

DEATH PROOF

Trauma, Memory, and Black Power Era Images in Contemporary Visual Culture



Raymond Pettibon, *Citizen Tania*, 2009. DVD video, 86 min. © Raymond Pettibon. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

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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* (2003), 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 nar-

rative 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."¹ 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-

fare in Latin America, *Revolution in the Revolution*, Debray builds on the philosophy of Che Guevara, of whom he was a close associate, to argue that mass revolution might be triggered by the spectacle of revolution created by small guerrilla forces. This went against the popular ideology of revolutionary social change espoused by its major contemporary actors, including Fidel Castro, who famously asserted that "the duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution,"⁷² or Guevara himself, who vigorously denigrated "coffee-shop theories" and "the do-nothing attitude of those pseudo-revolutionaries who procrastinate under the pretext that nothing can be done against a professional army."⁷³ Guevara instead declared: "Where one really learns is in a revolutionary war; every minute teaches you more than a million volumes of books. You mature in the extraordinary university of experience."⁷⁴ By contrast, Debray would argue that revolution "must have the support of the masses or disappear" and that this support could be created not only through the action of revolution itself but also through the spectacle it created, proving that "a soldier and a policeman are no more bulletproof than anyone else."⁷⁵ Debray and those he influenced thus created the "revolutionary" act of mediation that "revolutionaries" performed at the nexus of the "real" of history and the material traces of that act in media culture.

In his *Society of the Spectacle*—first published in 1967, the same year as Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution*—Guy Debord connects commodity fetishism to social transformation by revealing how the spectacle had come to dominate contemporary society. Debord defines the spectacle as modernity's mediation between the use value of commodities and its representation in money:

The spectacle is the other side of money: it is the general abstract equivalent 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 be and can do.⁶

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 *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified."⁷⁷

In 1968, a year after Debord published *Society of the Spectacle* and Debray 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."⁷⁸ 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 berets, and Governor Ronald Reagan was holding a press conference on 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 the 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 nonreading community."⁷⁹ 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

the Panthers garnered as "media star revolutionaries" when they were lampooned in Tom Wolfe's influential 1970 essay *Radical Chic*. Their impact as visual icons was such that they were both referenced in popular blaxploitation films and featured in films by French New Wave directors Agnes Varda (*Black Panthers—Huey!*, 1968) and Jean-Luc Godard (*Sympathy for the Devil*, 1968). Most of the contemporary video work that references the radical history of the 1960s and 1970s uses the more iconic images from this period.

Laura Mulvey's *Death at 24x a Second* ruminates on the relationship between still photography, history, and death. Mulvey focuses on Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny as a moment of friction 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 non-European people.⁸⁰ 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 chronological 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."⁸¹ Cinema is, ultimately, a collection of still images set in motion by the cinematic apparatus and is thus the "death at 24x a second" to which Mulvey's title refers. It offers, according to Mulvey, a medium that arrests and registers the experience of the history. She writes, "Cinema will increasingly become a source of collective memory of the twentieth century for those who missed living through it."⁸²

a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert draws its title from the name that Angela Davis used while underground, attempting to avoid capture as one of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted. The video mixes dramatized re-



Coco Fusco, *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert*, 2004. Video, 31 min. Image © the artist. Courtesy Video Data Bank.

creations of scenes of surveillance that are ambiguously historically defined as to their placement in a recent present or a historical past with a montage of still images of Davis from the 1960s and 1970s and other women who sport her iconic Afro, including former BPP spokesperson Kathleen Cleaver. Davis has written about how the celebration of the iconic visual style of groups like the Panthers "reduces the politics of liberation to a politics of fashion."⁸³ She has especially lamented the reduction of her own political participation to "a hairdo."⁸⁴ Rather than repeat an easy celebration of Panther style, films such as *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* engage with the ambiguous nature of visual representation, espe-

cially 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 Angela*, which appeared in a 2010 Berkeley Art Museum show tellingly titled *Hauntology*. In *Specters of Marx* Jacques Derrida relates "hauntology"—a term that he coins in the text—to the "staging for the end of history."¹⁵ According to Derrida, haunting 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 exteriority to us. He writes, "This spectral *someone other looks at us*, 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."¹⁶ For visual culture that considers the legacy of the radical black 1960s and 1970s, the photograph exists as the specter of history that is at once familiar and distant. Its presence 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.¹⁷

Films such as *a/k/a Mrs. George Gilbert* take the *punctum* of the still image and animate it as the unfinished business of history that addresses contemporary black states of being. Unlike director Raoul Peck, who painstakingly animated familiar images of martyred Congo liberation leader Patrice Lumumba, insisting on historical accuracy 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 Pathos* 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 content of its referent by focusing its lens on contemporary bodybuilders in an Accra gym. Similarly, Kerry James Marshall's *Mementos* (1998) isolates some of the most powerful phrases of the Black Power era onto plain white canvases that read "BY ANY 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 movement and its universal impact," as Goran Hugo Olsson's *Black Power Mixtape, 1967–1975* declares.¹⁸

The experimental film work that considers the legacy of radicalism thus negotiates the photograph's status as an evidentiary record of the historical at the same time that it negotiates the photograph 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 Isaac Julien's *Baltimore* (2003), 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 renovated Victorian mansion, this museum is at once archaic and a startlingly present part of Baltimore's history. 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 inanimate or living and what appears to be living but is actually mechanized.¹⁹ 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."²⁰ Freud defines his own version of the uncanny against Jentsch's theories, but the wax figures of Julien's *Baltimore* raise a different question in the context of a history of black radicalism:

are this history and the ideologies it represents living or dead?

According to Jentsch, the uncanny involves a confrontation with death that is symbolized by "intellectual unease" with apparently living inanimate objects. Freud 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 photography's ability to stop time at a point beyond the boundaries of life and death.²¹ I want to think of a third conflict that still photography presents: its 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 imagination; 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 iterated throughout the piece in the imagery of a timeless martyrdom. The video does this by blending past and present, still and moving images, digital and film stock. It also mixes, without specific referent, 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 formal 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 history of the Panthers within the context of the melancholia of a US history of slavery and its close

relationship to the uncanny and death. Beginning with images of newspapers into which still photographs 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 explanatory representation of slavery that caused Malcolm X to declare: "One hundred million Africans were uprooted from the African continent. Where are they today? One hundred million Africans 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 western hemisphere. What happened to those 75 million Africans?"²²



Fred Ho with Paul Chan, *The Black Panther Suite: All Power to the People*, 2003. DVD video, 49 min.

The sense of longing and loss in Malcolm X's demand to know the unthinkable is exactly the spirit of history that these films confront. Mulvey declares, "The frozen frame restores to the moving image the heavy presence of passing time and of mortality" (66). 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 ideological 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



Raymond Pettibon, *Citizen Tania*, 2009. DVD video, 86 min. © Raymond Pettibon. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles

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, Fail, 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. Actors 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 for the 1980s punk band the Germs and more recently Nirvana. The opening sequence of *Citizen Tania* begins by staging a dramatization of the sensational nature of the SLA's engagement with the media. In this sequence, Pettibon, acting as a Hollywood agent, phones a fictitious Hearst to discuss the kidnapping's potential as a cinematic event—before the event has happened. Installation work by Bill Jones and Suzy Lake in *Suzy Lake as Patty Hearst* (2008) and Sharon Hayes in *Symbionese Liberation Army, Screed #16, Patricia Hearst's*

Second Tape re-create audio and visual images of Hearst that are almost whimsical in their commitment to verisimilitude. While work that recycles Panther imagery tends to use it as an index of trauma, loss, and mourning, material that uses imagery of the SLA tends to revolve around the Hearst abduction and thus to exploit its sensational potential rather than any history or ideology that the images might also have invoked. Though the SLA conceived of itself as highly engaged in the politics of black liberation, the multiracial nature of the group and its sensational representation in news media ensure that this element is not a typical consideration of contemporary representation.

In the protest anthem "Mississippi Goddamn," recorded in 1964 at the height of anti-civil rights violence, Nina Simone declares her song "a show tune but the show has not been written for it yet."²³ "Mississippi Goddamn!" critique of US culture is both timely and timeless, but it is Simone's claims about the unrepresentability of black struggle that are particularly pertinent to discussions of Black Power imagery in contemporary visual culture. Work in which the recent history of radical politics figures prominently speaks to the basic problem of representation for historical questions that are largely unsettled and still have the power to be unsettling. Since 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 culture and as the specter haunting black visual culture.

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Notes

1. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 54.
2. Fidel Castro, *The Second Declaration of Havana* (New York: Pathfinder, 1994), 11.
3. Che Guevara, "Social Ideals of the Rebel Army" and "A New Old Che Guevara Interview," in *Che: Selected Works of Che Guevara*, ed. R. E. Bonachea and N. P. Valdes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969), 204, 375.
4. Che Guevara, "Interview with Laura Bergquist," in Bonachea and Valdes, *Che*, 386.
5. Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution: Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: Grove, 1967), 47, 51.
6. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone, 1999), 49.
7. *Ibid.*, 2.
8. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 257.
9. David Hilliard (with Lewis Cole), *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 151.
10. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (New York: Vintage, 1946).
11. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 65.
12. *Ibid.*, 25.
13. Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, Nostalgia," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Monique Gillyard and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 29.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.
16. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
17. Stephanie S. Hughley, introduction to *Constructing History: A Requiem to Mark the Moment*, ed. Carrie Mae Weems (Savannah, GA: Savannah College of Art and Design, 2009), 2.
18. "Black Power Mixtape, 1967–1975," in *Berlinale Katalog*, ed. Gabriele Gilner (Berlin: Impressum, 2011), 237.
19. Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelika* 2, no. 1 (1997): 9.
20. *Ibid.*, 14.
21. Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 57.
22. Quoted in "And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People," in *Carrie Mae Weems*, ed. Andrea Kirsch and Susan Fisher Sterling (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 92.
23. Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddamn!," *Nina Simone in Concert*, Phillips Records, 1964.