MATT BUCKINGHAM
A Man of the Crowd
March 18–June 20, 2004
Suzanne Weaver: Since you work in both video and film, what are the basic differences? Why did you choose to use film for A Man of the Crowd? And why black and white?

Matthew Buckingham: Video and film each evoke specific associations due to their technological differences and the resulting ways we have become used to seeing them. I would say that photography and film insist on something that "was." The "tense" of film and photography encompasses past, present, and future—the assertion "this-will-have-been," as Roland Barthes might have said. This is because of the time delay between the moment of capturing the image and the moment of displaying the image. Video, on the other hand, can be displayed while it captures. Since this is not possible in film, for me, video is invested with a stronger sense of the present, even when it is played back after a long passage of time.

I choose my media in relation to the content of the project that I am developing. The process of recording and displaying film and photography can be seen as analogous to the process of creating narratives from lived experience—a process of selecting, editing, and retelling. If I am working on a project that benefits from this idea of narration, so central to a broad range of ideas about history, then I would choose to work in film. If it is more advantageous to evoke a strong feeling of unmediated experience—the contingency of the present moment—then I would work in video. This is similar to the choice between color and black and white for me. Color photography adds information to the image, exceeding the original experience, and black and white excludes a lot of information, asking the viewer to fill in based on his or her own experience.

SW: In various reviews and press releases, it is mentioned that A Man of the Crowd draws on or recalls different types of film—journalistic, documentary, and film noir. In style and narrative structure, how is your film similar and dissimilar?

MB: All of the stylistic choices were made in relation to what I considered the meanings, intentional or not, that come out of "The Man of the Crowd," the story by Edgar Allan Poe upon which the project is based. What resonated for me were the different models that Poe offers for constructing knowledge, and their relationships to the genres or styles that you mentioned. The story's narrator engages in a journalistic investigation that anticipates documentary filmmaking. At the same time, the subject and setting of what he investigates have a spare but gothic quality that I think reemerges in the long convention of film noir.

SW: When viewing A Man of the Crowd, I was reminded of Italian neorealism, where there is often an obsessive quest, missed encounters, as in the movie The Bicycle Thief. Do you find any parallels?

MB: Yes, I would say especially in the choice of production tools in relation to narrative. Part of the goal of so-called neorealist filmmaking was to construct a story at the borders of reality, using real locations and often working with non-actors. Poe's story is about one man who follows another in order to find out who he "really" is. In making A Man of the Crowd, I created a third character—the camera operator—who takes on the role of narration through images, replacing Poe's language but not the role of the narrator himself. This third position was intended to enhance the sense of realism by revealing to a degree how the film was made. I intentionally used images where my reflection can be seen in windows or mirrors, literally making the film.

SW: I am finding the term "lived experience" often in current text on media. You used it in your answer to my first question. I first found that term in the writings of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty on embodied perception ("the world is not what I think, but what I live through"). In his essay "The Film and the New Psychology," Merleau-Ponty discusses film as temporal gestalt and says that movies are "gripping in their presentation of man" because they do not give us thoughts (as in novels) but deal with conduct or behavior; films "present to us that special way of being in the world." I guess this is a roundabout way of asking about your earlier statement "creating narratives from lived experience."

MB: If we think of narrative as a chain of events in cause-and-effect relationship that unfold in time and space, we can also see how narration is a process that orders time and erases contingency by selecting a "story" from "experience." The conflict between narration and contingency is central to the development of fiction and nonfiction filmmaking and allows us to speak to and understand other subject-positions. In this way we can reveal the position from which we speak while expressing our relationship to what we speak about. This use of "experience" comes out of my reading of relatively recent feminist writing, including Judith Butler, Denise Riley, and Joan Scott.
SW: How would you describe your camera technique, shots, and editing as they relate to creating narrative in *A Man of the Crowd*?

MB: This connects with your associations with Italian neorealism. By constructing the camera as a “character” in the film itself, I decided not to violate time and space the way one would in a fictional narrative in order to tell the story. In other words, I only condensed and never expanded time and space. I didn’t use reverse angles or multiple takes, and I cut the film in a way that I think suggests very short episodes or passages of time, very much in the way that so-called direct cinema in North America and England did.

This was also part of my motivating interest in the project—the way that Poe’s story relates to the questions that arose when basic filmmaking tools were made portable and were first employed in the production of non-fiction film. Historically, two camps emerged: a European, mostly French practice calling itself “cinema vérité” and “direct cinema.” These were opposing models. The French claimed that film could be used to provoke and register or capture the truth through confronting the subject. The direct cinema model in North America claimed the opposite, that truth only emerges when the subject has forgotten that the camera is there, unobtrusively observing.

SW: *Vienna* is a city loaded with history and collective memory—from Strauss to the Vienna Secession to Freud to Austrofascists, and from Anschluss to Nitsch and the Aktionismus. In the making of the film, did many of Vienna’s political, social, and cultural events resonate for you? Did you automatically think of Poe’s story as it is about *Holly Martins’* determination to find Harry Lime?

MB: Poe’s story is set in London, a city that Poe never saw as an adult. I knew that making a film from the tale would necessarily mean filling in this imagined fictional site with an actual place. I chose Vienna because of many of the associations you list. Especially important was the way that Vienna actively seeks to remain a 19th-century city. The city maintains its 19th-century profile and ground plan through various restrictions on building. By contrast it has also become home to many international organizations that greatly affect contemporary life and politics, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), to name two of the most topical. Placing the story in Vienna meant that it could unfold in a 19th-century city-space similar in scale to London of 1840, but with significant historical and contemporary incongruities.

In light of this, I deliberately chose to film in settings that recall a broad range of historical time periods. These are levels of meaning that open up and close down according to one’s knowledge of the city. But it isn’t always the expert or native who notices the references—sometimes it is difficult to see beyond what is most familiar.

SW: Could you please give examples of specific locations, buildings, and sites in your film that have historical, sociopolitical, or cultural significance or importance to the adaptation of Poe’s story?

MB: Every location has significance and each one is literally some type of passage through public space. I was especially interested in sites with multiple paradoxical layers of history. The Poe story begins and ends in a cafe. Vienna is famous for its cafe culture and for its many old atmospheric cafes. But I decided instead to use one of a local chain of cafes called Aida. There are over twenty in Vienna and they too have a specific atmosphere that evokes the 1950s and postwar reconstruction. The interiors of these coffee houses were designed using a great deal of mirror and other reflective surfaces. As we already touched on, I utilized this type of surface throughout the film in many parts of the city.

Another example is St. Stephan’s Platz, the open plaza at the center of Vienna. The man of the title—the man of the crowd—seeks out crowded urban spaces. Again and again he returns to St. Stephan’s Platz, where the faith-fully rebuilt medieval cathedral stands in sharp contrast to neighboring buildings constructed in the 1980s and 1990s. I also shot a sequence on a steep, narrow street called the Oppolzergasse. This is one of the streets where Holly Martins, played by Joseph Cotten, searched for Orson Welles in *The Third Man*.

One site the main characters pass through is Vienna’s Naschmarkt, the old food market just outside the old city. This place is slowly being converted from individual food stands to fast food chains and more expensive restaurants. A few minutes later there is a scene that takes place in one of the far western neighborhoods of Vienna, in Penzing, which was formerly a separate village and is now incorporated into the city. There’s a high level of contrast between the village-style architecture and the neighboring train yard, one of Vienna’s largest.

Another example is the “UNO City,” a massive modernist complex from the 1970s that houses many of the United Nations special commissions that are headquartered in Vienna, such as the IAEA I mentioned earlier. Not far from the UNO City is the Augarten, a French-style garden that I believe dates from the 18th century. During World War II the Nazis erected two enormous concrete anti-aircraft towers and bunkers here. It was impossible to destroy them after the war so they have been incorpo-rated into the garden plan.

One of the most layered sites I used is the 19th-century-style shopping passage, or arcade. This is an acknowledgment of the legacy the Poe story has in literary and critical theory. “The Man of the Crowd” was one of the Poe tales that Charles Baudelaire translated into French. Poe’s urban wanderers greatly influenced Baudelaire’s concept of the flâneur—the well-to-do meandering observer of complex city life. Walter Benjamin, in turn, also used the figure of the flâneur as a tool for understanding modernity and even returned to
the original Poe story in order to critique Baudelaire’s construction of the flâneur. The flâneur, the consummate “consumer” of the modern city, could easily fulfill his goal of being an observed observer in this type of arcade or passage. Benjamin’s materialist history of these arcades, in combination with his analysis of the flâneur, was meant to reveal the unconscious side of 19th-century European consumer society.

SW: What happened in the process of moving from literature to film? What are differences in codes and conventions between the two? Why change the title from “The Man of the Crowd” to A Man of the Crowd?

MB: The process was very much one of translation, which I believe heightened some aspects of the original and obliterates others. I chose to use the narrator’s description as a template for the action of the film. The text disappears and the viewer in many ways experiences a silent film. I inverted this formula in the accompanying book, where the original Poe language dominates and my own location photographs for the film become a counterpoint.

At the end of the story, Poe’s narrator labels the man he has been following “the man of the crowd” because this is the extent of the knowledge he has gained—that the old man he follows is essentially identified with the anonymous urban masses. There is a representative singularity in the original story, a positive identification of the mysterious man as “the” man of the crowd. I wanted to question this and open it up, implying that it is more importantly the method of secret investigation that constructs the person followed as “the” man of the crowd. Making the subject of my project “a” man hopefully implies that he is not so essential or specific, that the story documents one set of possibilities.

SW: Could you talk about the different spaces—filmic and sculptural—explored? The film is projected through a freestanding semi-reflective glass screen in the middle of the gallery that in effect recalls a minimal sculpture. Film and minimal sculpture (e.g., specific objects, the “real space” of Judd) both address the lived experience of the viewer, existential phenomenology. What happens when these different space-shaping strategies intersect?

MB: The semi-reflective glass at the center of the installation is a means for doubling a single projected image into two equal images. Simultaneously, the glass makes the viewer aware of his or her own position in relation to the film and the film’s story. The various reflections and shadows created by both the film and the viewer oscillate between the phenomenological and narrative registers. Upon entering, all of these channels must be negotiated at once. As the viewer “settles” into the story of the film(s), he or she is hopefully aware of doing so in a way that contrasts with the experience of the cinema or other conventional viewing situations.

SW: Let’s clarify what takes place when the image is projected through the hole of one wall (the projector is behind the wall). The reflective two-way glass in the middle of the gallery allows two symmetrical projections, one being a reversal of the other. Moreover, the twenty-minute film is on a continuous loop. This repetition, doubling, and reversal seem to parallel what is taking place with the young man following the older man in the film.

MB: Yes. The original Poe story is full of symmetries that I chose to emphasize and amplify. The follower and followed easily become doppelgängers of each other; the story unfolds over a twenty-four-hour period, beginning and ending at the same time of day; Poe employs an epigram concerning an illegible book at the beginning and end of the story; and so forth. These were the structural inspirations for doubling the image, condensing the time ratio into about one hour of narrative time to one minute of film time, and creating a seamless loop out of the story by joining the end to the beginning. I also retained the enigmatic epigram in the form of a cell phone call made by the follower at the point where the story begins again.

SW: When the viewer comes into the space, does the freestanding framed mirrored glass in the middle of the gallery reflect his or her image onto one of the projections of the film? In essence the viewer becomes part of the film?

Projected film images are created (contrary to video) by using the filmstrip to withhold light from the screen. The images are all, to one degree or another, created by shadows. This is also how the viewers register themselves physically in relation to the film—casting their own shadow more or less at the same scale as the figures in the projected image. At the same time, there is a more subtle play of reflected light unfolding on the surface of the glass between the individual viewer, the film reflections, and other viewers in the space.

SW: It’s as if there is a literal and psychological doubling, repetition, and reversal going on.

MB: Exactly.

SW: In film theory, Freud’s mirror-phase of childhood, fundamental to ego formation, has been applied. In traditional narrative there is identification—the desiring subject and the object of desire. But in A Man of the Crowd, identification and this typical subject-object are disrupted as the young man’s pursuit is challenged by the older man’s sudden stops and changes. Please elaborate.

MB: A very ambiguous play of desire propels the project. Whether Poe intended it or not, I believe the story can be read as a critique of solid subject-object distinctions and relations. As the action progresses, the sense of doubling overwhelms these categories. The more the follower uses his methods of observation in attempting to discover something about the man he follows, the less he learns about that man and the more he reveals about himself and his own desire for knowledge.
SW: In film, especially narrative, there is always an interdependent relationship between fact and fiction, real and imaginary, past and present. It seems in all your previous work, whether it is photography, video, or film, there is at play this dynamic relationship between these notions. You used representations of the past such as historical records, illustrations, documents, and data—a strategy of archival practice.

How does that relate to _A Man of the Crowd_? My first thought was that film is about the relationship between the past and present.

MB: I agree. I think that the desire at play in the story is a desire for the unknown, and in this case the unknown is partly generated by the age difference of the characters. Part of the old man’s secret lies in his own experience, whatever that may be. The younger man who follows is partly attracted by the inability to know of past time, someone else’s past. One of the first things that the narrator says after seeing the old man’s face is “How wild a history!”

SW: With your projects such as _Muhekeantuck—Everything has a Name_; _Definition; Amos Fortune Road_; and _The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa_, in the year 502,002 C.E., you explored the relationship between collective conscious, historical images, and actual place and site. These appear to deal with issues of sociopolitical import whereas _A Man of the Crowd_ is less sociopolitical. Or is it?

MB: I would say that the project addresses many of the same questions of defining the past within the present—but in broader and more symptomatic ways—by looking at some of the paradigms of historical investigation. Most of my work can be situated somewhere on a continuum stretching between geography at one end and journalism at the other.

SW: In your previous projects such as _Subcutaneous_ [which addresses Johann Caspar Lavater’s study of physiognomy], you brought up the idea of 18th-century thought on physiognomy continues today, in Kimberly Lamm’s intelligent and insightful essay for the publication accompanying the exhibition of _A Man of the Crowd_ at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, she associated “physiognomic logic influences” with the narrator in Poe’s story. Without explaining away all the layers of your film, how are these influences at work? Where and in what form are these influences most prevalent in society today?

MB: There is a direct connection between these two projects of mine. Poe’s narrator in the original story reveals a high degree of racism, sexism, and xenophobia when he projects his own categories of knowledge onto the strangers he sees passing by the café window where he sits. When the narrator cannot find a category for the “wild history” he sees in the face of the old man, he is compelled to follow him “whithersoever he should go.” Both _Subcutaneous_ and _A Man of the Crowd_ acknowledge this urge to project onto the unknown and particularly to navigate among unknown people by relating them to what is familiar. But in both cases I try to emphasize that the only knowledge produced is self-knowledge. I think this is true on a broader level today with regard to profiling and immigration policy. We learn far more about the nation-states that attempt to employ these methods than about the subjects they try to define.

SW: In narrative structures of traditional realist cinema there is a cause and effect—buildup, conflict, and resolution. The loop mechanism intensifies the fact that there is no resolution, no ending in _A Man of the Crowd_ but I still could not stop watching the film over and over again. There are few films, especially feature length, that I can watch again immediately afterward. In watching _A Man of the Crowd_, I feel caught up in the action. What is at play that seduces me to stand there for so long knowing that I will come back to the beginning with no resolution at the end?

MB: I hope that it is the way that meaning changes in relation to what you think you know about the “story.” In other words, the cause-and-effect chain is altered according to where you enter the story, when you happen to walk in. The longer you watch the more you witness cause and effect changing places.

SW: One reviewer did not notice that there is a soundtrack. Do you think she focused on the sound of the projector? What is the soundtrack?

MB: The sound is the natural sound that accompanies the image—so-called “diegetic” ambient sound. The installation is arranged in such a way that the mechanical sound of the projector can also remain very present for some viewers. This hopefully leads one back to the material conditions of the piece.

SW: Could you offer a few examples of diegetic sounds?

MB: Diegetic sound is any sound in a film that originates within the “world” or “reality” of the film’s events. This would include all incidental environmental sound. For instance, if a character in a film is listening to music on a radio, that’s diegetic. Any sound that the film’s characters are aware of, such as the musical score, is non-diegetic.

SW: With _A Man of the Crowd_, the viewer can see the projector’s light coming through a hole and can even go behind a wall and see the projector. This idea of the materiality of film has links with structuralist filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow. Have they been influential?

MB: Yes. This is related to questions like the sound of the projector—the material experience of the piece. So-called structuralist and materialist filmmaking was a big influence on me and encouraged me to use film outside of the cinematic context. But from the beginning I wanted to question the representational aspects of the materials I was using. I think I was led in that direction by the fact that there was almost no connection between materialist or structuralist filmmaking and historical materialism, structuralism, or post-structuralism. The terms appear to have been coincidental in a way. In experimental filmmaking, materialism and structuralism described the material and structure of the film medium itself in combination with the projecting apparatus. Little emphasis was placed on the social or political signification of film. Working twenty or thirty years later, I was very interested in film and photography’s representational powers—in the politics of representation, how we accept or deny the meaning and authority of visual narration in nonfictional as well as fictional moving images.

For me, part of this depends on how we see images (physically), so I began to incorporate the installation and configuration of space that surrounds the time-based projection element of the work into the project. In the case of _A Man of the Crowd_, the ideas of the piece have been spatialized, confronting the viewer, becoming part of the physical viewing experience.

SW: For the Dallas Museum of Art, you have curated a film series that is scheduled at different times during the run of your exhibition. We hope to have the following films: _Film_ by Samuel Beckett, _Vienna Walk_ by Gunter Brus, _Trio A_ by Yvonne Rainer, _Permutations_ by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, _Swamp_ by Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson, and _The Mythic Being_ by Adrian Piper. Could you comment on the connections between these films and your practice?

MB: These are all films that are in some aspect connected to the concerns of _A Man of the Crowd_. Some were directly influential; others I discovered after the fact. All of them engage in questions of following, doubling, and walking in the city, and what happens when film is employed to mediate these conditions.

SW: At the Museum, we will also install framed production stills. How is the making of these production stills integral to the process of making _A Man of the Crowd_?

MB: It was through those images that I decided on the settings in Vienna for the action of the film. There are forty-eight images in the series. In a way it’s another account of the twenty-four-hour journey through Vienna, in this case at a rate of two images per hour.
Biography
Matthew Buckingham studied at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago before receiving his B.A. in film production at the University of Iowa. He received his M.F.A. from Bard College and participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. Fellowships and grants include the Henry and Natalie E. Freund Teaching Fellowship, Washington University School of Art, St. Louis, Missouri; the DAAD Artists Program in Berlin, Germany; the New York Foundation for the Arts Artist Fellowship; and the Danish Film Institute Film Workshop Production Grant, Copenhagen, Denmark, among others. Selected recent solo exhibitions include A Man of the Crowd, Murray Guy Gallery, New York, and The Museum of Modern Art, Vienna, Austria; Subcutaneous, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia; Definition, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York; and Contemporary Film and Video: Matthew Buckingham, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. Selected recent group exhibitions include Watershed: The Hudson Valley Art Project, Beacon, New York; Cloudless, CCS Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Greater New York, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York; The American Century, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and Nuit Blanche, ARC Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Selected recent screenings include Three Films by Matthew Buckingham, Arnolfini, Bristol, England; Crossing Boundaries, National Cinématique, Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark; Reading Places, Pacific Film Archive/Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, California; and New Directors/New Films, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Checklist of the Exhibition
A Man of the Crowd
2003
16 mm film installation with sound, 20-minute loop
Dimensions variable
Originaly commissioned by The Museum of Modern Art, Vienna
Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy Gallery, New York
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Café Aida, 12:31 PM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Freyung Passage, 3:55 PM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Amesgassebrücke, 6:42 PM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Minoritenkirche, 8:44 PM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Kleeblattgasse, 9:09 PM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Prater, 10:38 PM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Eysinggasse, 2:50 AM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Prinz-Eugen Strasse, 4:55 AM
A Man of the Crowd, Location
Photograph: Augarten, 8:03 AM
2003
Nine silver gelatin prints
Courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy Gallery, New York
Air transportation provided by American Airlines.
The Dallas Museum of Art is supported in part by the generosity of Museum members and donors and by the citizens of Dallas through the City of Dallas/Office of Cultural Affairs and the Texas Commission on the Arts.