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## Emptying frames

### Keywords

photography  
temporality  
duration  
movement  
chemistry  
projector  
interval

### Abstract

*This short essay brings together some thoughts about two films, both of which take as their starting point the photographic still image and use film to expand and question the immobility of that image, teasing out small shifts and changes in its appearance. Candle and Tidal combine 16mm film and Polaroid photography to create a metaphor for movement and loss, evoking the alchemy of the photographic as it becomes a memory in a digital age. Through a commentary and reflection the formal characteristics of the work are described, and I explore how the filmed Polaroid is animated by the chemical transformation inherent in the Polaroid process. One of the key points is how the films concern themselves with articulating the filmic interval, as a chemical manifestation/metaphor.*

This short essay brings together some thoughts about two films, both of which take as their starting point the photographic still image and use film to expand and question the immobility of that image, teasing out small shifts and changes in its appearance. What follows are some observations about how these films reflect on their photographic materiality, the relationship between the still and moving image, the filmic interval, and the film and its projector. In the context of animation both films explore the boundaries

of what constitutes the form. What are the most minimal conditions for 'animation' to take place? Can movement come from a single still image? In *Candle* (2007) and *Tidal* (2007), two obsolete and disappearing media come together to reflect on their own condition, their material and temporality.

*Candle* is a film that documents a Polaroid developing. It is shot on a 100-foot roll of black-and-white 16mm film. This standard film length is roughly equal to the time it takes for the Polaroid to fully develop, about three minutes. The film presents this photographic event in reverse. Over the duration of the film the image of a candle disappears back into the emulsion of the photograph. The initial intention for this film was that I wanted to capture all the images that emerge from the photograph's development; the trace of the image as it solidifies into a fixed moment. The developing image is a time-based event and acts as an interval between the taking of the picture and the final settled image. Film preserves this moment, and makes possible its manipulation.

There is an uncertainty about the temporality of the image. The developing process is not entirely clear to the viewer, the familiar white border of the Polaroid is not included in the film frame, and so it is difficult to work out what is taking place. It looks a little like a collision of two film transitions, a dissolve and fade combined. *Candle* attempts to create a dialogue between the filmic interval and the Polaroid's photographic interval. I wanted to put the two media together to see how they would react with each other and to see if the Polaroid's chemical change could materialize and articulate the filmic interval.

A key consideration with this film was the question of what kind of image to use, and how a dialogue could be created between it and the process. Initially I was looking for things that would reflect the idea of 'emergence' or 'becoming' that the photographic transformation symbolizes; the images had to refer to a transition or change of some kind. To begin with I photographed a rainbow, then a number of trees in blossom, but the effect was unsatisfactory. The image needed to be able to suggest movement; it had to be an essential characteristic of the object being photographed. I finally settled on making a photograph of a candle, its flicker being the source of its animation. The idea of the melting of the candle merges with the photographic change of the Polaroid creating a paradox where the screen lightens as the candle 'melts' away till the flame is no more.

Movement can be seen and imagined in the film. Firstly, there is a movement in the image that comes from the motion of the film stock as it records. Both of these films are shot on a Canon Scoopic that has a fairly unstable means of holding the film as each frame is being exposed. This accounts for a bit of a wobble in the image that becomes particularly pronounced when you film a still object/image at 24fps. There is also a little more residual movement that comes from the projecting of the film, again for mechanical reasons. Finally, through conditioning the viewer expects to see movement on the screen, when confronted with a static image there is a desire to see it move, an element of 'projection' comes from the viewer.

The film projector is an important component in the screening of *Candle* as it sets up a discourse between the machine and the film. I am interested in creating a dialogue between these two light

sources: the light of the projector and the 'light' of the candle. The projector is projecting yet also appears to be burning away the image of the candle. The projector illuminates the room more and more as the candle disappears.

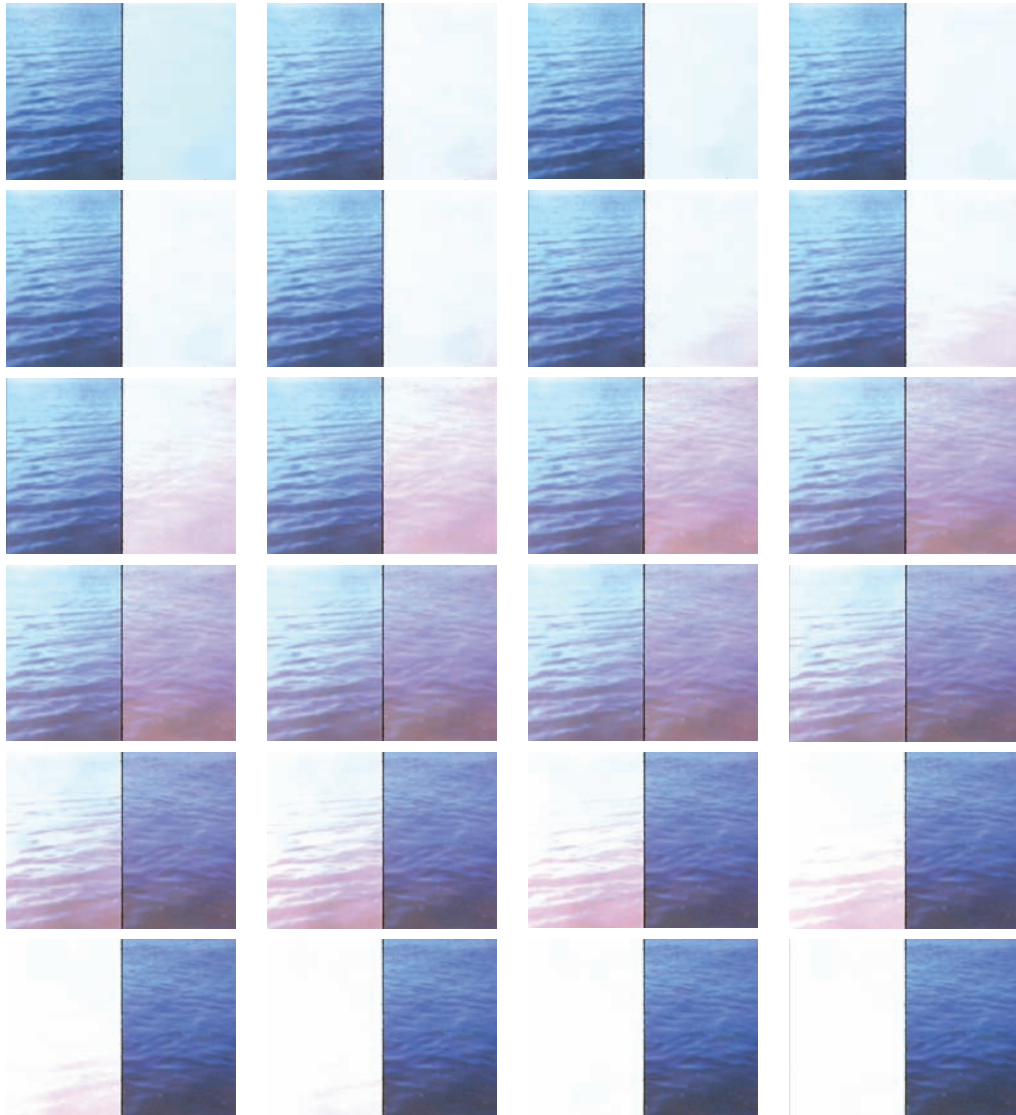
*Tidal*, also shot on a 100-foot roll of 16mm film, explores the same ideas about materiality and duration as *Candle* but as a split-screen film. A wave gradually disappears from one frame to the other over three minutes. The making of this film required some modification to the camera. A small piece of black 8mm leader is placed vertically over the camera gate to create a mask; this allows one side of the film to be exposed, then the other side. This process is the same principle as shooting standard 8mm film where a 25-foot roll of 16mm is exposed on both sides and split down the middle to create 50 feet of 8mm film.

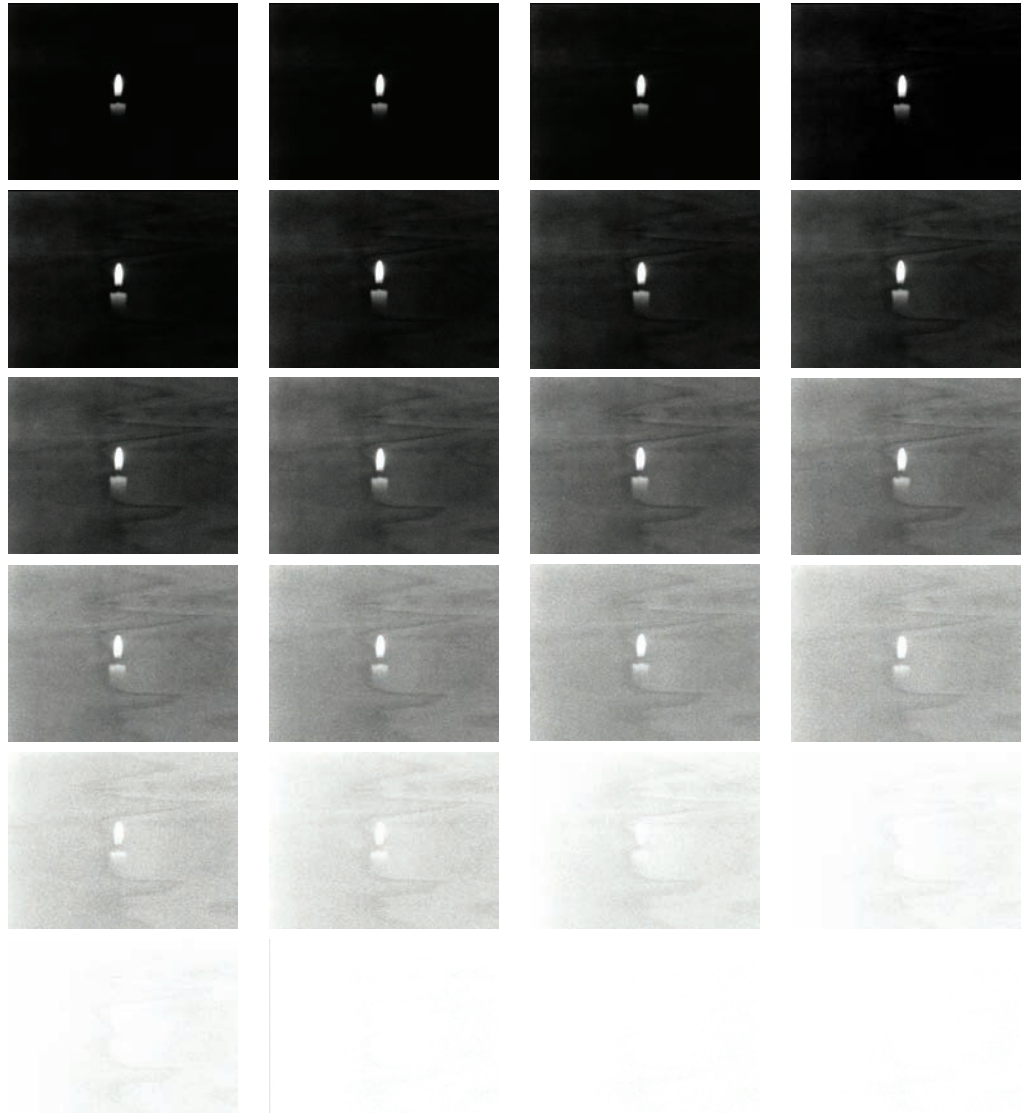
This technique is also similar to the pre-digital trick shot of masking the frame to create the illusion that the same person appears multiple times in a space, for example in Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). We also see this kind of special effect in Georges Méliès's work at the dawn of the cinema. Yet the masking in *Tidal* is overtly visual, there is no attempt to hide the 'trick', the wave appears to spill over and underneath the place where the mask is.

In *Candle* the emphasis is on the changing light and its relationship to the subject. In *Tidal* the manipulation of space is more prominent. The wave shifts from one frame into another, very slowly. There is a moment in the middle of the film where both waves are at an equal stage of addition and subtraction. The film becomes suspended for a moment as we reach its central point before the wave continues its drift along into the right side of the frame. The wave appears to wash over the surface of the photograph/film as the chemistry brings forth the image. This chemical process and its relationship to tides and the sea are made explicit by the film's title.

The perceived movement in *Tidal* as with *Candle* comes from what the subject evokes in the mind of the viewer, the chemical transformation, the camera and projector faults, but also the shift in the screen from left to right, the viewer shifts their gaze across the screen. Movement is more prominent because we have something to measure it against, we can compare the two waves against each other to gauge where we are in the film.

The classic notion of animation brings drawings and objects to life by a series of small shifts or changes to them; the result is smooth and continuous movement. This idea has been addressed on a number of occasions, and usually defines animation as a frame-by-frame phenomenon, or an illusion of motion that is created rather than recorded (see Solomon 1987: 9–12). Zbigniew Rybczynski, creator of *Tango* (1983), though, notes: 'I don't like to draw distinctions between film recorded at different speeds. Even twenty-four frames per second is a form of stop-motion – there are breaks in the movements between frames' (quoted in Solomon 1987: 11). This idea is usually summed up in Norman McLaren's seminal definition that 'Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art-of-movements-that-are-drawn. What happens *between* each frame is more important than what





happens *on* each frame [...] Therefore, animation is the art of manipulating the invisible interstices between frames' (quoted in Solomon 1987: 11) [sic]. As McLaren stresses, these shifts become 'invisible' and the space between each frame is lost or covered up by the illusion of movement. *Tidal* and *Candle* both attempt to slow down that shift, to get inside it, to be between the frames.

In *Candle* the photographic transformation is an attempt to articulate and materialize the space between the film frames. *Tidal* makes this more explicit by presenting this 'space' on screen as a vertical divide between the waves. The chemical change of the image in both *Candle* and *Tidal* creates a metaphor for movement and loss, evoking the alchemy of the photographic as it becomes a memory in a digital age. These two films present the beginning and end of an image, and both engage with the fundamental paradox at the core of cinema: that movement comes/came out of a series of still images. To best exemplify McLaren's definition of animation then, it is necessary to not merely create movement frame by frame, but to record that motion as it proceeds through, and is revealed by, frame-by-frame projection. The linear production of motion meets the lateral intervention of cinematography, documenting the space between the film frames.

## References

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## Contributor details

Neil Henderson studied at the Slade for an MFA in Fine Art Media from 1998–2000. Working as a student he explored multi-screen film installations using 50–60 8mm film projectors. Films since then have focused on landscape, drawing and photography. A number of films have been written about in Nicky Hamlyn's book *Film Art Phenomena* (BFI, 2003). Films have been screened at the Onion City Film Festival, Chicago; Aurora, Norwich; Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; Whitechapel Gallery, London; and Modern Art Gallery, Oxford. *Circles*, a film of audience drawings made in response to a performance by musician Evan Parker, was shortlisted for the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2009. He currently teaches on the BA Film Studies programme at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge.

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