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# Return Again: Subjectivity and Spectatorship in Niamh O'Malley's 'Vignettes'

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Ritualised behaviours seem to dominate the moving images that form part of Niamh O'Malley's 'vignettes', echoing and indexing a more structural concern with repetition. Each vignette is a composite of projected and painted imagery, typically consisting of a static scene, often a landscape, which is temporarily animated by the play of light and shadow emanating from a video projector. Human figures move through these hybrid environments, often engaging in activities that are repetitive or cyclical in character. The weary climbers filing past the camera as they reach the summit of the mountain in *Croagh Patrick 'vignette'* (2006), for example, are following a pilgrim trail that has been established for centuries. Similarly, the boys that launch themselves again and again from the diving platform in *Lough Owel 'vignette'* (2006) are engaged in a familiar rite of passage, possibly inherited from parents or older brothers and sisters.

While some of the video footage has obviously been recorded at a distance, suggesting covert surveillance or scientific observation, the camera is often placed directly in the path of the passers-by. But its presence is rarely acknowledged and this contributes to the sense that these human subjects share a trancelike state, which serves to remove them from their environment. This apparent dissociation between figure and landscape is heightened through specific processes of production and exhibition. With each vignette, O'Malley begins by making a series of video field recordings, which she then projects in her studio before isolating a specific fragment of action. This fragment is then further distilled, yielding both a moving image component, which is looped and repeated, and static features that are transposed to the canvas through painting.

While she paints, O'Malley refers repeatedly to the video projection but also pays particular attention to the surface of the canvas, adding specific textures or finishes to

create depth or luminosity. This careful and deliberate manipulation of optical properties is an established feature of her practice, and it is worth noting that the vignettes were preceded by a series of large-scale wall paintings incorporating persuasive and seductive visual effects, in the tradition of the *trompe l'oeil*. This exploration of artifice and seduction, in both the vignettes and the earlier work, exists in dialogue with a critique of established modes of pictorial representation. *The Return 'vignette'* (2005), for example, depicts a large new house set against a colourful backdrop of rolling hills and dramatic clouds. The scene initially appears idyllic, marred only by the presence of passing traffic, but as the cars move past the camera, the lack of action elsewhere within the frame creates a sense of unease. When the projection fades to white, it become apparent that the picturesque backdrop is partly invented; the mountains are actually relatively stark and the dramatic cloudscape is entirely artificial.

This moment of revelation is central to O'Malley's work, and each and every moving image sequence is briefly suspended so that the painted canvas can be viewed. The technology of projection is never hidden and the absence of recorded sound tends to solicit an explicitly visual and spatial interaction with the work. Unlike many film or video installations, the vignettes do not replicate a cinematic experience; instead of seating themselves in front of a screen, viewers are more likely to move around and repeatedly reposition themselves in relation to the canvas and projector. By directing attention to the apparatus of cinematic illusion, these works evoke earlier moments in the history of avant-garde film practice, such as the anti-perspectivalism of Stan Brakhage or the 'expanded cinemas' of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice. In the vignettes, however, illusion is somehow never fully dispelled. The revelation of the painted canvas should provide a sense of closure, but the opposite is often the case so that repeated viewing actually generates ambiguity.

The *Lough Owel 'vignette'* is particularly interesting in this respect; as already noted, this work depicts a group of pre-adolescent boys as they repeatedly climb up and jump off a diving platform. Each leap disturbs the calm surface of the lake, sending ripples outwards towards the edges of the canvas. As the action repeats, certain details begin to stand out.

For example, one boy is too afraid to jump from the top of the platform, and he waits until the others cannot see him before diving from the lower level. It is tempting to read this scene through the frame of psychoanalytic theory; the rippling of the water is of course suggestive of submerged memory, while processes of repetition are also central to both Freudian and Lacanian accounts of loss and desire. According to Freud, the child's game of continually throwing and then retrieving a plaything may serve as a means of coming to terms with the loss of the maternal figure. Lacan subsequently reinterpreted this scenario to explain the transition from the realm of the imaginary (associated with plenitude and the maternal) into that of the symbolic (associated with language). He suggested that the child's gestures could be linked to the process of acquiring language, emphasising that language functions as a system of differences. Within this system, meaning is derived from the relations that exist between words rather than from their intrinsic properties. Entry into the social realm involves recognition of difference, and also acceptance of mediation by others within a system of exchange. The combination of component elements in the vignettes dramatises a parallel process of transition between states, most obviously through the play of surfaces animating the Lough Owel piece.

O'Malley's work can also be theorised through reference to the history and social context of early cinema. Several vignettes feature representations of nineteenth century leisure spaces, most notably *Phoenix Park 'vignette'* (2006) and *The Dene 'vignette'* (2004), which is set in Central Park. Both works are concerned with the status of the park, as a highly constructed landscape that is designed to be experienced as a series of visually pleasing scenes. Significantly, the development of public parks during the nineteenth century parallels the emergence of a broad range of leisure spaces. These include both educational environments, such as museums and libraries, and spaces of spectacular entertainment, such as arcades and fairgrounds. Emerging on the margins of these leisure spaces, cinema seemed to offer a fusion of both education and entertainment. Just as the nineteenth century parks drew inspiration from painting, cinema borrowed from a variety of established narrative and pictorial forms, extending from photography and journalism to stage melodrama, fairytale and the magic lantern. This complex genealogy is directly evoked in O'Malley's work both by the term 'vignette' (suggesting a familiar or

conventional view) and by an intriguing fusion of fantasy and documentary elements.

Early cinema is often thought to be dominated by two opposing traditions; one associated with fantasy and artifice (exemplified by the trick films of Georges Méliès) and the other characterised by naturalism (as evidenced by the Lumières' actualities). For many audiences, however, the technology of cinema itself was the primary attraction, whether used in the service of naturalism, fantastic illusion or both. As Tom Gunning has noted, the 'cinema of attractions' appealed to audiences that were familiar with theatrical spectacle but equally fascinated by the science of cinematography.[1] In the vignettes these traditions seem to co-exist, and even to merge at various points; everyday images of the natural world (reminiscent of actuality filmmaking) are combined with optical trickery. Also, in keeping with the conventions of early cinema, the vignettes deliberately display rather than disguise the material and technological supports that make illusion possible.

Through these references to early cinema and the evolution of other forms of public spectacle, the vignettes offer an oblique but compelling commentary on changing modes of subjectivity. As film historians have noted, early cinema constituted an important 'public sphere', which was accessible to a very diverse array of urban dwellers, including women, workers and immigrants.[2] But the reinvention of cinema during the late 1910s, through the efforts of filmmakers, entrepreneurs and censors, contributed to a shift in modes of storytelling and exhibition. Cinema began to demand a new level of emotional and psychological involvement and live performance (in the form of musical accompaniment, commentary or interval acts) declined. Gradually, new modes of reception emerged and the collective gave way to isolated spectators.

It is within the context of this exploration of spectatorship that O'Malley's use of digital media acquires particular significance. Many artists working with the projected image have specifically sought to explore themes of obsolescence by utilising formerly

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[1] Tom Gunning theorises the cinema of attractions in various contributions to the anthology *Early Cinema: Space, Frame and Narrative*, edited by Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI Publishing, 1990).
[2] Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, (Harvard University Press, 1994).

industrial (analogue) media such as 16mm film or 35mm transparencies.[3] The vignettes clearly engage with themes of obsolescence, simply because of the fact that digital video is likely to displace 35mm film projection at some point in the future. The combination of video projection and painted canvas could also be read as a commentary upon processes of privatisation. This is because both painting and projection were once, at different moments, associated with public space but have since been reinvented for domestic consumption. Ultimately, the vignettes seem less concerned with technological obsolescence than with the decline of certain forms of collective subjectivity. In fact, critique of privatisation is already in evidence in O'Malley's work, perversely encoded within the representation of public spaces. At first glance, the joggers and walkers moving through Central Park and Phoenix Park seem to be engaged in a social activity that involves interaction with their environment and each other. But the structure and form of the vignette emphasises the extent to which these individuals remain detached from the spaces that they pass through. As one loop gives way to the next, and as the figures return again to animate their static landscapes, it becomes apparent that most will never be fully present in these places.

[3] See Rosalind Krauss's discussion of obsolescence in relation to the work of James Coleman "…And Then Turn Away", *October* 81, Summer 1997: 5-33.