

# MOLECULAR LACUNAS

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The experience of looking at Rob Sherwood's video work in *The Warp & The Weft* is not without a certain melancholy. Projected onto a screen in an unbroken loop, fluorescent greens, yellows, blues and reds pulse, contract and expand like passing city-lights refracted through beads of rain on a window screen. At times the colours appear on the brink of distinction, at others they are almost undifferentiated. The alternations of colour seem to hesitate, to hint at the possibility of meaning only to withdraw it.

While looking at the projection you hear occasional, drawn-out sounds somewhere between those produced by an old violin and a wet finger circling the rim of a wine glass. There is also a metallic property to these reverberations which, to my ear, is curiously comforting. As with the alternations of colour that occupy the visual field, there is no novelty or change here, only prolonged echoes and returns.

Yet the affective qualities of these works are complicated and in some ways accentuated when you think about the elaborate processes behind their production.

For the projection a series of monochromes were produced on MS Paint, a now largely obsolete computer programme. These monochromes were recorded by a video camera as they were displayed on a computer screen. Each video clip was then sampled into a grid on iMovie and the resulting 'colour charts' – squares divided into nine smaller squares – were photographed with a 'screen grab'. Around one hundred of these shots were taken, each with a different colour combination. Next the 'screen grabs' were placed back into the grid on iMovie as clips that lasted about two fifths of a second. These were then animated and looped so that the nine small squares of simulated pixels were continuously flicking into different colours. What you see in the final work is a recording of the vain efforts of a video camera on autofocus trying to keep up with these chromatic alternations as they unfold on a computer screen.

The sound, on the other hand, is not the sound of an object or instrument but that of a glitch that occurred when music was being streamed on the internet. This interruption, which lasted for only about a forty thousandth of a second, has been stretched out to a duration of forty six seconds. What is so particular about what you hear, then, is that it is the sound of a paradoxical conflation of interruption and continuity. One might also describe it as a contradiction in terms: a dislocated continuum that survives in the very act of decomposition.

So what are we to make of these processes? and how may they be related to the melancholic aspects of *The Warp & The Weft*? In his aphoristic essay 'Central Park',

the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin famously described allegory as a mode of representation that 'holds fast to ruins.' According to Benjamin the ruin interrupts the linear passage of time by presenting history not as progress but as nature in decay. Crumbling monuments built to signify eternity become evidence of civilisation's transience, so that the ruin becomes a contradictory figure of fleeting eternity. Indeed, central to Benjamin's conception of allegory is the coexistence of contradictory temporalities – the eternal and the transitory, the future and the past – which come together in the dialectical image of 'petrified unrest.' For this reason allegory is tied to the retrospective gaze of the melancholic, who contemplates a world that appears only as it retreats and sees everything in terms of its future ruination. Under the saturnine gaze, Benjamin writes, 'the most simple thing appears to be a cipher for some enigmatic wisdom.'

In an age of digital technology the idea of the ruin may seem like a thing of the past. Such technology restores, remasters, sharpens and preserves. It produces what sometimes feels like a seamless reality, one that is rarely experienced as transitory. Indeed it would be tempting to think of the high resolution of digital images, for instance, not only as a formal category but as an ideological one within which contradictions are resolved and temporality abolished in favour of the false appearance of totality. In *The Warp & The Weft*, however, we encounter caesuras in the space of meaning. The camera's digital gaze is unable to capture the enigmatic object of its focus, whilst the sound is that of a syncope wrenched from the arithmetical progression of a live stream, a syncope that lives on in an elegiac state of petrified unrest.

What we see and what we hear, in other words, are illegible fragments sundered from the customary contexts of life. In this *The Warp & The Weft* seems to echo Benjamin's allegorical gaze on modernity as haunted by its future destruction. 'With the destabilising of the market economy,' he writes, 'we begin to recognise the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins before they have crumbled.' So that, perhaps, is what we recognise here: the future ruination of the digital age and the plaintive cries of its melancholy ghosts, as if the course of the world were concealed in the tiniest fragment.