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The Book of Salt

Andrew M. Busti

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THE BOOK OF SALT

by

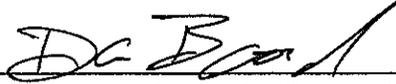
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B.F.A., University of Colorado, 2005

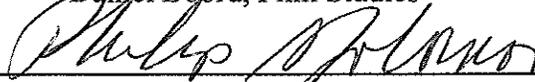
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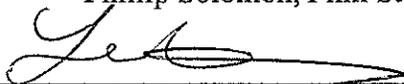
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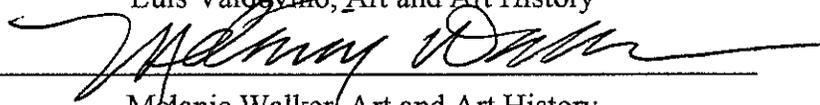
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Date 4/21/08

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Busti, Andrew Michael (M.F.A., Fine Arts/Film Studies)
The Book of Salt
Thesis directed by Professor Daniel Boord

Time, what does that word mean? Is it the clock ticking away at moments delineated by numbers, a subjective sense of duration, or a succession of discreet moments that are indexical, anticipatory and remembered? The definition would have to account for the numerous subjective experiences of uncountable individuals. Time cannot be an “it”, an object or a thing, but rather a verb, a dynamic happening that may have repetitive qualities, but may also be perceived as infinitely unique. Time may only have meaning at the moment of perception, the “now”. But then what is one to do with memory?

The particular motivation for providing an introductory analysis of *The Book of Salt* will be to reveal the formal devices that provide both literal and metaphorical “symbolism” in relation to the film’s overall focus on time and involuntary memory. The findings of such an analysis will reveal a latent meaning of personal experience that is woven into the work as well as provide a theoretical lens in which to view the work.

The film is derived from a primary concern in finding a means to symbolize abstract concepts of time and memory. This film searches to find a visual language in which to articulate the suchness of a subjective experience and memories. Time and memory are difficult concepts to describe in any form of language. Most individuals have a particular sense of what it is, but can rarely describe it in a concise fashion in relation to verbal or written language. Working with the both the temporal qualities

and physical properties of film has allowed me to produce work that makes my subjective feeling of time and memory a palpable viewing experience.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: Inspiration and Meditations

The initial inspiration for *The Book of Salt* arose out of a series of meditations on time and the subjective experience of it. When I turned 18 years of age, my father gave me his grandfather's pocket watch. I considered how it measured time in a very exact and linear fashion for my father, his father, and continued to do so for me. Through contemplation of this elegant device, I began to wonder how this device came to serve as a means to solidify time for a great deal of civilization. A clock or watch makes time tangible and somewhat manageable. It serves as a symbol of civilization's need to conventionalize abstract concepts that are essentially ineffable. So, in a way, the clock serves to define time or give it a representation that can be referred to in daily life. It quantifies experience into a series of numbers that ironically are just as abstract as the concept that they attempt to qualify. In being left with a sense of disappointment with this counting device's ability to represent the concept of time, I began to consider what time might be or feel like to me as an individual. Experience feels like an accumulation, as if all the moments that I have lived have brought me to the present moment. The present moment is fleeting, always passing, becoming an accumulation of lived moments in the past. The subjective awareness of the present moment then holds with it a simultaneous awareness of the past as well as the future. One assumes another present moment is coming while having some awareness of the moments that have gone by. In meditating on my subjective sense of time, it occurred to me that memory serves as a substantial

element of perceived continuity. It has been my experience that memory functions in two ways in relation to a perceived present moment. Memory can be a voluntary act in which one attempts to visualize a moment, occurrence, or event that one has experienced. But there is also involuntary memory, a flash of remembrance of an event or instance that surfaces in relation to a moment that is being experienced. Involuntary differs from voluntary memory in that it is not willed into ones mind, but rather seems to come from out of the blue. Involuntary memory is also referred to as Proustian memory. Marcel Proust explores the idea of involuntary memory in *Remembrance of Things Past*. Proust writes of an experience of drinking lime flower tea and a little cakes called petites madeleines, in which the taste of the cake dipped in the tea, produces a moment of recollection of a moment that was long forgotten.¹ Maurice Blanchot articulates this concept elegantly in his writings on Proust in *The Book to Come*:

Time is capable of a stranger turn. Some insignificant incident, which took place at a certain moment, now long ago, forgotten, and not only forgotten, unperceived—the course of time brings it back, and not as a memory, but as an actual event, which occurs anew, at a new moment in time...not a past and a present, but one single presence that causes incompatible moments, separated by the entire course of lived life, to coincide in a palpable simultaneity.²

It is this concept of involuntary memory or Proustian memory that I have set out to explore both thematically and formally in *The Book of Salt*.

The Book of Salt arose out of this particular meditation on time and involuntary memory. After locating a few rolls of Regular 8mm and Super 8mm

¹ Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*. New York: Random House, 1980, p.26.

² Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p.12.

family footage, which includes, my 4th birthday and my parents wedding, I considered these recorded experiences as preserved memories that held the potential to evoke the sense of involuntary memory and “palpable simultaneity” described by Blanchot. This footage held the potential to evoke this sense, in that the imagery in the footage either seemed or actually was the only memory of it. I was not in attendance at my parents wedding but I do have a familial connection to the people depicted. Where as in the roll that contained my birthday footage, I actually had no recollection of the events in my own memory until I saw the images. But even then, it seemed uncanny that one could watch oneself at an early age without any recollection of the initial events. This moment presented time that I experienced, that had been lost.

The title of the work is derived from my initial response to seeing these family films and personal sense of regaining time that had been lost. These family and personal events had been preserved in their recording. The word “salt” in the title is a direct reference to the element in the photographic emulsion that allows it to capture an image. Silver nitrate is a form of silver that is lacking an electron, and must gain this electron in order to return to its most natural state, that of metallic silver. So in a sense the silver salt that is present in the emulsion is in a state of lack or need. In the film’s emulsion there is also bromine, which can easily emit an electron when it is put in contact with light. This free electron is taken by the silver nitrate and forms a latent or unseen image in the films emulsion in relation to the light that was reflected by the outside world through the lens of the camera, therefore capturing an image of the outside world. Salt also plays a role in the preservation of foods and has been used in certain mummification practices. It is the idea of preservation in relation to the body

and the preservation of memories in the photographic medium that I wish to evoke in the title. The word “Book” in the title has a biblical resonance. Many of the books that make up the bible are titled “The Book of Job” and in many cases are personal accounts of events that took place, and therefore preserving the event from a particular viewpoint. Another biblical reference stems from Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot’s wife looks back in longing at the destroyed city and is turned into a pillar of salt.³ So the title of the film *The Book of Salt* should be considered in these terms, which suggest memory and looking to what has past and that which is preserved in a particular form.

³ The New American Bible, Catholic Companion Edition. Wichita: Fireside Bible Publishers, 1997, p.24.

CHAPTER II

Influences: Hollis Frampton and Phil Solomon

Hollis Frampton's film *(nostalgia)* (1971), a major influence that deserves mention in relation to *The Book of Salt*, explores temporality and how memory relates to the present. Frampton utilizes a simple set up which presents a photograph sitting on top of a hotplate. We see the photograph begin to fade and eventually burn away before our eyes, which takes about 3 to 4 minutes to be fully consumed. While we are presented with the image of a particular photograph, the audio track of the film is describing the photograph that will be presented next as well as providing reminiscent recollections of the times when the photographs were taken. The viewer is hearing a description of what will come and looking at the photograph that was previously described. The film, therefore, places the viewer in a state of memory and anticipation. The most influential aspect being how Frampton presented to influence that the past and future can have on the present moment. Frampton's imagery relies on the destruction of a photographic image in the film as a means to suggest time passing into memory. *The Book of Salt* differs in its treatment of imagery to suggest passed time. My film attempts to evoke the feeling of memory through the re-contextualization and manipulation of pre-recorded images in order to present them as new moments that flash out of the past into the present moment. It differs in its formal arrangement as well, by fragmenting its imagery as well as suggesting a nonlinear temporal progression, which jumps fluidly between past and future.

Phil Solomon's *Remains to be Seen* (1989), presents the viewer with a depiction of the memories revisited by a life in passing or in limbo between life and death. With the use of family films and landscape photography, the film presents impressionistic imagery in a space that has a sense of time outside of time, where memories and spaces are linked in a formal logic that evokes both a sense of prophecy and nostalgia. *The Book of Salt* is directly informed by the elasticity of temporal spaces utilized in Solomon's film, but is concerned with suggesting a space of vulnerability, open to flashes of gestures and moments lost in time. Memory here, is not habitable, but rather erupts into present recognition from an undefined space.

CHAPTER III

Process

As a process oriented filmmaker, I find that a discussion of my particular processes informs my body of work as a whole. There is a primary concern with silver based photography and filmmaking with a focus on chemical and physical manipulation of silver based images. One of my early works in super 8mm, a portrait of an antique Sears Roebuck wheelchair, titled *Wheelchair (2001)*, utilizes chemical toning as a means to degrade the physical image. The intention behind utilizing a chemical induced degradation in this work was to create an image that reflected the antiquity of the wheelchair. The wheelchair is slowly rusting and succumbing to time and the elements. The toning of the image invokes the natural processes of rusting, leaving a thick patina that consumes the shadows of the image, while the highlights glow through unaffected in contrast to the degraded shadows. This simultaneity of image destruction and detail illumination provides an entirely new image from the one initially photographed. This new image evokes the antiquity, degradation, and physical consumption of the actual wheelchair rather than just depicting an antique.

In *At Hand (2005)*, a different chemical process was explored in relation to the theme of the work. This film is an exploration of a dying relationship set in the subconscious landscape of the mind. The intention behind the chemical manipulation in this work was to create a space that is indefinable and constantly in flux. The chemical process used is an antiquated reversal process that removes the emulsion of the film in proportion to the darks in a black and white image, while leaving the

whites or highlights unaffected. Through careful monitoring of the image in the chemical, one can stop the reversal process before it fully removes the dark areas of the film. In doing so, the dissolved area of the image is left partially intact and resembles sheets of silk bubbling and rippling within the image. This is referred to as veiling, since the sheets resemble a thin veil. I considered the veil as a formal device to partially conceal the image from the viewer. The image floats between a space of abstraction and representation. The film follows a basic structure of descent, excavation, and ascent. The film contains image of a disembodied hand searching through the veiled muck of the mind, finding a female form, which seems dead or sleeping, and a release of the female form from the veiled subconscious. The film was a basic attempt at a uniting form, the veiled image, with content that necessitates a level of abstraction. The subconscious memory cannot easily be depicted, and the case of *At Hand*, the chemically manipulated image offered a way to embed the imagery in an abstracted and tumultuous space, which fit my conception of what the subconscious might look and feel like.

In *The Book of Salt*, is a step away from chemical process, but is similar to my other works in that there is a strong focus on how an image looks, in relation to how it might feel or be read by the viewer. In her book *Touch*, Laura Marks suggests that films which utilize deteriorating imagery with a diminished visibility disrupts viewer identification in the conventional sense.

...significance relies not on the viewer's ability to identify signs, but on a dispersion of the viewer's look across the surface of the image...and reconfigure identification so that it is not with a coherent subject but with nonhuman or

inanimate objects, and with the body of the image itself. They compel identification with a process, which is material but nonhuman.⁴

The primary concern in the film is how to articulate moments of involuntary memory in relation to a personal past. This focus is similar to that of *At Hand*, in its primary goal of exploring personal conceptions of mind and memory. *The Book of Salt* does utilize imagery of clouds and a storm that have been heavily toned in order to create an image that is different from ones normal view of clouds. The toned image is degraded, but also takes on other worldly colors, which remove the imagery from basic reality and suggest an alternate space. The realistic imagery culled from family movies was also manipulated in a way that provided a reading that is different from the original context. Manipulating the light in these images became my primary mode. Because the images already existed on film, they needed to be re-photographed on an optical printer in order allow for this kind of light manipulation. The light manipulation allowed me to make the images flash and flicker in and out of darkness. The idea was to create an image that suggested memories that flashed out of the unknown or darkness, into light and clarity. This also allowed me to focus on certain gestures that took place in the original footage. One example of this takes place near the end of the film, there is a shot with my grandmother sitting in a pew with my grandfather, and they are at my parents wedding. The shot begins with a fully lit frame, and ends with just my grandfather's hand illuminated with everything else darkened. This draws attention to the quality of the hand and the light that seems to emanate from it. It therefore becomes significant in a way that is very different from

⁴ Marks, Laura. Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p.92.

the original context of the family footage. The hand becomes significant in its new light; it is the only thing lit in the frame, and therefore presents it as a fragment of the original image. The overall goal in the film was to present fragments of personal moments that were recorded on film as memories that flash out of an undefined space and create connections between other fragmentary memories. So in order to create a new context that could focus on fragmentary memory it was important to recreate the recorded imagery.

The other aspect of recreation focused on the natural decay of some of the pre-recorded imagery. The footage from my birthday had grown a mold over the years, and offered a natural patina that is a record of time's effect on the film surface. This was consistent with my approach to creating a work of fragmentary memory. The mold fragments the image and embeds it in a wash that conceals the original clarity of the image. I drew attention to this natural patina in order to suggest that memories are actually new representations of past events experienced in the present.

CHAPTER IV

Form and Content

The Book of Salt revolves around the imagery of an impending storm. The film begins with clouds, which were filmed in time-lapse to accentuate their flow and activity. The clouds are constantly shifting color from bronze/gold to a blue through the use of chemical toning. The toner reacts erratically to the image, so each frame is varied and unique. The cloud imagery suggests two perceptible variations of time. The time-lapse flow of the clouds, offers an accumulation effect of time, while the toning texture with great variation between successive frames draws attention to the uniqueness of each present moment. There is also a flicker to the clouds, which suggests storm like activity, lightening and thunder. This effect offers a visual representation of linear temporal progression interwoven with moments of discreet uniqueness. I utilize the clouds as a visual metaphor for clocks and timepieces, but as constantly variable, without mechanical repetition. The cracking of the films emulsion in the cloud shots, suggests lightening as well as a splitting of the perceived moment of now into the past, or memory.

The first section of the film involves a children's birthday party. To begin the film here introduces a continued motif of stages in life. Here the birthday stands in for birth, for innocence, and in my case the earliest recorded film image of me as a child. These images also flicker like the clouds, the storm, and the lightning. The children are inside the home at a table with a window near by, it seems as though this scene could be a flash of lightning from the storm or a space that is safe from the storm

outdoors that is flickering through the window. This section repeats an image of a little girl in a birthday hat staring out the window, but we are unsure as to whether she is watching the impending storm, or gazing out the window daydreaming. This shot of the little girl cuts away to a scene outside the house, a scene in which the little girl is included as well as the other children and adults walking in a line. This shot resembles a funeral procession, which in the context of the birthday party suggests the idea of birth and death. Birthdays are both rituals and markers that mark progression through time. The sequence ends with a shot of myself blowing out the last candle on a birthday cake. There is a cut to black with a sound of thunder, suggesting a sense of lost memory through the actual loss of light in the cut. The sound of the thunder links the idea of memory as a flash of light with the clouds and storm we saw before. Memory as fleeting and erupting out of our metaphorical clock storm, coming in a flash of lightning and awareness, but disappearing just a fast.

To consider the lighting and textural components of this section in relation to the theme of memory will help identify the formal devices that evoke a sense of involuntary memory. The birthday party images flicker in a similar fashion to the cloud and storm footage. This flicker links the images to the storm, suggesting that the images themselves come out of nowhere, or other time, in a flash. This flicker also references the cinematic apparatus; silent film speed at 18 frames per second has a perceptible flicker. The footage of the birthday and all other footage in film are culled from home movies, which are projected at 18 frames per second and therefore when one revisits these recorded memories, they undulate in varied light. The light in the birthday section also has a luminescence, other than direct projected light, and

seems to glow of its own necessity. These images have a vibrant glasslike quality that both shimmers and cracks in the play of light on the surface. It is as if the image and memory contained cannot maintain initial clarity; they burst forth through the forgotten in a form that cannot be the initial moment but rather an entirely new experience of what has passed. The flash of recollection is still vulnerable to time and quickly passes.

The motif of reflection and memory is established in the first section with the image of the little girl looking out the window. The rest of the film is a departure from the birthday prologue and presents moments that are associated with different stages of ones life. The following section is introduced by a shot of me as a child running in the rain, during a storm, up and down the sidewalk. This provides a bridge to the wedding and garden section. This shot is used in varied repetition in order to suggest my voluntary urge to recollect certain moments from my families past.

The section that relates to the garden and the wedding offers a recollection of middle life. Maybe one gets married and has children, the children are taught to tend the garden. The elders are present with the children, which allows the different stages of life to intermingle, rather than being represented as separate from the others. The garden section is also juxtaposed with the cloud and storm imagery in order to suggest the impending passing of time over these images. The final section of the film is a re-visitation to the garden, but now in old age. Images of my grandmother looking out are juxtaposed with the image of the little girl looking out the window at the birthday party, creating a link between memories of completely different time periods. The small boy is let inside the house, given shelter from the storm, with the

help of his grandmother, while the film concludes with a shot of me as a child running a rainstorm. In this shot I run far away from the camera down the road only to disappear in a final flash of light. To link these two images of the boy seeking shelter, and myself in the storm, suggests a duality between memory as a safe haven and time as that which causes one to forget.

Overall, *The Book of Salt* utilizes formal devices that re-contextualize and recreate existing family films into a fragmentary recollection of forgotten memories. These memories and images, which are preserved in their initial recording, become a new image in a fragmentary progression of non-linear temporality. The fragments and gestures depicted become juxtaposed in relation to their significance, without concern for the logical display of past, present, and future. The images taken separately would lack the import that they gain in a fragmentary depiction of memory; they would merely be nostalgic recollections. Putting these images in a fragmentary form allows for connections between very separate time periods, suggesting that entirely new meanings arise from present recollections of past events.

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