

Shaun Wilson: Death of the Father

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Abstract

*The subject of this article is Shaun Wilson, an Australian visual artist who is recognised for his video artworks that focus upon images of home and domestic space. Wilson's artworks signify family and, through memory, are manifestations of house and home. I will demonstrate how Wilson has used the art of memory (a memory technique attributed to the ancient Greek poet Simonides of Ceos) as a creative tool to position his art in the Australian domestic space. Wilson's video artworks originate from a specific event in his life: the death of his much-loved father, Peter, in 1999. In the process I believe Wilson has created a new video version of the Australian house and home, one scripted on the continual understanding of coming to terms with his father's death. To demonstrate this hypothesis, I will discuss Wilson's pivotal interpretation of the impact of his father's death, *UberNocturnus Acts I to IV*, 2008. In the *UberNocturnus* series Shaun Wilson is presenting memory as a false recollection; the viewer recalls these images but now these are remixed and transported to a different time. Dark and foreboding in style, these videos explore the other side of the domestic space, the betrayal of family.*

Keywords: father, death, memory, home, family

1. Shaun Wilson - Video Artist

Shaun Wilson produces videos based upon images of the home and his recollection of personal domestic experiences. They signify family and, through memory, are manifestations of house and home. Such works have turned upon a specific event in Wilson's life: the death of his much-loved father, Peter, who died from cancer in 1999. In the paper I will reveal how Wilson has manipulated the death of his father as a creative focus to produce a substantial recontextualised version of house and home. Wilson is one of the first Australian visual artists to work without the necessity of a traditional studio space. A laptop computer, the internet and email enable him to cross international barriers and time zones in a post-studio environment in which home or office is the studio. Wilson's workstation has become an interchangeable electronic drop-in zone where the boundaries of domestic space, studio and art practice have not simply become blurred but merged as the one location. He exemplifies the contemporary new media artist, able to work just as easily while commuting on public transport, at home or in the work studio.

2. The Art of Memory

Wilson uses the art of memory (a memory technique attributed to the ancient Greek poet Simonides of Ceos) as a working tool to position his art in the Australian domestic space. The poet Simonides of Ceos in Ancient Greece invented what is called the 'art of memory' or 'method loci'. Simonides witnessed a disastrous accident at a banquet. The poet was called away from the celebrations and, in his absence, the hall ceiling collapsed, crushing the invited guests to death. The severity of their injuries made identification impossible, but Simonides was able to name the victims by remembering where each individual had been seated.

The application of the art of memory involves bringing to mind a familiar building; for example, the family home, then mentally ‘walking’ through the house, paying specific attention to details or objects such as items of furniture. These components can later be used to trigger certain memories.

3. Death of the Father

Peter Wilson was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1997. For Shaun Wilson this period was characterised by grief and coming to terms with his father’s slow death. Until then Wilson was secure in the knowledge that, as the family only child, he was the centre of his parent’s universe. Now all was changed and this loss profoundly disturbed Wilson’s perception of family, house and home as a secure environment consisting of mother, father, siblings, cousins and grandparents. More simply his childhood had now ended. In 2003 Shaun Wilson, while visiting his mother at his family house, discovered a stockpile of Super-8 film taken by his father from the years 1972 to 1986. Peter Wilson was an avid archivist of family events, filming Christmas festivities, birthday parties, weekend barbecues and countless other social gatherings. Wilson projected the film to discover a substantial account of his childhood and the family home; this experience was all the more powerful because his family did not own a Super-8 projector and therefore he was the first to view the images. The impact of this accidental discovery, all the more potent for being found in the Wilson family home – a place filled with memories of his father and childhood – has continually influenced (or haunted) his artwork.

4. The Memory Palace

Wilson’s first significant video series concerning his father’s death and its personal psychological impact was *The Memory Palace: Scale, Mnemonics and the Moving Image*, 2005, consisted of eight video projections each measuring 275 x 335 cm (Figures 1,2 &3). Wilson filmed on location at Monash Medical Centre, McCulloch House, Melbourne, where his father died, over two days in 2004. He walked through the palliative care unit, shooting with a hand-held digital video camera along the corridors and into the room where Peter Wilson stayed. Wilson utilizes the corridors of McCulloch House as a memory portal, a doorway to domestic familiar spaces such as the lounge room or kitchen he may remember as symbolically linked with his father’s death. Wilson I believe manipulates these ordinary objects, such as a chair or lavatory, as memory icons to trigger a greater consideration of home. The finished videos were then projected onto the gallery walls. He deliberately altered the film’s colour and brightness, causing the picture frame to collapse and become semi-circular in appearance. The intention was to create a series of filmic portals that connect two worlds: Wilson’s present domestic situation and the memory of his father. The works merge Wilson’s personal experience of home with the physical space that is the building and garden where Peter Wilson endured his final days. The image shows a projected domestic environment that combines the hidden of Wilson’s private experience as a child in a secure loving family contrasted with the pain of his father’s death. The final video in the *Memory Palace* series, titled *Through My Father’s Eyes*, 2004 (Figure 4,5,6 &7) shows Wilson as a toddler attempting to take his first steps in the backyard of the family house. The dominant image is of his father’s largely shadowed physique, bent over, tenderly clasping the young Wilson by both hands. At times for only a few flickering seconds, close-ups of Wilson’s red-haired head appear, smiling with glee. This is the one video in the *Memory Palace* series of ten where Wilson has directly employed old Super-8 film footage taken from the family archive.

Of the twelve three-minute Super-8 films used for the *Memory Palace* series, only eight seconds depicted Wilson and his father together. It is these eight seconds that he digitally mastered for *Through My Father’s Eyes*. Wilson was fortunate in that the majority of the Super-8 film footage was in pristine condition. With the original Super-8 film, the presence of the father, though unseen, is dominant, as it was Peter Wilson who pointed the camera’s viewfinder at mother and toddler son. In a fleeting moment, Wilson and his father are joined in a fumbling embrace as Wilson struggles with learning how to walk. With Wilson’s father shown guiding his son in these first steps, it was on this rare occasion his mother, Pearl Wilson who was filming. Like the filmmaker’s mistake we are not supposed to notice, this insightful moment is lost as quickly as it is gauged. It is this powerful singular video vignette that I believe defines many of Wilson’s beliefs concerning the stability of house and home, loving father as teacher, a mother standing unseen but nearby, and the security of the family home represented by the backyard walk. The power of the *Memory Palace* series and particularly *Through My Father’s Eyes* rests with Wilson’s expression of grief, and the imagery of a father helping his son to walk, ride his bike or learn to drive the family car.

What Wilson is offering with the series is a generically understood depiction of the domestic experience that crosses all borders, languages and cultures – an image of the loving family, father, mother and child.

5. 1975

Wilson next major exploration of family used the memory of his grandmother and carefree days spent at her home, as the creative stimulus. In *1975* (Figure 8, 9, 10 & 11) Wilson constructed a room for viewers to engage with the memory of his grandmother. He commented in an interview with the then Australian Centre of Contemporary Art director Juliana Engberg: 'I think the best way to describe the work I'm exhibiting [...] would be a room that you can go into and experience memories'.¹ He built a scaled-down model of his grandmother's lounge room, complete with a small blue fabric-covered couch. The couch was similar in shape, though much smaller in size, to the one that Wilson remembers sitting on as a toddler and watching as his grandfather Anthony played reels of Super-8 film of the Barbone family life before Wilson was born, an existence spent travelling the military airfields of Europe and the Pacific, or as a commercial airline pilot flying across the rural regions of Australia.

The walls of the purpose-built *1975* room and the ceiling were deliberately askew. It is awkward for an adult to enter the installation, one is compelled to crouch and bend. Tucked at the rear of Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, the room felt like a cubby house where a youngster would hide or stockpile toys, away from adult supervision. Wilson was attempting to force the viewer into an appreciation of the installation, as a three-year-old would see the world. There was nowhere for the audience to sit, except the small couch. As argued by the American philosopher and writer Edward S. Casey, our existence is often reflected by the room where we stand, the space we occupy. Wilson is particularly interested in Casey's theories on the house as a cogent force for the integration of thought, memories and dreams. As Wilson remarked: 'To me, house means a lockable cell, that's a storage pen for your memories'.² The blurred and hazy imagery of *1975* is not factual because it exists in another time and place. The video *1975* shows an interpretation of childhood and home filtered by memory. Projected in the *1975* room was a blurred and distorted video image, 120 centimetres wide by 70 centimetres high. Many of the digitally manipulated Super 8 and 16 millimetre filmic images showed a teenage Pearl Wilson with her parents, relatives and childhood friends on family outings, at picnics, shopping or school holidays. Hazy imaginings travel across the screen, located by the car design, fashions and distinctive haircuts as being somewhere in the 1950s. Time and age misconstrue events and, when tinged with adult experience, often create what can be described as a false memory. As Wilson has commented: 'When re-visualised over time, memories are not always an accurate portrayal of events. Through memory, historical fact is often changed, slightly misconstrued or even turned into fictive accounts such as false memories'.³ And so, too, with *1975*, Wilson is projecting memories of distant childhood recollections that, due to the passage of time, cannot be totally true. They are adult memories of home, fond, reflective and genuinely felt, but not really truthful in content.

6. *UberNocturnus Acts I to IV*

The *UberNocturnus Acts I to IV*, 2008 (Figure 12 to 29) are Wilson's most confronting films to date, crossing the divide between video art and cinema. The video, with its confronting use of film angles, blurred colour and gothic ethos, challenges the accepted understanding of the Australian house as three-bedroom, brick veneer, safe and secure. Wilson is questioning the viewer's preconceived understanding of domestic space by displaying the hidden and often psychological subterfuge at play within the house. As Wilson has remarked: '[The series] is predominantly the memories you get when you experience some sense of trauma, the hidden of the house we don't like to acknowledge'.⁴ It consists of four subsets or chapters individually titled *UberNocturnus Act I, II, III and IV* respectively. Each subset is ten minutes in length and has been filmed on high-definition video edited so that each work captures a single memory. The video is predominantly dark and tinged with green. The production includes several actors, various locations in Victoria and Tasmania, Australia, extensive use of period costumes and props such as a horse-drawn carriage and sailing vessels.

The sailing ship Lady Nelson, on which Wilson filmed the Tasmanian scenes, is moored on the harbour waterfront in Hobart, Tasmania. Wilson would often view the ship when he studied for his PhD at the University of Tasmania, Centre for the Arts. The dominant father figure of the *Memory Palace* series has now been replaced by a ship's captain (Figures 12, 13, 15 & 17). *UberNocturnus Act I* opens with a male figure in a top hat running through the bush. The same figure is then seen standing tall and erect at the bow of a sailing ship; sails unfold and flutter in the wind. There is extreme detail in the footage due to Wilson's use of a high-definition video camera. For example, the rope rigging of the ship is precise, crisp and clearly defined, as is the planking of the deck. The ship's bell appears on five occasions in *UberNocturnus Act I* as a visual motif that anchors the unfolding drama of the story. The bell silently tolls in rhythm with the pitch of the ship's hull as it slices the oncoming waves. Here, for the first time, the young woman who will play the film's secondary main character is encountered (Figure 14). These two figures will repeatedly interact as vampirish husband and wife as the narrative of the film unfolds through the various acts. The dominant blonde woman is comparable in appearance to Wilson's wife, and he admits there is a striking similarity.⁵ The visual sequences of *UberNocturnus Acts I to IV* alternate between the ship, the ocean and the Australian bush land of the opening scene. The relationship between the two main characters is unstated and the viewer is left to ponder if these individuals are lovers, husband and wife, or simply travelers forced together by the unfolding tragic circumstances. Ultimately, the male aims a pistol, an eighteenth-century flintlock, at the woman and, as the crescendo of the soundtrack leads the viewer to the next act, the gun blasts and the female figure tumbles back out of frame. The use of a psychedelic-red close-up of the flintlock with exaggerated blunderbuss barrel adds to the heightened tension of this overtly melodramatic final scene. Wilson has cited influences such as Alfred Hitchcock and his use of ruptured narratives as found in *Vertigo* (1958) and *The Birds* (1963), and Steven Spielberg with his use of framing in *Duel* (1971) and *Jaws* (1975). The stimulus of Hitchcock and Spielberg are strongly evident in the *UberNocturnus* series with tension created using close-ups of faces filled with anguished horror and the constant interplay of scenes adding to the narrative construction.

UberNocturnus Act II, 2008 (Figures 18 to 20), opens with the male lead, now hatless, but still unnerving. The ship has been replaced by a wooden bridge over which a horse-drawn carriage passes. The carriage is the type used by the upper or wealthy middle classes. *UberNocturnus Act II* introduces the use of a gabled window that is often shown overblown in white or bright fluorescent red. It is this striking singular image that dominates the video (Figure 19). The image was shot at the historic mansion, Labassa in Caulfield, Melbourne. The Labassa mansion is constructed in the high-Victorian architectural style with Second Empire and Italianate influences. Wilson has filmed there twice, believing that its domestic architecture, complete with elaborate interior period kitchen and formal garden, suits the gothic horror style and the 'house' narrative he is portraying. *UberNocturnus Act III* (Figures 21 to 23) begins with a woman wearing a full-length winter coat. Women have played a strong influence in Wilson's life. He acknowledges the support of his mother following Peter Wilson's death as being instrumental in keeping him level-headed and focused on the artwork. As he remarked: 'After my father's death, my mother was always there. Plus I am now married with two girls. Which I can tell you gives another perspective on the whole house and home scenario! So obviously one would surmise my closeness to the female gender appears strongly in my videos. For me women have always played a strong representational role for house and home. That's not to demean the influence of the male, but more a recognition of the power of the female role.

In *Uber Act III* I wanted to acknowledge that contribution, therefore the three opening women, being mother, partner and potentially youthful daughter'.⁶ In *UberNocturnus Act IV* (Figures 24 to 29) the top-hatted figure is replaced by a new male lead, Paul Bongiorno, who was best man at Wilson's wedding in 2008. The symbolic undertone here of connecting a personal family odyssey with the film cannot be dismissed as the Bongiorno and Wilson families have been good friends for four decades. As Wilson remarked: 'Paul knows where all the skeletons from the family house are hidden. He powerfully understands how I feel about my dad'.⁷ *UberNocturnus Act IV* (Figure 24) begins with Bongiorno crawling on the wet ground towards a stone water trough. His clothes are soiled and face unshaven. He wanders aimlessly, with fists clenched and possibly prepared to fight. This figure appears to be searching or lost and stumbles onward. The moon is red and luminescent. Bongiorno crawls towards the water trough, his face turns skyward to the moon but what the viewer sees instead is the face of another blonde woman.

Her haunting face, the colour of the night sky, dominates *UberNocturnus Act IV* (Figure 27). Here we see in this final haunting image the visual symbology of Wilson's mother, wife and young daughter, combined as a powerful sentiment of the loss of father. In the *UberNocturnus* series Wilson is presenting memory as a false recollection; the viewer recalls these images but now these are remixed and transported to a different time. Dark and foreboding in style, these videos explore the other side of the domestic space, the betrayal of family. Possibly the betrayal by Peter Wilson of dying; that is a harsh judgement but worthy of consideration. The metaphor of house and home has been replaced by two figures trapped on an eighteenth-century sailing ship. The artist creates a setting in this series that is outside the traditional domestic space characterised by the Australian house. These are foreign places that viewers may be familiar with through watching Hollywood movies such as those featuring Boris Karloff, Vincent Price, Bela Lugosi and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). In the *UberNocturnus* series Wilson uses the gothic-horror genre of these films to provoke the viewer's questioning anew of what is a home, family and domesticity.

6. Conclusion

The video artworks produced by Wilson are not a generic depiction of Australian domestic space as four walls with garden and garage, rather, they depict the love between father and son. To understand Wilson's representation of house and home we must respect this relationship. Wilson's pivotal gothic-orientated *UberNocturnus Acts I to IV*, 2008 series of video vignettes elaborate on his use of the loss of 'father' as a manifestation for house and home. This video art series, based on the relationship between the two main characters (male and female) and alternating between a sailing ship, grand mansion and Australian bush land setting, extends the parameters of house and home beyond the traditional three-bedroom brick veneer. The impact of personal grief transforms Wilson's videos into powerful interpretations of family and, by connection, house and home. It is this new version of domesticity based on the memory of his father via video that positions Wilson's creativity as unique within the consideration of contemporary visual art concerning the Australian home and domestic space.

Notes

1. For a full text of the Wilson and Engberg interview, see <<http://www.accaonline.org.au/NEW06>>.
2. Shaun Wilson author interview 2 October 2008.
3. Wilson, the Memory Palace: Scale, mnemonics and the moving image, PhD diss. University of Tasmania, Hobart, 2005, p. 24.
4. Shaun Wilson author interview 2 October 2008.
5. Shaun Wilson discussion with author 2 January 2012.
6. Shaun Wilson discussion with author 3 January 2012.
7. Shaun Wilson email to author 10 January 2011.

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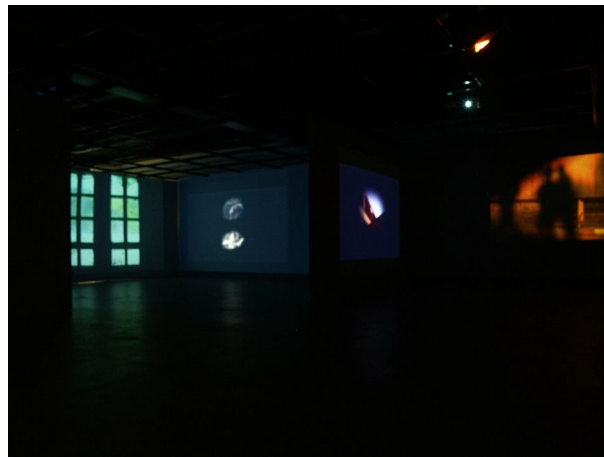


Figure 1: Shaun Wilson, The Memory Palace: Scale, Mnemonics and the Moving Image, 2005 (installation view) Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania. (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

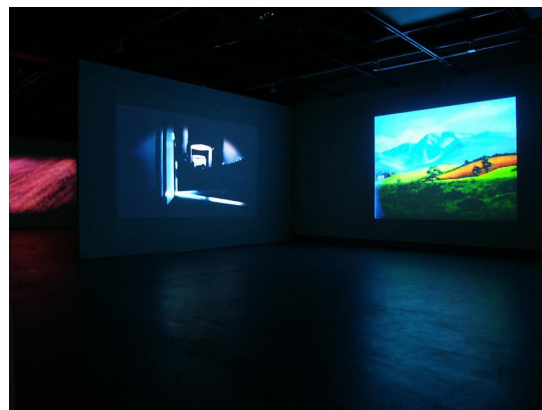


Figure 2: Shaun Wilson, the Memory Palace: Scale, Mnemonics and the Moving Image, 2005 (installation view) Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania. (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

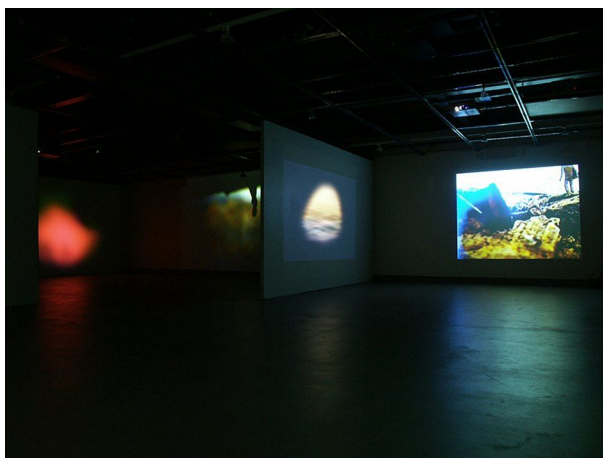


Figure 3: Shaun Wilson, the Memory Palace: Scale, Mnemonics and the Moving Image, 2005 (installation view) Academy Gallery, University of Tasmania. (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

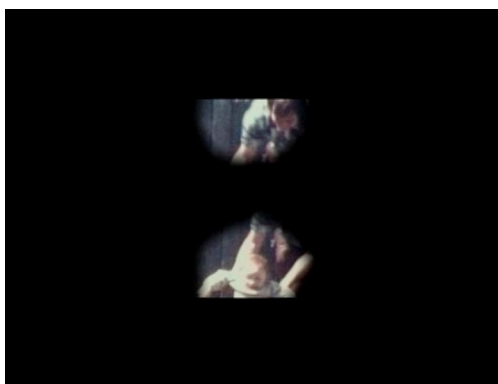


Figure 4: Shaun Wilson, Through My Father's Eye's, (video still image), 2004, 8mm as SD video, single-channel DVD, colour, sound, 3 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

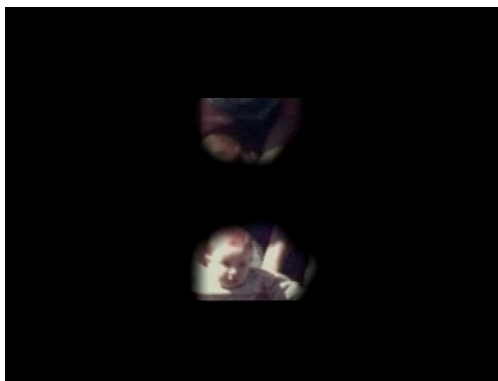


Figure 5: Shaun Wilson, Through My Father's Eye's, (video still image), 2004, 8mm as SD video, single-channel DVD, colour, sound, 3 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 6: Shaun Wilson, Through My Father's Eye's, (video still image), 2004, 8mm as SD video, single-channel DVD, colour, sound, 3 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

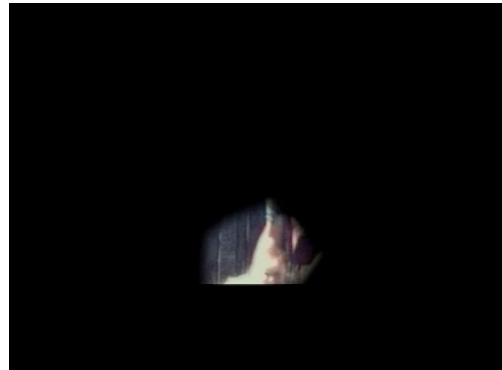


Figure 7: Shaun Wilson, Through My Father's Eye's, (video still image), 2004, 8mm as SD video, single-channel DVD, colour, sound, 3 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 8: Shaun Wilson, 1975, (video still image), 2005, mixed media, single-channel SD video, colour, sound, 60 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 9: Shaun Wilson, 1975, (video still image), 2005, mixed media, single-channel SD video, colour, sound, 60 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

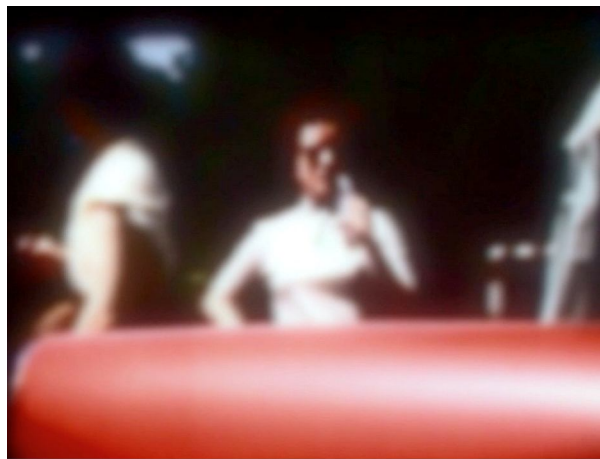


Figure 10: Shaun Wilson, 1975, (video still image), 2005, mixed media, single-channel SD video, colour, sound, 60 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 11: Shaun Wilson, 1975, (video still image), 2005, mixed media, single-channel SD video, colour, sound, 60 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 12: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act 1, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 13: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act 1, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 14: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act 1, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 15: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act 1, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 16: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act 1, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

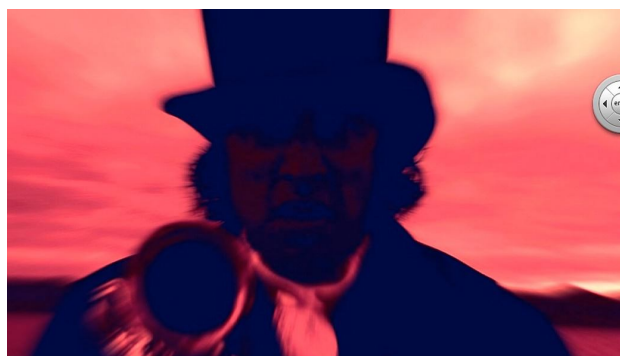


Figure 17. Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act 1, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 18: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act II, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

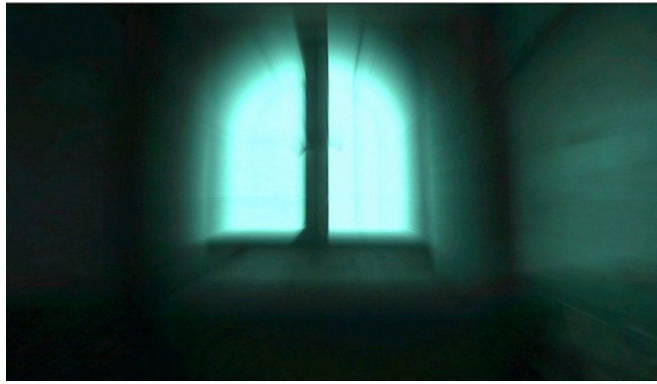


Figure 19: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act II, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

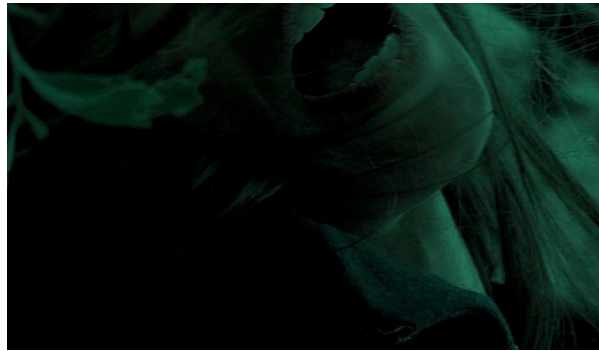


Figure 20: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act II, 2008, (video still image), single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 21: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, 2008, (video still image), single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 22: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

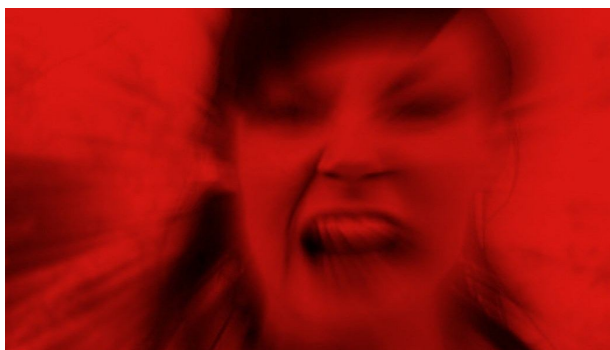


Figure 23: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 24: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act IV, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

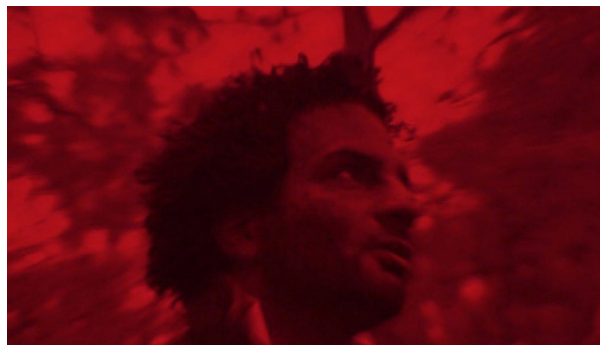


Figure 25: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

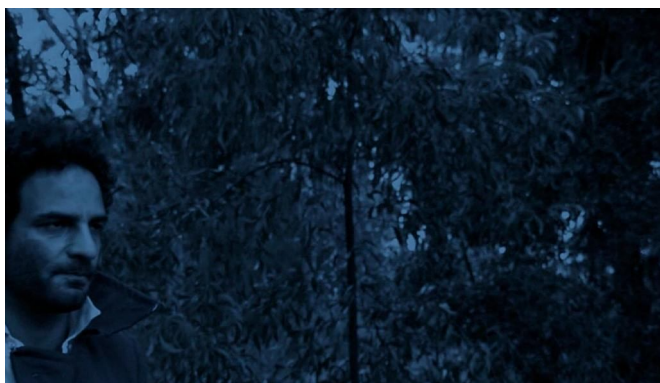


Figure 26: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)

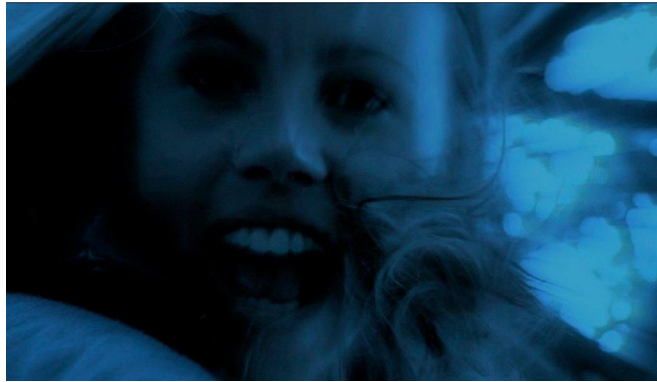


Figure 27: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 28: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)



Figure 29: Shaun Wilson, UberNocturnus Act III, (video still image), 2008, single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 10 mins (Copyright Shaun Wilson)