Phil Solomon, Psalm III:
In 2005, Phil Solomon collaborated with his best friend, the highly respected filmmaker Mark LaPore, on a short digital video entitled *Crossroad*, which they made as a get-well offering for a mutual friend. When LaPore passed away unexpectedly several weeks later, Solomon drew from the same source material to produce a trilogy dedicated to his memory: *Rehearsals for Retirement* (2007), *Last Days in a Lonely Place* (2007), and *Still Raining, Still Dreaming* (2008–09). This series of films, titled *In Memoriam (Mark LaPore)*, represents a dramatic shift for Solomon, in that all of the images are derived from various installments of the popular video-game franchise Grand Theft Auto, which marks his departure from celluloid-based to digital filmmaking.

This shift is especially surprising considering that Solomon’s previous work—including *The Secret Garden* (1988), *Remains to Be Seen* (1989–94), and the *Twilight Psalm* series (1999–2002)—is heavily invested in the material basis of Super 8mm and 16mm film. These films are literally handmade, as Solomon alters the chemical properties of the film’s emulsion and reprints his images frame-by-frame on an optical printer. Moreover, Solomon is still closely associated with a group of post-Structural filmmakers identified by Tom Gunning as forging a “minor cinema.” According to Gunning, this generation, which also includes LaPore, Lewis Klahr, Peggy Ahwesh, Peter Herwitz, and Nina Fonoroff, rejected Structural film to return to the emphasis on rhythm, montage, and the flow of images associated with Stan Brakhage, albeit with more modest ambitions and a faith in the image rather than the self. On the surface, this makes Solomon an unlikely candidate to embrace digital filmmaking so wholeheartedly.

Solomon’s shift to digital has important ramifications for the avant-garde as a whole. Specifically, *In Memoriam* draws upon a set of representational strategies

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1. This friend is filmmaker David Gatten. When *Crossroad* premiered at the New York Film Festival’s “Views from the Avant-Garde” in September 2005, it was called *Untitled (for David Gatten)* and is sometimes still referred to by that name.
associated with the poetic avant-garde, a tradition still deeply rooted in 16mm filmmaking.\(^3\) It is the interplay between this tradition’s frequent emphasis on compositional rigor—the play of light and texture, polyvalent montage, and elliptical narrative—and the singular digital aesthetic of Grand Theft Auto that constitutes In Memoriam’s major contribution. As many of the avant-garde’s most venerated filmmakers convert from film to digital, it is tempting to mark the occasion as both an ontological and an aesthetic rupture, with the concomitant assumption that the best digital work will be that which interrogates the specificities of its medium. Solomon’s films, however, complicate this assumption by introducing a set of representational techniques with expressly filmic connotations into the digital realm, which forces him to engage directly with the contingencies and possibilities of both media. Therefore, Solomon provides an instructive case study of how avant-garde filmmakers extend and reinvent their practice as they move from film to digital.

In discussing In Memoriam, commentators have tended to argue that the series represents a breakthrough because it calls attention to the coldness, emptiness, and, most importantly, immateriality at the heart of digital video through an implicit comparison with cinema. Just as Solomon mourns the loss of LaPore, these videos mourn the loss of film as a material substance, the replacement of “chemistry with code.”\(^4\) Despite the attempts of Grand Theft Auto (hereafter GTA) to mimic the corporeality of the physical world, Solomon’s ethereal digital landscapes do not really exist, thus forcing the viewer to confront the gap between presence and absence. This disconnect between a material world that compels belief by virtue of its indexicality and a theoretical world that attempts to approximate it by way of an intangible abstract code is thought to be the defining feature of digital video, its essence, and so Solomon’s films effectively make a medium-specific argument. Gregg Biermann and Sarah Markgraf, for example, note that these images are “absent, unreachable, and indeterminate—for they exist in the invisible electronic workings of a machine and in the split-second choices made by a user, no two game sessions the same.”\(^5\) Michael Sicinski asks, “How could one look at these images and see anything but loss, the very absence of the phenomenal world and its variegated textures?”\(^6\)

This reading is essentially derived by extrapolating from Solomon’s stylistic choices and thematic preoccupations. Solomon states that the films are elegies,

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3. The “poetic avant-garde” is not an uncontested term. My intention is not to argue for a redefinition of avant-garde aesthetics but rather to adopt a critical shorthand that calls to mind strategies associated with the “film poem,” “trance film,” and “lyrical film.” Generally speaking, these are films that foreground subjectivity, psychology, lyricism, and evocative imagery in a manner distinct from the Structural film or collage film. In adopting this term, I follow James Peterson, Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order: Understanding the American Avant-Garde (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), pp. 29–60.
which certainly seems an apt descriptor for works so imbued with ruminative, atmospheric melancholy. Because Crossroad was conceived spontaneously on what turned out to be the last night that the two friends would spend together, Solomon felt compelled to return to GTA to search for answers in the wake of LaPore’s death. The narrative of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (GTA: SA), the installment from which the first three films are derived, involves a protagonist, CJ, who returns to the state of San Andreas (modeled on California) to avenge his mother’s killer. Therefore, the game itself could be described as a narrative of mourning. Through associational logic, Solomon transfigures CJ’s loss into personal anguish by using the game as a vehicle to work through his grief over losing LaPore. Solomon explains that CJ’s back story became more relevant after LaPore’s death, inspiring him to revisit the game: “I was . . . searching for clues and poetic signposts; in effect, I was looking for Mark.” He further notes that this drive extended to the representation of the character, as CJ even came to resemble LaPore in physical appearance.

Consequently, In Memoriam’s overriding tone is one of sadness or loss. Sicinski calls the films “chilly and geometric—shadows of life at multiple, unbridgeable removes,” while Biermann and Markgraf describe them as “ghostly tableaux that trace the edges of stories long gone, dreaded, or never to be.” Solomon’s images prove worthy of such descriptions. A solitary figure roams through oneiric landscapes while rain pours from the sky. A hearse burns inside an abandoned railroad tunnel. Half-obscured in shadow, unworn clothes hang from a rack in an empty closet. Because LaPore died on September 11, exactly four years after the attacks on the World Trade Center, Solomon includes a number of references to the apocalypse. In Memoriam’s landscapes are often filled with airplanes, some of which explode or drop from the sky. Last Days, the film most consumed with apocalyptic destruction, incorporates dialogue from Rebel Without a Cause (1955), which explicitly addresses the end of the world as the camera descends into a dark, murky sea. Through these references, the films seem to suggest that LaPore’s death and the end of time are somehow related, even if this association is invoked largely through inference.

Solomon’s ability to force the game into such a dark, foreboding register makes it appealing to impute In Memoriam’s stylistic and thematic emphasis on loss to the very nature of digital media itself. While many avant-garde filmmakers, including Ahwesh, Jeanne Liotta, and Michael Robinson, have also made “machi-
ima,” the user-driven manipulation of video-game engines to create films, one could argue that Solomon is unique in forging a connection between digital aesthetics and cinematic ontology. Such a position, however, overlooks In Memoriam’s reliance on a set of representational strategies developed by the poetic avant-garde tradition rooted in celluloid film. Specifically, Solomon’s innovation is to amplify the evocative melancholy at the core of the game using poetic techniques in the realms of composition, mise-en-scène, and editing. It is the juxtaposition of cinematic and digital aesthetics that makes these films so arresting.

The first of these aesthetic strategies is an emphasis on compositional rigor that is somewhat new for Solomon. In many of his previous films, chemical alteration of the emulsion is sometimes so pervasive that discerning an individual shot’s overall composition becomes quite difficult. In Psalm III: “Night of the Meek” (2002), for instance, chemical treatment buries the images in a thick, swirling paste. The viewer can make out certain figures, such as a girl playing Ring Around the Rosie, but detecting a set of overriding compositional principles is challenging. In Memoriam, however, proceeds by a series of carefully rendered images, some static and others elaborately mobile.

A four-shot sequence from Still Raining, Still Dreaming serves to illustrate In Memoriam’s compositional logic. In the first, the Brooklyn Bridge at night is pictured from an extremely low angle by the equivalent of a static camera. A lightly swaying bush that hovers in the upper left of the frame offsets the strong diagonal provided by the tracks. This is followed by another static shot of a house at night, which is perfectly centered in the frame as an airplane glides slowly overhead. The third shot is of an empty factory with paper strewn about the floor, while the fourth features a slow, steady pan across a cramped closet. The camera passes over a woman huddled on a bed with her back to us, her clothes hung on a rack, and finally pauses to observe the shadows that flicker over the murky wallpaper. Such meticulous compositions have even led a few commentators to suggest that the films exhibit a tableau aesthetic, although there is quite a bit more shot variety—as well as camera movement—than this description suggests.

This careful attention to composition has been important to many avant-garde filmmakers. Because the avant-garde places such a heavy premium on visual novelty, filmmakers associated with many different schools and movements have attempted to compose images that are memorable, beautiful, or strange; in fact, some avant-garde films, such as Michael Snow’s Wavelength (1967), build their compositional strategies into the very concepts of the films.

13. Although it is technically imprecise, I use conventional cinematic vocabulary to describe these films. Hence, I will occasionally refer to a “camera” despite the fact that there is obviously no physical camera recording the shots.
them selves. Moreover, filmmakers have adopted a number of approaches to the problem of composing for the camera. In films such as *The Glass System* (2000) and *Kolkata* (2005), Mark LaPore favors static compositions that are held for extended periods, forcing the viewer to pay close attention to minor variations over a lengthy span of time. Compositions preferred by Brakhage and Nathaniel Dorsky often defamiliarize their subjects, encouraging the viewer to contemplate light, texture, and the relationships between images, thereby fostering a sense of exquisite delicacy.

What makes *In Memoriam* different is the fact that there is neither an actual camera nor a physical place being photographed. Because Solomon works with imagery generated by a game engine, securing a desired composition presents its own set of challenges. Most notably, composing for GTA forces Solomon to invent clever solutions to problems stemming from quirks in the game’s design. For instance, in order to produce a shot that does not foreground CJ’s presence, Solomon must commandeer a vehicle, which forces the game to adopt CJ’s point of view. Thus, almost every shot in *Last Days* and *Still Raining* is taken from a car, motorcycle, golf cart, hovercraft, or bulldozer, despite the fact that none of these vehicles is ever visible. The challenge for Solomon is to figure out how to manipulate the game into letting him drive specific vehicles into restricted locations to obtain a desired composition.15 To capture time-lapse imagery of rays of

15. Solomon alludes to the importance of this technique when he jokes that he should be nominated for “Best Driver in an Animated Short Subject.” Zemka, “An Interview with Phil Solomon,” p. 205.
shifting sunlight piercing through the window of an abandoned factory in *Still Raining*. Solomon had to find a way to drive a motorcycle into the space without falling through holes in the floor. Therefore, composing arresting shots often entailed devising ingenious ways to circumvent the game’s built-in limitations and challenges.

If static shots must be taken from parked vehicles, it follows that tracking shots are the result of vehicles in motion. In order to execute steady camera movements, Solomon must demonstrate a great deal of precision in his ability to maneuver with the game controller, as evidenced by the meticulous track in on Los Angeles’s Griffith Park Observatory in the first shot of *Last Days* or the slow track out of a dark forest that opens *Rehearsals*. Furthermore, the choice of vehicle can yield different results. By commandeering a helicopter or flying car, Solomon simulates crane shots of impressive scale, a rarity in avant-garde film production.

As these examples suggest, composition in *In Memoriam* is closely linked with a keen interest in landscape and place, both aesthetically and semiotically. A central achievement of the series is its integration of the landscape tradition of avant-garde filmmaking into digital environments. In *The Garden in the Machine*, Scott MacDonald observes that avant-garde filmmakers have devised a variety of novel strategies to represent a sense of place in the cinema, whether urban or rural. In particular, MacDonald focuses on the representation of


nature and landscape, arguing that the avant-garde’s insistence on the primacy of place is both distinctive and radical. Moreover, MacDonald conceives this trend broadly, tracing it through films about the wilderness, the American West, urban spaces, and the dichotomy between city and country, drawing explicit links between avant-garde filmmaking and nineteenth-century painting. In Memoriam fits squarely into this tradition, as Solomon’s compositions often invoke landscape artists ranging from painter Caspar David Friedrich to filmmaker Peter Hutton.

The central image in Crossroad, for example, is CJ, clad only in jeans and a white undershirt, staring into the distance with his back toward us, recalling Friedrich’s famous Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818). Friedrich’s wanderer stands on a precarious rock formation and gazes out at a tumultuous landscape enshrouded in the eponymous thick fog. Similarly, CJ is caught in the middle of a torrential downpour, with menacing black clouds moving ominously through the sky and gusts of rain whipping past him. In both cases, the viewer is presented with a highly expressive, contemplative depiction of the relation between nature and the body. Or, consider a shot of a dense forest in Last Days. The foreground is dominated by two large branches that protrude from the top of the frame and sway gently in the rain, while a wooden fence and the headlights of a solitary car

are visible on the horizon. While these objects are clearly recognizable, the hazy, black-and-white, heavy rainfall, the shifting patterns of light (generated primarily from lightning), and the dense texturing of the trees render them murky and mysterious. Compare this to Peter Hutton’s *In Titan’s Goblet* (1991), itself an homage to Hudson River School painter Thomas Cole. In Hutton’s film, a thick mist, later revealed to be smoke from a heap of burning tires, punctuates stunning black-and-white images of dawn breaking over the Catskill Mountains. In this landscape film, a ghostly poeticism infuses the phenomenal world such that it becomes at once familiar and strange.

Capturing footage from such a diverse array of locales forces Solom on to engage with GTA: SA’s especially vast geography, which offers a surprising number of digital environments. Although *Crossroad* and *Rehearsals* are generally more rural and *Last Days* and *Still Raining* predominantly urban, most of the films fea-

18. GTA: SA proved especially innovative in terms of game design. Central to its success are the related notions of immersion and game play. In terms of the former, the game boasts a massive number of backdrops for CJ to explore. The state of San Andreas consists of three major cities: Los Santos, Las Venturas, and San Fiero (Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and San Francisco, respectively), plus the rural regions that connect them. Each city is composed of sharply defined neighborhoods, which pose their own unique challenges for the player. Moreover, the gamer is responsible for performing not only the missions but also routine daily tasks such as eating and sleeping. Depending upon how he or she fulfills these basic functions, the game responds in kind; if CJ eats only fast-food cheeseburgers, the character begins to gain weight, making it more difficult to participate in high-speed chases. The game also offers a great number of possibilities for play as defined less by formal structure than by testing the limits and boundaries of the game itself thanks to the wide range of game experiences that a player can choose from. GTA: SA is exceptional in this regard and is often cited as the landmark “sandbox-style” game. Although the narrative centers around the missions that CJ must undertake, he is not obligated to complete them. The state of San Andreas is so large that a player can opt to neglect the game’s narrative and explore its open-endedness with relative freedom.
ture a variety of evocative settings, including forests, tunnels, lakes, oceans, mountains, theaters, hotels, apartments, convenience stores, and cemeteries. In *Last Days*, Solomon even includes a few famous locations, such as the Golden Gate Bridge and Griffith Park Observatory. These landscapes and buildings are sometimes populated by solitary individuals, but more often are utterly abandoned. By bringing to bear the strategies of landscape filmmaking on the cold artificiality of GTA: SA’s digital world, Solomon elicits a pervasive sense of uncanniness, as though the landscape were mysteriously unsettled.

Solomon’s use of carefully composed images is decidedly cinematic. Video games are coordinate-based spatial arrays, and because they are continually advancing the sensation of perpetual motion, composition tends to be negligible. Solomon, however, imports compositional rigor—a storied tradition in the poetic strand of avant-garde filmmaking—into the world of video-game aesthetics and plays upon the odd compatibility of the two. He achieves a similar feat with the game’s mise-en-scène by adopting the avant-garde’s long-standing interest in the sensual tactility of the image. In their analyses, Sicinski and Biermann and Markgraf are clearly responding to the delicate poignancy that Solomon brings to cold digital texture, using synthetic light and shadow to produce results that are genuinely surprising. This technique is closely linked to the poetic avant-garde, which has always been deeply engaged with the palpable quality of light inscribing an image into emulsion.

By “sensual tactility,” I mean to invoke the poetic avant-garde’s frequent emphasis on the surface structure of the image, its interest in atmospherics. In these films, techniques of composition and lighting serve to accentuate the formal allure of a landscape, object, or person. If a filmmaker can sustain images of this type for a certain period of time, as in Bruce Baillie’s *Castro Street* (1966), the film...
can convey a strong sense of mood or tone as the viewer becomes attuned to the
exquisiteness of the material world. Indeed, James Peterson notes that poetic films
are often organized according to large-scale patterns in tone.¹⁹ *In Memoriam’s*
prevailing mood might be labeled “contemplative,” as the formal elegance and strong
connotative dimension of Solomon’s images bring to the fore their sensual quali-
ties, fostering in the receptive viewer a state of meditation or rapture.²⁰

Early in *Rehearsals for Retirement*, we are presented with a thirty-four-second
shot depicting parallel train tracks underneath an arching brick enclosure, sug-
gesting a subterranean space or dark passageway. It is raining heavily, and the
drops bounce off the walls and tracks. Some of the drops disappear, while others
form exaggerated splashes on the ceiling, walls, and ground, which, of course, is
not logically consistent with real-world rainfall. Meanwhile, sheets of mist emanate
from deep inside the tunnel and proceed to march into the foreground. The qual-
ity of the mist, not to mention the regularity with which it comes forward, is
highly peculiar. Strangely, it appears uniform, as though it had molded itself to
the shape of the tunnel. Although it clearly is meant to register as mist, it also
resembles sheets of light, producing a hologram-like effect. In the shot’s final

²⁰. Atmospherics of this sort have been particularly important to avant-garde filmmakers, but they
are also evident in the art cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky and Terrence Malick, whose influence Solomon
has acknowledged. In fact, *Last Days in a Lonely Place* contains ambient sound from Tarkovsky’s *The
Sacrifice* (1986).
three seconds, the camera unexpectedly tracks forward, taking us further into the
tunnel before ending abruptly.

In this shot, there is a strong sense of compositional austerity; until the final
moments, the camera simply observes the archway from a fixed point. The shot
also conveys geometric precision, as the distinctive arch of the tunnel is offset by
the strong directionality of the tracks. The mist seems exceptionally delicate pre-
cisely because it appears pliant and otherworldly, almost like a hallucination. The
extended duration gives the viewer time to scan the image and contemplate the
ethereality of such an oddly tactile image. It should be noted that GTA: SA
marked a maturation for the series in terms of graphic rendering and interactive
play, with many video-game aficionados lauding the level of detail attained by the
game’s designers. That said, Solomon heightens the attention to detail already
present in shots like this one, which accounts for the strong sense of atmosphere.
In video-game scholarship, aesthetics are frequently downplayed, but Solomon
takes an interest in these games chiefly for their “dreamy, haunted landscapes,”
which provide him with the tools to generate his own evocative images.

An instructive point of comparison is filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky, whose
recent films consist primarily of poetic images of ordinary phenomena occurring
in and around his immediate environment—nature and city life, clouds, display
windows, clothes, signs, water, many varieties of flora—which take on a radiant
lushness that fills the viewer with a sense of devotion, to borrow the filmmaker’s
term. Through careful cinematography, Dorsky defamiliarizes these objects to
attune the viewer to nuances in texture, patterns of light, and the delicacy of the
phenomenal world. The editing emphasizes subtle but complicated connections
between the images, which produces an overall tone of rapture or heightened sen-
sitivity. In a certain sense, In Memoriam represents an attempt to inflect this
aesthetic differently by using digital media to generate the images, which results
in shots like those described above, seemingly of this world yet strangely removed.

In the gaming world, the capacity to render environments with precise detail is
usually situated within the context of realism, but this becomes complicated with
regard to GTA. While the series has been responsible for drawing attention to
improvements in graphic realism, the games are not visually realistic, at least not in
the sense that they mimic how we are accustomed to seeing the world. For example,
many of the game’s images are rendered with the spatial distortion and exaggerated
depth associated with a wide-angle lens, whereas the flatness of characters against the

21. A good general overview of Grand Theft Auto is Nate Garrelts, “An Introduction to Grand
Theft Auto Studies,” in The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays, ed. Nate Garrelts
24. See “Nathaniel Dorsky,” in A Critical Cinema 5, ed. Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of
25. For a discussion of realism in Grand Theft Auto, see Laurie N. Taylor, “From Stompin’
Mushrooms to Bustin’ Heads: Grand Theft Auto III as Paradigm Shift,” in Garrelts, The Meaning and
Culture of Grand Theft Auto, p. 118.
background simultaneously suggests a telephoto lens. Colors tend to be slightly oversaturated. As has been mentioned, raindrops pop off the ground in a way that seems overstated, even aestheticized. The fact that San Andreas is represented as a composite of three famous cities immediately invokes Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum, “a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself,” which could be extended to virtually every element of the game.  

Solomon states: “What intrigued me the most was the strange poignancy I felt in the game’s polygonal aspirations, its desires to be of the real world that fell short in very interesting ways.”

In this passage, Solomon suggests that he intuited a poignancy in the game itself, but in his films, he develops this quality by drawing upon the poetic avant-garde’s emphasis on atmospherics to underline the artificiality of the game’s attempts at realism. Most straightforwardly, he uses the menu to adjust the game’s interior settings, altering color, brightness, and contrast levels. Rehearsals is marked by a pervasive aqua-blue haze and very deep blacks, not unlike Gottfried Helnwein’s painting Untitled (After Caspar David Friedrich) (1998). This schema persists in both interior and exterior locations, uniting disparate spaces and thereby suggesting a self-contained world of quiet melancholy. The desaturated black-and-white of Last Days surprisingly introduces a slight graininess, which strengthens its connection to the 16mm tradition. In Still Raining, soft focus results from purposefully tilting the camera up to the sky during a rainstorm to get the “lens” wet. Moreover, Solomon can modify the “available light” in the game itself by knocking out streetlamps and car headlights, which is akin to orchestrating key and fill lights “on set.” Thus, his concerns are similar to those of a traditional cine-

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28. Phil Solomon, e-mail message to author, August 17, 2010. Note that this is an allusion to LaPore’s film The Sleepers (1989).

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In addition to establishing an overall tone or “look,” Solomon pushes the boundaries of the game’s mise-en-scène through the judicious use of cheat codes to extend the usual capabilities of regular game play. A cheat code is a series of buttons that the gamer inputs into his controller to introduce modifications that are not officially part of the game, although these effects are programmed by designers as challenges to users, who discover them and post the combinations online. Video-game scholar Cindy Poremba has classified cheat codes according to their functions. The most common cheats used in In Memoriam are those that she calls enhancements, “minor modifications . . . to the game that may enrich the meta-story or experiential narrative.”29 An enhancement is a cheat code that allows the player to access a novel but relatively inconsequential effect, increasing enjoyment of the game without fundamentally altering its structure.

In Memoriam’s most conspicuous enhancements are the extensive use of time and weather cheats. Time cheats permit Solomon to change from day to night at will. More importantly, weather cheats are featured in virtually every shot in the series. In all four films, Solomon conjures rain, thunderstorms, and overcast skies, which are used in conjunction with different environments for specific effects. In Last Days, a light rain lends the forest setting a glistening sheen, while the intense thunderstorm in Rehearsals causes the ocean to respond violently, appearing menacing and dark. By contrast, the storm in Crossroad is accompanied by sudden bursts of lightning. Other enhancements include generating (or “spawning,” in the game’s parlance) a hearse and forcing planes to drop from the sky.

Game designers deliberately program cheat codes into their games to

engage with their most ambitious fans. Some effects, however, are unintended. These “glitches” are programming errors that can be exploited by the gamer to induce effects that theoretically should be impossible. In In Memoriam, Solomon tends to use these glitches to juxtapose incongruous elements. Rehearsals contains a shot from inside a hearse as it moves slowly through a wheat field; bizarrely, the stalks of wheat appear inside the car, as though its boundaries are somehow permeable. Similarly, rain falls and fires burn inside an empty hotel lobby in Last Days. A bouquet of flowers that allows CJ to court romantic partners is used poetically in Crossroad and Rehearsals, inserted into incompatible spaces and left to float endlessly. These glitches are especially suited to Solomon’s aesthetic precisely because they are not overstated. In these shots, the mise-en-scène is thrown off-kilter by a single dissonant element, fostering an aura of poetic mystery, much like in Tarkovsky’s Mirror (1975) or The Sacrifice (1986).

Solomon’s manipulation of the game’s mise-en-scène suggests the thorny connection between In Memoriam and found-footage films, which Biermann and Markgraf call to our attention with the title of their essay: “Found Footage, On Location.” Because Solomon charges images that are not his own with a poetic valence, he calls to mind poetic found-footage films such as Bruce Conner’s Take the 5:10 to Dreamland (1976) and Valse Triste (1977). If we take found footage to mean images that the filmmaker did not shoot, then this would be an accurate descriptor. There is a tendency, however, to assume that the ingenuity of the found-footage or collage film is in the editing or juxtaposition of elements. A filmmaker may rework found images on an optical printer, thereby transforming them, but it is questionable whether the level of manipulation is as generative or of the same type as that open to Solomon in In Memoriam. Although he must work within the parameters of the game, he can construct his own shots, arrange figures and objects within the composition, adjust light levels, orchestrate camera movements, and perform many of the same basic tasks as a cinematographer or director. Therefore, it is perhaps best to add an important qualification to the classification of In Memoriam as a found-footage work.

Treatment of the image itself is not the only way that Solomon brings a poetic valence to his source material. This is also fostered by his editing strategy, which links images to each other via associational logic. More specifically, In Memoriam is cut according to the principles of polyvalent montage, which has been practiced by many significant filmmakers, including Brakhage, Dorsky, and Warren Sonbert. As formulated by Noël Carroll:

In this mode of editing, it is particularly important that each shot is polyvalent in the sense that it can be combined with surrounding shots along potentially many dimensions. That is, this style begins in the realization that a shot may either match or contrast with adjacentely preceding or succeeding shots in virtue of color, subject,
shape, shade, texture, the screen orientation of objects, the direction of camera or object movement, or even the stasis thereof.\(^{30}\)

Polyvalent montage builds on Sergei Eisenstein’s notion of overtonal montage, which brings together metric, rhythmic, and tonal montage, taking into account all of a shot’s elements. Conflict is generated by the tension between the primary and secondary stimuli within the frame, the dominant and the overtone, respectively.\(^ {31}\) Therefore, polyvalent montage can be understood as a form of overtonal montage in which the dominant is always shifting, or, as Carroll puts it, “overtonal montage in spades.”\(^ {32}\) The logic for editing two shots together might be as simple as comparison or contrast, but more often, connections are varied and elusive. Most importantly, Carroll stipulates that polyvalent montage can be staggeringly complex because the rationale of the cutting is constantly shifting to new “associative pathways.”\(^ {33}\) Two shots might be linked by a shared dominant, such as color, but a unique texture in the second shot might reappear or become dominant several shots later, creating a dense web of interconnections.

Polyvalent montage is not new to Solomon’s filmmaking. In an interview, he claims that “almost all of [his] work has been involved with trying to find new ways to place one image meaningfully next to another.”\(^ {34}\) In The Snowman (1995), texture, color, screen direction, and subject matter constitute four significant parameters that continuously trade off their roles as dominants and overtones. Certain shots, such as those featuring a snow shovel or a bathing suit, are clearly linked by the prominence of the color red. As comparisons are drawn between a boy playing in the snow and a boy splashing in a swimming pool with his mother, the viewer’s eye is drawn to similarities and differences of screen direction. The emulsion decay results in nearly opaque scratching over each image, but eventually this dominant fades into the background, as the imagery becomes legible enough to draw parallels in subject matter.

In In Memoriam, polyvalent montage operates at both local and global levels. Locally, clusters of shots frequently prime the viewer to search for continuities and discontinuities. For example, early in Still Raining, we see a series of static shots of houses and storefronts, all of which are slowly overtaken by moving shadows, presumably from Solomon blocking the sun with offscreen vehicles. Of course, all are united by subject matter, but a number of other parameters alternate as dominants. For instance, consecutive shots will sometimes feature shadows that move in the same direction (usually left to right or bottom to top), but others will cede directionality of shadow to color. In a nod to LaPore and Dorsky, storefront signage


\(^{32}\) Carroll, “Causation, the Ampliation of Movement and Avant-Garde Film,” in Theorizing the Moving Image, p. 178.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) “Phil Solomon,” in MacDonald, A Critical Cinema 5, p. 209.
forms new associations, whether it be color (red, green) or Chinese lettering. The first shot in the series is of a house at night, but just before the cut, a light appears in the window, anticipating the next shot of a storefront during the day.

At the global level, polyvalent montage is extended across entire films. *Rehearsals* revolves around a set of visual motifs that reappear in different combinations, calling out to each other without making their connections overly explicit. Some of these recurring images include low-level tracking shots through wooded areas, low-angle shots of CJ with blacked-out features, crane shots over land and water, fires burning, hearses, planes falling from the sky, and train tracks inside a tunnel. Solomon then permutes and multiplies these images, with the logic for their placement continuously shifting. A long section in the middle, for example, is built around tracking shots, as the camera lurches through fields, streets, and skies. This dominant is soon displaced by others, such as a darkened CJ facing the camera and the recurrence of fiery orange accents, but it later resurfaces, contributing to the film’s weblike editing schema.

The major advantage to polyvalent montage is that it transforms editing
from a functional operation into an expressive one. Solomon alludes to this when he describes edits as “emotional weather.”

In most films, editing is a means of communicating information to the viewer, capturing the most relevant gestures or facial expressions in order to advance a narrative. Polyvalent montage, on the other hand, privileges the sensual qualities of the image, which heightens the viewer’s attention to texture, patterning, and form. Because filmmakers are often wary of making connections too obvious or literal, the result is often a strong sense of ambiguity. In the case of In Memoriam, it can be difficult to articulate why one image follows another, but we nonetheless feel that it makes intuitive sense. In this way, editing becomes an emotional instead of intellectual pursuit; we feel the density of the connections before we can rationalize or explain them.

Because films employing polyvalent montage connect their images on the basis of formal characteristics instead of storytelling logic, most tend to be non-narrative. In Memoriam, however, blurs the distinction between narrative and non-narrative to the degree that it qualifies as an elliptical narrative. In narratives of this type, images seem to point to an ongoing story, but the particularities are fuzzy or in some cases entirely unclear. The viewer may have difficulty accounting for all of the pieces but nonetheless intuits a strong organizing logic or sense of a narrative trajectory. This allows the filmmaker to retain the semblance of narrative while also subverting it to the associational flow of images.

Avant-garde filmmakers have always flirted with, subverted, or engaged with

35. Ibid.
narrative, but Tom Gunning argues that it is a defining feature of the “minor cinema” filmmakers, who returned to narrative after its rejection by Structural filmmakers in the 1970s, albeit in a highly fragmented manner. These filmmakers seemed to be fascinated by the possibility of narrative but tended to efface many of the conventions associated with it, such as goal-driven protagonists, psychological motivation, and clearly motivated causality. Take, for instance, Solomon’s detailed explanation of his film Clepsydra (1992), the narrative of which he characterizes as a “repressed dream of incest memory.” He then proceeds to spell out this narrative with precision, along with the rationale for particular aesthetic choices. His explanation is valuable to viewers in part because it elucidates the intricacies of the film’s story, which are difficult to apprehend in viewing. Clearly, the viewer senses a narrative unfolding—in the film’s opening moments, a man boards a bus, a young girl has what appears to be a birthday party, and clocks are obviously a central motif—but the connective tissue remains obscure. In general, however, the film is richer for its ambiguities; the trace becomes more important than the particulars.

Solomon also employs this strategy in In Memoriam, which qualifies as an elliptical narrative on at least two levels. When viewed in order of their completion, the films cue the viewer to intuit an ongoing narrative on the basis of textual evidence. In this regard, In Memoriam is a typical elliptical narrative. The second level, which entails contextual knowledge and therefore is less available to the viewer, can be considered a kind of meta-narrative of Solomon’s relationship with LaPore, which is embedded in allusions, references, and motifs that are spread throughout the films.

On the surface, the films are similar enough that the viewer is invited to make connections between them. Broadly speaking, all four seem to occupy the same diegesis, undoubtedly because they were produced from the same game. Certain settings reappear, such as the ocean, which figures prominently in Rehearsals, Last Days, and, to a lesser extent, Still Rain. The forest in Rehearsals seems to be the same location from Crossroad. Furthermore, the weather remains consistent from film to film, reinforcing the impression that all four take place in the same general environment. Even the title of the last film, Still Rain, Still Dreaming, seems to allude to similarities in weather and activities. Nonetheless, our sense of a unified diegesis is thwarted by the fact that each film retains a distinctive look that separates it from the others. Crossroad and Rehearsals are most alike, but the latter boasts a color palette and a greater variety of locations that sets it apart from its predecessor. Last Days is perhaps the most distinctive, as its crisp black-and-white imagery and use of famous California landmarks are not repeated in the others. These differences are pronounced enough that they frustrate the viewer’s attempts to generalize too broadly about the relations between the films.

In Memoriam also features multiple protagonists and seems to be structured around a quest, although the object remains elusive. That is, in the behavior of the characters and purposefulness of the camera movements, the films appear to document an ongoing search, but the details are never entirely clear. In the first two films, CJ functions as a protagonist. In Crossroad, he alternates between staring contemplatively into the distance and running through a dense thicket of branches—but what is he thinking about, and what is he trying to find? In Rehearsals, CJ returns, but his appearance is different; he is depicted wearing a black gimp suit that obscures his face. What has prompted the change? CJ returns in Last Days, but his presence is diminished; he also shares screen time with two female characters, but who are they? We may assume that the story has shifted gears completely, but the characters adopt the same ruminative poses, suggesting that they, too, are searching for something obscure or deciding their next moves. Furthermore, in the last three films, the quest structure extends to the movement of the camera, which is constantly tracking forward, as if on the prowl. It passes through fences and surveys shop windows and empty rooms, but the target of its search never seems to be found. When we do witness a narrative “event,” it is usually after the fact—houses and planes are on fire, suggesting that something significant has happened, but the film never elaborates. Rehearsals, in particular, often seems set in the aftermath of a catastrophic event.

Meanwhile, Solomon weaves a number of motifs throughout the series that suggest a narrative lurking in the background. The spinning bouquet, prominent in Crossroad, reappears in Rehearsals. In all four films, planes glide across the sky. As has been mentioned, the apocalypse, a theme that has appeared in a number of Solomon’s films, is referenced explicitly in Last Days and implicitly in the others. Flying hearses meet watery demises in both Rehearsals and Last Days. These consistencies hint at a unifying narrative thread by suggesting that, like typical narratives, elements introduced will later reappear. The films encourage viewers to notice and organize patterns, but it is ultimately impossible (not to mention undesirable) to subsume those patterns to a linear chain of events connected by causal logic.

As mentioned, there is a second level of elliptical narrative in In Memoriam, a meta-commentary on Solomon’s relationship with LaPore that is embedded in a dense network of allusions. Throughout the series, Solomon uses the game’s imagery to weave a personal narrative that obliquely references LaPore, their connection to the avant-garde, popular culture that both found inspiring, and artworks that share similar thematics. For instance, the series of pans across shop windows in Still Raining cites LaPore’s film The Sleepers (1989), as well as Nathaniel Dorsky’s films, especially Variations (1998), which feature comparable images. Solomon and LaPore initially met at the University of Binghamton, where legendary filmmaker Nicholas Ray taught. Consequently, Last Days in a Lonely Place

38. Solomon claims that he has “always been drawn to apocalyptic visions in general” in MacDonald, A Critical Cinema 5, p. 221.
makes heavy use of dialogue from Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* and *In a Lonely Place* (1950), in addition to the titular affinities. The titles of all the films allude to troubled musicians, three of whom committed suicide. *Crossroad* invokes Robert Johnson’s famous encounter with the devil; “Rehearsals for Retirement” is a song by Phil Ochs; *Last Days* references Gus Van Sant’s film about Kurt Cobain; and “Still Raining, Still Dreaming” is the title of a Jimi Hendrix song. Many of these associations are visually reinforced, as CJ actually resembles Robert Johnson and both Solomon’s and Van Sant’s films include complicated tracking shots, many of which follow figures from behind. The soundtrack of *Still Raining* is taken directly from *Song of Ceylon* (1934), a film that LaPore, an experimental ethnographer, wanted to remake.

Of course, many viewers will not understand the significance of these allusions without knowing a great deal about the personal histories of Solomon and LaPore. Others, however, will pick up a reference now and again, perhaps to Hendrix, *Rebel*, or the Vertigo-inspired shot of the Golden Gate Bridge in *Last Days*. By incorporating these citations without clarifying their importance, Solomon adds a second layer of elliptical narrative. The viewer catches a series of references that seem to (and indeed do) point to an organizing narrative principle, but for most, the personal implications remain obscure. In 16mm films such as *The Secret Garden* and *Remains to Be Seen*, Solomon reworks his father’s old home movies on an optical printer, but the viewer may not entirely grasp the connection. In *In Memoriam*, he carries this strategy into digital filmmaking, personalizing source material that would seem to be emphatically impersonal.

As 16mm becomes an increasingly antiquated format, avant-garde filmmakers have been forced to rethink the basic conditions of their art. With many established filmmakers turning to digital technology, it seems logical to declare a revolution in avant-garde aesthetics, or at least a decisive break from the past. This is especially pertinent for the avant-garde because of its long-standing engagement with medium specificity, from the quality of light in Brakhage’s films to the reflexivity of Structural film. Consequently, the argument that the most promising digital work will be that which uniquely engages its medium—that rigorously interrogates the aesthetic particularities of digital video, presumably producing a *Text of Light* (1974) or *Serene Velocity* (1970) for the digital age—is an appealing one. According to this line of thought, a reading of *In Memoriam* emphasizing the degree to which it calls attention to the absence of a physical world would most accurately capture Solomon’s achievement because it suggests a medium-specific argument: Solomon has embraced the essence of digital image-making by underscoring its immateriality.

As I hope to have demonstrated, however, *In Memoriam* draws equally upon representational conventions derived from the celluloid-based filmmaking of the poetic avant-garde. These include compositional rigor, an emphasis on atmosphere and texture, polyvalent montage, and elliptical narratives. This does not
denigrate but rather enhances Solomon's achievement. By capitalizing upon the
game's built-in limitations and design particularities (and, in some instances,
flaws), Solomon engages meaningfully with both cinematic and digital aesthetics,
resulting in films that are at once outgrowths of GTA and entirely of Solomon's
own making. The strange disconnect that results from applying cinematic tech-
niques to the digital realm is precisely what accounts for the films' singularity.

If we follow Solomon's example, a prognosis for avant-garde cinema in the
era of digital media must acknowledge the profound continuities between cellu-
loid and code, a view that is informed by immediate context as well as the history
of avant-garde cinema. Furthermore, as Solomon proves, drawing upon older
avant-garde traditions provides one avenue for filmmakers to push digital aesthet-
ics in challenging new directions. Solomon's latest project, American Falls (2010),
is a site-specific media installation made on film and featuring the emulsion-decay
techniques that characterized his pre–In Memoriam work. For its premiere at the
Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., the film was transferred to digital and pro-
jected on six consecutive panels in the museum's rotunda. As this example attests,
in Solomon's recent film and video work, the old world meets the new, suggesting
that the most exciting developments in the avant-garde over the next decade
could well incorporate both the cinematic and the digital.