

Video Sensations: The Experimental Films of Hamid Naficy

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The Sony Portapak, the first portable consumer video camera and simultaneous tape recorder, was launched in the fall of 1965. The technology had three major appeals: portability, (relative) affordability, and ease of use. Its availability contributed quickly to flourishing media movements, such as documentary, which sought to challenge the status quo in their respective fields by marrying access and aesthetic naturalism, disrupting the one-way, corporate model of news and information production. Reportedly, one of the Portapak's first buyers – and users – was the Korean-born artist Nam June Paik. Other early adopters and video art practitioners included the German artist Wolf Vostell, and Steina and Woody Vasulka, from Iceland and former East Germany respectively: all young immigrants, or at least itinerant expatriates, in the United States, searching for a new language – one unencumbered by cinematic expectation, and in defiance of prevailing taste cultures – to express revolutionary or countercultural ideas. Early video art contained, at times, both a documentary impulse – to observe or report on

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the real, and, in particular, capture real sound and “real time” – and a desire to use new formats, and mixed media, to depart from and critique conventional visual media.¹

In this article, I will discuss Hamid Naficy’s experimentation with video technologies within the context of movements in documentary and video art in the late 1960s and early 1970s: his films, enabled by this new portable video technology and computer imaging software, combined features from both genres in order to produce original video aesthetics that simultaneously functioned as media critiques. More broadly, I discuss them as a reflection of, and contribution to, a counterculture that was increasingly concerned and fascinated with the possibilities of new technology. Though Naficy would later theorize exile and media in his scholarly work, his experimental films are an early attempt to grapple with his own experience of being foreign and displaced – and of being new. This experience was a fraught one, but Naficy’s films gesture towards the future and its potential.

These films were made during his term as a Master of Fine Arts student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Naficy continued making films for many years – mostly commissioned non-fiction films – before reorienting himself as an academic. Several of his video films were recently restored and preserved at Northwestern University. Four of these films, *Ellis Island: A Documentary on a Commune* (1969), *The Piano Player* (1969), *Blacktop* (1970), and *Salamander Syncope* (1971), were publicly screened together for the first time in February, 2018. This paper is born from the project to restore and screen these works, and the conversations that followed. I focus on *Ellis Island*, a documentary filmed at Naficy’s commune, *Urbanity Hurrah* (1970), a satire – of sorts – of news television, and *Salamander Syncope* (1971), an experimental film made using computer-generated imagery and then transferred to colour videotape. The three films together demonstrate the nexus between hippie counterculture,

¹Marita Sturken, “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History,” in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (Aperture in association with the Bay Area Video Coalition, 1990).

computing, and ecological concerns, which has been written about at length by Fred Turner in his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, among other works.

Hamid Naficy was born in Isfahan in 1944 to a family of prosperous physicians. Naficy adopted new technologies from a young age: in the preface to the first volume of his book, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, he describes his early experiments with film and photography. He inherited a Kodak Brownie box camera from his father, which he would use to take photos of his hometown. In his early teens, he graduated to a 35mm Agfa camera, a gift from a family friend who had purchased it in Germany. As Naficy writes, “My current interest in documentation must have begun then. I assiduously took pictures of my two favorite subjects: The very young and the very old.”² Naficy recalls sneaking his Agfa camera into the cinema, hiding it under his jacket. There, he took discreet photos of close-ups on screen (from King Vidor’s *War and Peace*) – an early, perhaps unconscious, self-reflexive engagement with film, and one that converted publicly projected theatrical film images into private, mobile ones. He would also purchase 35mm frames of films from vendors lined up on Chaharbagh Avenue in Esfahan. Eventually, he fashioned a method by which to exhibit images as well. He explains, “I built a wooden light-box with a window in its top. Inside, I placed a light bulb, a reflector, a roll of cartoon images, which I had cut out and pasted together. . . . By cranking the handles outside of the box, I could view the cartoon strip as it passed in front of the window. I added a lens to the window and was able to project the cartoon images on the wall, creating my first film show for my family.”³ Naficy’s desire to experience film not only as a consumer, but also as a producer, is evident in these stories from his youth, as is his desire to experiment with new technologies – particularly when he himself could make interventions in the technology’s intended use to create novel or unexpected images.

²Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1, *The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xxx.

³*Ibid.*, xxxv.

Naficy's first film, *Ellis Island: A Documentary on a Commune* (1969) was filmed on a Sony Portapak. The film is a playful, free-wheeling and intimate record of a commune that Naficy was a member of while a student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Though Naficy would later produce scholarship on direct cinema, and interview important members of the movement (such as Albert Maysles), at the time, it was in its early years, and he had not yet seen any of its defining films.⁴ Nonetheless, the Portapak enabled him to have the same intimate access and naturalistic style that would become markers of direct cinema, or, more broadly, what Bill Nichols has termed the observational style of documentary. Per Nichols, once portable camera and synchronous sound recording equipment became available, observational cinema could convey "the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world. The physical body of a particular filmmaker does not seem to put a limit on what we can see." He continues, "With this equipment, [the filmmaker] might more fully approximate the human sensorium: looking, listening, and speaking as it perceives events and allows for response."⁵

In the biographical preface to his four-volume *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Naficy describes his MFA films thus: "With one exception, all the films and videos I made at UCLA were psychological, surreal, abstract, and dystopic, expressing the various anxieties, disruptions, and displacements of modernity and exile I was experiencing – and was later to theorize."⁶ *Ellis Island* is the exception he mentions, the least experimental of Naficy's MFA films, but is notable for its fly-on-the-wall ethnography, and its representation of early anxieties of, and about, the counter-culture. The film is infused with the spirit of the hippie movement: not just its discourse, but the music (the group listens to "Evening" by the Moody Blues, a sitar-inflected piece from their psychedelic concept album *Days of Future Passed*), the casual nudity and drug-aided philosophizing, and so on.

⁴Hamid Naficy, interview by Michelle Puetz, Evanston, Illinois, 8 February 2018.

⁵Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 43-44.

⁶*Ibid.*, xlix.

Furthermore, even the loose-limbed, unfettered form of *Ellis Island* seems to be a reflection of its time. As Deirdre Boyle has written about early documentary aesthetics, “The early video shooting styles were as much influenced by meditation techniques like t’ai chi and drug-induced epiphanies as they were by existing technology.”⁷⁷

The structural conditions behind this production, and indeed all of Naficy’s experimental films, were determined by counterculture motivations as well. As with many other universities at the time, UCLA was in a moment of political upheaval as it faced several mass student protests in the 1960s, against the Vietnam War and the firing of then-professor Angela Davis, among other reasons. In his *Field-notes* interview for the Society of Cinema and Media Studies, Naficy claims that, “Students were actually taking over offices of the faculty at UCLA,” and also putting to use new mobile video technologies to record protests and related activities. These anti-establishment practices within the institution led to Naficy participating in an entirely student-run film course. He says, “As a group of 11 students in the MFA production program, we petitioned the department to give us a course that we, the students, would design and manage, and the department agreed... So, we were eleven students running our own class, in which I made some of my early shows.”⁷⁸

Ellis Island was also self-reflexive, as some of the direct cinema films were, with participants commenting on the presence of the camera and their roles in the film. In addition to its relationship to new modes of documentary, *Ellis Island* was very much borne of the same countercultural movement as video art. In her chapter “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form,” Marita Sturken writes, “The era in which video evolved was an intensely active and idealistic one, now seen as the primary moment of radical social upheaval in the United States and Europe... That video’s emergence coincided with this pivotal moment of idealism about cultural change and social pluralism contributed to

⁷⁷Deirdre Boyle, “A Brief History of American Documentary Video,” in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, 52. [See n. 1.]

⁷⁸Hamid Naficy, interview by Kaveh Askari, 5 January 2018.

its initial burst of energy and diversity.”⁹⁹ The political and technological impulses that drove documentary experimentation and early video art would merge to produce several significant films, including three of Naficy’s notable experimental works – all made between 1969 and 1971. *Ellis Island* featured the introduction of several thematic concerns and aesthetic themes that would develop in his later work, *Urbanity Hurrah* and *Salamander Syncope*.

The first scene of *Ellis Island* features a girl, pictured through a peep-hole lens, reciting the words of Alan Watts, the British philosopher who became popular for his writings on Eastern philosophies and psychotherapy. (There are similar segments later in the film, quoting Albert Camus and others.) The opening scenes feature the film’s only overt gesture towards Naficy’s pre-commune life: the sound of a tune played on a *ney*, an Iranian flute. After the introduction, Naficy embarks on a handheld camera tour of Ellis Island, the commune, which is housed in a Victorian mansion in Los Angeles. The doors of inhabitants’ rooms are plastered with political posters; anti-war sentiments dominate. The narrator explains that the residents of the commune are mostly upper-middle class, and from different national and regional backgrounds, but share a political worldview that rejects American middle-class values and practices. One of the doors opens to reveal a partially nude man and women; the man points to the camera, and leans in close to the lens to inspect it. Participants in the film frequently talk directly to Naficy, and further, remark upon the presence of the camera itself, differentiating *Ellis Island* from direct cinema works of the time (such as *Dont Look Back*), where, despite the intimacy provided by handheld camera movement and zooms, the participants largely do not look at or address the camera. During this shot, *Ellis Island*’s narrator explains to the audience that, “here, through just living in a really fluid human situation, we come to discover ourselves, and discover ourselves in relation to the harmony of things... and drugs help us, we admit that.” Thus, the film sets up what we might now consider an idealized encapsulation

⁹⁹Sturken, “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History,” in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, 106. [See n. 1.]

of the sentiments and practices of 1960s counterculture, though its participants soon reveal ruptures and hypocrisies in their chosen system. As the scene moves to a group of students seated on the floor, Naficy's camera travels from face to face and then to abstract body parts and objects, shifting in and out of focus, as if to echo the philosophy of transitory presence and "flux," as the narrator describes it.

Though formally *Ellis Island* may be the exception among Naficy's MFA films, its participants certainly express anxieties about modernity, yet he himself remains anonymous enough that these concerns are not necessarily intended to represent him. As Naficy trains his Portapak on a common room hangout, one member remarks, "Look at the machine there. Hamid is taking down what we're saying on a machine, what we look like, on a machine," while another contends that, "it doesn't understand anything, it just records it." *Ellis Island's* references to new technologies are brief and tangential, but the influence of these developments had permeated various facets of counterculture rhetoric: for example, "Turn on, tune in, drop out," was an oft-quoted hippie mantra, popularized by Timothy Leary, but credited to Marshall McLuhan. Leary promoted it as something of a spiritual saying, whereas others associated it disparagingly with drug culture, but its origin – conscious or not – is in the language of media machines. The conversation in *Urbanity Hurrah* also puts forth a range of technological terminology in relationship to notions of consciousness, nature, and rebirth. Naficy's films foreground this developing vocabulary while formal choices work to make new technology visible to the viewer (which I discuss in more detail below).

As the film continues, their discussion turns to the state of the commune: recently, they have let in new residents, but do not feel as though they embody the spirit of the commune. They share concerns that center on individual responsibility as a necessary part of communal living – for example, critiquing new members who are not thoughtful in their food consumption, leaving too little for those that eat after them. Other problems are more nebulous, but in general relate to a perceived lack of authenticity, in terms of living the ideals of the commune.

Urbanity Hurrah bridges the transition in Naficy's films from documentary and media critique to formal abstraction. It was conceptualized in the wake of an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara in 1969 – at the time the largest in U.S. history. The spill was considered a catalyst for environmental policy changes and the American environmental movement in general. A media furor ensued, bolstered by then-new aerial images of the spill and photographs of dead or injured birds and sea animals. The majority of the film centers on an interview with Dr. Charles Ehler, at the time a professor of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has since become a well-known environmental researcher, working with agencies and organizations such as the EPA and UNESCO, specializing in marine planning. The interviewer, Lowell Ponte, takes a slightly sardonic tone with Ehler, who in turn answers his questions about environmental planning, machines, and the future seriously. Naficy himself refers to the tone as “satirizing the TV discussion show format.”¹⁰ (Ironically, Ponte is now a right-wing commentator who advocated a theory of “global cooling.”)

The film opens with a close-up of Ehler, presented from alternating angles, repeating the same phrase: “One possible solution to our environmental problem would be the cybernetically controlled use of what I call evolutionary technology.” Cybernetics is, broadly, the theory of information systems deployed for management – one that appealed to institutions such as the military and corporations, but also to counterculture thinkers interested in utopian societies. Though Ehler is given the time to articulate his ideas and concerns, and the notion of cybernetics was being popularized at the time by writers such as Buckminster Fuller and Norbert Wiener, Ponte retains a skeptical tone throughout the interview. This tone is reinforced by Naficy's description of the film as satirical.¹¹

The film's set design appears bare at first, in generic television interview mode, with Ehler and Ponte seated across from one another at a table.

¹⁰Hamid Naficy, email correspondence with the author, 12 April 2018.

¹¹Ibid.

The two participants are in the spotlight, their surroundings dimmed. However, various surrealist disruptions interfere with Ehler's interview over the course of the film. The set, previously cast in black other than the torsos of Ehler and Ponte, is revealed to be a construction, with a shot revealing the window behind Ehler to be a hanging prop on a stage, looking out onto nothing. Minor comedic notes in the soundtrack – such as the sound of a baby wailing when Ponte mentions the book *The Population Bomb* – give way to wilder deviations from form: one features a cutaway of a man seated at an ornate coffee table, pouring Life cereal into a bowl, only to find that toy cars come tumbling out of the box instead; a Buñuelian touch that upends a domestic practice using its own icons. This shot exhibits no clear relation to the subject matter of *Urbanity Hurrah*, but gestures back towards Naficy's previous experimental films, such as *The Piano Player* (1969) in its use of a theatrical stage and amateur props, highlighting their artificiality in service of the absurd.

Other formal interruptions include abstract geometric imagery created through video feedback, including a shot of shapes rapidly emerging from an opened door. Towards the very end of the interview, Naficy uses video feedback to create the effect of new images emerging from Ehler's head. These images are of television programs, which change every few seconds, as though a viewer is impatiently flipping through channels.

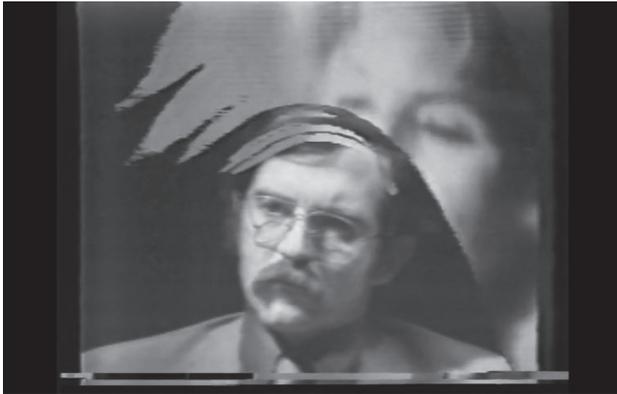


Fig.1. Video feedback effect in *Urbanity Hurrah*, 1970.

According to Yvonne Spielmann, video's specificity as a medium is in its electronic signal processing: "The flexible and transformative char-

acteristics of video are highlighted by the specific possibility that the visible form of an image can arise from different machines in the electronic setting: from cameras, from monitors and screens, and in various effects devices such as synthesizers, keyers, and analogue computers.”¹² Naficy takes advantage of this flexibility in *Urbanity Hurrah*, creating feedback images or keying in new ones into the existing image, in an otherwise verisimilar, television-style video recording.¹³ The effects reveal the medium as electronic, and show its break with film, and even television, where the transmission is stabilized to avoid such effects. This overt emphasis on the materiality of video reinforces Spielmann’s argument about video as a self-reflexive medium.

These disruptive and seemingly random technological images appear as if in response to Ehler’s proclamations about the “controlled use of technology.” (The repetitive, uniform abstraction in *Urbanity Hurrah* is also an aesthetic precursor to Naficy’s computer-generated imagery in *Salamander Syncope*, which I will discuss further.) Despite his technological utopianism – he argues that cybernetic information theory “may be a salvation to our ecosystem and to our problems” – many of Ehler’s ideas might sound reasonable to modern ears (at times even prescient). However, the score and surrealist ruptures lend a science-fiction affect to Ehler’s interview. As the film forwards notions of a technologically-managed future, it explicitly foregrounds its own new technology – however, it does so in order to produce something disruptive and confusing rather than an improvement or solution.

During the last scene of his interview, as the screen begins to swell with television footage, the sound also drowns out Ehler’s words. Naficy then cuts to the coda of the film, which is a parody of man-on-the-street interviews on television news programs. The segment is titled “Youth Claims to Know.” The interviewer asks students

¹²Yvonne Spielmann. “Video: From Technology to Medium.” *Art Journal* 65, no. 3 (2006): 54-69.

¹³Scholars such as Edward A. Shanken have noted the connection between the cybernetic notion of feedback loops, through which information is transmitted back and forth, and experimental artists’ use of feedback as a means to create interaction with the audience.

questions about their thoughts on pollution generated by oil leaks and other environmental issues, to which they all give straight-faced replies in some variation of the phrases “eat my shorts” and “tough cheese” – an irreverent, if not particularly sophisticated, rejoinder to facile news media coverage of emerging problems. As Sturken notes, the possibilities of video – both aesthetic and functional – led to the emergence of guerilla television and other art in this vein, part of a larger “new communications revolution.” She writes, “This overlapping of aesthetic intent and communications/social critique was the direct result of the political ideology of the time. In the late 1960s it seemed possible to infiltrate and change the hierarchical system of telecommunication in Western society.”¹⁴

If *Ellis Island* and *Urbanity Hurrah* depict counterculture discourse and demonstrate its imbrications with emerging technologies, *Salamander Syncope* represents a synthesis of many of these ideas that articulates itself entirely through form.¹⁵ Whereas the previous films had been made on two-inch videotape – the people’s medium – and *Urbanity*’s effects achieved through feedback, *Salamander Syncope*’s graphics were generated on an SDS Sigma 7 computer, with a DEC 340 graphics display unit, with the help of a team of computer scientists. It was then transferred to 2-inch colour videotape. (One of these scientists, Vinton Cerf, is considered a “father of the internet,” and currently holds the position of Chief Internet Evangelist at Google.) The film also features an original score, created with a Moog synthesizer, composed by Ken Yapkowitz.

Video and computer experimentation have an interlinked history, and thus, there was something of a shared language in experimental video and computer art. As Spielmann writes, “In light of the early structur-

¹⁴Sturken, “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form,” 107. [See n. 1.]

¹⁵Naficy made another entirely abstract film between *Urbanity Hurrah* and *Salamander Syncope* – entitled *Blacktop* (1970) – that features an interesting combination of analog sound effects and video feedback aesthetics. It is worth nothing as a broader formal experiment, though I have not discussed it at length here because it does not engage overtly with counterculture ideas, nor does it clearly exhibit medium self-reflexivity.

al connection between video and computers, it seems justifiable both to grant the electronic medium coding and programming functions and to follow, in this respect, the language use of the video technicians of the time.”¹⁶ Indeed, in his abstract for *Salamander Syncope*, which was his MFA thesis project, Naficy explains how both computer and videotape technology are used together in order to generate the desired imagery. In addition to Nam June Paik, other artists producing experimental art with computer and videotape at the time included John Stehura and John Whitney, who used computer technology to design the opening credits for Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. Though Naficy was familiar with early computer and video art by these and other artists, he wanted to work with an aesthetic vocabulary of his own invention, and there were a multitude of influences – both personal and cultural – at work in the production of *Salamander Syncope*. By nature of its technology, however, the film did share qualities with other early computer art – namely, those of repetition, permutation, and standardization, the appearance of geometric forms.¹⁷

In his abstract, Naficy wrote that, “a versatile, mathematical and interactive graphics language” was developed such that “the fusion of these two media can best be controlled and directed toward the expression of a specific notion, i.e., the invocation of molecular memory.”¹⁸ Naficy’s interest in scientific and technological ideas were evident even in his youth – he was descended from a family of physicists and describes, in his book, a family-run magazine called *Neda-ye Elm (Call of Science)* to which he contributed.¹⁹ Frequently, this intersected with his interest in artistic production. As an undergraduate student at the University of Southern California – where he studied dentistry before diverting himself to communication studies – he hosted a radio show on the university station. It was dedicated

¹⁶Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 12.

¹⁷Grant Taylor, “The Soulless Usurper: Reception and Criticism of Early Computer Art,” in *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundation of the Digital Arts*, ed. Hannah B. Higgins and Douglas Kahn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 27.

¹⁸Hamid Naficy, “Salamander Syncope,” (MFA thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1971).

¹⁹Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1, xli. [See n. 2.]

to playing non-Western music, but in between tracks, Naficy would read new findings from the *Scientific American*. He also began to read about animation and computer imaging in technology and computer magazines before ultimately deciding he wanted to make his own computer-animated film.

In *Salamander Syncope*, an undulating wave of abstract images appears and transforms until, ultimately, we are presented with one fully legible image: that of a fetus in a womb. Though Naficy's meaning is clear – in *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, he describes the film as being about “the origin of life”²⁰ – the connection between computer art aesthetics and the notion of some primordial experience or existence has been noted in regards to other works, too.



Fig. 2. Computer-generated image of a fetus, *Salamander Syncope*, 1971.

For example, in her chapter “From the Gun Controller to the Mandala: The Cybernetic Cinema of John and James Whitney,” Zabet Patterson writes about a John Whitney film, *Permutations* (1968), that was made on an IBM mainframe computer, also filmed at the University of California, Los Angeles. She characterizes the film's affect as a “sense of newness,” claiming that “*Permutations* remains remarkable in part because nothing much happens in it—nothing that the viewer can really remember; nothing, in any case, for which the

²⁰Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1, 1. [See n. 2.]

viewer can have much of a linguistic vocabulary. Shapes grow and shift, resolve and disintegrate. Vincent Canby claimed in the *New York Times* that in the formal play of shapes was an innocent joy, that they evoked the sense ‘of what it must have been like to see the world for the first time.’”²¹ Another landmark film for both the counterculture and cyber culture, Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), featured imitation computer graphics: the resolution of the computer graphics that Kubrick had requested was too low for his 70-millimeter epic, and so instead, colour-filtered graphics slides were projected and then filmed in order to create the desired effect.²² The film famously ends with the image of the “star child,” a fetus encased within a glowing planet that is approaching Earth. (The visual of the star child itself was inspired by in-utero photography, new and cutting-edge at the time.) The technological imaginary of the nineteen-sixties was conceptualizing new births, through new technologies.

Salamander Syncope’s images are constantly in motion, with the shapes in each shot maintaining an orderly coherence and control even as they mutate, divide, and recombine. Images in a brilliant colour scheme of neon pastels unfurl against a predominantly black background. Though shape and image configurations do not repeat during the course of the film, over the 24-minute run time, one begins to see images relate back to their previous iterations. Our instinct is to associate the abstract images in front of us with known quantities they might represent: the shapes become cells, galaxies, salamanders. Moog-generated electronic chirps on the score accelerate, suggesting action. Once again, it might put the viewer in mind of science-fiction films: our aural and visual vocabulary for the cosmic was, of course, invented by the cinema.

²¹Zabet Patterson, “From the Gun Controller to the Mandala: The Cybernetic Cinema of John and James Whitney,” in *Mainframe Experimentalism: Early Computing and the Foundation of the Digital Arts*, 347.

²²Margaret Rhodes, “The Amazingly Accurate Futurism of *2001: A Space Odyssey*,” *Wired*, 19 August 2015, www.wired.com/2015/08/amazingly-accurate-futurism-2001-space-odyssey/.



Fig. 3. Suggestive abstraction, *Salamander Syncope*, 1971.

Part of one's desire in watching a film like *Salamander Syncope* is to assume continuity, and assign narrative – even when several computer artists, such as James and John Whitney, sought explicitly to make non-representative art. They wanted to move “away from indexicality”²³ – indeed, this was one of the appeals of both early video and computer art. Marita Sturken quotes the video artist Frank Gillette's claim that there were “no formal burdens” for video because it had “no tradition,”²⁴ and she herself resists the notion that video should develop conventions that function as shorthand for meaning, as they can in film.²⁵ Scholars of video have argued for a medium-specific methodology of theorizing videotape, which is distinguished by its processing properties (a quality it shares with the computer). Video has often been dismissed as a simple, now-dead predecessor to digital video, considered low-tech and obsolete despite its aesthetic and technological influence on future electronic media. Thus, it is important to consider Naficy's films alongside those of his Northern California and New York peers. They are not simply historical curiosities that existed at the margins of mainstream media, or between techno-

²³Patterson, “From the Gun Controller to the Mandala: The Cybernetic Cinema of John and James Whitney,” 337. [See n. 16.]

²⁴Sturken, “Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form,” 107.

²⁵Ibid., 118.

logical developments in visual media. Rather, they are artworks that both have their own medium-specific language and cultural context, and which were influential in the development of digital media and its aesthetic codes. Some moments in *Salamander Syncope*, including its finale, permit a recognizable representative image, but the film still refuses its audience narrative, linearity, or formal convention. Art critics considered early computer art cold and impersonal,²⁶ but in fact, its abstract nature allows us to dwell in the sensory. Indeed, Gregory Zinman argues that artists such as Nam June Paik and Mary Ellen Bute, an illustrator whose experimental films anticipated computer-generated imagery, created or inspired connections between abstract synchronicity and the sensory.²⁷

Experimental film was Naficy's own mode of thinking through his particular experience in the United States. In *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Naficy describes the desolation and anger he felt in his early days in America. This "exilic panic" mobilized him to take up photography again, as a way of making sense of his experience, and of understanding the new world around him. He writes that, "photography became a way of fixing, knowing, and objectifying both the Western Other and myself."²⁸ He refers to his body as a camera, echoing Nichols' notion of the person with a portable camera as a "human sensorium." Together, Naficy and his camera became a vessel for observation and memory. This is evident in *Ellis Island* where, though Naficy does not include himself in the film, he lets the camera operate as an extension of himself. His fellow commune members only discuss his presence in the context of the camera he carries: the sensation of the camera-body.

Eventually – after he himself became an exile, and no longer only an immigrant, from Iran – much of his scholarly work would focus on exile art and experience. But, as he writes in the book, his own ex-

²⁶Grant Taylor, "The Soulless Usurper: Reception and Criticism of Early Computer Art," 18. [See n. 19.]

²⁷Gregory Zinman. "Analog Circuit Palettes, Cathode Ray Canvases: Digital's Analog, Experimental Past," *Film History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 135.

²⁸Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1, xlix. [See n. 2].

perimental videos were the first lens through which he configured the experience of exile. In his book *Accented Cinema*, Naficy considers films made by developing-world diasporas in the West. He argues that the filmmakers' displacement (whether by choice or not) from their countries of origin resulted, conversely, in a frequent fixation on place: home as tied to territory. When he looked back on *Salamander Syncope*, he confessed of its theme of "molecular memory" that, "what was being remembered, it seemed, was rebirth, my rebirth as a new subject in exile."²⁹ However, in his self-consideration as a subject in exile, space seems to have an ever-expandable quality, rather than being restrictive or secured. The film's aesthetics, along with its circumstances of production, suggest regeneration and evolution. In looking back at birth and its possibilities, it looks to the future.

Naficy's MFA films are a representation of – and contribution to – counterculture aesthetics and theoretical concerns. Through the sensations produced by the amateur handheld cinema of *Ellis Island* to the hallucinatory experimentation of *Salamander Syncope*, they demonstrate the confluence of emerging ideas about consciousness and new, particularly electronic, technologies. They make use of video technology not simply as an accessible and affordable method by which to record material, but as a medium with distinct properties that allowed for special effects and original aesthetics. In some of Naficy's works, it was also a medium that distinguished itself from others through these effects. These films, as well as the computer-generated *Salamander Syncope*, demonstrated, in their visuals, the possibilities of the technologies themselves. They eschewed classical narrative or exposition; instead, both *Ellis Island* and *Salamander Syncope* have a more impressionistic affect (the latter also defying notions of what rigorous and orderly computer art could produce).

Naficy's positionality as a student, commune member, and Californian during the 1960s – an active participant in counterculture practices – intersected with that of his experience as a foreigner, sepa-

²⁹Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 1, li. [See n. 2.]

rated by great distance from home and family. However, rather than mining the past, Naficy wanted to construct new futures. As with his contemporaries, including the Vasulkas and Paik, Naficy was interested in the materiality of new forms and their specific qualities, and with them, the promise of new visual languages – unencumbered by tradition, expectation, and place. As he wrote of his experiments, “I was exploring and creating a new identity for myself, by my own choice, chucking the roots for routes.”³⁰

³⁰Hamid Naficy, email correspondence with the author, 22 July 2018.