

Mini-Cinema A Digital Diary for iPod

CATHERINE RUSSELL

Midi Onodera's "movie-a-day" project is a series of 365 short videos, each less than a minute long and many less than 40 seconds. Like a diary, the entries are intimate and they feature a first-person-singular enunciation along with personal details about the author's life: her travels and her memories, her pets and her homes, her dreams and her fears, her experiences and her desires. But this diarist is not to be trusted. The details don't add up and the persona is incomplete, inconsistent and often incoherent, as if the diary were compiled from the fragments of lives lived in a highly mediated world of experience. It is a world of aphorisms and clichés, bad jokes and tourist brochures within which a poetic voice struggles for survival.

Shot primarily on a "VcamNow" digital camera marketed for children, Onodera's images are low definition, and feature close-ups of things and spaces such as landscapes, low and high angles of streets and interiors, and a wide range of digital abstractions. The imagery is usually framed within the frame of the screen by black or coloured borders, and the image is frequently split, multiplied and layered into even smaller pieces of movement and colour. She uses all kinds of special effects to make the imagery dynamic, and with the sheer volume of 365 little movies, the diversity is impressive. Each video has an electronic soundtrack, often using altered ambient sound, and each one has titles: an opening title followed by intermittent fragments of text superimposed on the images themselves. Insofar as the component parts work together to create dialogic effects, the 365 instalments are perhaps better understood as multimedia collages rather than "movies" or "films" or even

"videos" (even if I will continue to refer to them as such). As David James has argued, "every film is an allegory of a cinema," insofar as every film "internalizes the conditions of its production." In the case of Onodera's "movie-a-day" project, the social relations at issue are those of digital cinema and the mode of production is the miniaturized delivery system of the iPod.

Onodera's project is at once excessive in its sheer quantity and banal in its focus on the mundane and everyday. There are, in fact, more than 365 videos, as the package I received had ten "bonus" videos of more of the same. And yet they are not the same at all. Each little, numbered, video is like a surprise package or candy to unwrap, taste and dissolve in your mouth—or your hand as the case may be. One can screen them from a DVD onto a TV or computer screen, or one can find them online at www.midionodera.com, but I found they worked best on the iPod where they mimic the toy-like miniaturization of cinema that the new technology makes possible. As experimental films, they continue the project of exploring the aesthetic and cultural possibilities of the technologies of audio-visual representation, in keeping with the history of the avantgarde mapped out by David James. In this on-going reinvention of cinema, they constitute a reconfiguration of the everyday.

Many of the 365 videos are addressed to "vou," an interlocutor who might be a lover or might be a number of lovers, or who might be the viewer, or might be simply the fiction of someone who cares. For example, The Ride Down



features the light glimpsed through the cage of a warehouse elevator going down. The ride is interspersed with intertitles saying: "I thought you'd be home/ I wanted to see you/ I had something important to say/ just to you/ but you weren't there." The ride ends with a bump on the ground and the camera moves toward the door. The little camera is an appendage of the filmmaker's body, a woman who is herself barely glimpsed and who never films the faces of her friends. Only the faces of occasional anonymous passers-by are shot and even then, only at a distance. These are strangely unpopulated films. The only characters are animals: pets who are named, farm animals who are crudely anthropomorphised (in videos called Anthropomorphism 00.1 and 02.7 etc.), and dogs on leashes at one of Onodera's favourite floor-level camera angles.

Other videos feature montage compositions of urban grid-like buildings in the urban landscape; many feature trains and streetcars, many are about driving, parking and riding a scooter. The filmmaker's gaze frequently emulates the panoramic views and phantom rides of early cinema when it is appended to technologies of transportation, so that even in the countryside it is a very urbanized view of the world. The mobile gaze is one of many ways in which the "I" of the project is unsettling. "I" am at different times a car, a famous artist, someone who works in an office or puts up signs in airports, a daughter, a "hometown boy"-everyone except an experimental filmmaker. Onodera includes a number of images of homes in the country, with various stories attached to them-where



(she says) she used to live before she won the lottery, where her grandfather used to live, where she used to live with no neighbours nearby, or the house she can't afford. Is this an insight into the filmmaker's longing for

a house as a token of home? The many lies serve to hide the truth.

The persona within the diaries is very occasionally recognizable as Onodera, who we know from her previous films such as The Displaced View (1988) and Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax) (1985) in which she appears. In the course of the 365 videos she gets her hair cut and she



goes on vacation; she complains about going to work and she has memories of Japan. And yet the videos conceal far more than they reveal; they point to all the details of her life that the filmmaker keeps to herself. Her

experiences are all generic; they all belong to everyone: headaches, allergies, waiting in airports, looking for items on store shelves. She goes to Ireland, Venice, Los Vegas,

New York and Ontario cottage country, but her images are too small to reveal these places beyond recording the fact that she was there. Her post-production manipulations render these trips as memories of having been there, recalled and re-configured as tokens of experience.

Perhaps the most difficult element of these little videos is the text that is stamped onto the imagery in a variety of changing fonts. For example, Perchance to Dream is a long shot of a plastic bag caught in a winter tree branch

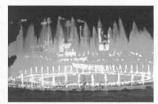
accompanied by an echoing soundtrack of altered ambient sound. Thirty seconds into the 43-second film, titles appear under the evocative image saying "Sometimes your dreams/ just hit a snag." The words are



like heavy objects weighing down the poetry of the film, dragging it back into the banality which it otherwise briefly transcended. The series is full of such clichéd language which is at once a distraction and an inscription of the media universe in which these films are implanted. Some of the videos use statistics and didactic warnings about the environment and HIV/AIDS; others invoke issues such as bird flu, airplane safety and bits of trivia about current events and history: yellow journalism, domestic abuse, Mohawk construction workers in New York, etc. The project embraces the world of information, trivia and received wisdom that remains more sincere than ironic, despite Onodera's colourful reworking of it.

The films' language frequently structures them as aphorisms or jokes. True Believer, in which train sounds accompany an unidentifiable moving light (maybe a flashlight?) in the darkness contains the following statement: "I don't believe/in ghosts/I don't believe in coincidence/I believe/ In revenge/I believe in good floor wax." Although the videos occasionally use fragments of recorded music and old photographs, these archival sources are the exception rather than the rule. The songs, mainly scratchy old tunes from the archive, such as "The Old Mill Stream" or

"Old MacDonald," are counterpointed with contemporary images-feet in a shower, or documentary footage of a construction site for example. The aesthetics are clearly linked to surrealism, abstraction and col-



lage, but at the same time they participate in a more contemporary discourse of design and graphic arts.

The 365 videos rigorously interrogate the nature of the "image" as an object. The techniques Onodera uses include a play with framing in which the image size and shape is consistently varied, a dynamic use of saturated colours, and special effects that alter space and time. An

extensive palette of designer colours are used to frame the videos, making interesting contrasts with the many striking images of nature. The rich colours contribute to the object-like nature of the image. "Hankie" is a close-up shot of yellow goldenrod against a deep blue sky. The image shakes with the force of several sneezes, restabilising with the phrase "allergy season," and ends with a shaky cough.

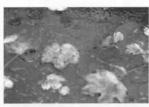


The poetry might be tacky, but the imagery is beautiful. A recurring technique of mirroring the split-screen image into a Rorschach twin creates a simple but remarkable effect with landscape, or with traffic. By

flipping the image, a formality is imposed on documentary reality and the "movie" starts to speak to itself within the technology of representation. Some of the videos are parodies of instructional videos, going through the steps of pie-making, oyster-shucking or butchering a chicken. In these and in other instalments featuring driving or timelapse photography, time is compressed into the tight frame of the speedy little films which are over before you can blink. If you are watching the films on a bus, train or plane, your gaze may wander away and you miss an entire instalment.

Rabbit Shit Haiku

The brevity and overall smallness of Onodera's 365 movies belie their complexity. They participate in a world of disposable culture, and yet their effervescence and formalism recalls haiku. Each one has at least three components: a title, an image or set of images, music or sound, and usually titles on, between, or over the images. The different elements tend to be discontinuous, such that the overall effect of each small film is made up of the collision of textual fragments. They evoke the poetic form of the haiku in their fragmentary simplicity and their extensive use of nature imagery, even if many of the films contain messages of a didactic nature that are antithetical to the



Japanese poetic form. The very first of the 365 is most explicitly haiku-like, with its title *The End of Summer*, evocations of death in the text, a voice intoning Japanese words, and a dissolving display of watery shots

of autumn leaves in the rain.

In Jonas Mekas's diary film Lost Lost (1975) he includes 56 "Rabbit Shit Haikus"—experiments with nature, film technology and language which anticipate Onodera's project by more than 30 years. I'm not sure if Mekas was the first filmmaker to attempt to write haiku with film, but his version in the midst of a monumental film project might serve as a valuable reference point. Mekas's approach to diaristic filmmaking has a sincerity of course that stands in striking contrast to Onodera's

frivolous use of the first-person pronoun "I". His project mobilizes a subjectivity deeply inscribed in larger discourses of geopolitics, the cultural spheres of the avant-garde and Romanticism, and the gendered space of the family—all of which are radically excluded from Onodera's oddly impersonal story.

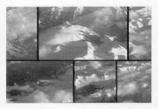
The differences between the two projects may outweigh the similarities, and yet the diary modality is in some key respects consistent. Jonas Mekas was the original "displaced person" of experimental cinema,2 and Onodera has also identified herself, in her previous work, in terms of difference,³ and both filmmakers experiment with the construction of identity in media. The filmic diary is in both projects a palimpsest of temporalities in which the time of filming is overlaid by the time of "writing"-of post-production processes of editing and adding sound and text. The experience of filming using handheld technologies (Mekas used a Bolex) is registered in both projects as a kind of presence in the world of things and people. The body and the eye were there in that world, and the images recorded become a kind of archive of experience. In the second stage, that experience is revised as a memory bank is searched, restored and catalogued, "collected" into a narrative or history. The two filmmakers, working in two very different eras of what Benjamin called "mechanical reproduction" exploit the disjunctive gap between the two temporalities for very different effects.

Mekas's film-haikus are fragments of a larger narrative of his autobiography. They are numbered and of variable length of one second to about 30 seconds, and they contain short scenes set in nature. His narration is rhythmic and repetitive, as he intones "The trees, the trees, the trees," or "The childhood, the childhood," although there are only adults in the images, frolicking in the snow, wading in the river, or walking in the woods. The imagery evokes the freedom and leisure of being in the countryside among friends, without a care in the world, enjoying "the wind, the wind, the wind," or "the clouds, the clouds, the clouds." And yet, the overwhelming sense of loss assigns the scenes to a time long ago, as if they were being turned into memories or memorials. Everyday life is transformed by cinema into a mediated vision where existential despair is briefly transformed into poetic interludes. The significance of the rabbit shit haikus in Lost Lost is indicated by a story that Mekas relates (twice) in voice over, about "the man who couldn't live anymore without the knowledge of what's at the end of the road." When he reached it, "he found a pile, a small pile of rabbit shit at the end of the road, and back home he went and when people used to ask him, 'Hey, where does the road lead to?', he would answer, 'Nowhere. The road leads nowhere and there is nothing at the end of the road but a pile of rabbit shit.' Not even the rabbit was there. The road leads nowhere."

In 2007 Jonas Mekas created his own series of 365 films, also made for internet and iPod, although where

Onodera's instalments are terribly brief, each of Mekas's run from five to ten minutes.4 The films are dated to chronicle the days of the year, and they are in much the same style as Lost Lost Lost and the other segments of the Diary Notes and Sketches project of the 60s and 70s, although he himself is far more present now in front of the camera. Densely populated with friends, colleagues and celebrity musicians and filmmakers, this is the everyday life of the Artistic Director of Anthology Film Archives, a man at the center of a cultural whirlwind, who has nevertheless retained his poetic D.I.Y. sensibility. In lieu of special digital effects, Mekas relies on low-tech graphics, low-level lighting and his familiar voice-over narration. He may have replaced his Bolex with a video camera, but his methodology has hardly changed at all. A certain obsession pervades this work, a desire to grasp every living moment before it slips away unnoticed and unremarked, to endow the banality of everyday life with the poetry of memorialization.⁵ The story about the rabbit shit is predictably recited in Mekas's rhythmic intonations in the January 30, 2007 episode.

For Mekas, the difference between the present and the past is always tinged with nostalgia as he inscribes longing into every image of his life. Onodera challenges that sense of nostalgia with a more pervasive sense of the ephemeral. The final video called *the end?* features a set of aerial shots of mountainous landscapes shot from a plane,



tinted vibrant shades of blue, green, purple, orange and red, in a changing rectangular collage of frames. With a soundtrack of electronic rumblings, the titles announce the imminent crumbling of the planet home that we

take for granted. Again, the didacticism of the text lends banality to the imagery, and the apocalyptic "message" is packaged into a platitude of doom. Only the colours speak out from the digital matrix, indicating a way out of the impasse of global despair. The absurdity of seeing the planet dissolve in the palm of your hand as you cradle your toy is much more powerful than the "message" of environmental collapse. If we can hold the whole world in our hands with an iPod, all sentiments are going to be diminished. In this sense Onodera might have discovered the true (digital) form of the rabbit shit haiku for the early 21st century.

The haiku form as it originated with Basho and the Zen poets was an attempt to evoke a certain experience through language: the experience of insight into the oneness of nature and the insignificance of self. As a fragmentary form, it appeared strangely "modern" to modernists such as Jonas Mekas. Three lines, three images or thoughts, snap together into a kind of recognition of the fleetingness of time, the fullness of the moment and the emptiness of past and present. Both Mekas and Onodera serialize their film-haikus in numbered series—a format

that inscribes an industrialized technology onto the nature imagery. If Mekas longs for the ideal of the haiku form from which he has been permanently "displaced," Midi Onodera's project poses the question of poetry in the dig-

ital age, or whether iPod haiku is even possible. The iPod adds more information to an already crowded media environment, constituting a distraction from the big picture and more or less inverting or negating the one-



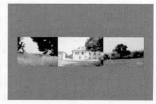
ness of the Universe by breaking it up into ever smaller pieces infused with technology.

The small videos that comprise Onodera's 365 movies have a haiku format in their brevity and their tendency toward the isolation of detail. A single visual element dominates each instalment, and is counter-pointed with sound and text. The poetic effect is a technologically mediated haiku. While the style and the mode of address refer to commercial media, especially advertising, the colours and the play with movement, line, density and collage evoke the avant-garde. As a diary, the project expresses the conflicting impulses of contemporary media toward the creative possibilities of the digital for art-making, on the one hand, and its tendency toward the ephemeral and disposable on the other. 365 films is "too many" movies. What use do they have? What role will they play? Their poetic effect is invested to some extent, in the hardware on which they are viewed, and the ways they interrogate the purposelessness of media. If this seems like a rather bleak conclusion, it is in keeping with the rather bleak outlook of the videos themselves, which are preoccupied with global pandemics and disasters, alongside the drudgery of work and the monotony of routine. However, approached from a slightly different angle, Onodera's 365 videos might be more redemptive.

Miniature Cinema

Writing about QuickTime movies in 1999 (almost ten years ago) Vivian Sobchack compared them to Joseph Cornell's boxes that he assembled in the 1930s and 40s. Like Cornell's collections of photos and small artefacts displayed in materialist collages, QT movies operate as "memory boxes." Sobchack argues that both "emerge explicitly from their relation to a larger totality of material and memorial possibilities: they and their found objects exist... as fragments of a personal experience." 6 In accessing the database of the computer memory, the QT movie always also refers to everything missing, to the depth and

scope of what lies outside the tiny frame. She says, "watching a QT memory box, I always feel the presence of an elusive and vast absence, a sea of memories shifting below the surface and in the interstices of what I actu-



ally see. In other words, I am always aware of the database as *effluvial.*"⁷

Many of Sobchack's remarks about QT movies apply to Onodera's 365 movies as well. Indeed, especially given the personal and artisanal manner of their construction, they evoke Cornell's collages, and in a sense they play out Sobchack's compelling analogy between Cornell and QT movies in a surprisingly literal way. With the prominence Onodera gives to framing, the many ways in which frames appear within frames, the nested framing within the rectangle of the screen, the short videos evoke the displays of Cornell's boxes. Onodera may not refer to the archive of popular culture and memorabilia as extensively as he does; and yet, her own experience as a body in space—in the city-becomes referenced as a "vast absence" of which we can glimpse only moments and traces. Certainly the remnants of songs, photos, clips and TV images that litter the series tend to reference and package the sensuality of past experience and cultural memory, but unlike Cornell, they are integrated into the pseudo-narrative of the film diary.

The impulse to record something "every day" becomes a ritual that structures the series. Without any guarantee at all that the films were made on the consecutive days of an entire year, the 365-plus films nevertheless constitute an accumulation of memories which have been assigned dates. The impulse toward totality inevitably also points to all that which is forgotten, unrecorded and unrevealed—some of which may be lingering in a database or hard drive somewhere outside the frame. Sobchack's argument about QT movies is based in part on Gaston Bachelard's



notion of space, and the aesthetics of containment, but also on Susan Stewart's theory of the miniature. Stewart's discussion of the aesthetics of size concerns the way that signification is altered through the processes of

magnification and exaggeration that characterize giganticism and miniaturization. As the relation of viewer to image or text is altered, so too is the production of meaning.

Stewart describes the miniature books of the 15th century as tiny accessories that were worn like jewels. They contained within them such information as calendars and almanacs, or bibles carefully and meticulously transcribed. For Stewart, the miniature "appears as a metaphor for all books and bodies." It amplifies interiority and exteriority and the division between them, and thus exaggerates "the divergent relations between the abstract and the material nature of the sign." Consider her remarks on the miniature book in relation to Onodera's gem-like haikus: "the book/jewel, carried by the body, multiplies significance by virtue of the tension it creates between inside and outside, container and contained, surface and depth." She further suggests that the miniature is the closest thing we have to a three-dimensional language, for

it continually points outside itself, creating a shell-like or closed exteriority." ¹⁰ If the diary project is about making one's experience somehow "significant," Onodera chal-

lenges and complicates the authenticity of experience. The image-object crystallizes perception and experience as an effect of technology, so that the "inside" is neither the identity of the filmmaker nor



the residue of experience, but an allegory of these things.

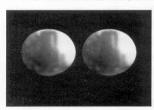
The reader of miniaturization, or the viewer of an iPod movie, is rendered larger, and in a sense disengaged from the text. The body is materialized in relation to the textobject and is necessarily outside and beyond it. Haidee Wasson has examined the small screens of QuickTime in light of Stewart's notion of miniaturization to suggest that it is a cinema of "suggestion"—rather than attraction. Streamed web films, which Onodera's 365 films are also designed for, are by nature fragmented and unstable, linked to the networks of technologies that bring them to the variable interfaces of computer screens. 11 iPod cinema is likewise dependent on a variable technological apparatus of delivery, and perhaps even more than QT movies, the hand-held movie is materialized in its technological inscription. Onodera's experimental aesthetics tend to foreground the technological abstraction of the pixilated image, exploring the full range of optics that the low-density image allows.

Stewart also notes that the miniature lends itself to tableau rather than to narrative. She remarks that it tends "toward expository closure. Whereas speech unfolds in time, the miniature unfolds in space." This brings us close to the contradictions informing Onodera's project in which everyday life is cut off from everyday life, packaged and labelled as precisely "epigrams and proverbs"—which Stewart notes are forms "whose function is to put an end to speech and the idiosyncrasies of immediate context."12 The miniature creates an "other" time, outside historical time, a time of reverie and fantasy, a time that Sobchack has linked to the unconscious of the database of computer memory. In Onodera's iPod cinema, the nostalgia of a diary project such as Mekas's is reconfigured as a spatial relationship between the "real" scale of the present tense and the miniaturized scale of the past that we literally hold

The soundtracks of the 365 films are in an important sense equally miniaturized in their low density mixes, reduced in most instances to a single thematic sonic element. Even if they are simple soundtracks, the audio environment is inevitably "larger" than the tiny image. It makes the experiential link between body and image, and is key to the effect of fantasy and reverie. Water sounds, animal sounds, traffic sounds, and music samples tend to amplify the spatial parameters of the small screen, giving it a rich sensual overlay. At the same time, they enable a

dimension of interactivity as the viewer can always alter the volume level according to individual comfort levels and audio environments. The 365 films are certainly not designed to be viewed silently, and in this sense, Stewart's notions of visual miniaturization need to be modified in the case of audio-visual web-streamed and iPod cinema. Sounds can be bigger than images, but Onodera's sound-tracks "work" best on a medium low setting. There are only a few fragments of dialogue occasionally overheard, and only a scattering of pop song samples to be heard. In most instances, the sound sets up a dialogue with the image as an equal partner, a suggestive counterpoint or imprecise dialogue.

The iPod is after all, or was, in the beginning, a listening device, but with the addition of the screen it becomes a portable cinema. Can it be considered a toy cinema? As an inversion of the Bazinian goal of "total cinema, what "use" does the iPod have? Stewart notes that toys are yet another manifestation of miniaturization, and we know that cinema was presaged by a series of parlor toys-visual devices with which adults entertained themselves before the "cinema" emerged. The iPod has in a sense taken us back to this era, as an instance of what Sobchack describes as a "false cinematic 'primitivism.'" 13 The automatons and model trains, the dolls and doll houses that also populate the world of toys are, according to Stewart, means of initiating another world—the world of daydream. The world of the toy is "an entirely new temporal world" because in the animation of the inanimate, the inverse is always legible—the proximity of the inanimate world of things to everyday life. Toys constitute the "dead among us" and also ensure the continuation, in miniature, of the world of life "on the other side." 14 Onodera's camera was designed for children, and perhaps the iPod was as well, so what are adults doing with it? Is



it the rabbit shit at the end of the road? The leavings of the technological imagination, finally reconfigured as an inspiration to day dream? Does this project forecast a future in which the immersive

spectacle of total cinema, along with its fiction of the unified subject is abandoned?

Onodera's 365 films, in their flow and their seriality, and in their toy-like apparatus, constitute another world. As a miniature cinema, outside of time, the project articulates another spatial and temporal world, which is that of digital media—a fragmentary, networked, omnipresent world in which the subject is infinitely dispersed. The world of representations and simulacra is finally transcended, leaving the body stranded in time and space, looking in to an allegory of the desire for transcendence. It points to a time beyond the society of the spectacle. I would describe the project as an allegory of a diary, a construction of everyday life and subjective experience from

a vast and infinite memory bank. The data of dreams, of glimpses and desires, has become detached from its profilmic sources and remade in the form of a new, tiny object. Experience has been completely remade and reinvented; the subject of perception in turn is infinitely displaced and deferred. The filmmaker has found herself as a lost and dispersed series of information, statistics, visions and hallucinations in which boredom is endured and revised as digital haiku. Like the ancient poetic form, they are at once beautiful and empty. They are indeed gem-like drawing the viewer into the vast expanse of the microscopic nothingness of the microchip in the box.

Catherine Russell is Professor of Film Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. She is the author of Narrative Mortality: Death, Closure and New Wave Cinemas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999). Her book The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity is forthcoming from Duke University Press. See http://cinema.concordia.ca/index.php/russell.

Notes

- David James, Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties, (New Brunswick NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) 12.
- 2 Lost Lost Lost is one part of a larger film project called Diaries Notes and Sketches that comprises footage shot from 1949 to 1975. Before coming to the United States, Mekas was labeled a "Displaced Person" as a refugee during the war, and he identifies himself as a "DP" in a community of European immigrants displaced by the war within his diary film project.
- 3 Onodera plays the role of a lesbian in *Parallax*, and *Displaced View* is about her Japanese heritage.
- 4 Mekas's 365-film project is available through the Maya Stendhal Gallery at http://www.jonasmekas.com/inter.html.
- 5 In a recent documentary about Jonas Mekas, he is seen shooting video constantly, *In the Shadow of the Light* dir. Sarah Payton, 2006.
- 6 Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for the Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of Quick Time," Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film, Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) 67
- 7 Sobchack, 67.
- 8 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 44
- Stewart 41
- 10 Stewart 45
- 11 Haidee Wasson, "The Networked Screen: Moving Images, Materiality, and the Aesthetics of Size," in Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema, Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord eds., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 81.
- 12 Stewart 67
- 13 Sobchack, 66.
- 14 Stewart 57.