Chapter Seven
The Photoshop Cinema

Concern with effect rather than meaning
is a basic change of our electric time.

—Marshall McLuhan, 1964[1]

American artist Jeremy Blake (1971–2007) is known for his mysterious time-based digital paintings. Yet shortly after his untimely death, investigations revealed hitherto unknown details about his production technique and in particular his reliance on a certain piece of software:

> They discovered Mr. Blake's labeled folders in Adobe Photoshop, the graphics-editing software. Each folder contained sequential picture files with titles. But within each dense file were numerous layers of the artist's "moving painting" imagery, their intended direction and flow indecipherable.[2]

Why has this fact since been ignored? Perhaps Blake's dependence on template-driven, automated commercial software in the production of fine art is too abrasive, embarrassing even, to the art world and its mythology of the genius-artist? Regardless, the fact remains: Blake's luminous and mystically colored time-based paintings originated in Adobe Photoshop and bear the trappings of this prefabricated and machine-made framework. Thus we are invited to consider what Adobe Photoshop is, what it means for contemporary aesthetics, and how the use of software applications like Photoshop conditions and alters creative production today.

In this chapter I argue that Blake's cinematic artwork, complemented by such feature films as *Pleasantville* (2000), *Sin City* (2005), *Waking Life* (2001), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), and *Speed Racer* (2008), is characterized by highly stylized uses of digital color that I call the Photoshop cinema. The Photoshop cinema involves the use of saturated, thick, digital color that figure as stylistic *and* conceptual opacities in regards to meaning, narrative, and image. By stylistic opacity, I mean the literal use of thick and rich colors, generated through Photoshop or similar software applications. By conceptual opacity I mean artwork characterized by an impenetrable style of cool, almost aloof indifference. Together, these stylistic and conceptual opacities constitute a new paradigm of digital colorism in contemporary media aesthetics.

The new school colorism bids adieu to expressionistic palettes and subjective color values, welcoming instead the prêt-à-porter convenience of store-bought color, prefabricated software layouts, and designed effects. Its sensibilities are similar to the way in which Charles Riley describes the colors featured in the Museum of Modern Art's 2008 exhibition *Color Charts: Reinventing Color, 1950 to Today*. "These colors," he writes, are without the "familiar litany of harmony, cool versus warm, synaesthesia, simultaneous contrast, complementaries . . . Goodbye Goethe and his colossally inspiring errors—hello Benjamin Moore." And while this exhibition featured almost exclusively the industrial colors of modern painting, with only a couple new media and photographic works, Riley's observations very much apply to my concept of the Photoshop cinema and the new conditions of postindustrial color.[3] For the moment, however, I must put this term aside and allow the chapter to do the intricate work of unfolding the details of the new paradigm of cool indifference.

My arguments in this chapter are thus concerned with a new style of colorism,[4] analyzed primarily through the gallery projects developed by Jeremy Blake, which I connect and compare to broader histories of color within Western painting, cinema, and the avant-garde, especially the structuralist films of Paul Sharits. More broadly, the chapter takes chapter 6's insights into post-optic algorithmic color and offers a corresponding visual style that is also unconcerned with hermeneutic depth or optical detail. In other words, if algorithmic color is code first and image second, then what kind of visual sensibility *can* emerge? The answer, as I will demonstrate, is one that deals in patterns and simulated surface effects through so-called transparent interfaces. As the last of the core chapters in the book, the Photoshop cinema shuts the door on the once-expanding field of optical perception, utopian ideals, and progressive visions that, several decades ago, birthed these colors (in chapters 2 through 4).

Digital Color

In the 1990s, as discussed in the second half of chapter 5, digital electronic color became synonymous with mass media, mass consumerism, and Internet commerce. Even in popular cinema and feature-length films, digital colors were choreographed and designed using color-grading techniques, a sophisticated form of color compositing, or chromakey, as analyzed in chapter 5. In the film industry, the technique has become unequivocally associated with digital intermediate (DI) technologies, which involve scanning an original film into a digital platform, manipulating it, and then (less frequently) "baking" it back onto the original format for distribution.[5] Accordingly, the examples I discuss in this chapter have been selected for their use of stylized digital color grading. And while high-end films do not use Photoshop software to accomplish this, they do use similar though more sophisticated and often customized software. For example, in *The Aviator* (2004) director Martin Scorsese commissioned a team of programmers to write a set of LUTs. A LUT, or "look up table" is a set of indexed numeric values that correspond to particular precomputed colors for a film sequence or set of images in a scene. Scorsese's LUTs emulated the "look" of 1930s and 1940s Technicolor film stock, the time period the film was set in. Here, algorithmic color was used to generate a more precise color than actual Technicolor color.

Jeremy Blake

Between 1998 and 2007, Jeremy Blake made nineteen colorful "time-based paintings," each running from three to twenty minutes and on occasion longer, though the work is often shown in a loop, making length somewhat irrelevant. His work is exhibited on plasma screens, as projections on gallery

walls, museums, or in private collections. Blake has collaborated with such established directors and musicians as Paul Thomas Anderson in *Punch Drunk Love* (2002), Lars Von Trier for the opening sequence of *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), and Beck for his album *Sea Change* (2002). He has also created several illustrations, large C-prints, and mixed media images, which tend to be thematically connected to the time-based work.

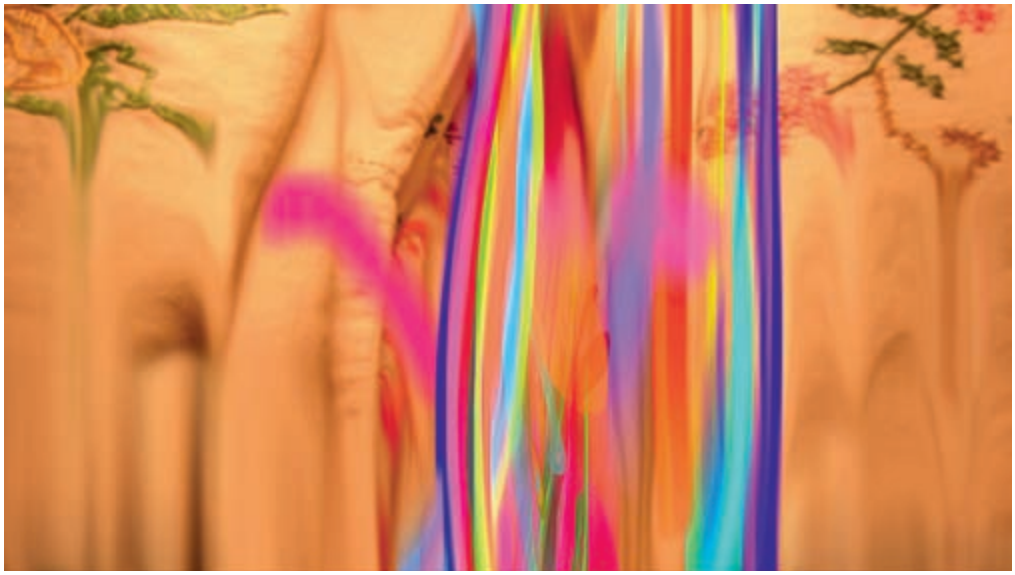
Blake's subject matter derives from the culture and history of southern California. As he puts it, "stilted dialogue, cheap special effects, and the prefab accouterments of success (hot tubs, vacation homes, powerful drugs . . .)" selected from "Hollywood's psychic dustbin."[6] The city of Los Angeles plays a key role in *Chemical Sundown* (2001), and Hollywood features prominently in *Century 21* (2003) and *Bungalow 8* (2001). The American frontier and the Wild West are the subjects of the *Winchester Trilogy* (2002–4), while the former punk rock subculture lies at the heart of *Glitterbest* (unfinished, 2007) and fashion, drugs, and music are prevalent in *Reading Ossie Clark* (2005), *Angel Dust* (2001), and *Sodium Fox* (2005) (figures 7.1 and 7.2).

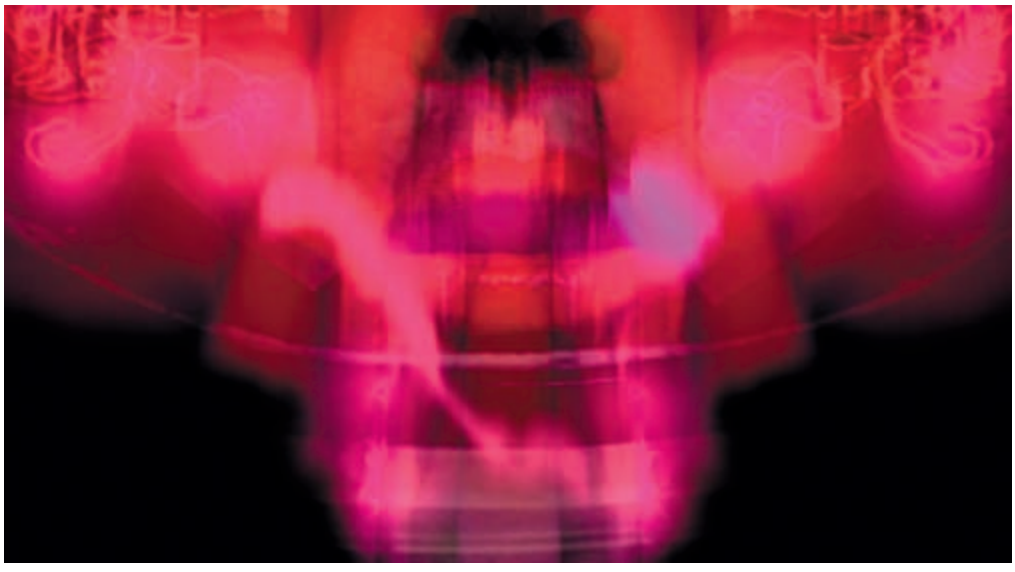
But what are these thick, opaque, and highly saturated patches of color, so characteristic of Blake's style, doing on the surface of the screen? Do they complement the viewing experience, or block it? These are important questions, and while the bright lights and luminous colors of the southern California landscape must certainly influence the artist's palette, one must also carefully examine the relationship between color and narrative before making further claims about them.

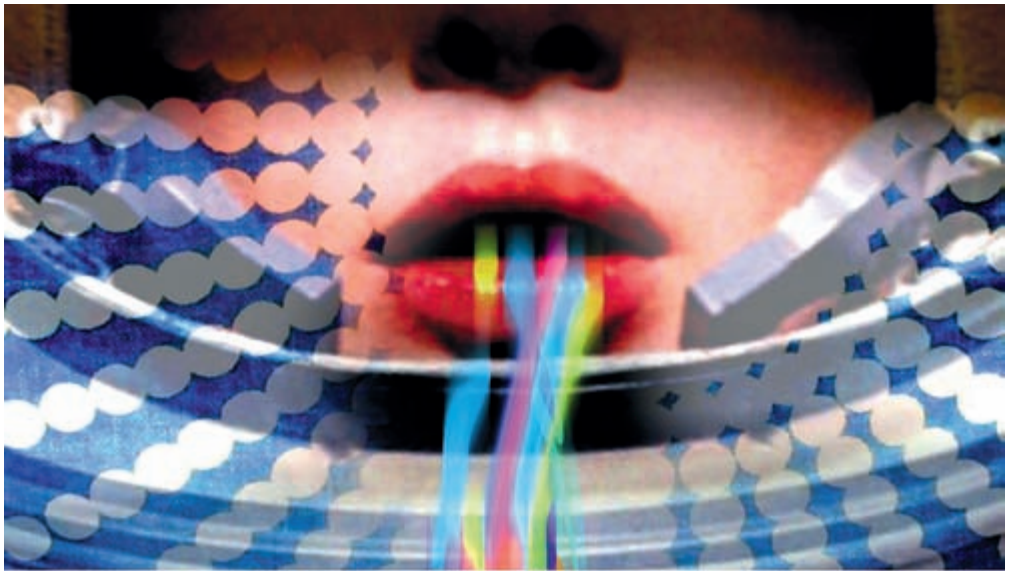
One of the most identifying traits in Blake's work is his use of saturated color juxtaposed with photographs, film clips, or vintage imagery, which he uses as a stylistic device that alludes to the historical and aesthetic debates between *colore* and *disegno*. As noted in the introduction, in art history the term *disegno* denotes line, compositional coherency, narrative ordering, and drawing skill, whereas *colore* denotes colorism and color treatment, traditionally through brushstroke. The two were pitted against each other, most notably at the height of the Italian Renaissance, with Florence's *disegno* and Venice's *colore*. When examining Blake's time-based paintings as a whole, it becomes evident first that his work plays off of these debates while also positioning itself at the intersection of the histories of colorism in film *and* modern painting, and second that a shift develops in the use of color throughout his work: from geometric and rigid uses of color in his early work, to the addition of explicit narrative and more fluid uses of color in his later work.

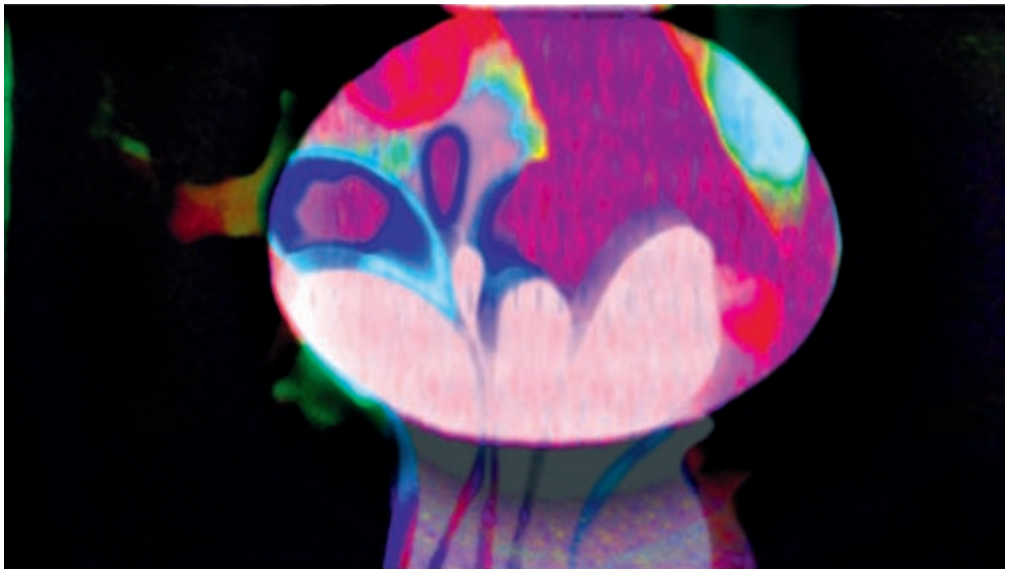
Narrative Saturation

The most mysterious aspect of Blake's work is his use of color in relation to narrative. Narrative has always been present in his work, even before he









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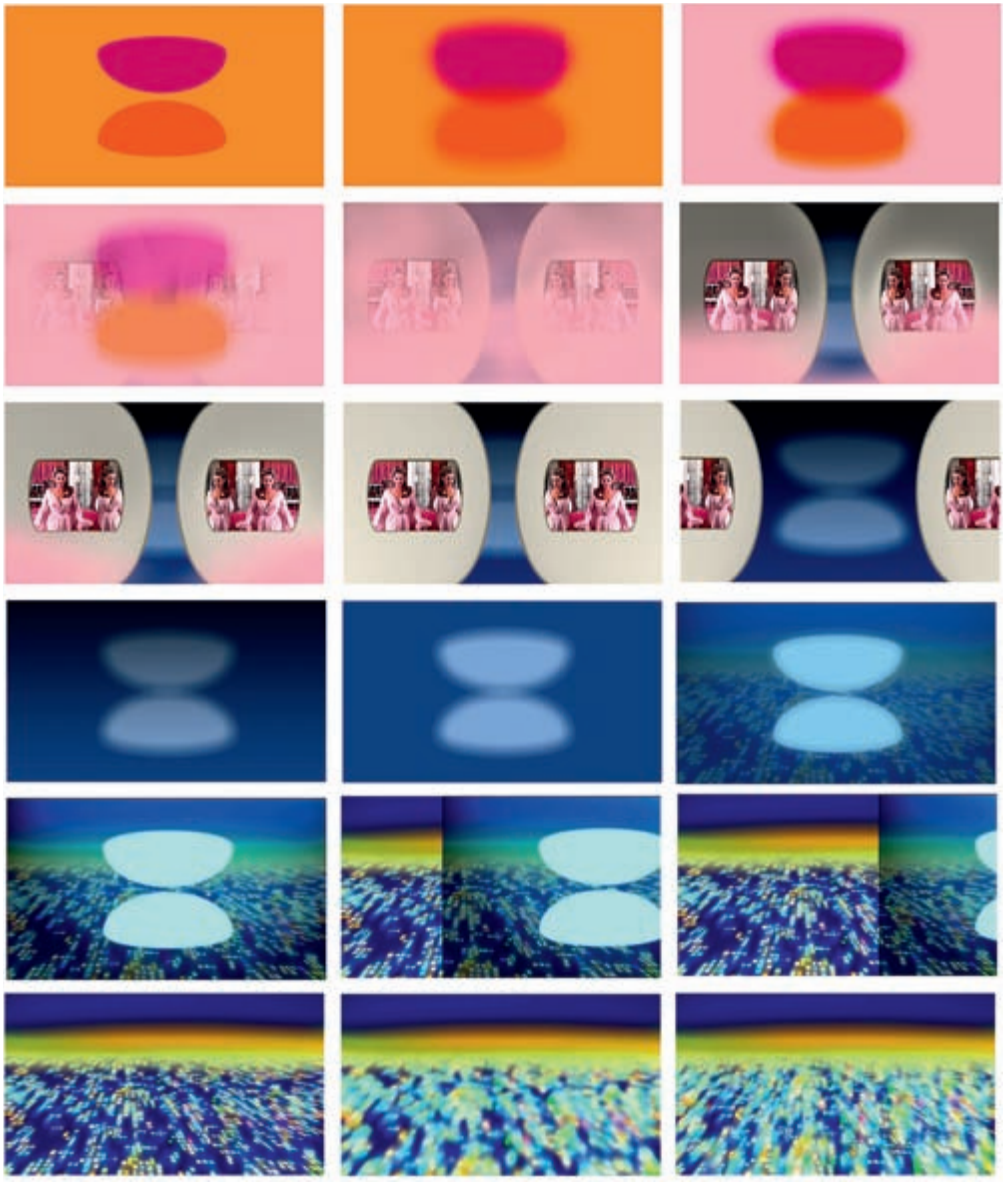

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turned to time-based media. Lance Kinz, Blake's art dealer and director at the Kinz & Tillou gallery in New York, explains that his early C-prints (the "mother" of his time-based paintings) are oriented horizontally, requiring the eye to move from left to right, suggesting narrative development.[7] At the same time, Blake's treatment of narrative, like his treatment of color, is idiosyncratic, cool, and orthogonal to conventional uses.

There are two predominant uses of color in the history of the moving image: either to support narrative and the formation of coherent meaning, as with films like *Ramona* (1936), *A Star Is Born* (1937), and *The Aviator* (2000), or to block them, as with *Punch Drunk Love* (2002) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), both of which Blake worked on (figures 7.3 and 7.4). The first approach is the most common in feature films and, as Scott Higgins has shown, is clearly illustrated in Technicolor's battles with color from the 1910s through the post–World War II period. In strident attempts to naturalize their new color stock, Technicolor went to great lengths to yield an otherwise unruly color technology into an established standard that would support, rather than disrupt, narrative cinema.[8] In this approach, color disappears in the narratavized content to the extent that it is subordinated and made submissive to it.

The second approach uses color to sensationalize, seduce, or invert and disrupt narrative and the consistent formation of stable meaning. This technique has appeared throughout twentieth century advertising and has had debut moments in cinema history, such as the hand-coloring and tinting fads developed in the era of silent film, which, as Tom Gunning has pointed out, had the effect of inciting visual desire and disrupting narrative flow.[9] Also associated with this approach is the use of color to depict nonnormative, mind-altering experiences, such as a dream sequence or drug trip. Perhaps the quintessential example of this is the LSD scene in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), where photographic sequences are intermixed with abstract colors, aligning color's appearance with mind-altering substances and psychedelic consciousness (figure 7.5). For the most part, however, using this approach as the *primary* mode of address has remained largely unpopular throughout the twentieth century cinema, though it has regained currency in recent years, for reasons I will explain below. Ultimately Blake employs both of the above techniques to some degree, but his development of the latter is by far the most prominent and sophisticated; a technique that returns color to associations with transgression and the dirty matter of materiality, as discussed in chapters 1 and 5. Before returning to this intervention in Blake's gallery work, I first discuss color's relationship to narrative *inversion* and *elevation* in recent feature films (two of which include works by Blake) and the midcentury cinematic avant-garde.

Not only has the insertion of abstract and nonfigurative color had a temporary and fleeting effect in cinema, but such uses inevitably end up

<< **7.1** Jeremy Blake, *Reading Ossie Clark*, 2003. Sequence from digital animation, 9 minutes continuous. Luminescent and saturated colors ooze out of a still photograph of a woman's mouth. Courtesy Kinz + Tillou Fine Art.

< **7.2** Jeremy Blake, *Chemical Sundown*, 2001. Sequence from digital animation, 12 minute continuous. One of the first photographic images to appear in Blake's time-based work. Courtesy Kinz + Tillou Fine Art.

7.3

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supporting and intensifying the narrative form. In other words, the appearance of color in this second approach is often restricted to pseudo-disruptions of narrative, i.e., to represent what was "only" a dream, moment of rage, or hallucination during an LSD trip, after which the film returns to its logical and cohesive narrative trajectory and color disappears back in it.

In 2002, after analyzing recent special effects in mainstream Hollywood cinema, film scholar David Bordwell identified a new narrative style that he termed "intensified continuity." Contrary to the claims that the Hollywood style has become "post-classical," he argues, "we are still dealing with a variant of classical filmmaking . . . Far from rejecting traditional continuity in the name of fragmentation and incoherence, the new style amounts to an *intensification* of established techniques."[10] Bordwell was referring to the now popular effects of time remapping and increased cuts in montage sequences, effects that have been used since the early days of cinema, now regaining popularity, in part due to the new ease and availability of digital media.

I here extend Bordwell's argument by shifting his terminology from narrative *intensification* to narrative *saturation*. The purpose is twofold: digital color techniques can simultaneously intensify the narrative form *and* the aesthetic of the visual image as it appears on screen. This doubling occurs because digital colors are flexible and capable of high degrees of saturation and luminosity, but also because of the way in which color can be used to interact with (narrative) form. My concept of "narrative saturation" thus builds on Bordwell's intensification thesis by reversing the traditional Western binary that privileges form (*disegno*) over *colore*, and instead allows hue and saturation to take an active role in critique. This is not a straightforward reversal where *colore* simply becomes the priority term; rather, the issue becomes the relationship *between* the two.

Blake's technique of narrative saturation is most evident in the segments he created for two feature films: Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love* (2002) and Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). In *Dancer in the Dark* the purely abstract, nonreferential colors invoke an aesthetic of sightlessness, a metonymy for the story line that develops through the visually impaired protagonist Selma (played by Björk) (figure 7.6).

7.3–7.4 Jeremy Blake, luminous color sequences in dir. Paul Thomas Anderson's *Punch Drunk Love*, 2002. Film stills.

7.5

7.5 Dir. Dennis Hopper, *Easy Rider*, 1969. Film still. This acid-trip scene occurs in a graveyard in New Orleans, depicted through a stunning montage sequence intercut with photographic sequences of ecstatic bodies and abstract colors.

7.6

Unlike the singular use of opaque color in the introductory sequence to *Dancer in the Dark*, *Punch Drunk Love* presents abstract color sequences and color overlays several times throughout the film. Film scholar Brian Price argues that these sequences halt the narrative flow, bringing its contrived status to the surface of awareness. For Price, Blake's sequences in *Punch Drunk Love* instantiate a trend in American and international cinema to use color abstraction to ultimately block narrative development and "overwhelm the narrative space" leading to a "state of entropy; [where] streaks of color undo the image."[11] Certainly these color bursts halt the image, but as one idiosyncratic scene leads into the next, these brief color bursts and chromatic layering effects function just as easily as transitions that bind the viewing experience together. In other words, the momentary pauses of color function as connective bridges within an already fractured postmodern aesthetic.

A first example of this occurs in the opening scenes of *Punch Drunk Love*. Just after the protagonist, Barry Egan (played by Adam Sandler) appears in an awkward royal blue suit, the camera pulls back to reveal an equally odd royal blue and white striped room (figure 7.7). Both seem idiosyncratic yet continuity is forged between their mutual eccentricities: an offbeat guy and an offbeat workspace. When the film cuts to an abstract color animation shortly thereafter, the viewer is already primed to carry over the visual metaphors—from meaningful color symbolism in the blue suit and a blue painted room, to more abstract and less referential color. This continuity unifies an offbeat set of abstractions, within an equally offbeat and idiosyncratic film, resulting in a cohesive narrative framework.

A second example occurs during Barry's phone sex encounter. Though perhaps a tongue-in-cheek poke at a cliché from the Hays code era, the symbolic use of free-floating color stands in as a symbol of orgasm. Viewers connect the subjective, psychosexual reality of the character with the otherwise

noncontingent color abstractions on screen. In a third instance, color overlays appear onscreen while Barry is enraged on the phone with the phone sex supervisor (played by Philip Seymour Hoffman), seeking revenge for a phone sex scam. A similar tongue-in-cheek cliché is at work when the supervisor's irrational state is symbolized by abstract color on screen. Madness, like idiosyncrasy and sex, are easily reabsorbed into the narrative as an irrational but acceptable aberrations. In all of these cases color appears to halt logic and sense and saturate its coherence with an abstraction of hues, but ultimately the film does the exact opposite. The semblance of nonmeaning is resubsumed into the larger logic of the story and character motivation, in effect saturating, intensifying, and expanding the range of rhetorical devices in Hollywood's commodity par excellence: the narrative form. 7.7

Similar examples of narrative saturation are found in the single red gunshot at the end of Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945) and in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), where digital grading is used to color a single red coat within an otherwise black-and-white film. Because the color red in *Schindler's List* is used as a symbol that looks backwards and forwards at once, according to film scholar John Belton, it is not "realistically" motivated but is instead "artistically" motivated, and thus the painterly use of color problematizes narrative coherency, Belton argues, and violates homogeneity and diegesis.[12] But as demonstrated, such brief moments of incompatibility hardly destroy the

< **7.6** Jeremy Blake, still from his introductory sequence to dir. Lars Von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, 2000. The abstract imagery echoes the film's motif of blindness.

7.7 Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, Stills from *Punch Drunk Love*, 2002. Throughout the film, the rich colors of the set design, chromatic overlays, and costumes complement Blake's opaque color sequences made for the film.

overall structure; rather they are used as exclamation points to offset and thus heighten the dramatic tension.

Such brief interludes and uses of color saturation are common in feature films like *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Pleasantville* (2000), and those cited above, which tend to employ digital grading techniques to fuse opaque color palettes with traditional black-and-white film and photography, live-action footage, or computer-generated animations. While visually enticing, these abstract and saturated color palettes ultimately offer a pseudo-disruption that, again, serves to *intensify narrative* and its relation to formal clarity, linearity, and thus chromophobic ideology. In *Pleasantville*, for example, color is initially introduced as a wild and transgressive excess, but by the end of the film, it has become the perceptual and realistic norm; full color is the everyday, objective reality. A film ostensibly about celebrating color's unruly power, Belton notes, ends up reinforcing homogeneity and convention.[13]

These two modes of colorism are not new. As noted, they loosely echo the long-standing debates between color (*colore*) and form (*disegno*), in a new medium. And yet when one considers Blake's gallery work, one encounters a new problem: a color treatment that moves beyond both Bordwell's concept of narrative intensification and my own concept of narrative saturation. Starting with moments of narrative saturation and temporary blockage, Blake then pushes his colors further, unwilling to allow them to rejoin the plot, its logic, or causality. In other words, Blake's gallery work exhibits a *use of color dedicated to the intentional and sustained mystification of narrative logic*. If the trend in contemporary digital cinema is to use opaque colors to introduce temporary and ephemeral distractions, only to resaturate and intensify narrative, then Blake's gallery work offers something else: *an inversion and critique of this technique*.

Color Contexts: Paul Sharits

While Blake's digital colorism is clearly prefigured in modern painting and experimental cinema, he also uses color in ways distinct from these predecessors. As he allows color to push away logic, coherency, and order, color affects become expressive in and for themselves, liberated from subordination to narrative, meaning, and form. These nonfigurative color techniques are not common in feature films, save for examples like those noted above, where they are employed as temporary and fleeting effects. These techniques *are* quite common, however, if not normative, in modern painting and this is why the color field painters Kenneth Noland, Gerhard Richter, Ellsworth Kelley, and Yves Klein together constitute one core set of interlocutors for Blake. A second set is found in structuralist film from the midcentury avant-garde, and more broadly, in the work of experimental film colorists like Stan Brakhage, Len Lye, Hollis Frampton, Gerhard Richter, Norman McLaren, Oskar Fischinger, Kenneth Anger,

and Paul Sharits, all of whom use color in ways that suggest interesting comparisons and connections to Blake's work. In particular, it is in the work of Paul Sharits that one finds an extremely elegant dialectic between color and narrative that is perhaps the most complementary—precisely because it is also so distinct from—Blake's use of color and narrative. 7.8

Sharits' *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G.* (1968), for instance, dedicated to and starring poet David Franks, is a twelve-minute color 16 mm film that alternates "violence with purity," as P. Adams Sitney puts it, which is to say representational photography and abstract color fields[14] (figure 7.8). The photographs feature the face and upper torso of Franks, beginning with fairly neutral images that, midway through the film, become violent and sexually explicit. As the photographs flash on and off, they are interspersed with full frames of color. By the end of the film the colors are intercut with scissors, blades open, pushed up to Frank's mouth. The effect is intense, passionate, and corporeal. The almost inaudible sound track complements the expressionistic treatment of color. It consists of one sound bite, the word "destroy," repeated with overlay, distortion, and cutting until it sounds something like "touching." The play and alternation between color fields and photographic imagery mirrors the play between audible and inaudible sounds and words. The switching occurs at a rapid and aggressive pace that in turn creates a layer of flickering and stroboscopic effects. The film, as Simon Field writes, "operates at the limits of perception (and possibly tolerance)" or, as Sharits himself puts it, as an "assault on the eyeballs."[15] Color here is clearly optical and concerned with the materiality of subjective vision.

7.8 Paul Sharits, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G.* 1968. 16mm, color, sound. 12 minutes. Film still. Courtesy of Paul Sharits Estate and Christopher Sharits.

This same dialectic between color (*colore*) and form (*disegno*) is at work in other films by Sharits, though it often seems as though color dominates and consistently wins out over the narrative elements (for example, *Ray Gun Virus* [1966]; *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* [1968]; *Shutter Interface* [1975]; and *Analytical Studies IV: Blank Color Frames* [1975–76]) (figure 7.9). At the same time, given Sharits' minimalist aesthetic, even the smallest, single frame of content may be enough to maintain an active relationship between color and narrative, suggests M. M. Serra.[16] For instance, in *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* (1976), for several minutes one sees only pure and solid color fields flashing on the screen until fragments of archival footage of two men undergoing epileptic seizures redirect the viewer's attention to a narrative register (figure 7.10). Sharits also slows down this archival footage, imbuing the men's experience with acute visceral pain: rolling eyes, dropped jaws, and twisted necks with heads thrown back, hooked up to electric wires and plugs on a hospital bed. The interspersed color accentuates the affect for the viewer, making the black-and-white images appear frozen and prolonged in the sensation of pain. The soundtrack is equally visceral, relaying the frequency of the patients' brain waves as they undergo these extreme situations. In the last third of the film, the monochromatic color frames come back in, still interspersed among the photographic images, but dominant enough to align color (once again) with physiological illness and that which is beyond reason and control.[17] Sharits' cinema is on the whole less concerned with story than it is with affect and color sensation, with all of its erotic, violent, visceral, haptic, and transgressive attributes, and this is why he is such an important predecessor for Blake. Both actively negotiate the relationship between photographic imagery (as narrative signifier) and color abstraction.

And yet, while Blake may have been influenced by the work of Paul Sharits and other avant-garde painters and filmmakers noted above, it would be a mistake to put his work exclusively into this lineage. For one, many of these filmmakers worked with color by hand—applying it frame by frame with a paintbrush, as Stan Brakhage did, or in pin-screen animation on an optical printer, as Norman McLaren did. The experimental filmmakers also worked with a wider color gamut and used 16 mm or 35 mm color film stock and, to state the obvious, their work was produced about thirty or forty years prior to Blake's. Another important difference between Blake's colorism and that of the cinematic avant-garde is the latter's concern with the filmic experience. For the cinematic avant-garde, film is subjective and physiological, generating a kind of visceral eye-body tactile experience where color in particular figures as something deeply emotional and expressionistic. Filmmakers and scholars who advocate this sensibility include Bruce Elder, Carolee Schneemann, Stan Brakhage, Scott Bartlett, Stan VanDerBeek, and Gene Youngblood, to name only a few. When Brakhage was viewing Sharits' *Analytical Studies III: Color Frame Passages* (1974), for example, he remarked, the "yellows begin to effect

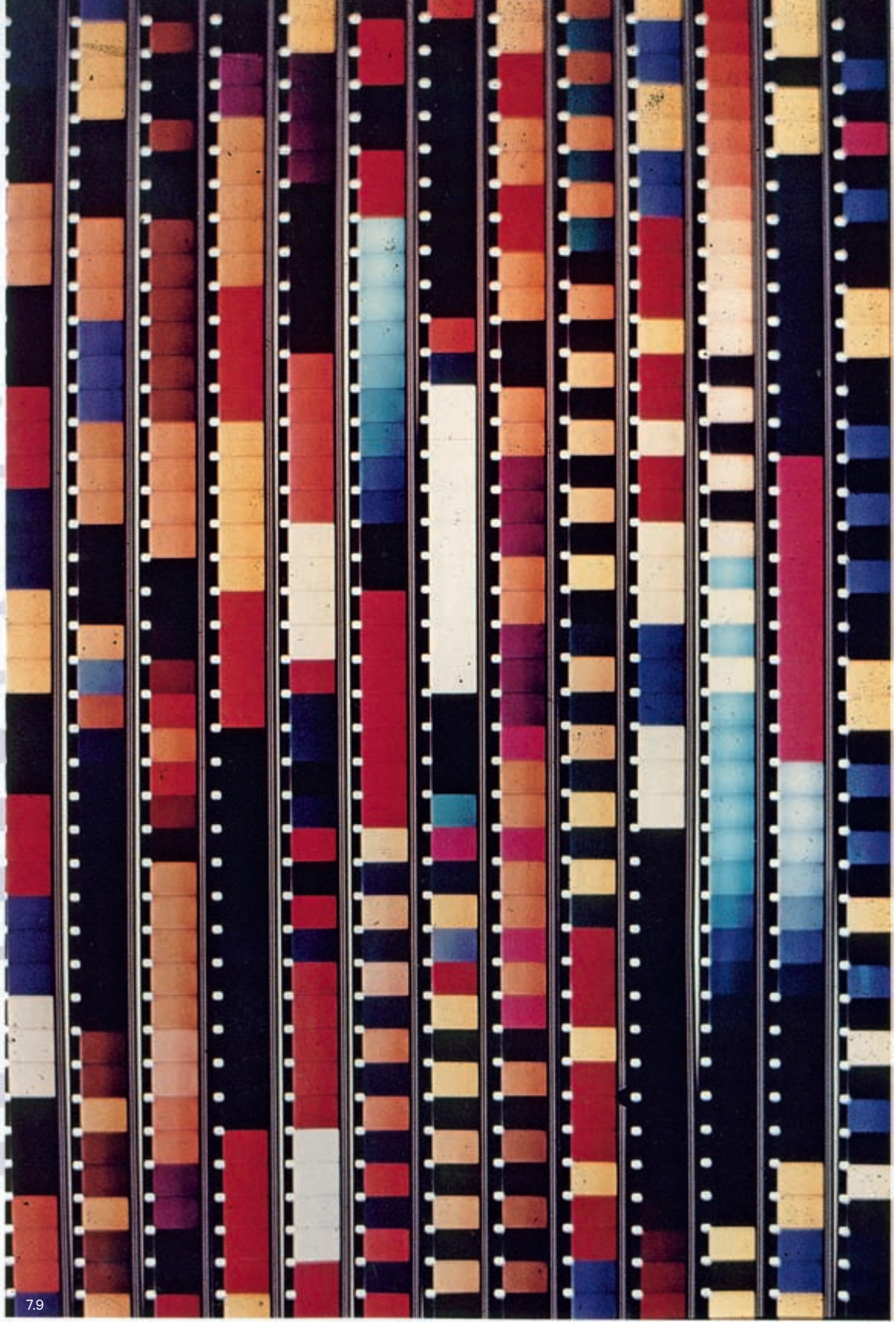
a meditative blaze . . . as-if 'echoing' the heating up of the body: I was . . . in [the] midst [of] a delicious healing fever cycle."[18] In contrast, the mystical eye of color perception (the same mystical and cosmological eye discussed in chapters 1 through 4), is entirely absent in Blake's twenty-first-century cool digital colorism (and for the most part in the work discussed in the previous two chapters). Blake's colors are bold and saturated, but they are also flat and indifferent.

Blake's colorism is also unlike that of a number of contemporary digital colorists who disavow narrative altogether.[19] Blake uses color to *uphold narrative tension and as a result creates an ongoing negotiation between narrative and color; meaning and nonmeaning; abstraction and representation; and past and present*. In this way, he is careful not to push color abstraction too far, to "botch" the work, as Deleuze and Guattari warn of the Body without Organs. For Blake, narrative always lingers, however dimly, in the background. To further understand this highly stylized use of color and its unique yet topical intervention in contemporary digital aesthetics, I begin with Blake's early ventures into time-based digital art.

Blake's Early Digital Work

On the whole, a metanarrative *about color* develops throughout Blake's work. Chris Chang argues that Blake's animation sequence from *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) alone visualizes the "entire history of postwar American abstraction."[20] I extend this observation to Blake's entire oeuvre: from the early rigid use of color to the fluid, organic uses in his later work. This trajectory offers a micro-allegory for the history of certain strands of colorism in modern painting but also, to some extent, the history of color in film, *in reverse*.

For example, one of his earliest works, *Bungalow 8* (1998), contains three parts, *Façade*, *Black Swan*, and *Hotel Safe*, all of which consist exclusively of abstract geometric shapes smoothly rolling in, off, and around the screen (figure 7.11). Abstract sounds complement the images and sprinkles of narrative distinguish it from abstract painting. And yet just as this luminous grid of colors gestures towards a story line, the screen fades to black. Narrative is understood only through an assemblage of sources, like the written description in the gallery or small hints in the images. *Bungalow 8* is a dwelling place "flanked by burning tiki torches," an "eponymous poolside cabana at the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles, often the scene of business meetings and decadent parties."[21] The piece was inspired by the detective mystery *Den of Thieves* (a novel Blake was reading at the time) and California noir. Beyond these kinds of fragments one's efforts to reconstruct the narrative in full are futile. Aside from the above noted sources, the clues in the images are indirect and doubtful. In fact they actively work *against* coherent meaning. Like the noir crime story



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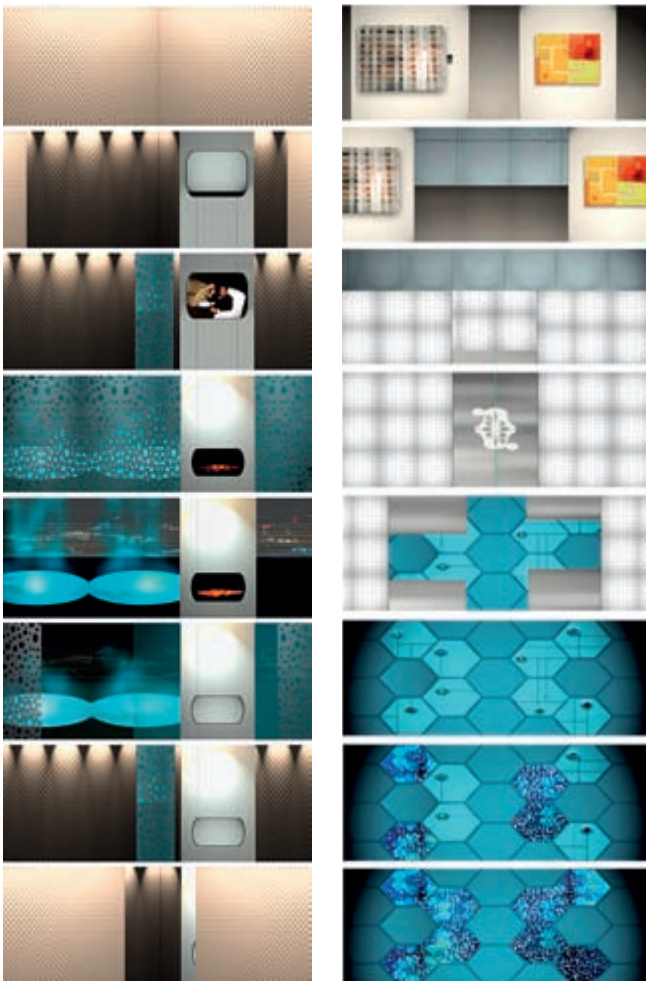
< **7.9** Paul Sharits, *N:O:T:H:I:N:G*, 1968. 16 mm, color, sound 36 minutes. Color film strips between acrylic glass. Courtesy of Paul Sharits Estate and Christopher Sharits.

7.10 Paul Sharits, *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*, 1976. Film stills, 16mm, color, 34 minutes. In the film, one sees only color until archival fragments of two men undergoing seizures are interspersed, creating a hybrid and "epileptic" viewing experience. Courtesy of Paul Sharits Estate and Christopher Sharits.



7.11

that inspired them, the only evidence remaining—a lamp left burning, a door left open, and a patio light left on—are fragments without a whole.

Similarly, *Mod Lang* (2001), *Berkshire Fangs* (2001), and *Chemical Sundown* (2001) depict fragments of a pseudo-narrative and tracings of a partial world. Things are disguised and situations obscured, often by bold shapes and abstract colors. Visual clues point to the story, but ultimately end up indicating that much more remains unknown. Taking its title from the legendary Memphis pop group Big Star, *Mod Lang* focuses on the protagonist, Keith "Slick" Rhoades, a rebellious character "in the mold of Quadrophenia's Jimmy Cooper" who embarks on a three-part epic. Rhoades moves to LA, meets a girl, and encounters drugs. He "loses control of his scooter on a rainy English road one night" and suffers neurological damage, but nonetheless the "refractory Mod finds his true calling: as a visionary architect whose building schemes bring him fame and fortune while providing a grand opportunity to antagonize conventional propriety."[22] The Slick Rhoades story *in-forms* its clean modernist shapes and colors. On their own the abstractions bear little signification. Below I argue that this process instantiates Katherine Hayles' concept of "information narratives," but for the moment I must stay with Blake's technique of straddling back and forth between color and narrative. By actively obscuring meaning, but simultaneously *pointing to its absence*, Blake introduces a kind of pseudo-mysticism and ghostly presence in the work, not quite there but somehow indicated in its absence, through colors as they become expressive in and of themselves, liberated from narrative and form.

Complementing the narrative fragments, one finds partial images and partial objects shifting between total abstraction and representation. *Angel Dust* (2001) depicts abstract shapes rapidly sliding on- and offscreen. Organized on a grid, the squares occupy the entire screen and consist of about seventy-five layers of colored squares, some shifting hues, others remaining static, alluding to "techniques inherited from traditional painting (i.e. using layer upon layer of translucent color)."[23] Moreover, while the images point to abstraction, the title *Angel Dust* connotes a particular chemical substance, culture, and historical moment. *Angel Dust* or PCP (phencyclidine) is a hallucinogenic drug that induces forms of neurosis and disorientation. As Blake explains, *Angel Dust* is a "hallucinatory treatment of an imaginary ski-lodge." But in terms of the colors and images themselves, one is not given this sense within the work. Designer drugs, like designer color, are compact and compressed products that necessarily obfuscate their origin and contents. Similarly, in *Guccinam* (2001) and *Station to Station* series 1–5 (2001), one finds abstract gridlike compositions, with dark and rigid shapes that automatically move on tracks like items on a conveyor belt. Colors remain strong but they are restrained, controlled by the formal grid that structures them. And again, meaning is held at bay: references are offered up just as easily as they are taken away.

Where narrative-based feature films tend to rely on clear, realistic photographic imagery—with an occasional gesture toward abstraction—in Blake's work the equation is inverted, particularly in his early work. With Blake, one is always unsure of objects and seldom given the opportunity to infer. In *Liquid Villa* (2001) one may think one recognizes windows on the side of a building, but the perspective is restrained, blocked by a color overlay. In another image from *Berkshire Fangs* (2001), one sees a computer-generated spaceship-like door opening to reveal another partial world behind it, consisting of winding strips of confusing and incomprehensible colored lines; swerving across the screen like cigarette smoke, they dissolve any stable signification. Caught between abstraction and representation, narrative is stopped in each sequence. Time is suspended: pushing forward while encountering blocks at each turn.

Near the end of *Chemical Sundown*, the third installment in the Rhoades trilogy, a photograph of a blond woman in a pink flowing dress appears. Slowly rotating like a plastic figurine on a pedestal, she is animated in a stilted fashion, like a frozen icon on display in a shop window. Despite this brief appearance (one of the rare photographic appearances in the early works), the underlying sense is still that *sense itself* is withheld. The girl exists, but remains anonymous and unknown. The description (once again) fills us in: Slick has been "exiled to the lush apocalyptic dreamscape of Southern California," where he has built his own "pleasure dome in the Los Angeles hills [and is] now living large with a beautiful sad-faced girl."[24]

7.11 Jeremy Blake, *Bungalow 8: Black Swan* (left) and *Bungalow 8: Hotel Safe* (right), both 1998. Sequence from digital animation, 3 minute continuous. Courtesy of Kinz + Tillou Fine Art.

Around the time that Blake produced the *Punch Drunk Love* sequence for Anderson, who requested an upbeat version of *Winchester* suitable for conventional film, a shift occurred.[25] In the work made after 2001–2, Blake's colorism is marked by more fluid and luminescent colors; more narrative inclusion, voiceover, and an abundance of cultural signifiers. The geometric colors in the early pieces make clear allusions to various modern colorists like Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Ellsworth Kelly, and François Morellet. In the middle works, one finds references moving backwards in time, to German Expressionism and Impressionism in the nineteenth century (such as J. M. W. Turner and Claude Monet). In the late work Blake becomes increasingly concerned with narrative, returning to the origins of Western art and the Renaissance's classification of the image as a "visual narrative." At the same time, colorism in this late work begins to resemble the hand tinting, dying, and coloring techniques used in silent film. When viewed from beginning to end, Blake's work *inversely* reflects the histories of color in painting and film.

Given these three variations of color in relation to narrative, and Blake's growing aptitude in mobilizing the third, we may now align his color treatment with Katherine Hayles' concept of the "information narrative." Emerging from computer culture, the information narrative denotes a shift in storytelling from the emphasis on presence and absence theorized in older media to the tropes of *pattern* and *randomness*. In the information society, Hayles argues, "pattern *is* the essential reality" from which subjectivity is born.[26] Blake's images and convoluted story lines oscillate between fragmented patterns and traditional modes of storytelling. The technique echoes what Vilém Flusser refers to as "post-history" or a "post-historical" situation comprised of technical images (see chapter 6) which navigate the tension between a preprogrammed reality and the increasingly narrow possibilities for its rupture, randomness, or malfunction. Similarly, Blake's images and convoluted storylines oscillate between these preprogrammed patterns of traditional modes of storytelling and ruptures that invoke distortion and noise in the form of color; color as meaningless affect and effect.[27]

In other words, Blake's style is neither pure noise (randomness) but instead a kind of disinterested stylistic distortion; a half-pattern formation constituting what Friedrich Kittler informally dubs an "aesthetics of interference" (which must be seen as antithetical to "information aesthetics," as I discussed in chapter 3). An aesthetic of interference allows noise and abstraction to figure as stylistic motifs *intentionally* fed back into a signal, data flow, or image to generate a sustained pattern of interference. It is the mobilization of what Flusser terms the "malfunction" in the "program" as an aesthetic trope.[28] In Blake, such interference aesthetics appear in the form of thick patches of opaque color, mixed in with his use of photographic imagery and textual signifiers, carefully

modulated through his use of pseudo-narrative. On the one hand then, these patterns become noise—meaningless to a viewer's eyes and ears—but on the other hand, it is precisely because of this ongoing play between pattern (meaning) and noise (interference) that Blake's images figure as accurate reflections of hyperdividuation in media culture. This is how and why Blake's colorism is markedly digital and informatic, in terms of style, material technique, and ontology.

Layering: History at a Standstill

Blake has used visual layers from the start—whether by mixing media like photography and painting, text and image, or the layers of history itself. Where older methods like silkscreen or offset printing involved time-consuming rituals to separate and maintain the color identity between each CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, black) layer, digital media have radically simplified this process. Photoshop software is known for its flexible layers and color channels. In fact a "mask" in Photoshop is only a more sophisticated alpha channel (see chapter 5 for more on the alpha channel). When Photoshop was introduced in 1990, it integrated features for increased automation, efficiency, and digitization, allowing users to layer elements, vary degrees of transparency, and manipulate objects and colors independently of the rest of the image with flexibility and ease.

Layering aesthetics are closely associated with techniques of montage and compositing (chapter 5), which have historically tended toward one of two extremes. On the one hand there is a practical use of layers: a newspaper uses different layers of images, text, and captions and blends them into one seamless, flat image space. On the other hand, there are layering techniques that make the layers explicit, such as Paper Rad's dirt style, or John Heartfield's collages, which accentuate the *disjuncture between image elements*. These two styles may also be extended to politics: the former figures as an ideological covering over, while the latter figures as critique, revealing the inner workings of the "apparatus." However, capitalism is increasingly quick to appropriate any critical practice into a cultural dominant, as Raymond Williams has noted. So while Blake's compositions reveal fragmentation in their layers, this alone does not guarantee critique. Without an accompanying analysis, fragmentation and layering in themselves reveal nothing. Furthermore, Blake's layering technique—like Paper Rad's—connote disjuncture and fragmentation in *human* experience—not ideology critique. In short, the technique is indicative of a condition, not a criticality.

In his early work, as noted, Blake seamlessly merges and subtly blends layers. From *Bungalow 8* (1998) to *Liquid Villa* (2001), *Angel Dust* (2001), and *Station to Station* (2001) the layers (subject to the same color treatment) almost always blend together in what resembles a formalist composition, consistently

involving smooth animations of fairly rigid, clean geometric shapes. At the same time, another technique begins to develop with *Chemical Sundown* (2001), *Winchester* (2002), *1906* (2003), *Century 21* (2004), and *Sodium Fox* (2005). Here, layers start to function as aesthetic objects, left open to reveal dirt and disjuncture. These layers display difference *as difference*, whether in content, style, reference, or origin. For example, at the end of *Chemical Sundown*, the juxtaposition between photographic and opaque color proudly announces itself with the rare appearance of a human figure. Framed within a frame, the "beautiful sad-faced girl" slowly grows larger on screen. However, as noted, the photograph remains frozen and the girl appears immobile. As the image is enlarged, the smooth animation seems to thaw her out, bringing her back to life in extended slow motion. The juxtaposition between human figure and abstract, saturated colors intensify the disjuncture of time unfolding out of time.

In *Reading Ossie Clark* (2003), soft and luminous rainbow colors ooze over the mouth of a static, desaturated photograph of a woman's face. In *Winchester*, the same rainbow ooze emanates from a vintage photograph of a cowboy's forehead after receiving a bullet of opaque light. Contrasted with the rigid geometric color in the earlier work, this oozing, drippy paint is more luminescent, but also messier. Subsequently, the unclear luminous layers introduce a *conceptual block into material meaning*. In other words, the relationship between visual and semiotic elements renders a visceral materiality to the color that denies base matter, such as a house or car, favoring instead a *materiality that is transcendental*. One begins with luminous opaque colors on the surface layer—a symbol of elevation that points beyond the image—but does not and cannot move beyond it. Embodying matter and spirit in one, colors free themselves just as they remain limited to the canvas (or screen). This is echoed as bits of representational imagery invite cognitive and intellectual engagement, but color abstractions keep them at bay. The doubling movement within the colored layers in relation to other layers (versus narrative development) returns representation to the material and technical ground of the screen and image. Color moves simultaneously in two opposing directions, leaving one in a conceptual and visual standstill.

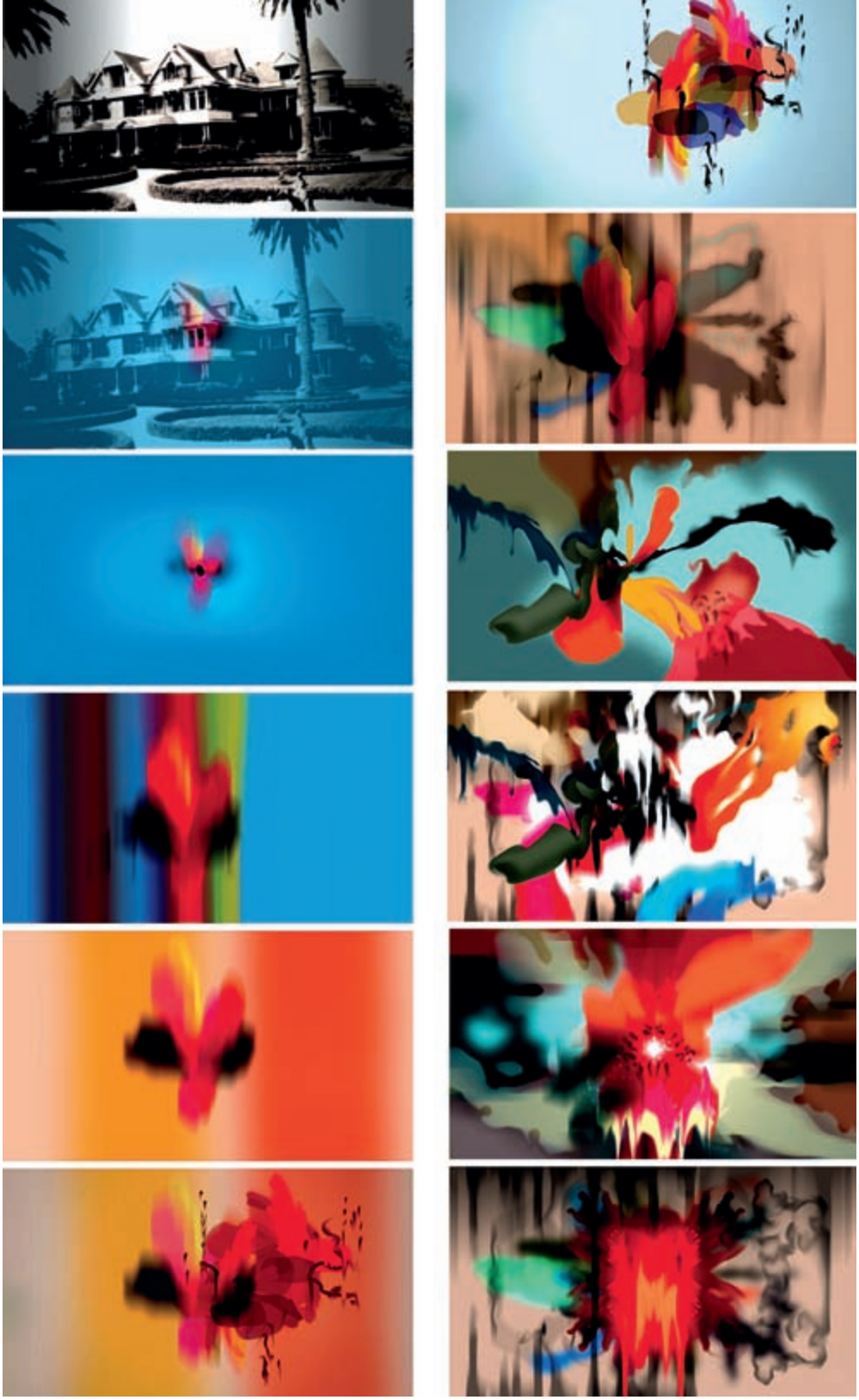
History at a standstill emerges from these preconditions. The temporal instant of a no-time time depicted throughout these "time-based" artworks is, as Rolf Tiedemann has argued elsewhere, a gesture to regain experience, consciousness, and essential meanings, but one that ultimately fails to do so.[29] Acknowledgment of this failure allows formerly sacred color to become profane: leaving only the specters of presence in the noise of a muddled and confused human history. Blake's semitransparent layers visualize this ambivalence. Furthermore, the ontology of the standstill—a no-place place caught in dead, cyclical time—is also evidenced in his treatment of history as a medium of radical mediation, and epistemological (mis)perception.

Spirits and ghosts symbolize the failure of progress narratives, coupled with the inability to see or comprehend history, as such. During the nineteenth century, in an attempted reconciliation for earlier violence, Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester gun fortune, boarded up portions of her California mansion in order to, she believed, protect it from its haunted past. The *Winchester Trilogy* (2002–4) opens with *Winchester* (2002), and an aerial view of the Winchester mansion accompanied by the sound of a rotating film projector. Philip Monk observes how the juxtaposition between cinema and the mansion creates a "proto-cinematic haunting machine"[30] that aligns the history of the West with the history of early American film: both are obsolete and yet they remain actively haunted by vital and animated spirits.

The next piece in the trilogy is *1906* (2003) and the third, *Century 21* (2004), which opens with a neon Century 21 sign perched on top of a movie theater, alluding to the new movie complexes and developments that mark the changing landscape of California. Where the Winchester mansion was once built over Native American lands, today multiplexes and California McMansions layer over nineteenth-century architecture and ghosts of the "wild west." The three parts of the trilogy add historical reference upon reference—layer upon layer—making any single image disjunctive and ambivalent (figure 7.12). While I discussed the disjoined layering aesthetic of color and photographic imagery above, here the juxtaposition is historical, creating a future push and backwards pull within each layered composite. The effect echoes Jameson's notion of postmodern pastiche, where historical eras blend in an indecipherable present without origin, certainty, or singularity. Instead of intensifying narrative as a form of narrative saturation, as discussed above, colors here grow, becoming more alive: literally animated to draw in the specters and paradoxes of history into the present.

The intentionally odd mix of past, future, and present, ghosts, machines, and reality, and opacity and transparency in the *Winchester Trilogy* crosses temporal and existential boundaries, allowing spirits to materialize and historical fact to evanesce. As ghosts are memorialized they become objective and eternal, while houses, theatres, industries and people fade into distant memory. Even the drug-induced psychosis in *Sodium Fox* shows how Blake's "subjects" consistently reflect a cloudy experience in the present. But if ghosts (and by default opaque color) have become more real than reality, and the stories that they supposedly derive from, then these unruly digital color effects must be understood as a viable framework to analyze representation, subjectivity, and historicism today.

The significance of the disjunctive-layering aesthetic in Blake's work—versus the seamless blending of layers—must also be positioned against the conventional arguments for "remediation" and "remix culture" (and in this regard his work is also stylistically analogous to Paper Rad's, as analyzed in



7.12

chapter 5). For David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, "remediation" entails the loss of media specificity into "hypermedia." For Lev Manovich, the release of After Effects in 1993, complementing the release of Illustrator and Photoshop a few years prior, introduced a hybrid or "velvet revolution" in software, where products and applications meant for different industries or output platforms could be used interchangeably, resulting in what he terms an "aesthetics of continuity," characterized by an aesthetic of seamlessness that recombines different elements into a unified whole.[31] As he puts it elsewhere, "To use the terms of Roland Barthes, we can say that if modernist collage always involved a 'clash' of elements, electronic and software collage also allows for 'blend,'" that is, a "velvet" smoothness to congeal formerly "disparate elements."[32] At the same time, Manovich also recognizes that hybrid media may result in different uses and styles: "In some cases, the juxtaposition of different media is clearly visible . . . In other cases, a sequence may move between different media so quickly that the shifts are barely noticeable."[33] And indeed, one cannot assume that the fact of hybrid software guarantees an aesthetic of continuity, especially in regards to dirt style and Blake's later work.

This is the case, first, because the aesthetics of the unified whole is apropos to Modernist aesthetics, not to Blake's work or dirt style which are more in line with poststructuralist and postmodern sensibilities. This also includes colorism in the service of remix, mashup, and glitch art, all of which intentionally and provocatively leave the seams open and on display. Second, the aesthetics of continuity prioritizes cohesive narratives and a unified compositional structure that is far from progressive, but rather a relapse into the ideology of chromophobia, which privileges *disegno* (form, order, narrative) over color and sensation. Glossing over the ways in which the latter terms have been subordinate to form and Reason, denies the significance of Blake's colorist interventions in the history of Western aesthetics. Moreover, if one fails to take account of the continual and ongoing disjunction, intentional fragmentation, resistance to hermeneutics, and standstill in Blake's work, one misses a critical entry point for understanding his work, and by extension the way it in which it corresponds to the new paradigm of colorism in digital art.

With Blake, as with my analysis of Paper Rad in chapter 5 or Jordan Crandall in chapter 6, it is through color, layering, and abstraction that the gap between cognition and sensation, or code and interface, is rendered in critical and aesthetic form. Using the same color grading techniques pervasive in industry and feature films, Blake pushes digital color to the edge of representation, to the extreme of style, which in turn brings about a visualization not of digital code per se, but rather the way in which the *logic* of the algorithm structures and sets the conditions of possibility for *all* visual style, as such. Before concluding, I want to note three works that demonstrate how Blake's use of fragmented voiceover narration complements his color treatment.

7.12 Jeremy Blake, *Winchester*, 2002. Sequence from digital animation, 18 minute continuous. Thick patches of colors overlay each other, creating a rich and textured compositional space. Courtesy of Kinz + Tillou Fine Art.

Sound holds an intimate relation to the moving image, a relation that has been theorized since optical sound was introduced in 1927. However, much less has been noted about the role of voiceover narration, perhaps because voiceover narration is often used when the budget cannot accommodate the synching of sound and image. Regardless, voiceovers play a curious role in Blake's late work. After *Reading Ossie Clark* (2003), voiceover narration is constant in his last two pieces: *Sodium Fox* (2005) narrated by a "reclusive and profoundly talented poet named David Berman," and *Glitterbest* (2007), left unfinished at the time of Blake's death, but nonetheless narrated by punk-rock icon Malcolm McLaren. While it is believed that much of *Glitterbest* was in place at the time of Blake's death, one cannot know how it might have looked had he finished it.[34] The found files consisted of several Photoshop layers. McLaren's voiceover, already complete, like that in *Ossie*, contained fragments of references: to "Blitzkrieg yellow, Minnie Mouse pink, England's pastures green, bullocks blue . . . grandmother rose . . . lush . . . lip-gloss only . . . punk." These color-coded phrases seem to want to connect to a larger whole, to use color to index history or memory, but they cannot—they remain stilted, frozen, and incapable.

Similarly, *Sodium Fox* opens with a still image of a bikini-clad girl lying in the sun. The "camera" scans the image like eyes grazing a body. Berman announces, "Cross-eyed from giving too much head . . . she leaves her makeup beside a mountain of clothes . . . tonight God has asked her to love me as a favor to him . . . [thunder]." The image transitions to a view of the sky—possibly the stars seen through a skylight—and a man with opaque yellow rays coming from his eyes appears wearing a helmet. One is not sure who is talking, if he is talking about the girl on the screen, himself, or if he is being literal or metaphoric, or both. Aural confusion echoes visual confusion. The sound track consists of fragments of Berman's poetry, arranged in sonic patterns and phrases without a throughline. In *Sodium Fox*, Blake took James Rosenquist, Neil Young, and Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* as inspirations for the treatment of his narrator's "interiority as a landscape."[35] The sonic mixed messages not only depict the subject's internal reality in spatial and visual terms, but in so doing intensify the mismatched historical patterns already under way; a voiceover narration that saturates its own incapacity to narrate.

Reading Ossie Clark is a literal reading of the journals of the late fashion icon Ossie Clarke by art critic Clarissa Dalrymple. The piece is also full of rhythmic and half-baked references to car crashes, pills, the "night of a thousand frocks," and unlucky spiders in the bath. "Here smoke this Ossie, we'll have a better day tomorrow," commands an anonymous voice. References to drugs, fashion, life in the fast lane, and suicide remain liminal; bits of information without consequence or context. In many ways, the use of digital color to portray drug use and its related culture here assumes a cynical tenor, antithetical to

the more sincere yet satirical portrayal of color in Paper Rad's work. While one sees photographs of headlights, spilt pills, and collages of body parts, lipstick, and psychedelic colors, they seem alienated and bear little relation to each other. The voiceover fragments refer to the image, but they do so by way of obfuscation and confusion, blocking meaning, thus intensifying the autonomy of color patterns and sensations.

Katherine Hayles has argued that subjectivities in the information narrative become patterns. As long as a pattern endures, a subject has attained "immortality."[36] Blake's images and fragments of voiceover fail to produce causal meaning or unified coherency, but they do provide patterns of effects and visceral textures that transcend the limits of the cognitive and logical and allow history, however muddled or dirty (like dirty color revealing the mediation inherent in modern perception), to live on in the present. The ongoing exchange between the material and immaterial, consciousness and information, and form and color ensure that fragmented patterns and narratives become central motifs. But they are also just that: ongoing and fragmented histories continually suspended in oscillation without any resolution. All constituents remain at a standstill.

Photoshop Heaviness

With Blake's digital coloration techniques in mind, we can now directly address the way in which narrative saturation and layering figure in the Photoshop cinema. The theory of the Photoshop cinema is on the one hand specific to the use of color in Blake, but on the other hand it may be extended to other instances of colorism in digital cinema, such as *Sin City* (2005), *Waking Life* (2001), *300* (2006), *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), *Speed Racer* (2008), and *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) (figures 7.13 and 7.14) and, as noted, to contemporary digital media aesthetics in general.[37] In this broad sense, the Photoshop cinema is offered as a theory of digital colorism apropos to new media aesthetics in the 2000s, and in particular, as a complementary counterpart to Lev Manovich's 2002 theory of "generation flash."[38]

In his article by the same name, Manovich offers a theory of Internet aesthetics qualified by simple, thin, clean Bauhaus-like lines. He offers this term because the generation of web and graphic design that emerged in the 1990s came to rely increasingly, perhaps even exclusively, on (what was then Macromedia) Flash software to create web products. In contrast to the streamlined contours of the Flash aesthetic, the Photoshop cinema is thick and heavy, and this heaviness has since migrated online.

The Photoshop cinema is heavy first and foremost on a material-technical level. Flash, like Adobe Illustrator, is a vector-based program, where all images are composed of vector sequences. A vector is an image composed of smaller objects, all of which can be defined, or expressed, as mathematical functions,

7.13 such as a line or a curve. While color is assigned to lines in Illustrator, it is a sec-
7.14 ondary concern compared to the program's primary function: to outline shapes and forms. Photoshop, on the other hand, is a bitmap, or raster-based, application where images consist of three layers of pixels. A 16-bit image in Photoshop would have two values for each R, G, or B pixel location (2^{16} = 65,536 colors), so three layers of color value, plus an alpha channel, are assigned to each pixel. This adds up to a lot of information, which means longer processing time, more hard drive space for storage, and more sophisticated display devices needed to see and manipulate the image information.

Even though both vector and bitmap systems produce images with saturated color, the vector-based Illustrator (and Flash, by extension) is primarily concerned with slim and efficient lines, where the bitmapped Photoshop is predominantly concerned with color information. Furthermore, the character of the images produced with each system retains a distinctive look and style. Vector images generate light and clean-looking compositions, like Flash or Illustrator aesthetics, while color photographs labored in Photoshop produce images with multiple layers, which creates a thickness, adds depth, and engenders a more bloated use of computer memory. Between Photoshop and Illustrator, the *disegno* and *colore* debates find their contemporary manifestation.

Second, beyond this material heaviness, there is also an epistemological and historical heaviness that characterizes the Photoshop cinema. As demonstrated in Blake's work, we find layer upon layer of history and culture. With each new layer, the weight of time builds, leaving one suspended in an uncertain visual and cognitive space. Opaque colors double the weight; a visual supplement for what was once *all*-meaningful. Generally speaking, if meaning exists and can be generated from a text or work of art, then interpretation, in the traditional sense of the term, is possible. It is on this edge of possibility that Blake's work thrives. He creates a pseudo-expressionism and indifferent color affect, molded from within already standardized colors and narrative templates.

Blake is by no means the first artist to work this edge between color and form, meaning and non-sense, causality and chance. These binaries date back to the origins of aesthetic theory, and in particular to Kant's discourse on the sublime, which emerged from the backdrop of classical metaphysics, where one saw and knew the world based on the way in which the world revealed itself to oneself. In 1790 Kant inverted this notion so that the subject was now positioned at the center and as the source of knowledge and experience. Known as the Copernican turn in aesthetic philosophy, this radical reversal was Kant's attempt to reexplain the metaphysical gap between subject and object, which came to a heightened pitch in the experience of the aesthetic sublime.

In a sublime moment the subject is overcome by the feeling of awe: pleasure coupled with fear and uncertainty. Reason is unable to come to the rescue and the subject faces an incomprehensible, irreparable gap and void in cognitive experience. The aspect of fear associated with the sublime was first noted by Longinus between the first and third century AD, and later by Edmund Burke in 1756, as a kind of sheer terror of the physical incommensurability and incapacity of the human mind to give representation to the enormous forces and limits of nature. The sublime then, as far as aesthetic experience is concerned, *is* the schism between subjective experience and the objective world, a schism that grows wider through modern science and technics. This ontological and cognitive block is essentially what characterizes the Photoshop cinema.

< **7.13** Dir. Richard Linklater, *A Scanner Darkly*, 2006. Film still. The highly stylized uses of digital color emphasize the thick and opaque aesthetic of the Photoshop cinema.

7.14 Dir. Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, *Speed Racer*, 2008. Film still. Thick patches of opaque color mixed with animation and live action photography characterize the hybrid and rich colorism of the Photoshop cinema.

Considering the sublime in the age hypertechnology, Fredric Jameson argues that these cognitive blocks have been supplemented by late-capitalist, postindustrial, commodity culture. While such postmodern theories have passed their prime, their relevance lingers (if they have not in fact become *more* pertinent, precisely because such criticality draws thin in the current climate). And thus it becomes appropriate to recall that postmodernism, for Jameson, is both a historical period *and* a style, a link that allows him to connect aesthetic sensibilities to historical and critical consciousness.

Where modernism denotes the period in the arts and literature ranging from about 1890 into the early to mid-twentieth century, marked by an aesthetic of "alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation" that is linked to industrial mass production, postmodernism emerges in the late 1960s and 1970s and is deeply connected to postindustrial labor and information technology.[39] To highlight this difference, Jameson juxtaposes Heidegger's analysis of Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887) with his own analysis of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. In Van Gogh's painting, Heidegger recognizes the "world" of the peasant through which one could experience the "authentic" toil of the worker working on the land. The painting moves the viewer beyond its surface by illuminating the whole of the organic, holistic, and unified lifeworld of the worker.

In distinction, postindustrial, postmodern art cannot demand such authentic wholes or self-contained hermeneutics (what I referred to in the previous chapter as "post-hermeneutics"). Warhol's shoes are flat, suggesting an impenetrability and lack of interpretive meaning. Where Van Gogh's colorful gestures were marked by the "stridency of Utopian color," in Warhol and Blake, colors have been inverted as "though the external and colored surface of things—debased and contaminated in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images—ha[ve] been stripped away to reveal the deathly black-and-white substratum of the photographic negative." There is no "speaking to us" in Warhol's shoes, just as there is no speaking to us—expression, interiority, or soul speak—in Blake's Photoshop colors.[40] Digital colorism is not concerned with or capable of such internal, visionary imaginings, let alone connecting to a broader utopia or cosmos that once seemed so tangible and concrete, whether in nineteenth-century painting or in the electric artwork circa 1969 (see chapters 1 through 4).

Not only are we no longer able to access this sublime, we are also undisturbed and untroubled by this inaptitude. Commodity culture both engenders and supplements this condition, on the one hand with the fear of automation and hypertechnologies, as discussed in chapter 6, and on the other hand with new promises implied in an ever expanding media landscape saturated with constantly changing, seductive eye-popping hues. In the "cultural turn" to mass consumption, the consumer society, and postindustrialization, the logic of the commodity finally enters all forms of life and experience. What ought to be

powerfully critical in art, Jameson remarks, is now as impotent as any commodity form.[41] Compare the visceral and gut-level corporeal affect in Sharits' depiction of epileptic seizures with Blake's work, where intense color is used not to invoke bodily affect but instead to float above it on the surface, as mere *effect*. This technique similarly applies to a number of the Photoshop cinema films noted above, in chapter 5, and to new works I will introduce in the postscript. Gloss and eye candy dazzle and overwhelm the eyes in rich and flat digital color.[42] The aesthetic of disjunctive layering *and* historical standstill in Blake's work, and by extension in the Photoshop cinema, are symptoms of the way in which digital color in contemporary media art is always already caught in the informatic loops and algorithmic abstractions fueling the postindustrial age.[43]

Electric Cool

All visual, electronic media are cool media. One could argue this thesis was more apropos to analog color television, normative in 1964, when McLuhan formulated the concept:

> There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, "high definition." A cartoon is "low definition," simply because very little visual information is provided.[44]

With all of our so-called technological progress, one would think that this cool televisual medium had by now become hot. In the last few decades television and screen technologies have dramatically increased resolution and color quality, resulting in various forms of HDTV. Surely this low-fi cool has been overheated?

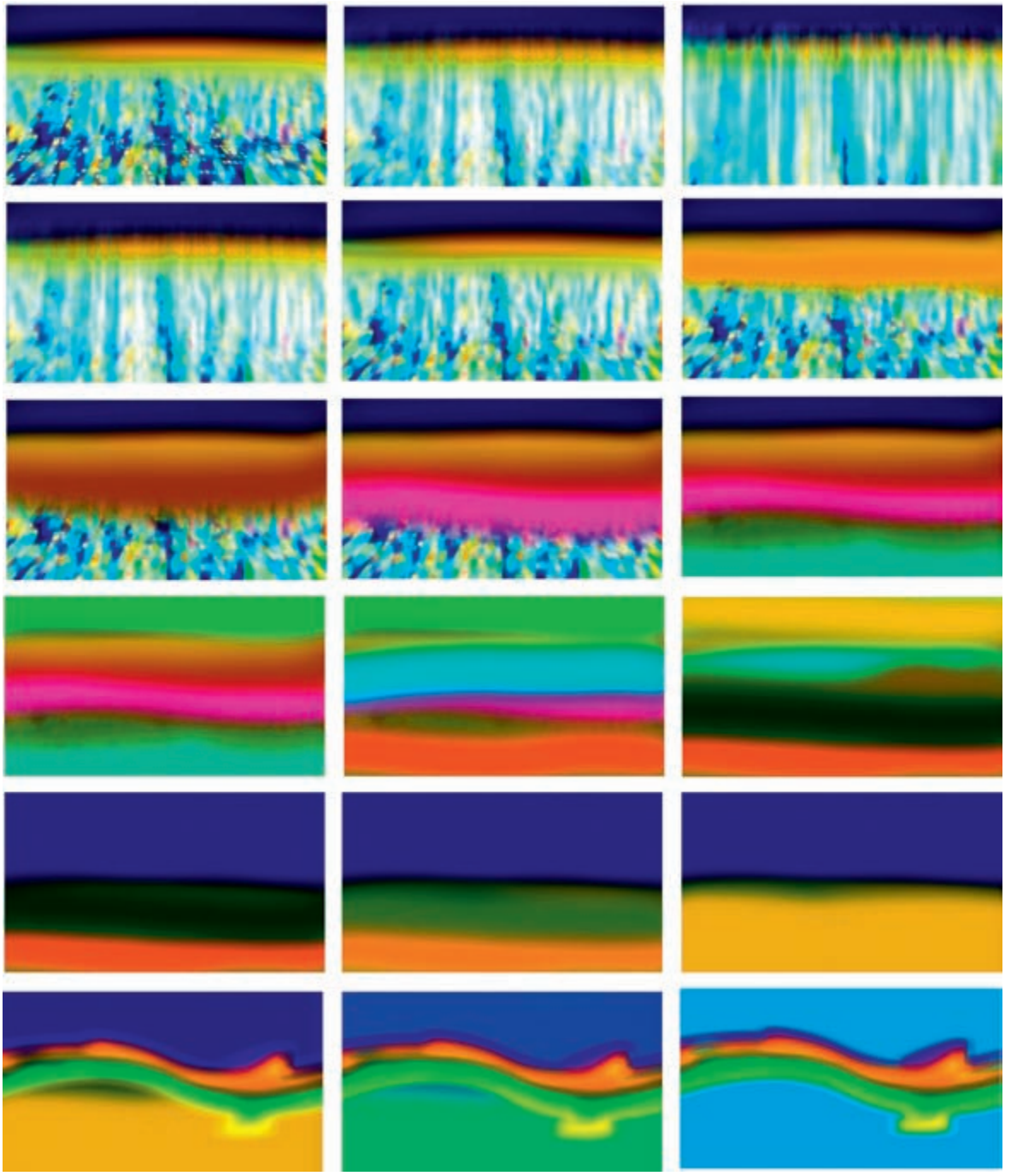
Moreover, McLuhan is careful to point out that hotness and coolness are flexible traits. Using Kenneth Boulding's notion of the "break boundary," which describes the moment when a "system suddenly changes into another or passes some point of no return in its dynamic processes," he explains how a hot medium can become cold by placing it in a foreign culture or through various degrees of technological change. McLuhan refers to this shift as a "reversal of the overheated medium." For example, in reference to urban sprawl, he writes, when "the road [goes] beyond its break boundary [it] turns cities into highways, and the highway proper takes on a continuous urban character."[45] Hot and cool media are like hot and cool affects: fickle, malleable, and adaptive. And thus it must be that television and computer media have, alongside "sophisticated" and "democratic" software, overheated into hot and sexy new toys with high-res candy-colored GUI displays. But in fact television and computer media, I argue, have become even cooler.

Despite improvements in pixel detail, high-resolution screens, or processing amplifiers, electronic media retain a healthy kernel of cool, as McLuhan saw it in the 1960s. First, this is the case on a technical and material level. Both television and computer screens increasingly depend on some form of liquid crystal, light-emitting diode or plasma to generate an image that, as I argue in chapter 2, has a flat and cold character. This flatness is further amplified by the necessary dependence on additive color mixing in viewing electronic imagery, which is to say, an increased involvement in viewing, demanding one work harder to see more of what is already less (i.e., its low resolution and compressed color palette). Then there is the fact that all visual electronic media are overwhelmingly dominated by cool blue or green hues. Video sensors, for instance, are modeled after the human eye, which is far more receptive to value differences in green light than in red or blue—though blue is a close second—which means that bluish or greenish electronic images are much easier, more efficient, and therefore cheaper to produce than red or fuchsia ones.

Computational miniaturization, thanks to the integrated circuit and silicon chip, has further cooled what was already cold. Changes in cinematic viewing conditions also support this shift: watching movies in video versus film, at home on a television monitor, on the computer, online, on a small screen, on airplanes, or at the gym. All of these practices demand increased involvement, participation, and interactivity. Together, these experiences of electronic color give us the very definition of McLuhan's cool media, further enhanced by requirements for "interactivity" intrinsic to new media, making them even cooler than digital television. In sum, coolness resists detail (technically) and emotionalism (stylistically). Its function is to undo comprehensive visual clarity. Cool, as Alan Liu puts it, is an "aporia of information . . . information designed to resist information."[46]

Chemical Sundown

I conclude this chapter with an example from *Chemical Sundown*, where layers of fluid and ephemeral colors continue to play games with history and perception. In a final scene, rigid horizontal lines morph into a series of orange, purple, and yellow waves that loosely represent the chemical colors of the Hollywood sunset (figure 7.15). The colors become fuzzy and blur into each other, giving way to an aerial view of Los Angeles and the darkness that falls after sundown. In this scene nature is depicted as sublime beauty. But the difficulty is that this beauty is the supposed beauty of chemical and polluted colors. Although digitally enhanced in Photoshop to be more opaque, intense, and luminous, the colors nonetheless echo the foggy colors of the dirty Los Angeles skyline. Chemical beauty is a disturbing and uncertain beauty, a visual beauty graspable in an abstracted image, while also sublime in that it carries the unbearable realities of environmental destruction.



7.15

7.15 Jeremy Blake, *Chemical Sundown*, 2001. Sequence from digital animation, 12 minute continuous. The hazy and polluted Los Angeles skyline depicted at sunset. Courtesy of Kinz + Tillou Fine Art.

The saturated colors of Blake's chemical sky allude to a darkened human existence that may now be compared with the hazy chemical colors of Joseph Mallord William Turner's visual reference to Goethe's cloudy color perception in his *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory)—The Morning after the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (1843). Here Turner also used soft and sublime spectral color abstractions that appeared in the polluted atmosphere as a result of coal pollution during the height of the Industrial Revolution, transforming the darkened skies into glowing and luminous color-scapes.[47] One may also include the Impressionist painters, and in particular Monet, who painted the distorted and luminous perception of heavy air, transforming (as Blake did) thick air and the invisible apparatus of perception into a mystical and glowing color space. Like the commodity form that mystically transforms material relations into "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,"[48] Blake, Monet, and Turner alike use the cutting-edge color technology of their time (whether mass-produced collapsible-tube oil paints or Photoshop brushes) to transfigure the chemical and industrial world into a sublime and majestic one.

But unlike Monet and Turner, Blake works in the postindustrial climate of computer automation and informatics, with pseudo-narratives, or "information narratives," that do not evolve or "progress" over time, but rather they only ever return to the facticity of their own displacement and uncertainty. When one views Blake's work as a symptom of such social and cultural crises, one sees that these so-called narratives and temporal structures have led us nowhere. In fact, passing time in the Photoshop cinema, a so-called time-based medium, only ever returns us to the surface of our flat hypercolored screens. Through historical and critical analysis, however, as this chapter and the previous ones have shown, these luminous colors can be returned to the material ground of history, aesthetics, and the algorithmic techniques (coding, layering, compositing, juxtaposition, and abstract color effects), once developed in the utopian pursuit to transcend them. This is why colorism in the Photoshop cinema is cool, complacent, and indifferent but also concrete, historical, and vital.

This book began in the 1960s and 1970s, in a visionary moment for color in aesthetic computing. In the twenty-first century this color became cold but convenient and flexible, what I have referred to as democratic, or Photoshop, color. Everywhere these dense and opaque new colors deck the ceilings, floors, and walls of our screen cultures; bolstering a society of hyperdividuation sauced on hysterical and ceaselessly scintillating hues but socially and politically complacent. Void of radical ideals and historical consciousness, save for the occasional retro-mashup satire, the failure of the 1960s utopian imaginary now congeals in the vibrant hues of the Photoshop palette, their eye-popping glossy allure flickering, yet caged within each and every liquid crystal display.[49] In the postscript I offer some further thoughts on this paradoxically bright declension.