

The Case of California

**Cease to exist / Just come on say you love me.
Give up your world, come on you can be ...**
Charles Manson, "Cease to Exist"

**Cease to resist / Come on say you love me.
Give up your world, come on and be with me ...**
The Beach Boys, "Never Learn Not to Love"

≡ ON MARCH 9, 2011, a celebratory event marked the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the cult theory classic, Laurence A. Rickels's *The Case of California* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991; University of Minnesota Press, 2001). The commemoration included a screening of artists' films and videos that responded to many of the bicoastal California/Germany investigations that make for Rickels's *Case*. The session was hosted by UC Santa Barbara's Department of Art, and was attended by academics, intellectuals, and an in-group of Rickels's students—exemplars of the Teen Age as inscribed in the *Case*.

In 1991 *The Case of California* firmly established its main reception in the visual arts and media. *Artforum* initiated a series of conversations with the author, intended to explore and establish the context for his work. Films have since included *The Case of California* among their supporting props: the documentary *The Beach Boys and Satan* (dir. Christoph Dreher, 1997) investigates Dennis Wilson's connection to the Manson Family, and *Prüfstand VII* (dir. Robert Bramkamp, 2001) is a partly fictional account of the invention of rocket flight in Nazi Germany. Bramkamp's film also documents the bungalow beach paradise

that was erected by the Nazis on the island of Usedom, where Peenemünde is located and U2 rockets were launched. Making an uncanny-proof home within the precincts of gadget love, von Braun and his cohorts trigger Bramkamp's associations with Rickels's California genealogy in good and evil. (Rickels's own reading of the invention of the rocket in *Nazi Psychoanalysis* appeared the same year as *Prüfstand VII*.)

The screening session focused on recent short films that more directly engage in the thought experiments of *The Case of California*. Terrence Handscomb's *Der Himmel über Kalifornien / Miserere: Nachtrag zu "Der Himmel über Kalifornien"* (2007) explores themes constitutive of Californian youth-death body culture, while Stephan Lugbauer's *The Mackeys* (2010) presents memory in and of Southern California as yet another jump cut into the coast's quintessential death cult. *Spout* (2010), directed by Alex Muñoz, is a short film based on the feature screenplay Rickels wrote in the mid-1990s. Set in California, *Spout* tracks the local emergence of vampirism out of one couple's efforts to preserve and hide loss against the inroads of successful mourning.

The session was introduced by critical theorist and cin-





ema authority Colin Gardner, whose tone of libidinal nuttiness, repurposed psychoanalysis, and close reading of Frankfurt School philosophy both formed and informed Rickels's bicoastal proposition. Gardner played along by playing the little-known recording of Charles Manson's song "Cease to Exist," followed by "Never Learn Not to Love," a reworked rendition of Manson's song popularized by The Beach Boys (from the 1969 album *20/20*). By 1968 The Beach Boys' Dennis Wilson had become caught up in the Manson Family. Before the relationship soured, Wilson paid for studio time to record songs written and performed by Manson, and introduced the would-be musician to acquaintances in the entertainment business.

Manson made it big: not as a singer and songwriter, but as a notorious murderer. The play between popular music and the dark side of the force spans both coasts, but settles in California. In Rickels's *Case*, "'California' is the endopsychic reflection [of myth and music, which shifts] into another theoretical format—that of the group inside the death cult" (48). It was through this

exposition that Gardner's introduction provided a segue to the screened works that followed.

Themes of libidinal aggression and body culture as bicoastal pathos are picked up by Terrence Handscomb's video *Der Himmel über Kalifornien / Miserere: Nachtrag zu "Der Himmel über Kalifornien."* The first part of Handscomb's work features spooky falsetto renderings of the Beach Boys classics "Good Vibrations" and "Surfer Girl," sung by the artist. The second part features a choral work "Miserere" (full name "Miserere mei, Deus" / "Have mercy on me, O God") that was composed by German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in 1860 at the age of seventeen. The lo-res *Miserere: Nachtrag zu "Der Himmel über Kalifornien"* is set in a seedy part of Venice Beach, California, spiked with themes of autoerotic body culture, gay circumcision ritual, and the psychology of power and sexual difference. The circumcision of infant males in the United States can be likened to a compulsory form of infantile plastic surgery. And yet the corollary refusal of circumcision by parents, which became the



counterculture to its regular application as hygiene, grew the supplement of voluntary circumcision as requested by young adult males in California seeking the aesthetics of streamlining for the impression made in swim trunks. The in-group psychologization of the Semitic moniker was Handscomb's new supplement to Rickels's *Case*.

This results in one of two outcomes manifested as the proverbial "two sides of every story" expression. On the one hand, autoeroticism "fantasmaticizes by turning around even (and especially) aggression. On one's own person, misfired aggression triggers a reverse series of mental representations, which has as target the cynical subject who abuses himself" (Rickels, 146). On the other hand, the eternal child is perpetuated. Nietzsche, for example, "remained his life-long solo recipient of his libido, orchestrated as dividuus what couplification of sexual difference seems to close off between two individuals" (Rickels, 146-47).

Alex Muñoz's short film, *Spout*, plays out the horror film genre with deft intelligence and smart, often hilarious, quotationalism. A grandmother—played by Rena Owen—and her grandson negotiate mourning by drinking the blood of those who annoy them. Set in the former Los Angeles suburban home of a famous Disney designer, the film vampirizes the uncanny side (but in the jocular vein) of substitution and mourning. The depiction of the mixed-race German American family introduces several twists, and shows that the bearer of traits of multiculturalism in California is welcomed, in theory, as another "Beached

Blanketed Bimbo." When the recently widowed father starts bringing his dates home, grandmother and grandson welcome the substitution prospects as takeout. But the secret of dates gone bad is revealed when the latest prospect proves somehow to be immune, as the process of successful mourning takes back the control over the household from the two unmourners. A surprise ending, in keeping with the rituals of vampire representation, reasserts the escapism of undeath.

Yet *Spout* involves no vampiric bite. The vampire fangs stereotyped by Hollywood horror films have been superseded by gadget love: a small spout is inserted into the neck of the victim from which the escaping blood is imbibed. The logic of the spout is the logic of adolescent gadget fetishism, which is very much at home in Rickels's *The Case of California*. *Spout*'s gadget love thus subverts popularist (Hollywood) vampire film history, by leaving it well and truly buried, together with the *Unheimlich*, on the other coast from whence it came.

Austrian artist Stephan Lugbauer's *The Mackeys* is also set in Los Angeles, but plays out as a filmic collage on both coasts. As a Museum für angewandte Kunst Wien fellow, his experimental film evolved out of a six-month residency in Los Angeles, based on former residents' memories, diary entries, references to art, literature, and film. *The Mackeys* opens with a woman reading from *The Case of California* as the frame for the German-language subject to experience California—or, rather, to experience Lugbauer's own famously melancholic culture, but stripped bare of the Baroque rationalizations. To the extent that *I Think I Am:*



Philip K. Dick is Rickels's 2010 sequel to *The Case*, Lugbauer's decision to quote from the work as well is apt. This quotation concerns how our relations with the dead and our "housing" of the dead turn on the present, and are conceived as the vanishing point that—following Theodor Adorno's insight—renders the recent past the most repressed span of time. To this, we can thus relate only as the prospect or threat of catastrophic returns from prehistory.

It is through the related relevance of California to the philosophical writings and real-life story of Adorno that this review can draw to a close. Themes in *The Case of California* and the allusions contained within the inspired screenings run parallel to one another: the collapse of space, time, identity, and the affect of political events upon the human psyche exist as a bicoastal reverberation between Germany and California—within the very orbit of Adorno's travels and travails. Adorno escaped the Nazis on one coast, and fled to the other coast in exile, ending up in Los Angeles for nearly a decade. Having already experienced the apocalypse of the mournable death of his father(land), he discovered in the Walt Disney Company "the unmournable death of the child" lodged inside the infantile cartoon characters that Disney, as another Big Brother of industrialized group psychology, carried forward in so many syndications (Rickels, 54).

This subject of group psychology and group mourning (or lack thereof) is further illuminated in our relationship to the theocracy of Hollywood celebrities—a point Mike Kelley also stressed in an interview in *The Beach Boys and Satan*. As a rejec-

tion of this establishment, the Manson Family had a "death list" of Hollywood stars to be targeted, and conspiracy theories continue to circulate around the macabre series of violent murders that were led by Charles Manson. The unmournable lost object of the child, cut out of the two-weeks-from-term pregnant belly of Sharon Tate at the time of her murder, is lost to the void of the real only to be symbolically exhumed by the theatrical media farce that was Manson's trial—and twelve parole hearings since—and the morbid curiosity exacerbated by photographs of Tate's spouse, Roman Polanski, standing in his blood-stained living room that appeared in *Life* magazine.

In Rickels's *The Case of California*, it is this group psychology in mass media society that responds to varying social phenomena of a collective suspended belief that crosses over—and now reaches far beyond—the coasts of Germany and California. The cultural representations outlined in Rickels's text were reiterated and rejuvenated through the lens of contemporary artworks provided by Handscomb, Lugbauer, and Muñoz. The anniversary celebration helped viewers navigate an intricate web of passages that outlined the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis, Hollywood, The Beach Boys, the Manson murders, current events, and more. It is this ever-expanding repertoire of related social events and artifacts that makes Rickels's perspective on California as symbolic object—indeed as "philosopheme" (as he puts it in the "Fast Foreword" that opens the book)—relevant in the twentieth century, and well into the twenty-first.

~Desiree D'Alessandro