratch Perry, and George Clinton, working respectively in jazz, reggae, and funk, independently deployed the discovery that they came to Earth from another planet on a spaceship.[[1]](#footnote-1) As Clinton says in the film, "Space for Black people is not something new. I really believe we've been there, we're returning to there, and the consciousness of black people, of all mankind, is striving to return. Whether somebody gave us our intellect genetically by cloning, or that we're descended from the stars." High-speed, almost subliminal montages take ownership of history, ancient cultures, and outer space as the heritage of the African diaspora. (LUM)

**Wednesday, September 26 Nested narratives à l’Orient**

Lotte Reiniger, *The Stolen Heart* (Germany, 1934, 12:00. 16mm)

In one of Reiniger’s captivating silhouette animations, a demon steals the townspeople’s musical instruments. Inspired by a shadow play she saw on a 1926 trip to Egypt—shadow puppetry having traveled westward from Indonesia—Reiniger developed a painstaking stop-motion technique to animate her filigree-like cutouts. She devised a multiplane camera to keep images on several glass planes in focus. The rarely seen *The Stolen Heart*, made for a German organization promoting music in the home, was made shortly before the leftist Reiniger fled Germany. The film may be an allegory for the Fascist distaste for useless beauty; as researcher Megan Ratner points out, an official told Reiniger, “We need healthy produce for the German people. What you make is a caviar in which we have no interest.” (LUM)

Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il fiore delle mille e una notte* (Italy, 1974, 130:00. 35mm)

The *Thousand and One Nights* is the Ur-text of nonlinear narratives, with stories nested inside stories and leading to other stories. Retaining the source’s dizzying structure, Pasolini selected the most erotic stories—“the flower” of the Nights—and filmed them in Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, and Nepal with a cast of nonprofessional actors. Pasolini replaces the original framing story of Shahrazad with the tales that cluster around Zumurrud the slave girl (Eritrean-Italian actress Ines Pellegrini) and the innocent youth Nureddin whom Zumurrud chooses for her master. *Il fiore* is a jumbled treasure-box of Orientalizing aesthetics, with fantastical costumes, compositions modeled on Persian miniature paintings, and Ennio Morricone’s reverie-inducing music. Its gorgeous settings including Isfahan’s Sheikh Lutfollah Mosque and the traditional architecture of Sana’a and Zabid—much of which has been destroyed by Saudi bombardments in Yemen’s current civil war. Viewers have the opportunity to be provoked on multiple levels while submitting to the film’s Edenic beauty and enveloping atmosphere of pansexual pleasure. (LUM)

**Wednesday, October 3 Diagrams**

Hollis Frampton, *(nostalgia)* (U.S., 1971, 38:00. 16mm)

A cerebral detective movie, Frampton’s *(nostalgia)* creates temporal and indexical paradoxes. A photograph is set on an electric hot plate, impressed with a burning spiral, and burnt to ash. At the same time a voice (Canadian experimental filmmaker Michael Snow, reading Frampton’s words) describes not this but the next photograph, compelling viewers to divide their attention between what they see and what they hear, physical evidence and verbal testimony. (LUM)

Haroun Farocki, *Eye/Machine III* (West Germany, 2003, 25:00. DVD)

"*Eye/Machine III* addresses the automation of vision in the present era through “smart machines,” “smart bombs,” and person-less cameras. Derived from military technology, the first automated images were those photographs taken from airplanes to measure the accuracy of missile drops in World War II. *Eye/Machine III* charts a kind of genealogy from this historical moment to the current ubiquity of mechanized imaging in the technological and commercial sectors." (Akram Zaatari)

Steve Reinke, *Rib Gets in the Way* (Canada/U.S., 2014, 52:00. HD video)

“I want to be buried with my moustache attached to my nipple rings,” Reinke states at one point in *Rib Gets in the Way*. But, he admits, he is too afraid of piercing to have it done while he’s still alive. In this and myriad other ways Reinke confronts the obliteration that awaits us all with an infective lightness. Every stone in the edifice of culture constructed to make life meaningful—authenticity, aspiration, psychic interiority, presence, the greatness of art, the beauty of nature—crumbles away, and the alternative logics Reinke proffers may be cold comfort. The video’s shocking and offensive moments test a viewer’s capacity to let go of meaning and still be breathing in order to receive Reinke’s gifts of humor, from a *Spiral Jetty* marked out in jelly beans to a youth recording himself masturbating with a kitten on his face. Beloved low-budget auteur George Kuchar, in many ways a godfather to Reinke’s enterprise, makes a cameo. *Rib Gets in the Way* culminates in an adaptation of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in Jessie Mott’smemorably bloopy watercolors. (LUM)

**Wednesday, October 10 *My Heart Beats Only for Her***

**Location: Screening room B-04, Carpenter Center**

Mohamed Soueid, *My Heart Beats Only for Her* (Lebanon, 2008, 88:00. DVD)

In the 1960s, Palestinian guerrillas traveled to Vietnam to train with the Viet Cong, identifying as Communists and taking *noms de guerre* like Abu Ali Hanoi. Soueid’s intricate and tender film discovers these idealistic roots of Fatah, the Movement for the Liberation of Palestine, through interviews with Fatah veterans, astonishing archival footage, and a fictional time-traveler assigned to coax out history’s secrets. Remembering the era when the militant left realized common cause and made international connections, *My Heart Beats Only for Her* sighs over the present when the only remaining international force is global capitalism (and the armed movements able to function within it). Moving among Beirut, Dubai, and Hanoi, Soueid’s technique of fabulative montage, in the tradition of Chris Marker, allows him to diagnose historical events by way of subtle feelings and seemingly absurd moments. (LUM)

**Monday, October 15, 7:00 Dragonfly Eyes *corrected date***

Xu Bing, *Dragonfly Eyes* (China, 2017, 79:00)

“This is a man. He’s recorded 300 times each day. This is a woman. Her privacy is all used up.” Visual artist Xu Bing composed this dystopian love story entirely from surveillance footage recorded in China and uploaded by institutions and individuals. The title evokes the composite image of world seen through an insect’s eyes. Real-life locations come together in constellations, in a kind of montage you could call statistical. The necessarily loose narrative is unified by poet Zhai Yongming’s fictional dialogue, Yoshihiro Hano’s score, and Le Danfeng’s sound design, while the agitated rhythm of Matthieu Laclau’s editing suggests clicking or swiping through videos to settle for a moment on the bizarre or banal. As it begins, Qing Ting is leaving the monastery where she has been training as a nun: the composite image gives viewers the startling knowledge that even Buddhist monasteries in China are under heavy surveillance. Taking a job at an industrial dairy farm, she meets Ke Fan, who becomes enamored of her. Ke Fan goes to jail for attacking a woman who insults Qing Ting. Once he is released, he searches for Qing Ting without success, disoriented by the numerous young women in offices, cafés, and beauty parlors who resemble her, until he begins to suspect that she has reinvented herself online.

*Dragonfly Eyes* deals in a paradox: On the one hand, surveillance performs as it was designed, capturing people and events unawares: it permits glimpses of the world in what André Bazin would have called its virginal purity, from a pedestrian’s disconsolate gesture to a spiderweb glittering with dew. Indeed we can bring Bazin’s attitude not to the events in the footage but in the surveillance footage itself: ignored, ugly, but trying to comprehend the world from its limited perspective. On the other hand, people and things have come to conform to the informational image of surveillance. A theme of plastic surgery resonates with the way surveillance captures and encodes the surfaces of things, and in turn people (and cows, engineered to produce more milk) transform to more closely resemble a certain ideal image.

Now assisted by image-recognition software and big data, surveillance constructs a statistical world from metadata. In some of the more recent footage, facial-recognition software draws its rectangles around the characters and even estimates what they are doing (“the woman no249627 takes off her shirt”), amplifying the sense that people can be replaced by their metadata. An atmosphere of amorality or neutrality envelops the two characters as they drift from scene to scene. The cameras’ disinterested gaze captures terrifying scenes of plane crashes, suicides, and natural disasters with the same bland attention they accord to the most trivial of recorded events, creating an almost exhilarating sense of general annihilation. Surveillance cameras don’t judge, and neither does the film. (LUM)

**Wednesday, October 17** *No screening*

**Wednesday, October 24 Hermetic physics**

Harvey B. Lemon, *Electrons* (U.S., 1937, 11:00. 16mm)

A cheery narrator and winsome animations elucidate how electrons, at the time thought to be indivisible minimal parts, pass through liquids, solids, and gases. *Electrons* explains, among other things, the principle of the vacuum tube and how photo-electric cells are used to make film soundtracks. Harvey B. Lemon, a professor of physics at the University of Chicago, researched spectrum analysis and in 1927 observed a vivid pink auroral display from his campsite on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Upon his retirement Dr. Lemon became scientific director of the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. (LUM)

Eric Siegel, *Tomorrow Never Knows* (U.S., 1968, 3:10. DVD)

In this work made with his Process Chrominance Luminizer, Siegel liberates the electronic waveforms from their raster cage to twitch and shimmy. The PCS inserts a color-sync signal into a monochrome video signal and adjusts brightness, contrast, hue, and other qualities, generating a new color video signal.[[2]](#footnote-2) These produce colors and patterns like the skins of tropical fish, and moiré forms that, to the best of my knowledge, result from interference between signals of differing amplitude. The Beatles sing, “Relax, surrender to the void”; but the dancing electrons remind us there is no void. (LUM)

Charles Eames and Ray Eames, *Powers of Ten: A Film Dealing with the Relative Size of Things in the Universe and the Effect of Adding Another Zero* (U.S., 1977, 9:00. 16mm)

*Powers of Ten*, based on Kees Boeke’s 1957 children’s book *Cosmic View*: *The Universe in Forty Jumps*, remains a disturbingly sublime account of the scales on which the cosmos can be thought, while the human scale slumbers on a picnic blanket. The seemingly continuous “zoom” is in fact composed of a great variety of imaging techniques. It is interesting to note when indexical methods for representing the knowable universe, such as satellite imaging and electron microscopy, give way to diagrams, models, and animations. Also notable: at what point programmable machines take over the act of making the cosmos visible. Though scientific imaging and visualization have increased in sophistication since 1977, it’s still worth considering that the universe has not asked to be visualized for humans and needs ingenious coaxing. (LUM)

Basma Alsharif, *Deep Sleep* (Greece/Malta/Palestine, 2014, 12:45. HD video)

Visual strobing that allows you to watch your own rods and cones at work hint that this is not going to be a vacation movie, despite the temple architecture, departing cruise ship, and seascapes from Greece, Malta, and Gaza. The waves are moving *away* from the shore; a horse runs backward through a grove of palm trees. Alsharif’s Super-8 shots are processed to make invisible colors appear, and binaural pulsing sound plays against the location sounds of birds and rasping cicadas, as though to admit other powers into the visible and audible fields. The filmmaker often refers to her own body, but this only augments the loss of grounding and scale. Generously, *Deep Sleep*’s hallucinatory journey concludes with a much-needed drink of water. (LUM)

Robb Moss and Peter Galison, *Secrecy* (U.S., 2008, 80:00. DVD)

A documentary that struggles to produce images and sound even though, as Rob Moss laments, “Nobody wants to talk to you. There is nothing to see.... What is there to film in any case?” *Secrecy* intertwines two stories of refusals to disclose. One began in 1948 when a B-29 bomber crashed while carrying out some kind of secret testing. The United States Supreme Court threw out the petition of the crash victims’ widows, *Reynolds v. United States* of 1953, setting the precedent for hundreds of other cases that protected classified documents in the name of state security. Another legal case, *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, established that a Guantanamo prisoner has the right to habeas corpus—a right that president G.W. Bush had dismissed in a secret memo. Moss and Galison interview fascinating characters from the CIA, the NSA, and Los Alamos: people who identify with forces of secrecy and are articulate about why and how certain things should remain hidden from the public. Visually, the film navigates between legible images and images that conceal secrets within indexes and diagrams. (LUM)

**Wednesday, October 31 Magic**

Napoleon Chagnon, *Magical Death* (US/Brazil, 1973, 29:00. DVD)

"The shaman plays a vital role in Yanomamo society, he calls, commands, and is possessed by spirits, or hekura. 'Like myriad glowing butterflies dancing in the sky,' the hekura come down invisible trails from the mountain tops when they are summoned. A powerful shaman manipulates not only the spirits of the mountains but also those that live within his own body. The body is a vehicle for the hekura: lured by beautiful body paint, they enter the feet and eventually settle in the chest. In 1970, the village of Mishimishi-mabowei-teri was visited by leaders of the village of Bisaasi-teri. ..." (Documentary Educational Resources)

Achipatpong Weerasethakul, *Cemetery of Splendor* (Thailand, 2016, 121:00. DVD)

"Soldiers with a mysterious sleeping sickness are transferred to a temporary clinic in a former school. The memory filled space becomes a revelatory world for housewife and volunteer Jenjira, as she watches over Itt, a handsome soldier with no family visitors. Magic, healing, romance and dreams are all part of Jen's tender path to a deeper awareness of herself and the world around her." (Strand Releasing)

**Wednesday, November 7 Information**

Tom Tlalim and Martijn van Boven, *Field Notes From a Mine* (Netherlands, 2012, 20:00. DVD)

An abstract documentary constructed from data, *Field Notes From a Mine* is generated from a data set of sites on pilgrimage routes across North Africa between the years 1300 and 1900, moving from south Sudan to Marrakesh. Programmer Artm Baguinski designed software for Tlalim and van Boven to cache data found along the route and interpolate from it. The film’s austere artfulness invites reflection on more sloppy and pernicious geopolitical surveillance platforms such as Google Maps. (LUM)

Agnès Varda, *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (France, 82:00, 2000. DCP)

In this celebrated documentary Varda lavishes her empathy and wit on France’s modern gleaners, people who scrape a living from the leftovers of commercial agriculture. Gleaners take advantage of the fact that much of material life falls under the radar of capitalist codification. For example, a kilogram of uniform potatoes translates into a price, and they are sold. Meanwhile, harvesters pass over perfectly edible potatoes that are too small, too big, or too knobby, and leave them for the gleaners to collect. The ethic of finding value in discards extends to every aspect of the film, including Varda’s own handheld-camera discoveries. (LUM)

**Wednesday, November 14 Alchemy**

Stan Brakhage, *The* *Garden of Earthly Delights* (U.S., 1981, 2:00. 35mm)

Like Bosch’s painting, *The* *Garden of Earthly Delights* invites metamorphosis. Brakhage presses leaves, flowers and stems onto clear leader and thence, in flickering insistence, upon viewers’ eyeballs, allowing us to feel what it might be like to be an ant, or indeed a plant. (LUM)

Florence Anthony, *Foxgloves in Medicine* (Wellcome Film Unit, 1951; 8:30 excerpt of 26:00 film. 16mm)

The foxglove is considered by alchemical gardeners to be governed by Saturn and associated with the Underworld. Toxic yet beloved of bumblebees, the plant of finger-hugging (hence “digitalis”) flower was long used in folk treatments for heart irregularities and introduced to formal medical practice in the late 18th century by physician William Withering. Anthony’s film, made for the British pharmaceutical company Wellcome, focuses on the modern alchemists who isolated digoxin from *Digitalis latana* in 1929. (LUM)

Satyajit Ray, *Parash Pathar* (The Philosopher’s Stone) (India, 1958, 111:00. DVD)

"Paresh Chandra Dutt, a middle-class bank clerk in Kolkata, attends a charity match on a rainy day rather reluctantly. At Curzon Park, where the match is apparently to be held, he finds a small, round stone. Thinking it is a marble, he gives it to his nephew. The child discovers that it turns metal into gold (i.e. it is the Philosopher's stone). Dutt 'buys' the stone from the child with sweets after witnessing the stone's power himself. He decides to take a few old cannonballs from the city dump, turn them into gold, and sell them. This scheme makes him rich..." (Shradha Home Video)

**Monday, November 26, Harvard Film Archive *The Great Buddha+***

Huang Hsin-Yao, *The Great Buddha+* (Taiwan, 2017, 102:00)

Huang’s stunning fiction debut has swept awards at numerous festivals, including five Golden Horse awards and Best Picture at the 2017 Taipei Film Awards. By turns tender, sardonic, and gut-punchingly funny, the film is also a meditation on class in contemporary semi-rural Taiwan. Oily playboy Kevin (Leon Dai) is a sculptor whose factory turns out massive Buddha statues—an irony in which the film delights, with plenty of irreverent scenes depicting the Buddha as hollow, headless, or overpriced. Kevin and his coterie of corrupt politicians cavort at a swimming-pool cocktail party and generally trample the rights of women and the poor. But the film’s gentle protagonist is the sculptor’s slumped, bespectacled night manager Pickle (played by documentary filmmaker Cres Chuang). His buddy Belly Button (Bamboo Chen) makes a few *jiao*recycling plastic bottles; we learn that he lives in a spaceship-like hovel ingeniously constructed of scavenged materials. The two improvise vicarious entertainment by watching video files downloaded from the sculptor’s dash cam. They witness an event that puts them in a terrible bind. With no resources among the living, they visit a Chiang Kai-shek temple to consult the dead but helpful charismatic dictator. In an economy governed by prestige, favors, and who you know, the movie hints that justice can only come from the supernatural.

Huang’s background as a documentary filmmaker informs the film’s refreshing focus on marginal characters and their scavenged lives. They are dignified by Chung Mong-hong’s widescreen black-and-white cinematography with little camera movement. (Huang confessed during the Q+A at the Vancouver International Film Festival that he resorted to black and white because the Buddha statue was the wrong color! It was a felicitous decision.) In contrast, the dash cam records Kevin’s world of entitlement in garish color. The contrast between these media invites a reflection on the resolution at which people live. Corruption allows the rich and famous to be oblivious to all but the most obvious clichés and fawning intercessions. Like the sculptor’s dash-cam recordings, their life is low-res. In contrast, the poor, who struggle to divine the whims of the powerful and to read the landscape for clues to survival, cannot afford to ignore the smallest detail. Their life is high-res. (LUM)

*No screening November 28*

**Wednesday, December 5 7:15**

Michel Haznavicius, *OSS 117: Le Caire: Nid d'espions* (Cairo: Nest of Spies)(France, 2006, 99:00. 35mm)

Haznavicius is best known in English for *The Artist* (2011), but his retro spy series featuring French secret agent OSS 117 (based on novels by Jean Bruce) is just as clever and delightful, yet less filling. Jean Dujardin's comic style perfectly suits the suave yet ignorant secret agent sent to Cairo in 1955 to investigate the disappearance of a colleague, seize control of the Suez Canal, and quell Islamic fundamentalism, among other missions, while disguised as the director of a chicken factory. Evidently the production team devoted themselves to painstakingly spoofing every aspect of a 1950s Bond-style spy caper, from hilariously blocked fight scenes to gorgeous set designs and costumes, mambo-driven sound track, and neocolonial tone-deafness. Elegantly layering themes of dissimulation, encryption, Orientalism, and mastery with performative dissolutions of genre conventions, *Le Caire: Nid d'espions* is the perfect concluding film for this series. (LUM)

1. John Corbett, "Brothers from Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton,” *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994: 7-24); titled after the 1983 John Sayles film in which an extraterrestrial takes the form of a Black man. See Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,"*CR: The New Centennial Review* 3:2 (2003): 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carolyn Kane, "The Electric 'Now Indigo Blue': Synthetic Color and Video Synthesis Circa 1969," *Leonardo* 46:4 (2013): 360–366. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)