

**The Aesthetic Hyper-Object in Experimental Short Film Practices:
Lina Sieckmann and Miriam Gossing's Art Documentaries**

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Short experimental films by the German female director duo Lina Sieckmann und Miriam Gossing put domestic environments on cinematic display in new and challenging ways. The essay discusses the links between the films' documentary agendas, surreal visual montages, and poetic feminine voice-overs. Selected films are placed into dialogues with Michael Renov's concept of aesthetics in documentary film and Timothy Morton's notion of the "hyperobject." This theoretical framework highlights the tensions between the films' powerful aesthetics and feminine queer desire as they decenter socially ingrained dualisms.

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Sieckmann and Gossing's experimental film art presents overlapping layers of lushly visual cinematography, intricate female voice-overs, and sound effects.¹ In this article, I will demonstrate how three of their short films, *Desert Miracles* (2015, 10 minutes), *Souvenir* (2019, 20 minutes), and *Ocean Hill Drive* (2016, 21 minutes), activate the nexus between architectural spaces, voice, and sound. They accomplish this through an intricate layering of voice and space, or the opposite, the withdrawal of voice and sound. In each of the three films, the rhythms of the camera movements shape the films' visual language, while voice-over recordings charge the spaces with tensions of longing and loss. Exemplifying Sieckmann and Gossing's unique brand of "documentary film art," the films incorporate analog and digital technologies such as 16mm and digital video, Dolby stereo surround sound,

and special effects. The editing procedures are carefully designed to create connections between images (of places, artifacts, and objects) and textual documents. The artists digitize the footage and edit it creatively by layering film with still photography and a voice-over track that is based on excerpts of internet postings and/or recorded interviews. By attaching voices and feelings to objects, the films evoke melodramas of the object world.

In what follows, I shall briefly outline the theoretical framework that informs my readings of the films. After introducing the three films in general terms, I will sketch Michael Renov's four functions of documentary poetics in order to argue later that Sieckmann and Gossing's films confirm and further what Renov calls the "aesthetic function" of documentary film (Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary" 3). The filmmakers do not only reveal a pre-given visual reality; instead they design aesthetic objects by rearranging found textual documents and visual components. As Sieckmann and Gossing's website suggests: "As a duo Miriam Gossing and Lina Sieckmann have made several experimental films on 16-mm film, in which urban and private architecture, hyper-staged environment, and the notion of desire are examined – combining documentary imagery with fiction and found footage." (Gossing and Sieckmann, n.p.)

Given the "hyper-staged" character of Sieckmann and Gossing's aesthetic environments, Timothy Morton's notion of the *hyperobject* will serve as the second theoretical reference for my reading (Morton, *Hyperobjects*). In Sieckmann and Gossing's films images of separate architectural spaces are spliced and joined into multi-layered audio and visual assemblages that explore the ambiguities and complexities of love and desire. Their films challenge viewers to question preconceived notions of perception and identification through their aesthetic strategies, inviting them to explore the ambiguous emotional manifestations of female and queer subjectivity. Renov's and Morton's thinking about film, visual art, and cinematography complement each other in regard to Sieckmann and Gossing's work, as both critics point to art's power to reveal the hidden realities behind objects and the emotions, reflections, and words they evoke.

Assemblage as Poetic Documentary

In his essay “Toward a Poetic of Documentary,” Renov identifies and differentiates four specific but intertwined functions characterizing the complexity of documentary film. According to Renov, these four functions—reporting, persuading, critical, and aesthetic—“operate as modalities of desire that fuel documentary discourse” (Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary” 22). Among those four, the aesthetic function is especially relevant for Renov, to whom the term “documentary” embraces film’s inherently poetic aesthetics. The term “aesthetic” refers to a film’s “composition, function and effect,” while the term “poetics” designates the film’s “rigorous investigation” of these aesthetics (20). Renov admits that his expansion of the term ‘documentary film art’ is just a start, as it is “open ended and demands extension” (36). This is consistent with the understanding that documentary films are more complex than that for which naïve views would give them credit. Renov thus insists on the importance of “expanding the received boundaries of the documentary form to consider work traditionally regarded as of the avantgarde” (34). Sieckmann and Gossing’s films would conventionally be placed in the category of the avantgarde; however, this essay will argue that their visual assemblages blur the boundaries between the avantgarde and documentary film genres. In both genres, the transfer of a three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional screen alters reality, but as Renov explains, in documentary that alteration is deliberate: “The radical reworking of the documentary material creates sound/image relationships that are unavailable in nature” (34). Sieckmann and Gossing’s films likewise capitalize on the split between source materials, their referent, and screen images to create new visual constellations and indeed realities. As Gossing explains: “In our productions we scan historical 16 mm material and edit it with VFX and Color grading, the latest image editing technology. Through this process we derive images that have never before existed, hybrid aesthetics that combine the past and the future into new

colors that would not exist in analog or digital production. By introducing slow or fast motion into selected sequences an effect of surreal speed is created.”²

At the same time, pauses in the flow of speech accentuate the visual and underscore Sieckmann and Gossing’s camera work. These long moments of silence draw our attention to the artistically staged interiors that are often void of human bodies but saturated with references to human yearnings. *Desert Miracles* depicts the many wedding chapels of Las Vegas. In stark contrast to familiar representations of Vegas as a pop city buzzing with life, light, entertainment, and consumerism, the film embodies a more ghost-like, ephemeral vision of the city that is haunted by female yearning and passion (Stierli 2013). The visual tracks of



Figure 1. Sieckmann&Gossing, *Desert Miracles*. © Sieckmann&Gossing

Desert Miracles and *Souvenir* depict some of the anxieties of love relationships, while *Ocean Hill Drive* presents the increasing torment of inhabiting a house that is haunted by ghostlike lights. The cinematography of all three films evokes strange and unfamiliar realities that linger within architectural spaces, anonymous female voice-overs, poetic monologues, and silences. Spaces begin to speak. Mark Fisher

describes such ungraspable anonymities as “eerie” or “weird.” He explains these as moments “when the semiotic systems, in which relics of our culture are



Figure 2. Sieckmann&Gossing, *Ocean Hill Drive*. © Sieckmann&Gossing

embedded, have fallen away” (63). What looks and sounds like a real thing at first glance becomes unintelligible. According to Fisher, “the weird is constituted by a presence – the presence of *that which does not belong*,” while the eerie “is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*” (61). Eerie and weird feelings express unusual associations and unfamiliar experiences that evoke speculation and suspense (62). Fisher’s categories correspond to the emotions and anxieties the films invoke through the visual assemblage of various uncommon, and at times unintelligible, realities. The juxtaposition of textual documents further increases this sense of ambiguity by charging the objects with emotions that are otherwise invisible—thus transforming mundane artifacts into hyperobjects in Morton’s sense.

In Renov’s account, the elemental reporting function of documentary film is linked to its role as a mediating factor. As soon as the camera is focused on one or the other aspect of reality, images are isolated from their original contexts, their actual time and dynamic environments, and associated with new discourses. By choosing and filming the object, the camera eye detaches it from a larger context

to facilitate or complicate our understanding of it. This is different from the tendency of documentary film to either *persuade* the viewer that a given reality represents truth, or to self-reflectively *interrogate* its own representational processes. In the latter case, the message of documentary is complex: rather than using factual language to shape a belief or opinion and to entertain, it unsettles the mindset of the viewer. However, Renov emphasizes the aesthetic function of documentary, notably its expressive tendency by which it draws our attention to the skillful craft of the directors, editors, cameramen, and producers who filter the so-called objective world and sort found objects, arranging them according to their own vision and perspective. Furthermore, Renov articulates that a film's specific ensemble of visual, textual, and sound elements can have an explosive effect. The "ideas and feelings" penetrating documentary art appeal to the audience to facilitate learning, reflection, and criticism, but also enchantment and pleasure (Renov, "Toward a Poetics of Documentary" 35).

Sieckmann and Gossing's films accentuate Renov's expressive functions through their highly stylized aesthetic montages of textual, visual, and aural elements. In the larger context of Renov's theory, the films can be said to reflect on their own status within the documentary genre. They show the found objects, slowly revise their meanings, and thereby confirm Renov's argumentative commitment to the poetic core of documentary cinematography. As Gossing explains in a personal email: "The film grain evokes a sense of authenticity, of originality ("it was like this," "this is how the light entered the lens and exposed the film strip"), the unmediated discourse of the photographic image. In our case, however, the material is digitized and deliberately presented through digital pixels. The grain you see is constructed." [my translation] Sieckmann and Gossing explicitly and deliberately interfere with the found objects and architectural spaces by cutting and assembling the shots to create a new and lasting cinematographic reality. Wedding chapels evoke happy fantasies that are, however, undercut by anxieties of commitment. The glamorous splendor of cruise ships is juxtaposed with empty doorways in the home of the abandoned lover. Residences turn into

erie and frightening spaces. In the process, reproduced and rearranged things are charged with new, thought-provoking connotations.

The Aesthetics of the Hyperobject

While Morton first applied the term “hyperobject” to ecocritical concerns, he later emphasized its relevance for cultural objects as well, especially artworks, which he calls “machine[s] for upgrading the mind of the viewer” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 179). Morton proposes a mechanistic relationship between art object and the observer’s mind, the perceived and the perceiver. Art is charged with the power to change the viewer’s perception of reality. He argues that “the machine is complex enough and distracting enough to unhinge one’s habitual pattern and encourage new cognitive maps to be drawn” (179). This conception of hyperobjects relaxes the demand for unity, wholeness, and totality, and it encourages new perceptions of reality, however enigmatic. In 2018, Morton expanded his theoretical approach by staging the art exhibition *Hyperobjects* together with Laura Copelin at Ballroom Marfa. The exhibited art and non-art objects “reveal the wiring under the board of emotion” (Morton, “Hyperobjects and Creativity”). This spatial metaphor emphasizes perception as an obstacle to conveying emotional experience. Human awareness and emotions are not in sync, they hide each other and need to be brought into closer contact again. This is the task of the hyperobject, as Morton explains in the introductory essay of the exhibition catalogue *Hyperobjects for Artists*. He argues: “Things exist in strange piles of other things that don’t add up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Things can slip out, fall off cliffs, find themselves in a beautiful strange love song.” (ibid.) The phrases “slipping out” and “falling off” refer to artworks as dynamic agencies that are marked by voids and empty spaces. Things are not as manifest and graspable as the term “thing” seems to imply. Artworks, when seen as hyperobjects, call fixed material properties into question, alerting us to the strangeness and hidden aspects of things. Hyperobjects document the “wiring” that actuates our emotions and perceptions, thereby making the invisible visible. In the process, reality becomes fluid and unpredictable.

Sieckmann and Gossing's film art presents such a thought process that explores a fundamental shift in perspective towards everyday objects and personal spaces. Souvenirs and residential houses act as hyperobjects that cannot be simply seen but have to be thought and unraveled. Fixed and stable signifiers become fluid and animated through dynamic assemblages of visual effects, sounds, and voices as they fuse the past, present, and future connotations of these everyday objects. They become charged with the puzzling range of emotions that they represent, thus making these feelings visible. For example, in the film *Souvenir*, an item that once signified the sentimental attachment to a person or his memory turns into a sign for separation, divorce, and independence. This effect is achieved by shooting through windows, doors, and gates. As the camera glances into private homes and public spaces, it reverses the inside-outside relations to infuse the spaces with hyperreality. The cinematography itself allows the viewer to rest and reflect upon what they are seeing. For example, in the beginning and end of *Souvenir*, the souvenirs themselves are depicted in a never-ending rotation. These meditative shots evoke a sense of eeriness and "allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" (Fisher 10). The mental attitudes of "rest" and "contemplation" in the viewer are required to account for the hyperobject: "Resting is an aesthetic event . . . Meditation or contemplation is the quintessence of rest in this sense . . . Philosophical reflection on the hyperobject is also a form of rest" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 198).

The Aesthetics of Desire in *Desert Miracles*

Desert Miracles is a perfect example for the strange friction within the hyperobject between quiet reflection and emotionality. The film explores the silence of empty wedding chapels, spaces which without weddings and people are emptied of their sacrosanct meaning. The chapels draw attention to that which is absent. The film opens and closes with a shot of a church gate filmed from the inside. We expect a wedding couple to arrive but instead a luxurious Cadillac drives into the chapel. The car radiates in red, the symbolic and cliché color for love. Given its association with luxury and consumer culture, the car's image contrasts with the sublime

sacred space in which it is placed. An Elvis Presley impersonator then steps out of the car. We see him only from the side, but well enough to recognize his distinctive outfit and hairdo. Surprisingly, he does not perform celebrity and never looks up to the audience, instead he leaves right away through the chapel's side doors as if to call his stardom into question or indeed to heighten it—the sequence remains ambiguous to its meaning. The icon of popular rock star extravaganza with more than 636 sold-out shows in Las Vegas alone disappears into the anonymity of a passerby—or is he escaping the paparazzi (Jones 2019)? Sacred and profane luxury, pop and high culture clash and leave us disoriented and wondering about the hyperreality of this setting.

Throughout the film, a female voice-over offers a commentary to these otherwise silent places. Reading a letter, she addresses an absent lover to express her love for him as well as their relationship's tensions, conflicts, and jealousies. The filmmakers explain: "The text is based on anonymous posts by different women in various internet wedding forums. One fictional female character is composed out of many assembled perspectives on desire, relationships and social expectation" (Gossing and Sieckmann, "Desert Miracles"). These anonymous texts are "found" and don't have a straightforward "documentary" status in the traditional sense. Instead, they exemplify Renov's category of the aesthetic function in documentary. The single voice of the speaking "I" does not present an individual but a conglomerate of many fragmentary discourses, since there is no personal name attached to the voice. In the beginning, she says: "My dear lover, we have been together for such a long time and I am really happy with you. I can easily say that I never felt so in love with a person." (ibid.) This seemingly individualized voice describes emotions that extend beyond her own. Quoting the words of diverse women, the voice expresses emotional turmoil. Mixing individual voice and anonymous quotes, the film's aesthetic is structured by subjectivity instead of personal agency. Expressed by an anonymous "it," love implies feelings of sadness, depression, and of being lost while at the same time suggesting closeness and marriage. This inner turmoil contradicts the expectation of harmony and the convention of reciprocal support in partnerships as suggested by Christian

wedding vows. Love is in itself unstable. The longing for the lover, the addressed you, interferes with the desire for other male and female partners. As the voice states: “But then I get the sense that I could also fall in love with Katie and sometimes I feel suddenly attracted to Daniel, I told you and everything can feel so wrong.” (Ibid.) Queer, heterosexual, monogamous, and polyamorous desires speak simultaneously, and shatter conventional concepts of desire, and of functional and lasting partnerships. ‘Queer’ here is a broad term that connotes monogamous as well as non-monogamous relationships. In fact, it questions these kinds of differentiations. Confused, the speaker questions emotions, likes, and dislikes. Desires are in flux. Her use of the pronoun “everything” is perplexing as it encompasses inner and outer experiences. Everything is called into question, including the social and legal institutions of wedding and marriage, which are being queered. As Elizabeth Freeman suggests in the conclusion of her book *The Wedding Complex*, which interprets the wedding as a queer event: “. . . the wedding can call forth social possibilities that do not necessarily reconcile with or reduce to the legal construction of marriage as (at various historical moments) heterosexual . . . monogamous, and/or indissoluble” (211). The speaker in the film would agree: Legal constructions of marriage do not correlate with the conflicting experiences of love. The uncontrollable shifts of emotion and perceptions of reality undermine love’s stability as an object of representation, not only through the wedding but also through the physical structures of wedding chapels. The text ends with the ironic question: “I don’t wanna be separated and isolated and alone. I wanna feel special and safe and I want to be loved, just the way I am. So, I guess, I just wanted to ask you...Would you marry me?” (ibid). The “I” asks for love while knowing that this word presents only an abstract hypothesis that is contradicted by the reality of her emotions. And with the request for marriage she calls for a tie that is conferred by authority and power but represses the fluid emotional state of the individual. Her mindset is marked by contradiction: while one emotion is to resist control, the other asks for it, and the idea of love is caught between these desires for regulation and liberation. She explains: “In general I often feel like lagging behind, forcing myself to keep up with all of that . . . Jane, the office, my own

ambitions . . . I'm trying to be as good as I can but I feel like even with you there is this pressure. And . . . in some moments love feels like an order to me" (ibid). Binding conventions of social norms trouble her.

This intersubjective quarrel mimics issues addressed by speech act theory. Judith Butler elaborates on J. L. Austin's analysis of the performative force of wedding vows when she explains: ". . . it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary 'act' emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions" (18). In Sieckmann and Gossing's film, the inserted text complicates the illocutionary force of the vow. While the abandoned wedding chapel quietly insinuates the formality of the binding vow, the desire to be bound is intrinsic to the speaking subject. The "I" endorses what Butler describes as the state of subjectivity: "There is no subject who is 'free' to stand outside these norms or to negotiate them at a distance; on the contrary, the subject is retroactively produced by these norms in their repetition, precisely as their effect." (22) When the protagonist asks for marriage, she simply repeats set phrases. By calling upon institutionalized authority, the performative act of the judge or priest, she admits to social norms' firm grip on her psyche. Although she experiences this power as threatening, she nevertheless incites it. These coinciding desires for control and liberation point to the idiosyncratic voids and crevasses of self-critical awareness. Elaborating on the complex uses of the term queer, Butler observes that "the term often is favored by a young generation who wants to resist 'the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by 'lesbian and gay'" (20). The speaking "I" is a perfect example for this kind of resistance: she explains her queer and confusing desires that undermine patterns of lesbianism or gayness when she admits her attractions to "Katie" and "Daniel." Her actual emotions conflict with the norms they inhabit, and her self-critical reflections are entangled with emotions from which she fails to distance herself. While she requests marriage, we know that stability and permanence of the relationship are not

possible for her. This ambiguous position inadvertently submits to the falseness that is part of the marriage proposal.

To summarize, the “I” explores her contradicting desires and emotions, and although they are fluid and do not fit into fixed categories, she still asks for marriage, for fidelity, and stability. This request is based on emotional self-deception: by appealing to the institution of marriage the “I” repeats a normative phrase after destabilizing the basis for the required marriage vow beforehand. The request that demands permanence and emotional stability is undermined by the unstable emotions and yearnings that drive the subject into marriage. As an unstable “I,” the speaking figure is caught between speech patterns and emotional disarray, wandering between heterosexual and lesbian desires and gender identities. It is driven by a complex network of emotions and yearnings.

In keeping with Renov’s function of the aesthetic documentary, the filmic montage articulates confusing liminal desires that do not fit with current social conventions, like gendering of identities, social relationships, and weddings. The montage inscribes falseness into each single linguistic proposition, and each has to be corrected or modified right away. The “I” admits that desire cannot be delineated: “In some moments love feels like an order to me, like something my life would be meaningless without, but . . . I can’t tell what it is that I want.” The “I’s” use of the word ‘marriage’ sounds strange in the context of her self-reflective pondering. Butler understands this problem perfectly when she writes: “The hope of ever fully recognizing oneself in the terms by which one signifies is sure to be disappointed. This not owning of one’s words is there from the start, however, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself.” (28) We are conditioned by multiple repetitions of linguistic utterances and norms that don’t necessarily represent our emotions. The “ambivalent” fluid presence of the “I,” which is only audible in the voice-over, blends with the various visual interiors of more than fifteen chapels. Stylistically, these Las Vegas chapels range from replicas of older churches to chapels that simulate casino décor. By inscribing the subject’s obscure emotions into these diverse architectural spaces,

the film creates complex layers, which aesthetically document a hyperobjective reality.

In appealing to the tastes of a diverse clientele, Las Vegas's chapels compete as profit-generating commodities. The Graceland Wedding Chapel, for example, a 1947 remodel of a residence of Scottish settlers, was one of the first wedding chapels constructed in response to the Las Vegas wedding boom when the city eased its wedding licensing laws after WWII (Graceland Wedding Chapel, n.d.). The chapels are not only built as replicas of traditional structures, they all reduce the function of traditional wedding ceremonies to staged simulations. The rituals performed therein are no longer linked to set religious or spiritual contexts but cater to the secular desires of the customers. Ritual turns into a commodity and becomes part of Las Vegas' entertainment industry. *Desert Miracles* approaches this culture of simulations without any concerns about the loss of the original's "aura" as they often vibrate through the work of cultural critics like Walter Benjamin or Umberto Eco. Instead of pondering the loss of originality, Sieckmann and Gossing's films reinvent the aesthetic hyperreality of the chapels. The smooth camera movement from one carefully examined interior to the next creates an ornamental landscape of commodified chapels. We do not see any other parts of the city or of the surrounding environment. Yet the film's title, *Desert Miracles*, ironically evokes sublime desert landscapes with their fata morganas. Instead of such natural wonders, the film presents the opulent interiors of Las Vegas's wedding chapels. The latter fit the mold of postmodern aesthetics, as their ornamental and exuberant style clashes with traditional wedding conventions. Clichés permeate the architectural space and become readable as visual metaphors of the brokenness of these conventions: While the text speaks about love in architectural terms as "pillars" of a relationship, in the end these pillars are fragmented, suggesting absence of the inherently assumed stability.³ The marriage proposal "Will you marry me?" is undermined by contradictory emotions—"I could also fall in love with Katie and sometimes I feel suddenly so attracted to Daniel"—and also by the questioning of love itself (Gossing and Sieckmann, *Desert Miracles*). This paradox is mirrored in the architectural space

of one of the filmed churches. The area around the altar is framed by two pillars that stand on their own and do not carry an arch. They are separated by a void, while the top of each is decorated with greenery. The cheaply made, low ceiling of the depicted chapel contradicts the grandeur of the Grecian white pillars.



Figure 3. Sieckmann&Gossing, *Desert Miracles*. © Sieckmann&Gossing

Architecture and text comment on each other: the existence of the pillars in the film suggests that the institution of marriage can bear no actual weight and serves only a symbolic function.

Another visual metaphor is the image of the Cadillac. The film couples it with a voice-over that imagines the car as a setting of romantic love: “And yeah, I want those rosy summer nights with you in the red Cadillac under the stars telling me over and over again that you love me, only me.” (Gossing and Sieckmann, *Desert Miracles*). Yet the film exposes these words as empty phrases with no clear connection to the object of desire. In reality, the Cadillac arrives in the church but the driver—an Elvis impersonator—leaves. A recording of Elvis’s song “Only You” reinforces the sense of us being separated from his physical presence. The Cadillac embodies a complex hyperobject of queer desire: clichés of love expose desire as inherently fragile and tenuous. They contradict traditionally defined heterosexual relationships, and open up spaces for experimenting with different

meanings of love. This othering of love involves hetero-and homosexual, monogamous, polyamorous, and other shapes of liaisons and affairs. Queering here is an “inquiry into the formation of homosexualities,” as Butler suggests in her essay “Critically Queer,” that opens up spheres beyond the dualities of hetero- and homosexual bonds (21). On a meta-level this experimental setup is highlighted by the filmed series of simulated chapels and churches. By transferring ritual into commercialized spaces and their playful simulations, this architecture frees wedding ceremonies from their traditionally serious sublimity. The fake inserts playfulness and lighthearted humor.

The Aesthetics of Desire in *Souvenir*

In *Souvenir*, another female monologist reflects on partnership, love, and betrayal, although here the emphasis is not on the promise of future romantic relationships



Figure 4. Sieckmann&Gossing, *Souvenir*. © Sieckmann&Gossing

but on the betrayal of love. Instead of wedding chapels, small ceramic dog sculptures serve as points of departure for Sieckmann and Gossing's "inquiry" into the formation of queer desires. The sculptures are souvenirs from far-away places, sent by sailors to their wives at home as tokens of their love. The women then display them as keepsakes on their window sills, where they express the lonely longing for absent husbands. However, later in the film these connotations shift. The ceramics that first stand for trust in the married partner and the hope for his return later lose this meaning as the wives learn about their husbands' cheating on them with prostitutes. The wives are disillusioned when they realize the emotional betrayal. They revered a partnership that was already lost. While the film moves on, it charges the souvenir with an increasing number of conflicting and contradictory meanings. Instead of idealizing the past, it comes to depict betrayal, broken relationships, and the female search for liberation from marital disappointment. The souvenirs are even associated with the themes of wreckage and catastrophe as depicted in William Turner's painting of a stormy seascape, "Shipwreck," of 1805. In the opening of the film, the monologue of an anonymous "I" conjures the synchronicity between natural and emotional events in the past, present, and future, and artistic expression.

Sieckmann and Gossing's website informs us that the voice-over texts are based on "interviews with seamen's widows" or "women left behind on shore" who represent hidden aspects of "the history of a trade as old as our civilizations" (Gossing and Sieckmann, *Souvenirs* n.d.). As in *Desert Miracles*, the voice-over text is compiled from several interviews found on the internet. In the opening, this monologue merges with images of the dog ceramics, indicating that we are hearing the voice of a sailor's wife. Two figures, thing and human, are fused into one voice that expresses hope or confidence in the "master's safe return." However, this tamed domesticity is threatened. The insertion of Turner's painting of a shipwreck as backdrop anticipates the dangers that are hidden in this domestic scene. The souvenir as a stable signifier of the domestic sphere is called into question. At the same time, the long empty hallways in the widows' residences reveal domesticity as confinement and stress its hazarding absence of communication, as the female

voice-over points to this captivity as an experience shared by other wives and widows: “There was nothing next to us, just the water.” The “I” realizes its shipwrecked sociality. The souvenir of the film’s eponymous title becomes loaded with contradicting semantic connotations, including hope and longing but also the loss of desire, domesticity, and identity. The ceramic dog figures function as hyperobjects that invite reflection on the meaning of domestic relationships and sexual identity. As Hans Blumenberg argues in “Shipwreck with Spectator”: “Shipwreck, as seen by a survivor, is the figure of an initial philosophical experience.” (12) The film’s intricate aesthetic layering of traditional painting, domestic trinkets, and architectural interiors with textual montage invites this kind of reflection.

In the next sequence, the film offers a radical counter imagery as it explores the gaudy spectacle of luxury and entertainment on a cruise ship. A lavish still life turns into a moving image. The voice lists myriad other souvenirs and gifts the sailor’s wife received from her husband. The dog souvenir that seemed special in



Film Clip 1. Sieckmann&Gossing, *Souvenir*. © Sieckmann&Gossing

the beginning corresponds to the images that “catalogue a collection of the souvenirs gathered at sea” (Gossing and Sieckmann, *Souvenirs*). This is consistent with Susan Stewart’s conception of the souvenir as an alien object. In

On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, Stewart thus defines the souvenir as an object that replaces authentic and complex experiences with small and graspable things, and as commodities that function as metonymic placeholders of past events. This is because souvenirs are inscribed with memories or they evoke the imaginary presence of the giver of the gift in the recipient's mind. For the sailors' wives, the souvenirs gifted by their husbands become fetishes of their unfulfilled desires, of their longing for absent partners, and of the celebration of their distinctive liaison. Ironically, they celebrate an imaginary present that has been lost already. As Stewart explains: "The souvenir . . . is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia." (135) As the voice-over recounts all the exotic places the idealized partners have visited—Dubai, Singapore, and Cape Horn among others—the men are othered as colorful and mysterious lovers. Domesticity here is built on nostalgia and glamor. For instance, the film features a "sequin dress from Sao Paulo" as a nostalgic token of Brazil's glitzy and extravagant Carnival culture. At the same time, the voiceover associates the shiny sequined dress with fish scales and female pheromones, while correlating the love story and its eroticism with ocean landscapes.



Film Clip 2. Sieckmann&Gossing, Souvenir. © Sieckmann&Gossing

Throughout the film, we encounter many blue spaces and things such as interior neon and fluorescent light installations and abstract light art. Michel Pastoureau, in his study *Blue: The History of a Color*, describes blue as the color of nostalgia and suffering: “Werther’s blue coat and the blue flower dear to the poet Novalis made blue the Romantic color par excellence. Long after the Romantic movement had ended, blue—especially light shades with a touch of gray—remained the color of melancholy and suffering. It had already fulfilled this function in medieval symbolism and has continued to do so in modern times with the concept of the blues in music” (138). The film’s color scheme goes a step further by establishing intriguingly complex and ambiguous connotations of blue. It associates the natural blue of the ocean with the ships’ dazzling interiors, and the physical attractions of sex scents.

While immersed in longing for her partner, the voice of the wife realizes: “. . . and I was stuck.” The woman has become pregnant, has been in and out of jobs, and moved into a semi, all while waiting for him. Everything changes when her friend Martha informs her about the circulation of porcelain dogs in exchange for sex: “Have you heard about the porcelain dogs? I mean, you could [sic] these dogs quite often in windows around here . . . The same ones he brought me. She said they bought them from the whores, to spend the night with them.” By learning that the dogs were acquired by her husband in the course of bargaining for sexual pleasures, the “I” realizes that the gifts represent disloyalty rather than devotion. What she believed to be a thoughtful gift becomes a sign of his lies and infidelity. The wives’ sentimental and melancholic fantasies were far removed from any social reality, and only indicate deluded perceptions of their marriages. Upon this realization of betrayal, all the women shift their attitudes, move away from their obsession with the past, and unanimously turn the dogs around as an invitation for new lovers to come in as soon as the husbands leave, demonstrating the power of female liberation. What was a sign of longing for lost pleasures turns into a signal for future lovers. As if to encourage these new adventures and exploits, the prose

narrative switches to verse and a stream of consciousness that evokes visions of turbulent underwater landscapes.



Film Clip 3. Sieckmann&Gossing, *Souvenir*. © Sieckmann&Gossing

Throughout the film, we slowly learn more and more about the powers of the souvenir as a fetish that evokes the exotic and simultaneously misleads and deceives the fetishizer. Sieckmann and Gossing's probing, lingering camerawork animates the souvenir, turning it into a fetishized hyperobject, before exposing it as a hyperobject of deceit. Interior monologues reveal the deceptiveness of the souvenir's melancholy. As a trace of the past, the porcelain dogs point to an unknown future, which is no longer marked by nature imagery or consumer objects, but by an eerie other. The voice over contemplates: ". . . it became quiet, remained still, and it came to me" (Gossing and Sieckmann, *Souvenir*). The idealized object is replaced by the arrival of an enigmatic "it." Behind the impersonal pronoun "it" two different kinds of provisional subjects are lurking: one functions as a variable, the other has no referent on its own. "It" moves (Percus and Sauerland, 7). The film points to this moving "it" through the dynamics of flickering spotlights that shine into the distance. The "I" welcomes the encounter with this strange otherness, which represents that which does not belong in the

sphere of domesticity and replaces what melancholy lacks. Exemplifying what Fisher calls the *weird* and the *eerie*, this “it” liberates the subject from the conventions of her emotional fixation. As Fisher explains: “The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it.” (10) Here, the flickering spotlights add exotic and outlandish potentials to the visual plot. The film references and revises a wide-ranging cinematographic history of spotlights and presents them more as liberating agents than as creators of chaotic disturbance. The “it” is evoked as the other of chaos.

The dog souvenir is shown at the end of the film again. However, by then the film has added new layers of meaning through visual assemblage and voice-over. The fetishized exotic hyperobject from the beginning reveals itself as a hyperobject of deceit and liberation. In this trans-dimensional hyperobject, the latter dimensions were present all along, as the obscure, hidden layers of the same fetish.

The Flicker Aesthetics of *Ocean Hill Drive*

The flickering lights that point towards vast and unknown futures in *Souvenir* function as a central motif in *Ocean Hill Drive*. A female voice-over, quoting from internet postings and interviews, introduces the scene: “We bought our house eleven years ago, when my husband got a new job in the city of Boston . . . We’d just got married . . . It was a dead-end street . . . And then I remember the first time it came to our home.” (Gossing and Sieckmann, *Ocean Hill Drive*) The voice-over focuses on “it” but, as Mélanie van der Hoorn argues, “. . . we never find out exactly what ‘it’ is” (110). There is no climax or turning of the narrative. The dream house turns into an unnerving challenge for the newlyweds, as the dream promised by its interior, and eventually exterior middle-class comfort and security, become lost and obsolete. The “I’s” curiosity about the flickering lights expands into an obsession and her domesticity becomes increasingly eerie. When she speculates about the cause of the shadows, she finds no answers, no narratives. In *Ocean Hill Drive*, Gossing and Sieckmann adapt the genre of haunted house stories and experimental flicker films, but do not offer any explanation for the disturbing

shadow flickers. Questions about the absent agent intensify. The film separates the cause of the flickering from its ever more threatening and demonic effects. The filmmakers found reports about the traumatizing effects of wind turbines in the area around Boston on the internet. The turbines' spinning blades reflect the sun so that the shadows flicker on the outer and inner walls of nearby residences. This results in a glimmer resembling stroboscopic effects. People in areas close to such turbines complain about health effects and severe psychic disturbances, and as a response organize protest groups. The film does not engage in the social activism against deficiencies in urban planning and the regulatory processes for offshore wind energy development. Instead, it examines the visual phenomenon's disturbing invasion of the private sphere by decoupling the shadow flickers from their cause. The rhythmic pulsations of the shadows' dark figures evoke horror and fearful associations of death and dying. The "I" asks her neighbor: "Did someone die in this house or in yours?" Her question is consistent with Fisher's claim that the eerie has a metaphysical dimension: "Why is there something here where there should be nothing?" (12) The film asks exactly this question, and points to the disturbing effects of optical interferences with the imaginary. It also indirectly references early cinematographic experiments with silhouette animation that is based on shadow play traditions. However, Gossing and Sieckmann's film abstracts the shadows from their source. The flickering shadows describe a metaphysical enigma between dark and light, conjuring a meta-cinematographic reflection that also informs the ending of *Souvenir*. In both films, the flickering lights abstract from the suburban houses or trinkets on display. The voice-overs in both films disengage from their concrete surroundings, and also from their current attachments and conceptual frameworks. In *Souvenir* this indicates a liberation from emotional attachment; in *Ocean Hill Drive* it suggests that the space remains haunted by the obsession with horror.

Conclusion

In *Souvenir*, sharp contrasts between the empty hallways of domesticity and the imagined sensual splendors of the sailors and absent husbands outline the

tensions between female and male spaces and desires, imagined or real. The ceramic dogs as souvenirs represent these distant spaces. While they first function as tokens of emotional intimacy, they later depict the estrangement of the partners and open up new perspectives towards new relationships that transcend binary fixations. In other words, they create liminal spaces at the borders of gendered identities. As hyperobjective things that are prone to diverse applications and multivalent interactions, the dogs become agents of queering the spaces they inhabit.

In *Ocean Hill Drive* the shadow flickers are present even if their source remains a mystery for the local population. This eerie absence threatens the comfort and homeliness of the domestic sphere, as represented by the single-family residence. As in *Souvenir*, the film thus fractures ideals of domesticity. If *Souvenir* places the obsession with porcelain dogs in a different light, *Ocean Hill Drive* shatters the ultimate stereotype of domesticity by way of an eerie flickering. As a result, eeriness itself flickers.

As poetic documentaries, both films establish hyperobjects that deconstruct stable signifiers through cinematographic assemblages of found objects and texts that question and reject patriarchal conventions of domesticity. Both films queer female desire by breaking with the patriarchal hegemony of married life, its values of devotion, faithfulness, and monogamy, as well as the idealization of the family home as a sanctuary. *Ocean Hill Drive* transforms the domestic space itself into a haunted sphere that threatens the family home. In contrast to its function as a sanctuary, the family residence becomes the site of mental confusion, and disarray.

In Sieckmann and Gossing's film art queering goes much further than just resistance to gender norms and an inquiry into homosexual relationships. The films' assemblages gradually disperse conventions of perception and challenge the audience to critically envision and reimagine domesticity in all of its incarnations, including in non-traditional partnerships and suburban settings. Just as *Desert Miracles* de-sanctifies church rituals, *Souvenir* de-sanctifies domesticity by revising the mnemonic function of souvenirs. Instead of evoking memories and

enchantments of the past, they call for liberated futures and new partnerships. A similar effect is achieved in *Ocean Hill Drive*, where residential homes become haunted sites of panic but also allow for alternate perceptions of the everyday. As critically queering the notion of agency, Gossing and Sieckmann's film art unravels preconceived notions of female desire and its emotional manifestations. At the same time, the works' aesthetics reveal the hyperobjectivity of things. However, the films also add another level of discourse: they point to the hyperobjectivity of the films themselves. As poetic assemblages of found texts and digitized and analogue film, they capitalize on the advanced possibilities of the cinematographic medium to represent, create, and invent new perceptions of reality.

¹ The artist duo is comprised of the Cologne-based filmmakers Lina Sieckmann and Miriam Gossing.

² Gossing, e-mail message to author, August 13, 2020 [my translation].

³ As the voice over suggests: "But by looking closely at us and the pillars that support our relationship, the people we love and live with, I didn't find anything wrong with it."

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