

## whitehot | September 2013: Josh Azzarella: Untitled #160 (Balcombe)

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*Josh Azzarella: Untitled #160 (Balcombe)*

Josh Azzarella: Untitled #160 (Balcombe), in which F.W. Murnau's 1922 German Expressionist silent film masterpiece *Nosferatu* is reductively transformed into a full-length reproduction, is one of the most compelling, magnetic, improbable, hypnotic, and absolutely strange works of video art around. Clocking in at a full 90 minutes, it took the artist more than two years of meticulous pixel-by-pixel digital collage, photographic and audio augmentation and intense concentration to remove all traces of human (or vampire) personages or their cast shadows and thus re-render the film in its depopulated entirety. Notwithstanding the superhuman feat of concentration, detailed perception, improvisation and patience such an undertaking requires, the presentation of a classic item from the collective memory thus denuded of its foremost signifiers prompts salient questions about authorship, attention, symbolism, mood, narrative, and the vagaries of recollection.

The first thing one notices is that the removal of the characters does little to ameliorate the tension, suspense, anxiety, and gothic romance of the film. As actions and events are all but obliterated, the accompanying score and soundtrack, interior sets, architecture, lighting cues, and the viewer's own imagination take over the task. With other forms of visual communication thus piqued into heightened states, even without resolution of the storyline, the work does evoke a high degree of the same visceral emotions in the viewer as the film intended. As the film progresses, viewers find themselves paying closer attention to a multitude of details in the imagery that otherwise might have been overlooked. Furniture, props, meals, bedclothes, picture frames, buildings, foliage, animal life, weather and slamming doors -- all of these and thousands of other allegedly marginal moments suddenly find themselves in starring roles, called upon to do a larger part in relating a tale and set a mood. And finally, the viewer is thrust into a competitive game, a tussle between their own memory and the reality in front of their eyes. The figuring-it-out game, the I-think-I-remember-that-scene game -- a constant comparison between then and now which makes the viewer's own mind the site in which the work is finally completed.

As with Azzarella's previous works -- all of which involve removing either the people or other main elements from universally recognizable images -- the act of removing creates not an emptiness, but a void that is filled in a rush of possible alternatives. And in the end, that makes the artist's true subject not the works upon which he operates, not art history, and not politics -- but rather, his work is about the very nature of memory, attention, and experience themselves. And it does exactly the one thing everyone can agree that art should do and that the best art has always done -- it shows us back our world in a way that forever changes how we see it.

