Photo Talk 03

Erin Shirreff, video still from *Moon*, 2010. Color video, silent, 32 min. loop.

Time

Within the *blue hour*, a fixed grasp of space and time becomes elusive—is it closer to dawn or sunrise? Sunset or dusk?[1] Between these times, the potential of space and time opens. This potentiality can be conceived in terms of a seeming absence of fixed linear time as, for the *blue hour*'s duration, time does not appear to move, or rather to progress. In reflecting on the relation of time—of the past, present, and future—Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow offer an alternative to the pre-dominant conception of a fixed and linear time:

> [w]e might pin down a buckyball's location [used in the double-slit experiment and] by observing it, but in between our observations, it takes all paths. Quantum physics tells us that no matter how thorough our observation of the present, the (unobserved) past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities. The universe, according to quantum physics, has no single past, or history. The fact that the past takes no definite form means that observations you make on a system in the present affect its past."[2]

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[1] Even these examples present a bias to the progression of time from dawn to sunrise, sunset to dusk. Rather, the possibilities should also include the movement from sunrise to dawn, dusk to sunset, and all other possible relations.

[2] Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 82.

Thus, in this un-fixed state, time can be understood to span the past, present, and future while allowing for potential access to, and being in, each simultaneously.
The *blue hour* can be understood as existing in an ontological state that is analogous to photography and is the closest we can get to the moment of experience, a *now*. It is within this (un-fixed) state that anxiety is located. As Søren Kierkegaard, in his seminal text *The Concept of Anxiety*, writes:

> If time is correctly defined as an infinite succession, it most likely is also defined as the present, the past, and the future. This distinction, however, is incorrect if it is considered to be implicit in time itself, because the distinction appears only through the relation of time to eternity and through the reflection of eternity in time. If in the infinite succession of time a foothold could be found, i.e., a present, which was the dividing point, the division would be quite correct. However, precisely because every moment, as well as the sum of the moments, is a process (a passing by), no moment is a present, and accordingly there is in time neither present, nor past, nor future. If it is claimed that this division can be maintained, it is because the moment is *spatialized*, but thereby the infinite succession comes to a halt, it is because representation is introduced that allows time to be represented instead of being thought. Even so, this is not correct procedure, for even as representation, the infinite succession of time is an infinitely contentless present (this is a parody of the eternal).[3]

The *blue hour* and photography do not posses a space-time relation different from that which we experience. Rather, they make visible, through condensation, an absence in our understanding of the meaning of time as a process, as a transition, as a state of becoming in time and space. Time, as Kierkegaard proposes, is contentless. It is to this absence, this lack of content, and this nothing, that the *blue hour* and photography find themselves unable to speak. It is a space-time relation that haunts their being (and ours) as the question without an answer. Outside of the entrapments of past, present, and future, a relation of time with space can be conceived that does not negate the potential offering of duration. As an autonomy from the expectations of linear time, progress, and advancement, this freedom, offers the potential of becoming set in resistance to anxiety.

Imagistic Space

As the brief spell between day and night, the *blue hour* signifies a break in reality that establishes a frame (space-time relations) in which a state of being rests in the potential gap provided between space and time. This position of the *blue hour* can be brought into contact with photography through Eduardo Cadava's claim that, "the photographic event interrupts the present; it occurs *between* the present and itself, between the movement of time and itself. This is why nothing can occur in either the continuous movement of time or the pure present of any given moment."[4] We can also think of this quality of space-time in relation to Walter Benjamin's idea of *space-crossed* time, in which time-

[3] Søren Kirkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1981), 85–86.
[4] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 61.

becomes-space and space-becomes-time.[5] As Cadava notes, "time is no longer to be understood as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial, an imagistic space…."[6] This imagistic space connects the *blue hour* to photography as being between time in the advancement and withdrawal of light, between the past and the future. For both the *blue hour* and photography, time presents itself to us as this "spacing," and it is this continual process of becoming and disappearing that, for Benjamin, characterizes the movement of time.[7] This movement, as duration, can be found most evocatively in the space and time when the ephemeral sky mirrors the material earth, when space is offered up as a fluid atmosphere that envelops all surfaces and depths in blue.

Liquid

Photography rests within the "fog" that Benjamin conjures at the beginning of his "A Small History of Photography."[8] He used the idea of a fog to evoke the shifting, and unstable, form of photography's early development as a medium. This "foggy" state of photography was a moment in which the photographic continued its transitional state of being. In a short passage written by Cadava on Benjamin's thoughts on photography, the former considers how the latter, "[a]rguing according to the logic of the photographic image…affirm[s] a movement of interruption that suspends the continuum of time. By retaining the traces of past and future—a past and future it nonetheless transforms—the photograph sustains the presence of movement…. Within this condensation of past and present, time is no longer to be understood as continuous and linear, but rather as spatial, an imagistic space…."[9] Similar to Benjamin's conception of the photographic image, the *blue hour* condenses time and space into imagistic space by retaining traces of the past (for example the remnants of daylight) and glimpses of the future (the darkness that is mingling with the light signifying the night to come). The *blue hour* is thus a moment of interruption and is brought into being as a suspension in the continuum, or progress, of time. It is space condensed in time, and also time condensed in space. This thickness is in direct relation to its feeling of depth, of space and time that recedes into the depths while not moving—duration without progression.

Liquidity in the form of vapor was significant in the photographic processes used during the early years of photography that Benjamin discussed. There were a number of wet emulsions in use: the cyanotype was an early successful example and the wet plate collodion process was another. In additional, liquid was important to photography through the chemistry of processing and preparing photographic negatives and plates. The daguerreotype, for instance, employed iodine vapor and mercury fumes to coax delicate images onto silver plates while a gold chloride solution was used to reinforce them. Seminal proto-photographer William Henry Fox Talbot makes reference to these processes in a poem about the early failed attempts at fixing a photographic plate. A

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[5] *Ibid.,* 63.
[6] *Ibid.*, 60.
[7] *Ibid.*, 61.
[8] Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol. 2 1927–1934*, trans. Edmund Ephcott and Kingsley Shorter (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard U P, 1999), 240.
[9] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 60.

section of his poem, "The Magic Mirror," published in 1830 in *Legendary Tales and Prose*, reads:

The distant hills: then rolling up the vale
Shrouded it o'er with Vapours wan and pale.
The Lake, the Mountains, fade in mist away,
And lurid Darkness overspreads the day.[10]

In this passage, the "wan and pale" time of the *blue hour* and the time of the photographic image are both evoked as moments of undetermined duration set between the physicality of space and the passage of time. A transition from seeing in light to feeling in darkness is offered. The feeling is one of desire for fixity within a transitional object that, for a certain period, remained ungraspable.

Liquid haunts photography as a reminder of the aforementioned processes, and other, historic processes. It is not just a reference to the specific past, as noted above, but to our own moment and the steady decline of modern photographic film processes and usage. In his short 1989 essay "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," Jeff Wall illustrates the relations between water, as a fluid liquid, and the photographic. For Wall, "water—symbolically—represents an archaism in photography, one that is admitted into the process, but also excluded, contained, or channeled by its hydraulics."[11] By using the term "archaism," Wall is referring to the ancient production processes that water embodies, and to how "the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory."[12] Significantly, he directs our attention to the new displacement of water in photography with the present-day prominence of digital and electronic technology and processes that are replacing photographic film. In these new systems, water is removed altogether from the immediate production and processes. It is still indirectly involved, though, set at a distance, in such spaces as the generation of electricity, which enables these very technologies and processes.

In the 25 years since "Photography and Liquid Intelligence" was published, the importance of liquid as a fluid has become less visible but remains essential. The hydraulics have become even further integrated. Fluid remains an elemental aspect of digital photographic processes and technology, in the ink that is now used to make photographic inkjet prints, in traditional printing processes that are combined with digital technology, and in the batteries that power portable photographic technology and upon which the digital camera is fundamentally most reliant.[13]

The *blue hour* and photography share an ontological connection in a "sense of immersion

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[10] An extract from William Henry Fox Talbot's 1830 poem "The Magic Mirror," in *The Art of Photography*, ed. Mike Weaver (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1989), 15–17.

[11] Jeff Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," in *Jeff Wall Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: MOMA, 2007), 109.

[12] Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," 109. The processes given as examples of archaism and as embodying ancient productions are washing, bleaching, dissolving, and the separation of ores in mining.

[13] Chromogenic photographic prints are now primarily made using digital image files outputted through LED lights onto traditional photographic paper, which is then processed with photographic chemicals.

in the incalculable" that is associated with "liquid intelligence."[14] Like Benjamin's fog and the *blue hour*, there is contraction and expansion, a flowing into new spaces and the taking on of ever shifting shapes and forms. Curator Matthew Thompson notes that, "[t]he constant tension between fixity and fluidity embodied in photography produces a fundamental anxiety."[15] Therefore, like the *blue hour*, photography is defined by the struggle between differing states in transition. As such, change, particularly technological transformation, is an inherent characteristic of photography. The fundamental anxiety that this constant flux creates can be found in the spilling, leaking, splashing, and seeping of the fluid nature of photography, which Wall describes as "[a] natural form, with its unpredictable contours, [it] is an expression of infinitesimal metamorphoses of quality."[16]

Still playing in background Erin Shirreff's *Moon* (2010)

Moon

In the studio, the artist prepares photographic images: a selection is made and printed in slight variation.[17] Then, one at a time, the prints are placed on a wall. A camera is set up with an auto-timer and a photograph is taken every 5–10 seconds. The lighting process begins and is simple and intuitive. The intention resides in the development of an array of lighting effects using handheld pot lights. Light shines through the image from behind, above, bellow, or at a severe side angle. In relation to reflection and refraction, the light is at times caught—stuck in or on the photograph—and at other times, it simply slips by. As the analogue lights proceed, and wander in hand with the photographer, the image of the print transforms. The photographs of the variously lit prints are imported and choreographed—the two surfaces of the image and the print are composed. Past. Present. Future. The work wants us, the viewer, to be mesmerized by the dancing play of light across surface.[18] There is something sculptural in this process—in the language of light and its conversation with the material of the photographic print.

How might the photograph, as imagistic space, compose surface and depth? Erin Shirreff's *Moon* (2010) engages this question by offering duration as light that is reflected and refracted in the re-photographing of the photograph. Imagistic space is used as the ground onto which the crossing of time and space are explored in duration. Evoking the space-time of the *blue hour*, Shirreff's *Moon* is a photographic work that

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[14] Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," 110.
[15] Matthew Thompson, "The Object Lost and Found," in *The Anxiety of Photography* (Colorado: Aspen Art Museum, 2011), 75.
[16] Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence," 109.
[17] Approximately twelve different photographic images were used in the making of *Moon* (2010). Each image was printed on different surface textures and material, such as mat, semi-mat, glossy, and transparent paper.
[18] See "Erin Shirreff Takes Her Time," *Art 21: New York Close Up* video, 7:14, released October 12, 2012, produced Wesley Miller and Nick Ravich, http://www.art21.org/newyorkcloseup/films/erin-shirreff-takes-her-time/.

composes transitions.[19]

Moon is projected as light and cast onto a material support that reflects it into view. Eduardo Cadava writes that the relation between light and deflection, "is essential to the possibility of an image's emergence. Light can in fact only give way to an image when its path is impeded, when it is turned away from its course."[20] The quality of light reflecting off the Moon is mirrored in the reflecting of light off the wall. Further, the photographs used to make this work draw their image from reflected light and offer a poetic relation to the Moon they seek to represent. This third relation relies on the studio photographs as surfaces to reflect studio light back into the camera. They are used in this way to reflect light back into the apparatus that had sought to compose the space between it (the camera) and the Moon—not to flatten the space but, rather, to bring it into closer proximity.

The concept of proximity brought into relation with *Moon* evokes Italo Calvino's short story "The Distance of the Moon."[21] Calvino's story is set in a time when the Moon was in much closer proximity to the Earth, having recently been made from it. The characters in the story venture out onto the sea during a full moon, when the water's surface is like a mirror. This flatness allows them to balance a ladder within a boat to climb up and transition from the Earth's atmosphere into that of the Moon's. The space above becomes the space below once the characters travel into the Moon's atmosphere—up becomes down, and down becomes up. The surface of space is crossed while a transition is made between one image and another, as between one depth of surface and another. Looking up from the Moon, the surface of the water on Earth hangs above the characters and becomes an image, an image that was only a moment before a depth of space. Within the story, the space between the Earth and the Moon is brought together and composed, making space transition between surface and depth.

In Shirreff's photographic video works, such as *Moon*, surface is made subject and framed as the primary material quality of photography. The surface of a surface, as a doubling of surface, creates contrast where flatness is no longer flat but composed of depth. A depth that was always there, as between the surfaces, but is only now made visible and given presence. Within the *blue hour*—as space where depth cannot rely on the contrast created by direct light—an absence of contrast exists. This absence of contrast brings the near and the far together, it immerses the space-time in the depth of surface as imagistic space. In similar fashion, *Moon* seeks to make visible the depths of the surface of the photograph by expanding the space of flatness associated with photography. This is done through the composition of surfaces, a position that questions the veracity of the flatness of photography as surface without depth.

In considering *Moon*, what is the relation to the photographic frame inside which the composition takes place? In a frame that does not move, duration can be conceived as a composition of time and space. Within this frame, movement takes place, especially in the eye that wanders about it. Eduardo Cadava provides an important theoretical relation

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[19] The moon, as within the *blue hour*, appears in the work briefly. During 7:04–8:04 as the time between the *blue hour* and daylight; and, at 12:07–12:38 as the time between the *blue hour* and dusk.

[20] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 93. Also see chapters "Matter" and "Reflections."

[21] Italo Calvino, "The Distance of the Moon," in *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks, and William Weaver (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 3–19.

between movement and photography when he writes, "[b]y retaining the traces of past and future—a past and future it nonetheless transforms—the photograph sustains the presence of movement, the pulses whose rhythm marks the afterlife of what has been understood, within the movement it gorgonizes."[22] If photography is not in any singular sense then, now, or in the future, it must still have a form of duration, as a space-time relation that is not fixed but rather is in transition and in the process of becoming. *Moon* represents photography in duration as a pulsing rhythm composed from still photographic images taken one at a time. The camera does not move, nor does the frame shift or alter. The photographs are transformed through the presence of movement as a transition between lightness and darkness. It is useful to consider Shirreff's work in relation to the "durational photograph" as a concept of photographic time that is "mobile" and located in the idea of duration as "incomplete time."[23] Movement, as transition, is created through duration. But photography, as a process of transition and becoming, has never been "still." This is a foggy space, an atmosphere thick with uncertain depth.

In Shirreff's work, the space between photography and video has become increasingly porous. The processes, technology, and subject engaged in the production of *Moon* place it in relation to a photographic discourse. The current overlap and oscillation between processes develops a weaving together. By questioning this work in relation to specific discourses, it is used as a lever to open further investigations into the fringe areas of what photography is, and of what it is becoming. For Shirreff, her photography-video work has no beginning or end; rather, "every moment within it contains it."[24] This is synonymous with the space-time of photography and the *blue hour*, in which time detaches from a linear progression and the experience of space unfolds in duration.

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[22] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 60.

[23] "Interview with Owen Kydd," in *Aperture* (blog), Spring, 2013, http://www.aperture.org/blog/interview-with-owen-kydd/. For more on "durational photographs" refer to my discussion in the "Studio Framing Floor" section of this dissertation.

[24] See the video "Erin Shirreff Takes Her Time."