Where does this black sun come from?
—Julia Kristeva, 1989

The projected image has become increasingly prominent in the art gallery over the past quarter century.1 In the accompanying catalog to an illustrative 1997 exhibition, Projections: Les transports de l’image, Dominique Païni argued that this prominence of projection heralded its crisis, resulting from the displacement of film and photography by video and digital means. The 2010 installation American Falls by Phil Solomon both existed in and figured the crisis that Païni described. American Falls highlighted its filmic legacy through its images’ appearance as distressed celluloid, produced by multiple stages of digital and chemical manipulation of carefully curated found footage, while multiplying its own projection; it figured the filmic medium in its digitally mediated images and was projected digitally onto six screens. American Falls presented an elegy for the filmic medium by retaining specific material characteristics of film as its content and model. Through an analysis of Solomon’s postfilmic installation, I will theorize a practice of melancholy projection in which melancholia is an instance of failed or negative projection and projection exists as a juncture where nonidentity is cultivated in both cinema and psychoanalysis.

American Falls was commissioned by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and was exhibited there from April 10 to
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July 18, 2010. In this manifestation the exhibition occupied the Corcoran’s rotunda, which acts as an entryway/centerpiece to the galleries. *American Falls* grounded its concern with filmic cinema in that medium’s historicity—its indexical relation to its objects, the sense that filmic cinema is grounded in the concrete reality of what it records—which is most apparent in its use of images bearing the marks of distressed and ruined celluloid. This concern with the material of film addresses a physicality that is felt to be lost in digital media’s fantasy of immateriality. In *American Falls*, film is a signifier of a specific yet distorted history that can be felt in and through the loss of cinema’s association with filmic materiality. Film’s association with materiality and historicity recurs throughout its century-long existence, established in part through its photographic lineage, as suggested by Mary Ann Doane: “The photochemical image is an inscription, a writing of time, and while Kracauer was suspicious of its potential for a positivist historicism, it nevertheless bore within it, and produced for its spectator, a respect for the resistances and thereness of historicity. . . . Its promise is that of touching the real.” In other words, film promises the past presence of history—of historicity itself—even as it manifests a fear that the mediation of history is also history’s forgetting. *American Falls* connected this historicity to the specificity of the mass public audience, the public component of filmic cinema, through the spectral appearance of recognizable and definitively American imagery and the thematization of projection as integral to the presentation of the filmic image.

Solomon’s installation coincided with a special exhibition on Eadweard Muybridge, a key figure in the development of technologies that would soon coalesce into cinema. This coincidence served to emphasize the importance of cinema as a medium closely identified with history in *American Falls*, which included portions of Muybridge’s precinematic imagery as part of its own image stream. Solomon has noted the importance of this coincidence: “I thought that I would also parallel the history of American movies with *American Falls*. It ran concurrent with the Muybridge exhibition at the Corcoran, so that was wonderful coincidence and served as a last minute inspiration. Essentially I decided that I needed recognizable images and I needed to tap into the collective unconscious idea: here’s our collective pool of images and sounds.” The presence of the Muybridge exhibition, with its emphasis on American landscape photography and its parallel appearance in *American Falls*, highlights the importance of cinematic historicity for Solomon. Solomon’s association of “recognizable images”—pulled from a “collective pool”—with cinema can be read as a reference
to the specific and individual content of the varying images, which runs from Muybridge, Thomas Edison, and D. W. Griffith to Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin to King Kong, *Night of the Hunter*, Abraham Zapruder’s footage of the John F. Kennedy assassination, and beyond, but it can also be understood as a reference to the medium of cinema itself. This broader claim is signified through the breadth and iconicity of the images but also in their appearance as distressed, produced by transferring an already manipulated digital archive of images onto film for further processing and then transferring each frame back into a digital image. In other words, the focus of Solomon’s claim can be broadened from the specificity of the content of the images depicted to their signification of the historicity represented by filmic cinema.

The installation emphasized cinematic historicity through the organization of the gallery space to recall the collective activity of cinematic viewing and through what Solomon refers to as the “chemically obscured distressed” quality of the images that simulated the appearance of cracked and disintegrating emulsion that seems to resolve into a sepia-toned metallic substance. By exploiting these aspects of filmic cinema, *American Falls* offered a rich figuration of an American modernity that is mourned in its pastness, which is rendered as filmic cinema but is unavoidably present in the maintenance of this mourning as an ongoing project. Solomon’s installation retained celluloid and projection as specific characteristics of filmic cinema signified through postfilmic means in order to express the title’s ominous associations of a fallen American ideal, identified here with the golden age of American cinema. Projection is the less obvious of these two characteristics; it is a presence that is marked as absent in the space of the installation, which hides its digital projectors in a box in the ceiling, out of sight. *American Falls* presents an ambivalent mourning of the idea of cinematic mass experience and a specifically American filmic history.

Païni’s essay “Should We Put an End to Projection?” associates projection with a historical logic of modernity: “The projection of the image thus arises from a dialectical logic that connects, of course, to the dialectical image described by Walter Benjamin, for whom the encounter with the urban crowd and with cinema was the decisive quality of modernity.” As theorized by Païni, cinema is a mass medium that, through its association with urban space, is a crucial component of modern experience—similar to the collective experience that Solomon references as his concern in *American Falls*. Projection is the basis for cinema’s status as a mass medium for Païni because it provides the means by which the celluloid
images are exhibited for large audiences, transported from their location on celluloid to the distant screen. Païni writes that “[The projected image] equally has the power to vary its site (size of image, distance traveled by the light beam). But above all, since the projection of an image mixes in a single composite the image and the light necessary for its exhibition, it associates representing and exhibiting.” Exhibition, public display, and sociality are inherent in the practice of projection, and these qualities are critically remediated by the installation format of American Falls. Solomon did not seek to re-create the space of the theater in his installation, but he did signal the importance of cinematic mass experience as it contrasts with the experience of installation art:

In the cinema, I sit in the dark; there’s a high visual and audio signal-to-noise ratio, and I give myself over to the intensity and authority of the screen. With installations, I often find myself smugly resistant because, you know, they often don’t have any kind of aura, a particular ambience that invites you to give yourself over to it. I’m perfectly aware that there’s a kind of postmodern conscious resistance to cinematic aura and its semi-fascistic control over the senses, but something is also lost when we left the darkened rooms of cinema.

Solomon’s installation combined characteristics of the contemporary gallery’s emphasis on participatory experience in the 360-degree organization of the space with the absorption of theatrical viewing through its dimmed light and the placement of seating within the space, situating it between the darkened rooms of cinematic viewing and the white cube of the gallery.

Solomon’s installation multiplied the projected image onto six screens, spread out around the room and rising above the spectators. It was inspired, according to Solomon, in part by the shape of the waterfalls from which the installation takes its name. The screens formed two curved sets of three screens that faced one another and alternated in varying patterns so that the center of one set was consonant with the image on the outer screens of the opposing set; each side displayed the same image on the two outer screens that the middle screen displayed on its opposing side. These tall triptych screens hung from the ceiling, compelling the installation’s viewers to look up at the screens framed by the ornate molding of the Corcoran’s rotunda. The multiplication of the projected image in the opposing triptychs presented a set of stimuli that was very difficult to process as a whole—it was impossible to view all of the screens simultaneously. But this initial feeling of being overwhelmed and overpowered by the multiple projected
images gave way to a sense of stability as viewers settled on one of the benches that were situated more or less beneath each triptych screen, inviting them to focus their attention on the opposing sets of screens. In other words, the installation invited a slow transition from an experience that finds its lineage in minimalist sculpture and installation art, moving around the space of the rotunda and toward a more spectatorial, static relationship to the images as in a conventional cinematic theater. *American Falls* sought to re-create a semblance of the immersion of the theater through the spatial dynamics of the installation while problematizing that experience through the installation’s emphasis on the display of its own conditions of spectatorship.

The organization of the space highlighted the spectatorial character of the installation. The rotunda was set up so that as viewers watched the set of screens opposite them, other visitors sitting on the benches across from them were also visible. Seeing other spectators became part of the viewing experience. The body of the spectator was further emphasized by the scale of the projections and their placement directly above the subject, offering a stark contrast between the size of the images and the bodies of the spectators seated below, diminishing the body and offering the subjects a semblance of the sublime view of the falls of Niagara from below in the space of the installation. Through its mirrored spectacle of spectatorship and inhuman scale, *American Falls* emphasized the public component of cinematic viewership; it paid homage to cinema as mass spectacle. Solomon’s installation is not alone in referencing the space of the theater, the space of projection, as one that connotes a mass audience, either now in danger of disappearing or as a potential instance of its mimetic re-creation. For instance, Martin Arnold’s *Deanimated* constructed the semblance of a decrepit and empty cinematic auditorium for its exhibition. Meanwhile, Matthew Buckingham ties the politics of his use of the projected image to its creation of a social space, implying that such spaces are endangered and must be cultivated: “For me, the primary reason for working with the projected image is that it always implies some kind of social space.”

While the space of the Corcoran’s rotunda was not specifically reminiscent of the space of the cinematic theater, spectatorship occupied a significant position within *American Falls*. For Solomon, this public component of his installation is also linked to the specificity of Washington, D.C., and the Corcoran itself: “I also wanted to acknowledge that this was a public work in a major public space, and a commissioned work by the oldest art gallery in the U.S. Surrounded by a city of [sic] primarily comprised of monuments to
Solomon’s concern with the public component of his installation appears in his employment and figuration of the mass spectacle of filmic projection. And given the fact that he notes the gallery’s close proximity to other monuments to the dead in the war memorials of the National Mall, it is fair to consider *American Falls* as a memorial to filmic cinema. Solomon’s installation reified the spectacle of spectatorship as an object reminiscent of a particular mode of filmic projection for a mass audience, a collective experience of images; it enacted the spectacle of film through an absence of filmic projection, a lost filmic cinema that is retained as semblance—a black sun without origin.

As an installation produced through projection and concerned with the historicity of filmic cinema, *American Falls* can be located in the context of postfilmic cinema that develops a fragmented or partial definition of cinema through the dissociation and dismantling of its conventional unified function. Jonathan Walley writes of “paracinematic” practices, which can be understood as a forerunner of the postcinema of *American Falls*: “Paracinema identifies an array of phenomena that are considered ‘cinematic’ but that are not embodied in the materials of film as traditionally defined.” Walley locates this “paracinema” within the practices of artists such as Paul Sharits and Anthony McCall, who looked beyond the modernist medium specificity of structural filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton or Michael Snow. Instead Sharits, according to Walley, is “signaling that the search for the essence of cinema—for an ‘elemental, primary cinema’—is not necessarily a matter of limiting or reducing cinema to the materials of the film medium as traditionally defined.” In a similar manner, “McCall’s version of cinematic essentialism, a dematerialized essentialism that focuses on less concrete, tangible properties, has the effect of opening up a cinematic work to elements, effects, and values associated with other art forms, placing it in the family of performance-based, participatory forms that were so prevalent during this period.” Walley’s account of the paracinema of the 1970s offers a lineage of the sort of differentiation between a cinematic idea and a filmic materiality that appears in *American Falls*.

However, the paracinematic practices of the 1970s differ from Solomon’s installation in key ways. For instance, while McCall’s *Long Film for Ambient Light* dispensed with celluloid and the projector, retaining temporality and light as cinematic qualities, *American Falls* retains celluloid and the projector in forms that affirm their absence. While *American Falls* shares elements of the postfilmic ambitions of paracinema, it is less concerned with testing the boundaries of the cinematic medium and combating structural
film’s medium-specific ontology. Instead, Solomon’s installation uses projection and celluloid to signify the idea of cinema as the mediating element of its historical iconography. *American Falls* is not concerned with film as a nonillusionist immediacy, an approach common to both structural film and paracinema. Film in *American Falls* is a melancholy object that recalls its own instability in remembering complex historical events: modernity, New Deal capitalism, and a dominant and benevolent American nation at home and abroad. Projection signifies key aspects of this melancholia through its negative presence in Solomon’s installation.

For Païni, film is associated with a history of the image in modernity that identifies it as a technology premised on projection. Following Paul Virilio, Païni periodizes modernity into three logics of the image: the formal, characterized by painting and architecture and ending with the eighteenth century; the dialectical, which is coincident with the emergence of photography to the introduction of video and cybernetics, roughly 1840–1950; and the paradoxical, the age of television, video, and the computer as well as the collapse of the image into its material support and the decline of the differential identity of projection.17 Projection is associated with the age of the dialectical logic of the image because of the necessary distanciation and differentiation of projection. The distinctive distance and difference that projection provides are crucial for Païni, signifying a possibility of nonidentity produced in the filmic image’s dispersal across the celluloid strip and the screen, in and through the activity of projection. Projection is not an essence of cinema but instead is the means by which the locations of the filmic image are temporarily joined, mediated. Doane argues that this dispersal and nonidentity are intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus: “Cinematic images are projected; cinematic images are also stored. And the material nature of their existence is in each case quite different, incompatible.”18 This heterogeneity of the cinematic image is what projection briefly unifies. The nonidentity of filmic cinema is significant for Païni because it offers a possibility of thinking historical difference. This nonidentity, according to Païni, is what connects the dialectical logic of projection to Walter Benjamin’s dialectical image. The projected image is dialectical in holding together two separate and unreconciled instances, images, or objects.

Païni’s recourse to Benjamin helps to clarify the political and historical stakes of his argument: “Projection as dialectical image. . . . This comes down to saying that the luminous transport of the image would be an apparatus favoring the encounter in a flash of Past and Now, a *spasmodic* image.”19 In other words, the projected
image maintains a heterogeneity of temporality in its present. The political import of projection’s heterogeneity is twofold for Païni. First, projection creates the mass cinematic spectacle and its attendant reorganization of urban experience and revolutionary politics. And second, it figures the possibility of future difference in the inherent differentiation of the projected image, divided between celluloid and screen and held together in nonidentity by projection.  

Filmic projection unifies the functions or tasks of the apparatus; it holds the image in suspension as it refuses its identity with itself. The unity of the filmic apparatus that projection provides is a temporary one, vanishing once the activity is finished, once the light dims and the film ends. Filmic projection is its own refraction through the difference that it introduces into the image itself; from the image on the celluloid to the image that falls upon the screen, there is a relationship of nonidentity. It is seemingly the same image but broken in space, achieving its momentary unity through a beam of light that passes through one instance of the image in order to create its virtual staging on the screen. The filmic image, on both filmstrip and screen, contains a dynamic difference within itself that is proximate to Benjamin’s dialectical image. Film finds its allegiance to the dialectical image not in any single image but instead in its maintenance of nonidentity, its spatial dispersion. The image does not exist solely on the screen or on the celluloid; rather, the image exists in their mediation by the projection of light. Filmic projection is an important aspect of cinema’s ontology in that it insists upon the motion of both the apparatus and the image. It locates the medium’s essence in the partial and uneven unity of the cinematic equipment in projection. Projection defines the totality of the filmic apparatus as fragmentary. This is the sense in which we can understand projection as being dialectical, as being modern: projection is mediation.

The prominence that projection has gained in contemporary art exhibition is a way of interring filmic cinema as an obsolescent phenomenon of modernity; postfilmic cinema is a late medium that lives on past its filmic component, projected into the future. Projection reifies that which it previously held in suspension. In this instance, as for Theodor Adorno, the museum is closely associated with death and mourning: “Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art.” Erika Balsom has argued for the specificity of this museal form as the context for a cinematic ruin: “Within the pristine and sanctified spaces of art, 16 mm film is employed as a precious remnant of a cinema in ruins.”
But as *American Falls* demonstrates, it is not simply the actuality of 16mm film or even film generally that necessarily represents the ruins of cinema. *American Falls* offers an iconic cinematic figuration, an illusion of the cinema, whereby the actual materials of the filmic apparatus have mostly been displaced, while a semblance of its representational ability remains as a representation of film itself. This absence of film and its illusionist re-creation breaks with Pâni’s theory of projection. The active presence of projection is essential in the work that Pâni discusses, with the noisy mechanical functioning of the projector serving as a counterweight to the fullness of the image on the screen. As Pâni states, “The projected images in the present installation need, for their meaning, the visibility of the machine that projects them.”

*American Falls* functions differently. Rather than emphasizing the activity of projection, Solomon’s multichannel installation retains and multiplies the number of projectors while hiding their location within the gallery. Projection is a concern for Solomon in a different manner than that described by Pâni or as demonstrated by Sharits, McCall, or others, such as Tacita Dean. In *American Falls*, projection appears in negative form, a repressed presence that nevertheless remains—a melancholy projection. In the melancholic projection of Solomon’s installation, film lives on beyond its own passing as a reflection on its own ephemerality. The melancholy projection of film is a veiled confrontation with the passing of history itself, a history represented in this instance by and through the filmic medium.

Modifying Pâni’s theory of projection in order to account for the absence of the filmic apparatus in *American Falls* requires looking to that other location of projection’s prominence in modernity: the psychic operations of the subject as theorized by psychoanalysis. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud describes projection as an allaying of internally produced sensations of unpleasure. Rather than recognizing this unpleasure as produced internally, the subject expels the disturbing characteristics of itself onto an external object that enacts those internal scars through an external identification of unpleasure. Freud writes that

> a particular way is adopted of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. This is the origin of projection.
Projection is an internally motivated production of the differentiation between inside and outside; it originates in anxieties about the inability to distinguish inside from outside, subject from object. Crucially, projection does not produce a definitive border between inside and outside, instead remaining a dynamic process. But it is this internally generated dynamic differentiation that connects psychoanalytic projection to the processes of mediation and the dialectic.

In the context of Freud’s definition, Päini’s association of projection with the dialectic can be reframed as an ongoing negotiation and assessment of the boundaries of the self through its redefinition of the relation to the object. Cinema for Benjamin occupies a similar role in defining the limitations and perceptions of the subject in the historical context of the industrial metropolis:

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. Different above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.

This is Benjamin’s “optical unconscious,” a defensive preparation that actualizes the metropolitan subject, integrating it into the scale and pace of the city. But cinema arrives late, after the subject has already been integrated into the city for which the cinema provides an antidote. This seemingly contradictory logic of cinema’s mediation of a metropolitan experience that is already well under way at the medium’s emergence at the end of the nineteenth century is part of Benjamin’s dialectical method, mediating past and present through the object. This dynamic tension was a political imperative for Benjamin, as it opened the possibility of a future that was radically different from the present. The dialectical images “functioned like switches, arresting the fleeting phenomena and starting thought in motion or, alternately, shocking thought to a standstill and setting the reified objects in motion by causing them to lose their second-nature familiarity.”

The “optical unconscious” is the subject’s mimetic adaptation of its perception through the mediation of photography and film to the radically transformed reality of industrial production, the
city, and modernity, altering the subject’s relation to the world as it participates in that very transformation. The “optical unconscious” functions with the temporality of the dialectical image, mediating past and present in the interest of producing a future difference: “By refracting the modern physis, film simultaneously transforms it: ‘With the dynamite of the split second,’ it denaturalizes the entire ‘prison-world,’ undoes its semblance of immutability, and makes its scattered ruins available for mimetic transformation and reconfiguration.”32 In a historical sense, it is true that cinema itself did not appear until after much of the development of the modern city was already complete, but this structure of belatedness only reconfirms the importance of melancholia in Benjamin’s formulation. The importance of projection for Solomon appears in a similarly belated fashion, illuminating the past and present crises of cinema; filmic projection structures and facilitates American Falls even as it seeks to renounce its presence and presentness.

What this suggests is the importance of temporal disjunction to both cinematic and psychic projection. However, this does not imply the presence of a temporal progression in either form of projection but instead implies that the identity of time to itself is held in suspension. Immediately prior to describing the origin of projection, Freud offers the example of a simple organism that builds up a barrier against external stimuli, creating a distinction between self and nonself and, in the process, a sense of temporality. However, temporality for Freud is not simply a matter of marking the passage of stimuli, because the unconscious is “timeless.” Because of the distinction between the unconscious and conscious mental processes, the external barrier that defends against threats originating from without does not function against internally generated stimuli: “Towards the inside there can be no such shield; the excitations in the deeper layers extend into the system directly and in undiminished amount, in so far as certain of their characteristics give rise to feelings in the pleasure-unpleasure series. The excitations coming from within are . . . more commensurate with the system’s method of working than the stimuli which stream in from the external world.”33 According to Freud, this commensurability of internal stimuli has two effects: internal stimuli are more predominant over the psyche, and the protective functions that are deployed against external stimuli are not effective against internal stimuli that are experienced as too intensely unpleasurable. Projection originates in the structure of the subject in order to define its difference from the world as a singular and coherent perspective; it is the subject’s manner of navigating the difference between inner and outer while maintaining its necessary fragmentation.
If psychoanalytic projection is a self-generated deflection of the inside to the outside, the concept in cinema is associated with exhibition, making public the recorded images, and also actualizing the cinematic apparatus in a single instance. According to Païni, what is lost in the transition away from projection’s necessary enactment is film’s temporal heterogeneity. Projection is not a requirement of the moving image; even as it is often employed in its exhibition, as in American Falls, it can be displayed by many other means and both precedes and continues after filmic cinema. While the moment of film may be in decline or have passed, cinema remains in what Païni defines as the logic of paradox, which exists as a crisis of public representation, partially existing through the appearances of its former filmic self. The logic of paradox retains the qualities of projection without their functional necessity, without the demands of projection that mark film. Following Virilio, Païni’s image of paradox organizes itself not through the distanciation of projection but instead through its own effective reverberation. A fundamental characteristic of the video image, from the blurry interlacing of early video art to the overabundance of detail in the most recent high-definition monitors, is the identity of the image with its support and the possibility of a simultaneous recording and playback, a characteristic associated with narcissism by Rosalind Krauss. Projection after film implies an uneasy differentiation in the realm of the image; it is a remainder that no longer holds the temporal nonidentity that operates through the necessity of filmic cinema and is attributed to it by Païni. Instead, the postfilmic projected image retains the potential nonidentity of filmic projection through its absences; projection’s reification is its potential rehabilitation as a critical function in postfilmic cinema.

As employed in American Falls, projection amounts to a melancholic gaze toward a past and now romanticized mode of production. This figuration of a past cinema (or past as cinema) abandons projection’s mediating role in favor of a repressed presence. Unlike the works of Sharits and McCall, where the projector itself becomes a significant part of the experience, Solomon’s installation figures projection much more prominently as an absence. It is a projection that has failed not because the image does not appear but instead because it is marked by a severing of the link between filmic cinema and projection while still retaining projection as its mode of presentation and as a representation of filmic cinema. It is in this sense that the projected image in American Falls is understood as melancholic.

At about the same moment that Païni was posing the question of projection’s continuation, Laura U. Marks noted a quality of...
vanishing or distressed visibility in experimental film and video: “Many recent experimental films and videos, flouting the maximization of the visible that usually characterizes their media, are presenting a diminished visibility: their images are, quite simply, hard to see.” According to Marks, this diminished visibility in experimental film was linked to the emergence of diseases that attack the coherence of the body, principally AIDS. “What this look enacts is something like a perpetual mourning, something like melancholia in its refusal to have done with death. . . . Faded films, decaying videotapes, projected videos that flaunt their tenuous connection to the reality they index, all appeal to a look of love and loss.” As with the diminished image in the works that Marks discusses—a quality that is also utilized by Solomon, though his images retain their iconographic resemblance at crucial moments—it is the negation of projection in *American Falls* that marks it as melancholic. Following Marks, melancholia can be reframed from an embrace of disintegration as death into a reconfiguration of the subject’s self-identical coherence, instead recognizing its objectivity, its “relations with others and all matter, which is, after all, in a state of constant dissolution.”

Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” presents the two topics as differing modes of grief: respectively, a successful and an unsuccessful de-cathexis—detachment but also withdrawal and divestment—from the object of affection. Freud begins by noting the similarity in the symptoms of mourning and melancholia, but he nevertheless sharply distinguishes them and stigmatizes the latter; melancholia is the pathological form that grief takes:

> The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterances in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.

Mourning shares all of these traits with melancholia except one—the loss of self-regard. This diminution of the self is key to the operation of melancholia. Melancholia is an abstract or unconscious loss that differs from the conscious loss of mourning. Whereas in mourning the ego becomes withdrawn from the world, in melancholia the ego withdraws from itself: “In grief the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” In mourning the boundaries of the self are maintained, while in melancholia those boundaries are reconfigured and even dissolved. This
weakening of the ego does not result in a simple dissolution of the self, at least not immediately or in every instance, but instead a consideration of the ego, or a portion of the ego, as though it were an object. Instead of moving on to a different object, the libido instead internalizes the lost object, identifying it with the ego. In melancholia, the mourned object becomes part of the self, identified as part of the ego yet alien. This inward mourning is then expressed as a loss of regard for the self through a loss of regard for the lost object. Another way to understand melancholia is as an inward projection, a failure to introject that results in the incorporation of a differentiated element into the ego that is unacknowledged.

Melancholia can be thought as a negative projection in the failure to externalize the unpleasure of the lost object as something other because it is unacknowledged. Instead, the unpleasure becomes incorporated into the subject and results in its expansion through the loss of coherence. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok argue that in melancholia, the subject incorporates a version of the lost object into itself, a difference that is entombed within the subject, repressed but always present. "Incorporation results from those losses that for some reason cannot be acknowledged as such. . . Without the escape-route of somehow conveying our refusal to mourn, we are reduced to a radical denial of the loss, to pretending that we had absolutely nothing to lose." This unending and unacknowledged mourning is the form that the relation to the lost object of filmic cinema appears as in American Falls. The melancholia that appears in American Falls is an amalgam of the lost filmic object and the imagination of an ascendant and dominant American empire. What distinguishes Solomon’s installation is the manner in which it mediates these highly resonant moments of modernity through the recognizability of its images while also being out of reach and distant, as signified by their appearance as damaged and diminished celluloid.

For Freud, melancholia is a regression from a cathexis onto objects to a primary narcissism, a turning inward. Abraham and Torok describe the melancholic object as being encrypted within the subject, splintering the coherence of the ego:

The crypt perpetuates the dividing walls by its very nature. No crypt arises without a shared secret’s having already split the subject’s topography. . . . Crypts are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object’s doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the object’s secret that needs to be kept, his shame covered up.
This identification of shame with the mourned object follows from Freud’s attribution of the difference between mourning and melancholia to a distinction between the types of objects mourned. According to Freud,

the exciting causes of melancholia are of a much wider range than those of grief, which is for the most part occasioned only by a real loss of the object, by its death. In melancholia, that is, countless single conflicts in which love and hate wrestle together are fought for the object; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object, the other to uphold this libido-position against assault.

Mourning usually involves a lost individual or thing, while melancholia involves more abstract entities, such as ideas and places—or, as in the present instance, history itself.

As opposed to the mechanism of projection whereby the ego expels an internal excitation outside of itself, melancholia functions by incorporating an object that had been external back into the ego, or, as Abraham and Torok would have it, the object is encrypted within the ego. But this is not simply a subsumption: the ego is attempting to detach itself from the object but only succeeds in drawing it into itself and making of itself an object. Melancholia is an inverse or negative projection that is always striving to detach itself from the object and reassert a distinction. Melancholia is a form of negative projection in the sense that the object becomes the subject in its attempted differentiation from the ego. As negative projection, melancholia holds the elements of the ego in suspension, fragmenting its coherence while maintaining the semblance of a totality. Melancholia contains a desire for an other but maintains this other by producing an other within the self. Thus, melancholia is a differentiation that never leaves the subject, putting the boundaries of the subject in crisis, rupturing the form and coherence of the ego. It is in the context of this crisis—a crisis of the ego’s boundaries, blurring the boundaries that define the subject’s protective capacity—that we can speak of melancholy projection.

The object of melancholic projection is felt only as an absence. It is as though the object had set out a space in the subject while seeking to diminish its appearance. Melancholy projection is an amorphous concept of absence; it is not an equation of melancholia with projection but instead is a way of understanding the particular functioning of melancholia as a desire to maintain an unacknowledged other. Marks argues that melancholia produces a tactile sense of viewing that dissociates the coherence of the subject through its identification with an uncertain and undefined object:
“This sort of look, then, is not just about death, but about loving a living but non-coherent subject, an image that contains the memory of a more complete self. This look is a kind of reverse mirror stage: we identify not (‘jubilantly’) with a self that is more unified than we are, but with a self that is aging and disappearing.”

Adopting this formulation, the aging and disappearing object of filmic cinema, and all that it signifies in its associations with history, nation, and nature in *American Falls* offers an instance of melancholy projection.

Melancholy projection is a figuration of the contemporary status of projection in relation to the filmic medium as it exists and is memorialized in instances of the moving image in the gallery; it is the manner in which the signifiers of film that are present nonetheless thematize their own absence. Film figures as a fragment in a totality that it maintains in melancholy projection. *American Falls* represents film through that medium’s dispersal and dissolution. The division of the spectator as one who sees and one who is also part of the spectacle, the multiplication of projection, and the decayed appearance of celluloid that characterizes the images all contribute to this sense of dispersal. *American Falls* exhibits its melancholy incorporation of projection through the mediating function of its images, a spectacle of history. In this feature, it finds its inspiration, at least partially, in a different medium and in a different historical period: nineteenth-century American landscape painting.

Solomon’s *American Falls* was inspired by Frederic Edwin Church’s 1857 painting, *Niagara*, one of the most important and well-known works in the Corcoran’s collection. Solomon offers his own account of the installation’s emergence from the specificity of the Corcoran and this particular piece of its collection: “when you walk into the Corcoran, there’s a big rotunda that’s essentially the gateway to the rest of the museum. . . . Then I saw the painting downstairs called *Niagara* (1857) by Frederic Church; it’s a great painting, a landscape painting with incredible detail.” This origin narrative highlights certain aspects of Solomon’s installation: the importance of the space of the Corcoran gallery, the sense of historical painting as a part of an image culture shared by film, and finally the importance of the American landscape in Solomon’s installation. Church’s painting of an ascendant American nation provides the relief against which the fragmentation and loss of *American Falls* is set, even as it is the very portrayal offered by Church that is fragmenting.

As an iconic site in the American national imaginary, Niagara Falls was particularly important in the construction of an American
ideal. The falls offered a figure of the nation’s growing power and breadth of influence and was an image of the nature that the nation was mastering. David Huntington notes the iconic importance of the falls in this national context: “As site and sight, Niagara was the very spectacle of national aspiration.” Church’s *Niagara* uses this spectacular site of American potential for its object, presenting an untouched natural landscape that was open and available for the expanding nation. Iris Cahn links this particular national imaginary, depicted in paintings from the great pictures tradition such as *Niagara*, to the actualities of early film. According to Cahn, the prominence of landscape painting in the national imaginary deeply affected the development of the iconography of early American film: “By focusing on the glories of nature, the American Great Picture, unlike its European counterpart, helped to establish an iconography for an early American cinema whose subjects would be linked to the adventure of the railroad, tourism, and later, to the rugged backdrop of a mythic West.” But the importance of Church’s painting in the American national imaginary is made ironic in the fact that the view that the painting offers of the falls is actually from abroad, offering the perspective of someone standing on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, looking across the American landscape from a vantage at a slight remove. But the vantage offered by the painting is by no means without precarity.

The composition of Church’s rectangular painting shows a vertical arc that curves through the full height of the frame. There is no ground in the image, at least not where the image’s vantage point lies: the only land visible is across the open wound of the falls. This produces a feeling of being at the edge, of confronting nature as closely as possible while also conquering it. By contrast, Solomon’s installation reverses this spatial dynamic, reflecting a shift from the mastery and ascendancy of *Niagara* to the uncertainty that marks our own historical moment’s relation to its past and present. While Church’s painting is staged at the edge of the falls, the force of Solomon’s installation is in the sense of being overwhelmed, inundated from above by a steady succession of images. In contrast to the static representation of power and control in *Niagara*, *American Falls* is a precise sequence of images that offers a cinematic American history—in motion—that begins to fragment in the very instant of its appearance. Unlike in Church’s painting, the images of the falls in the early segments of Solomon’s installation are mostly from below the falls, looking up. The first segment of the installation focuses on Niagara Falls and is titled “Maid of the Mist,” a title closely associated with the site through the name of a boat that ferries tourists to a vantage of the falls from below.
This segment includes footage of both Anne Edson Taylor, the so-called Queen of the Mist and the first person to survive going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, and Jean Francois Gravelet, “The Great Blondin,” the first person to cross the falls on a tightrope. From this beginning, the images produce a fragmented American history. Solomon himself confirms the importance of the idea of America in his choice of images: “I knew that I needed to work, one way or another, with classic American iconography. I knew that this was going to be about the mediation of the American idea—how events were transcribed and delivered in various media.” This idea of America is narrativized in the sequencing of the images, moving from the ascendant hope of industrial America as depicted in the images of Niagara Falls, the construction of the railroad, and Abraham Lincoln to the decline and uncertainty implied by the haunting images of Zapruder and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as aerial shots of Lower Manhattan, with the World Trade Center obtrusively present. As Leo Goldsmith notes, “American Falls . . . offers a richly allegorical account of America’s rise and fall through a torrent of intricately distressed celluloid sourced from a disparate array of films and newsreels, and featuring everyone from Amelia Earhart to King Kong to Robert Oppenheimer to Charlie Chaplin.” This variety of images renders a history of the nation in its juxtaposition of shots. From images of Niagara Falls that are coded as being from the early twentieth century to aerial views of Lower Manhattan from the late twentieth century, the history laid out by these images is one of American progress and decline. All of these images, from disparate moments that recall specific and recognizable places and events, are presented in the same visual style. The areas that do materialize are sepia toned and metallic, as though they were encased in bronze to be stored and forgotten—a crypt of the filmic image.

This crypt is constructed from the apparent detritus of the disintegrating images. The procession of images consists of found footage—as Solomon says, “our collective pool of images and sounds.” The shared historicity of the images across their difference is marked by their apparent decay. The process that Solomon used to create his images that signify a damaged celluloid sits at the nexus of digital and filmic technique:

I captured hundreds of digital scenes into timelines, with each scene bordered by fades into and out of black, which essentially translates to the images emerging out of and submerging back into the chemical treatments I employed. I also digitally enhanced the gamma and contrast for
every scene because the overall effect of my post-processing treatments is primarily based on the density and location of black in every scene. These Final Cut timelines were then optically transferred, frame by frame, to 16mm black-and-white film, which is then processed, printed, treated, dried, and then manually rephotographed again on an optical printer back into jpeg files.

Solomon constructed and then reformatted a digital archive of film history onto film for its determinate destruction and finally redigitized it for further manipulation, editing, and projection. The chemically distressed, decayed character of the images of American Falls juxtaposed the mourning of film and the mourning of America. The similarity of the visual texture of the images interrupts their historical specificity and difference as they accumulate. The shots from Niagara Falls, dating from the early twentieth century, appear in the same visual register as a later aerial shot of Lower Manhattan. The homogenous visual style of the images weakens their historical register, removing them from their own historical specificities and, correspondingly, material indices. The homogeneity of the visual style highlights this depleted historicity as itself a historical condition; this de-historicization is the signifying function of the images within the installation. They represent the idea of America as an ahistorical ideal made available through a melancholy projection. Through this procession of images of a reified American history, Solomon’s installation addresses and historicizes the contemporary crisis of the American national imaginary.

In this sense, the title of the installation has multiple and ominous meanings. The images of Niagara Falls that are intercut with images of Lower Manhattan suggest a broad interpretation of what the installation’s title might refer to, from the falling water at Niagara to the man falling from the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, to a broader destabilization of America’s role, both real and imagined, as the world’s sole military and economic superpower. The explicit meaning of the title in the context of Niagara Falls is a reference to the smaller (as compared to Horseshoe Falls) of the two main waterfalls that make up the site, but it also implies the uncertainty of the imaginary ideal of the American nation. The title signals an elegy for an imagined sense of certainty about the American Dream of broad economic security that, in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, is more radically in question now than at any moment in recent memory. The images of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan evoke the attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City and Washington, D.C., that led to significant retrenchment of nationalist sentiment in the face of a real
historical and spectacular wound. In this sense, the title evokes not only the actual fall of the World Trade Center towers and the victims there but also the perceived threat that the attacks presented to American military, economic, and cultural dominance. All of this is accentuated by the installation’s placement in the Corcoran Gallery of Art—surrounded by monuments to the dead—which is not only in Washington, D.C., but is also across the street from one of the most recognizable symbols of American power and nationalism, the White House.

American Falls offers an image of the American ideal in crisis and at risk of disintegration. However, this is not nostalgia for a simpler or more innocent American nationalism but instead is an accounting of the current status of melancholy projection. American Falls identifies America as a concept that is always in tension with itself, always a projection of an imagined outside and reconstructed past that is reincorporated into the idea of America. What is unsuccessfully mourned in American Falls is suitably uncertain, even as it is localized in such abstractions as nations, histories, and technologies. If the twentieth century was the century of modernity and cinema, it was also the American century. In American Falls the devolution of the image directly relates to a sense that the mediation of history is also history’s forgetting. In this sense, American Falls is concerned with cinema as a signifier of a particular image of American modernity that is remembered as lost and in danger of being forgotten.

If American Falls is an instance of melancholy projection through its thematization of a loss that is felt as a loss of the very idea of the object, depriving the subject of an active externality, then that meaning of the installation can only be inferred from its effects. In other words, the end of film and the crisis of the American nation that are thematized by the space of the installation and the homogenization of the disparate images are symptoms of the amorphous and unconscious emptiness of the loss allegorized in melancholy projection. Melancholy projection is an attempt to return an element of history to a present that feels at one with itself without the mediated distance of projection.

This essay began with an epigraph by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva’s figural image of the black sun is a reference to Freud’s claim that in melancholia the subject falls under the shadow of the object, that the subject cannot escape from the negative projection of melancholia. Kristeva asks “Where does this black sun come from? Out of what eerie galaxy do its invisible, lethargic rays reach me, pinning me down to the ground, to my bed, compelling me to silence, to renunciation?” Her figure of melancholia can also be understood
within the context of projection. The black sun actualizes the figu-
ration of negative projection that I have been arguing is crucial
to melancholia. Melancholy projection is an attempt to objectify
an insubstantial and amorphous feeling of loss. However, it is a
loss felt only through its effects as an absent presence without loca-
tion or determination. It is a confrontation of the subject with the
inability to conceptualize the loss of the abstract and indetermi-
nate object. Projection becomes the symptom of this loss in this
instance, as it thematizes and clings to filmic cinema without being
able to locate it as that which has been lost because it still appears
in altered form. Melancholy projection is the confrontation of the
subject with its own inability to register loss as loss. This is perhaps
what Païni means by the paradoxical logic of the contemporary
moment. In the context of the contemporary status of projection’s
unacknowledged loss, the paradox of the present is its inability to
imagine a future with a difference, a nonidentical temporality.

Notes

The epigraph is from Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia (New York:

1. For accounts of the prominence and ubiquity of the projected image in
contemporary art, see “Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art,”
October 104 (Spring 2003): 71–96; Erika Balsom, Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary
Art (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013); Stan Douglas and Christopher
Eamon, eds., Art of Projection (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009); Tamara Trodd,
ed., Screen Space: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art (Manchester, UK: Manchester

2. It was subsequently shown at the Museum of the Moving Image from Septem-
ber 15 to November 25, 2012; the University of Michigan from March 25 to April 2,
2012; Dartmouth College in 2013; and elsewhere.

3. On the materiality of the digital, see Philip Rosen, Change Mummified: Cinema,
Historicity, Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 301–49; Jussi
Parikka, What Is Media Archaeology? (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 65–89; Braxton
Rosen’s account points to the ways that discourses around digital and analog media
map onto those of historicity, identifying a digital utopia of the new, a not yet that
is forever postponed, which is characterized by three ideals: practically infinite
manipulability, convergence of diverse media, and interactivity. Parikka and Soder-
man identify ways to think about materiality in the context of digital media, such
as the significature of the algorithm or the physicality of servers and the networked
infrastructure.

4. Mary Ann Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,”

6. Ibid., 6.


8. The cinema, in contrast to the broadcasting of television and radio, is experienced as a mass, as a crowd. In other words, while radio and television address a larger audience simultaneously, they are isolated in the experience of the transmission. Cinema addresses a smaller audience in simultaneity, but the experiencing of it in an audience, in a communal and public space, is crucial, and this is the importance of projection for Païni. Cinema exists in a specific place and in a specific social context that the practice of projection makes possible.


16. Ibid., 20.


20. Building on Benjamin, Rosalind Krauss has made a similar claim for the cinematic medium as employed by Marcel Broodthaers against what she identifies as the modernism of structural film, arguing that cinema’s early imperfection represents the promise of difference that Païni desires: “In so parting company with the structural film’s modernism, Broodthaers was not denying film as a medium. He was, rather,
understanding this medium in the light of the openness promised by early film, an openness woven into the very mesh of the image, as the flickering irresolution of the illusion of movement produced the experience of sight itself as dilated: a phenomenological mixture of presence and absence, immediacy and distance.” Rosalind Krauss, _A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition_ (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 44.


22. For a contrary view, see James Leo Cahill, “How It Feels to Be Run Over: Early Film Accidents,” _Discourse_ 30, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 289–316.

23. Although I am not making a strong claim for projection as the essential cinematic quality, there have been numerous attempts to isolate singular aspects of the cinematic apparatus as its most important, in both theory and practice. Key instances would include Dziga Vertov’s attempt to locate the essential quality of cinema in the practice of montage, André Bazin’s indexical ontology of the photographic and filmic image, Siegfried Kracauer’s ethical and political insistence that film could rescue a broken material reality, apparatus theory’s association of the cinematic apparatus with the structure of ideology, the attempts by various artists associated with structural film to distill cinema into a single instance of its concrete reality (the zoom in Michael Snow’s _Wavelength_ or the materiality of the apparatus itself as a confirmation of film as a historical materialist practice in Peter Gidal), and the already mentioned paracinema of McCall, Sharits, and others. For a recent account of the current crisis of cinema’s identity, see Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg, and Simon Rothhöfer, eds., _Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema_ (Vienna: Austrian Film Museum, 2012).


25. Erika Balsom, “A Cinema in the Gallery, a Cinema in Ruins,” _Sternen_ 50, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 414. The history of cinema is a history of its impending or already arrived death: from its very invention with Lumière’s “invention without a future” to Bazin’s claim that cinema had not yet been invented to recent declarations of the death of cinema in the face of its shifting locations and technical means in the age of the digital—dissociating film from cinema. However, while film’s history as the dominant commercial exhibition medium has come to an end, its history as a storage medium lives on, as it is a more stable storage platform than digital.

26. I am thinking here of the work of Tacita Dean in particular, such as _Feinsehturm_ and _The Green Ray_, which is the key example in the Balsom essay mentioned above.

27. Païni, “Should We Put an End to Projection?,” 32 (emphasis in original).


32. Miriam Bratu Hansen, _Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter
Melancholy Projection

Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 159. The quotations in this passage are from Benjamin.

33. Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 32–33.

34. Païni, “Should We Put an End to Projection?,” 28.


37. Ibid., 94.

38. Ibid., 109.


40. Ibid., 167.


42. Ibid., 131.

43. Freud, General Psychological Theory, 177.

44. Marks, “Loving a Disappearing Image,” 104–5.

45. This claim is made in a press release put out by the Corcoran Gallery of Art: “Inspired by Frederic Edwin Church’s 1857 masterpiece Niagara, one of the best-known paintings in the Corcoran’s historic collection, and by Washington’s monumental war memorials, American Falls explores the aspirations and struggles that lie at the heart of the American Dream.” See “Phil Solomon: American Falls,” press release, University of Michigan, Stamps School of Art & Design, March 25, 2012–April 2, 2012, http://stamps.umich.edu/exhibitions/detail/phil_solomon_american_falls.


50. Goldsmith, “Chemical Sundowns.”


52. Leo Goldsmith, “Chemical Sundowns.”


54. Kristeva, Black Sun, 3.