I had started to feel like the world had been invaded by a past that we could recognize but no longer understand. Something told me that my own memory was going. I was noticing too many things without being able to say much about them other than that I had seen them before. Though I could no longer match every face from that time with a name, I still recognized hers. Like most of those who had seen her, I hardly knew who she was. What I did know was that her image cast a long shadow.

—Narrator speaking of Angela Davis in Coco Fusco’s a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert

In Death 24x a Second, Laura Mulvey argues that cinematic images belie the deathlike qualities of still photography because of their ability to invoke the appearance of life through motion. This essay examines film and video projects that use found footage and still images from the Black Power era by redeploying them in experimental film and digital formats. Often highly didactic and formulaic in their original form, the Black Panther Party’s (BPP) imagery of guns, fists, and men in militarized formations contested prevailing notions of race, power, and masculinity. Similarly, groups like the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) are most often remembered through their spectacular representation in visual media culture rather than through their political actions or agendas.

Video and film projects such as Raymond Pettibon and David Markey’s Citizen Tania (1989), Fred Ho and Paul Chan’s Black Panther Suite (1998), Isaac Julien’s Baltimore (2003), Sharon Hayes’s Symbionese Liberation Army, Screed #16, Patricia Hearst’s Second Tape (2005), Coco Fusco’s a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert (2004), and Goran Hugo Olsson’s Black Power Mixtape 1967–1975 (2011) mobilize Black Power images in a formal as well as narrative challenge to conventions around race, gender, and sexuality. They also question the notion that the historical past is effectively dead because of its seemingly fixed status as a static object in structures of nostalgia and memory. Film, video, and installation work by Fusco, Julien, Pettibon, Kerry James Marshall, Bill Jones and Suzy Lake, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Carrie Mae Weems position still photography in ways that challenge the boundaries of new media and the prevalent notion that the radical ideologies of the Black Power era are necessarily dead.

These films act as a mediation of the political in that they negotiate between the material physical reality of history, nostalgia, and the failed utopian aspirations of the liberation movements that they represent. But they also represent, as well as (re)present, an archive of negotiation around the materiality of the still image and the spectacular nature of the moving image. Laura Mulvey begins her essay “The Index and the Uncanny: Life and Death in the Photograph” with Rosalind Krauss’s assertion that still photography is situated “at the crossroads of science and spiritualism” and thus generates “associations with life after death, while also supplying, for the first time in human history, a mechanized imprint of reality.” Mulvey’s deployment of Krauss thus locates photography as both an index of physicality and as a signifier of what lies beyond the physical, for her, it is “the uncanny.” I wish to explore this canon of films in relationship to an uncanny that is both pictorial and political.

The SLA and the BPP differed widely in ideology, methodology, and political impact, but the two groups shared an investment in redefining media culture through spectacular moments of what Regis Debray would label “armed propaganda.” In his widely influential 1967 account of guerrilla war
The spectacle is the other side of money: it is the general abstract equivalence of all commodities. Money dominated society as the representation of general equivalence, namely, of the exchangeability of different goods whose uses could not be compared. The spectacle is the developed modern complement of money where the totality of the commodity world appears as a whole, as a general equivalence for what the entire society can and can do.

For Debord, the spectacle becomes a defining feature of capitalist society because it begins to define everything from social structures to social relationships. He writes: “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images,” it is “a writatuanhuang which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified.”

In 1968, a year after Debord published Society of the Spectacle and Debra published Revolution in the Revolution, Guevara would be killed in the jungles of Bolivia after failing to incite revolution there; and Larry Neal would declare the Black Arts movement “the sister to the Black Power concept.” Groups such as the SLA and the BPP sought to shatter the stranglehold that dominant media and advertising had over visual culture by consciously attempting to disrupt existing image culture with a kind of “armed propaganda” shaped at least partly by the Black Arts movement’s belief that black culture should reflect a uniquely black aesthetic. The BPP’s entry into media culture was its dramatic protest in 1967 at the California statehouse in Sacramento against proposed legislation to ban the carrying of firearms in public. Two factors greatly enhanced the drama of the Panthers’ appearance: they were armed with rifles and outfitted in their signature black leather jackets and boots, and Governor Ronald Reagan was holding a press conference at the statehouse lawn at the time. Though the Panthers had fewer than fifty members at that point, pictures of the event were on the front page of several national newspapers, including the New York Times. Similarly, the SLA made a deliberate decision to kidnap Patricia Hearst, the daughter of media mogul William Randolph Hearst, to ensure international media coverage for what was then a fledgling organization of less than twenty people.

The Panthers greatly privileged visual culture in their weekly paper, the Black Panther; as David Hilliard wrote in his autobiography, they reasoned that "the black community was basically a non-read community." Their interventions into visual culture through the Black Panther, whose national circulation at its high point reached over one hundred thousand, was complemented by the attention

Laura Mulvey’s Death at 24 a Second reminds us of the relationship between still photography, history, and death. Mulvey focuses on Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny as a moment of frisson between the conscious and the unconscious mind to examine the photograph’s tie to the idea of death as something always present as a moment of anxiety and return for the subconscious but also always disavowed by the conscious mind. Photography as a medium is particularly tied to the question of death by the historical circumstances of its birth as a technology on the cusp of a modernity that was still oscillating between the spiritual and supernaturalism of religion and the secularism of the mechanical and scientific. One need only look at Freud’s 1918 study Totem and Taboo, tellingly subtitled Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics, to see the limitations that Freud presents in imagining the psychic lives and cultural imaginations of the "primitive people." However, African American culture’s deep investment in the haunting of the past in the present and its constant negotiation between collective trauma and the individual psyche makes psychoanalytic theory relevant, especially in relationship to the legacy of the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, which are consistently depicted in relation to politics of mourning.

For Mulvey, it is the photograph’s ability to extract reality from the continuity of chronologically time that ultimately links it to an experience of death, as a still photograph arrests the passing of time in much the same way that death does. It also acts as an index of events that replicates Freudian theories of trauma. Mulvey declares, "Trauma leaves a mark on the unconscious, a kind of index of the psyche that parallels the photograph’s trace of an original event.”

Cinema is, ultimately, a collection of still images set in motion by the cinematic apparatus and is thus the “death at 24 x a second” to which Mulvey’s title refers. It offers, according to Mulvey, a medium that arrests and registers the experience of the history. He writes, “Cinema will increasingly become a source of collective memory of the twentieth century for those who missed living through it.”

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ually in relation to the longing for the utopian possibility that Black Power politics presented, which seems to be lost in the present moment.

The same specter of historical haunting present in a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert reappears in Carrie Mae Weems’s 2008 installation piece The Capture of Angola, which appeared in a 2010 Berkley Art Museum show tellingly titled Hauntology. In Spec- ters of Marx Jacques Derrida relates “hauntology” — a term that he coins in the text — to the “staging for the end of history.” According to Derrida, haunt- ing tests our limits of perception and our sense of being, not only because of the specter’s existence outside time but also because of its complete visual extremity to us. He writes, “This spectral someone other at us, so we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to absolute anteriority and asymmetry.” For visual culture that considers the legacy of the radical black 1960s and 1970s, the photograph exists as the specter of history that it at once familiar and distant. Its pres- ence interrogates and calls on us to examine our position relative to a history that is most notable in the absence of its presence. Stephanie S. Hughley’s comment that Weems is an artist who “remind[s] us of who we have forgotten we are” highlights the ontological problem that this history presents for the viewer.37

Films such as a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert take the portion of the still image and animate it as the unfinished business of history that addresses contemporary black states of being. Unlike direc- tor Raoul Peck, who painstakingly animated famil- iar images of martyred Congo liberation leader Patrice Lumumba, insisting on historical accu- racy and specificity for everything from the actor’s tie to the settings for his feature-length narrative film Lumumba (2000), the films that recycle Black Power images resist the pull toward a hagiographic re-creation of history. Lyle Ashton Harris’s 2010 triptych video installation Untitled (Black Power) appears to reference Richard Wright’s 1954 text Black Power! A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pin- tons in its geographic locale only. While Wright’s text, over four hundred pages long, is a reflection on the specific pitfalls of nationalism in response to the rise of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Harris’s piece empties the obvious ideological and didactic con- tent of its referent by focusing its lens on contempo- rary bodybuilders in an Accra gym. Similarly, Kerry James Marshall’s Memories (1998) isolates some of the most powerful phrases of the Black Power era onto plain white canvases that read “by ANE MEANS NECESSARY,” “BLACK POWER,” and “BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL” in capital letters, without referent to their original historical or rhetorical context. The films that recycle radical political culture reflect an ambivalence toward the continuing presence of their subject matter, even if they have an explicitly didactic aims to “enable a younger generation to acquaint themselves with the Black Power move- ment and its universal impact,” as Goran Hugo Olsson’s Black Power Message, 1967–1975 declares.38

The experimental film work that considers the legacy of radicalism thus negotiates the photo- graph’s status as an evidentiary record of the his- torical at the same time that it negotiates the photo- graph as a record of the uncanny, a present that can never be properly recorded. The films create their notion of black radical history from the discord between history as evidence and history as an index of an inexplicable trauma that is as distant as it is familiar. In Israel Juliens’s Blackmore (2008), actors move through historical figures such as Malcolm X who are frozen in time through their figuration as wax figures in Baltimore’s Great Blacks in Wax museum. Situated in an old firehouse and removed Victorian mansion, this museum is at once archaic and a startlingly present part of Baltimore’s his- tory. The wax figures in the museum recall Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” which defines the uncanny as a moment of “intellectual uncertainty” characterized by a confrontation between the animate and the inani- mate or living and what appears to be living but is actually mechanized. Jentsch writes, “One of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton.”39 Fred defines his own version of the uncanny against Jentsch’s theories, but the wax figures of Julien’s Blackmore raise a different ques- tion in the context of a history of black radicalism:

are this history and the ideologies it represents liv- ing or dead?

According to Jentsch, the uncanny involves a confrontation with death that is symbolized by “intellectual uneasy” with apparently living inani- mate objects. Fred sees the uncanny as a moment of discomfort that mirrors our most primal fears, including castration anxiety. Roland Barthes, as Mulvey points out, sees the pictorial uncanny as representing a conflict with death that is based on photograph’s ability to stop time at a point beyond the boundaries of life and death.40 I want to think of a third conflict that still photography presents: it’s confrontation with history and the historical. In these depictions, the films largely disavow the visual depictions of violence that Black Power groups are so much associated with in the popular imagina- tion; rather, they offer a searching representation of a historical record that is depicted as “lost” or far removed from the contemporary context from which the films work.

Black Panther Suite is a video collaboration between jazz composer Fred Ho and videographer and visual artist Paul Chan and the Afro Asian Music Ensemble, which Ho leads. It presents a visual index of the struggles of nonwhite people in the United States in which the images of black nationalist struggle, particularly of the BPP, are iter- ated throughout the piece in the imagery of a time- less martyrdom. The video does this by blending past and present, still and moving images, digital and film stock. It also mixes, without specific refer- ent, dynamic images as divergent as voiceless digital images of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, still photographs of Ken Saro Wiwa and César Chávez, black-and-white film of Panthers marching in formation, protest footage from South Africa, and graphic drawings by Panther artist Emory Douglas. Ultimately, it wrestles not only with the historical in its narrative index but also with its for- mal mix, which includes still photographs that are dynamically digitally altered. It does so to explore the visual archive of the BPP as a record of not only struggle but also failure.

Black Panther Suite opens by situating the his- tory of the Panthers within the context of the mel- ancholia of a US history of slavery and its close relationship to the uncanny and death. Beginning with images of newspapers into which still photo- graphs of enslaved Africans are inserted and then digitally altered, the film focuses on slavery in the US culture of forgetting. It highlights an absence of an explanatory representation of slavery that caused Malcolm X to declare: “One hundred million Afri- cans were uprooted from the African continent. Where are they today? One hundred million Afri- cans were uprooted, one hundred million . . . [—] excuse me for raising my voice — were uprooted from the continent of Africa. At the end of slavery you didn’t have but 25 million Africans in the west- ern hemisphere. What happened to those 75 million Africans?”41

The sense of longing and loss in Malcolm X’s demand to know the unhinkable is exactly the spirit of history that these films confront. Malve declares, “The frozen frame restores to the moving image the heavy presence of passing time and of mortality.”42 The still photographs of enslaved Africans return the question of history to the trace- presence of people of African descent in the United States in relationship in a moment that accesses both trauma and melancholia. As if images can no longer hold the weight of the video’s ideologi- cal content, the video ends abruptly with a simple black-on-white intertitle that reads, “no picture until we get what we want,” and a similarly
presented recitation of the Panthers’ “Ten Point Program.” In the final ninety seconds, the video holds a black screen as Fred Ho’s composition “Fight, Fall, Fight Again until Victory” plays.

Recent work that considers the SLA is more likely to focus on its status as media event largely eschewing the history of the group as the impetus for mourning invoking or provoking the contemplation of a still photograph. Raymond Pettibon’s work in Citizen Tania [FIG 4] as told to Raymond Pettibon is typical in its ironic address, its playful engagement with popular culture, its lack of attention to any specific historicization, and its reinforcement of the more spectacular aspects of the Hearst kidnapping. Action in the low-budget video read like a who’s who of the Los Angeles underground art and punk world of the 1980s, including filmmaker Dave Markey and Black Flag guitarist Dez Cadena. The SLA’s martyred leader, Donald “Cinque” DeFreeze, the group’s only African American member, is played by Pat Smear, the guitarist Dez Cadena. Black Power politics has since become an untenable solution for both mainstream and African American politics, it will continue to exist in a space of disavowal in mainstream and the specter haunting black visual culture.

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Notes
4. Che Guevara, “Interview with Laura Boquet,” in Bonachea and Valdes, 94.
7. Ibid., 2.
12. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 47.
20. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 16.
26. Ibid., 12.