

Overture



16mm film installation
7 min. (loop)

In his first film installation, Douglas combines the pictorial language of historical film footage with set pieces of *the* literary text of the early twentieth century, creating therein a subtle reflection on media time and remembered time, narrative openness and closure, as well as forms of technological appropriation and representation of landscape. The work links three short film sequences produced by the Edison Film Company in 1899 and 1901; the footage shows documentary views of the Rocky Mountains filmed from the roof of a train. They are accompanied by a narrated commentary—excerpts from Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927). The total length of the spoken text corresponds to two complete runs of the three picture sequences. Accordingly, the installation seems to comprise two parallel layers of time that unfold, however, at different speeds: a “double” time that drifts apart and converges again every seven minutes when the loop restarts. The effect of parallelism of the image and soundtrack is supported by the synchronous sequences of light and dark, on the one hand,

and by speech and silence, on the other. The film sequences alternately show pictures of sublime mountainscapes, followed by the train entering a tunnel. The tunnel shots themselves are prolonged by subsequently appending blank film and intensified in contrast to the partly overexposed, partly faded outdoor shots. The voice-over plays back synchronously with the landscape views and is suspended for the duration of travel in the tunnel. The picture and the sound mirror and invert each other: Proust’s first-person narrator describes moments between sleeping and waking, darkness and twilight, disorientation in space and time, intermeshed by Douglas with daylight shots in a contrastive placement. The decadent “inner landscape” of the *fin de siècle* contrasts here with an “outer landscape” whose pervasion with media and technology stands for a radically different, modern experience of reality. As such, the metaphor of the overture—the instrumental introduction before the curtain rises—stands for the ambivalence of a historical moment.



In North America, the railroad was regarded as a key technology for making the continent accessible, allowing connections between previously remote areas and thus linking them to national economic cycles and a synchronized calendar system. It hence served to create a homogeneous geographical space that advanced the formation of an imperial, national consciousness under the sway of modernity and progress. The Edison Company film footage redoubles this effect in a sense by staging the landscape made accessible by the railroad, hence transported from its natural state into the modern age, in what was one of the most advanced media of the day. The succession of landscape and tunnel shots in the film thus metaphorically breaches the gap between sublime nature and engineering, elevating this sight to a media-borne apotheosis of modernity. At the same time, the railroad stands for a mode of perceiving landscape in motion that may be seen in analogy to cinematic perception. The view from the train window, transforming a succession of discrete images

continuously passing by in front of our eyes into a moving panorama, correlates to film, synthesizing itself frame by frame into a continuum in our perception. The railroad, ploughing through the landscape like a projectile, is at the same time the projector that “spools off” the fragmented panorama before our eyes.

The film footage used in Douglas’s *Overture* stems from the Paper Print Collection of the Library of Congress. These are, then, copies archived as photographic paper prints at a time when films were not yet protected by copyright. While a large number of the original films are now lost, these paper prints have stood the test of time and can now be copied and distributed on film. By means of this media detour, photography has become the memory of film, that, in turn, updates photography in the moving picture. The time conserved in the historical films is therefore not lost but is subject to a number of translations, which, along with the actual pictures, likewise archive the traces of the gradual wear of the carrier media.

The last stage of translation, for the time being, in which Douglas applies sound—significantly a literary reflection on memory—to the historical footage, returns to the theme of these infinitely reproducing media in the circular structure of the loop. The recurrent, total blackout of the passage through the tunnel not only embodies the radical finiteness of (media) memory but also the reverse side of a modernity that effaced and rewrote the millennia-old history of a continent in the name of progress of “civilization.” At the auspicious moment of the opening of modernity, the curtain rises for just a brief moment, only to close again.

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