

# Chemical Pictures

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## Securiosity

# “Securiosity: Landscapes of Fear in Recent Video Art by Deborah Stratman and Steven Matheson”

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## ABSTRACT

The videotapes “In Order Not To Be Here” by Deborah Stratman and “Apple Grown in Wind Tunnel” by Steven Matheson each examine how topographies of the American landscape are inscribed with the fears and anxieties of the human presence on earth. This paper, read through geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s book “Landscapes of Fear”, contrasts two divergent visions of our contemporary built environment; one of paranoia and surveillance and another of possibility and redemption.

Stratman’s tape focuses on suburban vignettes wordlessly rendered both by static shots taken in the dead of night as well as by helicopter shots following fleeing fugitives that we recognize from the vernacular of reality police TV shows. The tape, a compendium of the affordances of the class society, manages to subtly describe the ambience of anxiety that infuses American urban life.

In contrast Steven Matheson, in “Apple Grown in Wind Tunnel”, has created a fairy tale that slyly reverses tropes culled from conspiracy narratives. We follow a character that discovers secret radio transmissions disseminating recipes for medicine and elixirs made out of industrial waste. The work becomes a thought experiment about anxiety, media culture, and the health care system in the post-industrial, consumer world.

## Intro

This paper comes from a topic in a seminar I am teaching at NSCAD this semester. The class has been considering a wide range of artists’ film and video work and in a section, called “Landscapes of Fear”, we considered two recent American videos: *In Order Not to Be Here* by Deborah Stratman and *Apple Grown in Wind Tunnel* by Steven Matheson. We read these works through excerpts from the book “Landscapes of Fear” by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. Although both of these tapes respond to the contemporary American landscape and the ambiances of fear that it inspires, the juxtaposition of these two pieces was in a way a contrast. Stratman’s tape is a documentary (abet with a few staged elements) whereas Matheson work is fiction, basically a modern fairy tale.

Both these tapes present the landscape not as it is usually treated: i.e., as a backdrop for the character’s

stories to unfold, but landscape as the central focus of the work – or you could say as the central character. The topographical aspects of both these works, I believe, will allow me to place this work in relationship to the “changing technological horizon in contemporary photography” that our panel is considering, in that they both owe a debt to the formal devices of framing and point of view that align them with photography but they both introduce time into the equation.

Foucault noted in his interview with the editors of *Herodote* – a journal on geography – that at least from the time of Bergson; “space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.” (*Questions on Geography*, p. 70) These works problematize this opposition; Stratman’s film uses time to describe the stillness of the landscape at night and thwarts our anticipation of narrative and in Matheson’s video the landscape is enlivened by a narrative involving radio transmissions and utopian promises of a panacea of medicinal cures. The landscape in each of these works stands as the uncanny no-man’s land promising or threatening both life and death.

## **Securocity**

In “Landscapes of Fear” Yi-Fu Huan notes that “Security and “Curiosity” have a common Latin root: *cura* which means anxiety, care, or cure. Here we see how our imagination and anxiety are two sides of the same coin. Morse Peckham touches on this theme in his book “Man’s Rage for Chaos” where he describes the biological purpose of art a ‘rehearsal for uncertainty’, that is; when we make art, we are rehearsing ways in which we will adapt to the anxieties of dealing with uncertainty within a ‘psychically insulated’ space of the imagination. The particular anxiety I want to highlight in looking at these works is the anxiety we have about our post-industrial, urban landscape.

## **Night Time**

*In Order Not to Be Here* is a 16mm film shot largely in Naperville, a suburban community outside Chicago, where filmmaker Deborah Stratman grew up. It could be any suburban community in America. The film presents an UR-suburbia, characterized by the uniformity of suburban features: gated communities, fences, walls, shopping centres, parking lots, drive-through pharmacies, fast-food restaurants, and ATM’s. Stratman shot this film in the still of the night. She presents us with sequences of landscape shots; a catalogue of the soulless vacuum of suburbia. Each shot is treated like a photograph. It is framed and captured and yet trapped in the confines of a narrative-less film. Each shot, as Berenice Reynaud characterizes it, is “held beyond the conventional limits of spectral endurance, time does not flow towards resolution, but is congealed as a “pressure block,” a stasis waiting to explode, a presence failing to materialize, an ever-vanishing present.” Here we encounter ‘night’ time, as something distinct from daytime with its narratives of schedules and timetables. This is the landscape of insomniacs; of time waiting for consciousness itself to collapse into sleep, a no-man’s land between freeform unconscious anxiety and the structured schedule of our conscious ego.

Rising up in this half-dream are the long suppressed fears of the other that, as Yi-Fu Tuan recounts in his book, have inhabited the landscape throughout history. However, in our contemporary situation, our fears of the other in the landscape have turned inward towards ourselves. The contemporary landscapes of fear now reflect a fear of our own human presence. Yi-Fu Tuan points out: “If the educated people of the Western world can still be said to fear nature, it is the paradoxical fear that plants and animals, even rivers and lakes, may die through human abuse. The fragility of nature, not its power, now makes us almost constantly anxious.” (p212, *LoF*) It has been a long time since we have imagined that we conquered the night and it’s irrational fears. Night now is perpetual twilight. The American philosopher Alphonso Lingis notes “The electrification of human habitats maintains this twilight and stops the oncoming of night.” (p9, *The Imperative*). But what do we see there? What haunts that stillness of 4 am? That city that never sleeps is now the city that doesn’t get enough sleep. Alphonso Lingis again: “The night is not a black mass that stops

our sight on the surface of our eyes; our look goes out into the night which is vast and boundless. The sense of sight can be taut and acute in the depths of the dark. The night is not a substance but an event; it pervades a space freed from barriers and horizons. It extends a duration which moves without breaking up into moments; night comes incessantly in a presence which does not mark a residue as past nor outline a different presence to come.” (p9-10, *The Imperative*).

This boundless and sublime night lurks in Stratman’s film; however, suburbia as we are shown tries to contain it and tame it. The film carefully shows us the progression of built structures and their implied social behaviors that contain and inflect human presence in suburbia. At night we armour ourselves with cars. We become ghosts, tracing ourselves across security camera systems, we wander aimlessly in a land of promise that shows us no affordances. Fear is the hegemony that builds the panopticon of suburban bliss.

### **Cut to the Chase Scene**

Stratman’s work also reflects on one more dimension of the apparatus of suburbia. The film is bookended by two long sequences of helicopter shots. In the first sequence, that leads us into the film, we see armed police as they track fugitives guided by the all-seeing radio voice from the helicopter. They stumble around the blackness of night aided by night-vision technology. The sequence, all too familiar from news and police TV, reminds us of the strategic bird’s eye view from video games – what is known as the “World-View”. We are put in the position of power of negotiating and controlling space here. At the end of the video there is another helicopter shot – this one lasting a hypnotic seven minutes. It follows a figure running through a suburban neighbourhood seeming to try to be evading capture – except that there doesn’t seem to be anyone following him. This shot (that we discover was staged by Stratman) is juxtaposed with the sound of a news report about a man who has barricaded himself in a house and set it on fire. Even though we can eventually discover the ruse, the ease at which these tropes fit together make us reflect on how the media landscape has inscribed our experience of our familiar surroundings and how the drama of our lives is already determined for us by the oft repeated news stories of human desperation.

### **The Community of Fear**

In *Landscapes of Fear*, Yi-Fu Tuan points out that we “often lament the looseness of human ties in the modern world, and yearn for that intimacy of human bonds that once existed (we feel) among member of a family, a neighborhood, a village or town. We forget that fear was and is a common reason for weaving close human ties. Remove threats of environment, whether they be the forces of nature or human enemies, and the bonds of community tend to weaken.” In Steven Matheson’s videotape “Apple Grown in Wind Tunnel” we are interjected into a narrative as a typical atomized modern individual negotiating the intimacy of fears about medicine and the body through the subterranean and dispersed world of CB radio transmissions. The fact that these are radio transmissions and not, as they would be today the boundless topography of the internet, draws us into a consideration of topography and the landscape. Formally the tape consists of a restricted vocabulary of extreme close up shots (hurried scratching of notes, CU shots of exotic medicinal preparations, hands hurriedly notating maps) and point of view shots of the landscape (quite literally as we often see a hand pointing at features in the landscape – this is in contrast to the ‘World-View’ helicopter shots in Stratman’s tape, here we have the first-person shooter perspective from video games such as DOOM). The video feels claustrophobic and subjective as we are drawn into the clandestine world of the character of the woman who transmits anonymous folk cures in fleeting CB radio broadcasts.

This is a work of fiction and yet when I showed this work to my class a common response to the tape was that it seemed believable. The tape, largely through the use of these intimate shots and compelling voiceover, successfully pulls us into a speculative narrative that plays on our distrust of large industrial interests in medicine. It seems plausible – to these viewers – that the large drug companies are not entirely altruistic about our health. Undoubtedly the tape indicates the fault lines already delineated by the debate

between 'traditional' and 'holistic' medicine.

The narrative shares something with a 'conspiracy theory' style of storytelling. We are put in the point of view of discovering some repressed truth; situating the individual against the oppressive forces of society. The 'conspiracy theory' style of narrative – or the 'paranoid style' operates in fiction but also seeps into reportage of political life. The writer Richard Hofstadter identifies how this style operates in the gulf between the politics of consensus and the politics of pluralism. Journalism with its balanced approach appeals to consensus. The conspiracy narratives are characteristic, then, of pluralism. The conspiracy theory style appeals to those who have been immobilized by what Mike Davis calls the "destruction of social space" in civil society; that is, the withering away of public space due to the collapse of intermediary institutions that negotiated the relationship between the citizen, capital, and the state in the neoliberal society. (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri). Community is increasingly less connected to geography in our mediated world. The demands of capital have dispersed familiar and geographical connections amongst people and attempted to replace them through technological 'tele'-presence; photography, mail, telephone, television, and the internet. This presence is increasingly fictional and fleeting. The progression towards the simulated presence and indeterminacy of these presences is played out in Matheson's tape in a curious narrative twist. We discover that the woman who disperses the miracle cures, who is just a voice in the wind giving out hope to those dispossessed by the medical industry is a phantom, a bodiless voice.... This ambiguous narrative gesture turns us to consider the allegorical nature of the tape.... Although it is 'believable' it is also an object lesson, a thought experiment about where and how we place our trust in institutions as well as our sense of embodiment in the landscape.