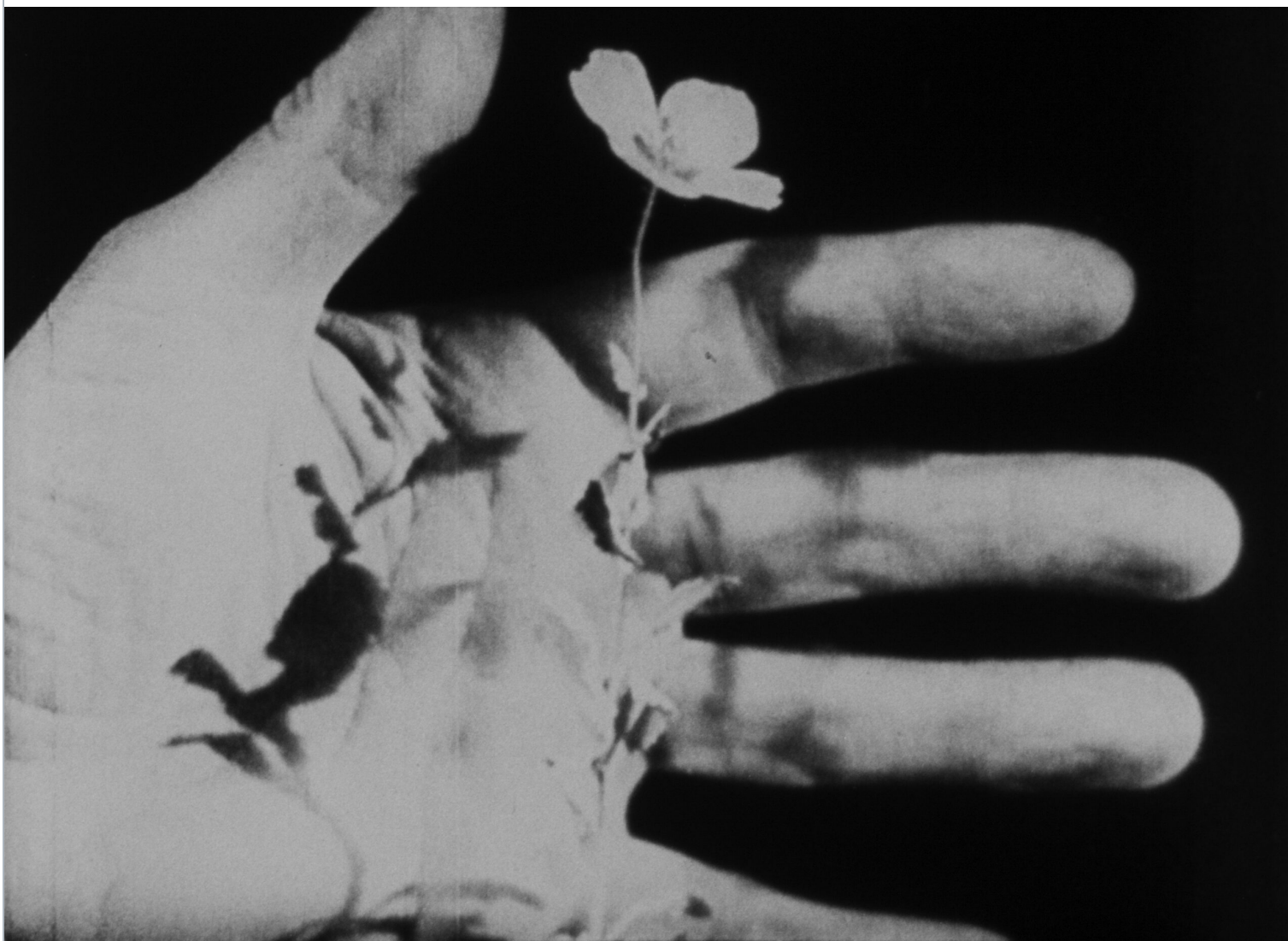




[Studies in Natural Magic Program Notes](#)

Michael Wallin: The World Is Full of Miracles



By **Jon Davies**

If the brain becomes disorganized, a person may forget how to eat. He may walk in circles or become rooted to a single spot. Some, for convenience sake, choose to live inside boxes. Others receive messages from tiny molecules of air.

Living in the world is not so very difficult. There are patterns to follow, numbers and words of advice. Making contact with others, when approached with determination and vigor, is as straightforward as eating a bowl of mush.

The mystery of life is being here with you. The mystery is being with your absence. This is a story. There is isolation and brotherhood, desperation and hope. A heart is laid bare. There is blood. Man leaps from an airplane. Danger. It is not a story for the timid...

So begins Michael Wallin's classic 1988 film *Decodings*. Wallin was born seventy years ago in Palo Alto. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Decodings* is suffused with an aura of suburban repression and the sense of menace that greets non-conformity. A work of shattering, strange beauty, it employs an enigmatic narration alongside intensely affecting music by Shostakovich to reveal deep reserves of feeling in the musty old images Wallin uses as found footage. The

film accomplishes a kind of enchantment through estrangement. Its carefully edited visuals are drawn from some of the most banal material imaginable: industrial or instructional films and other anonymous ephemera bearing an amateur's stiffness, as if the subjects were cripplingly aware of the camera. In Wallin's hands, however, these stale fragments take on an oneiric quality, as if the most degraded cultural detritus has the potential to generate profound metaphysical understanding.

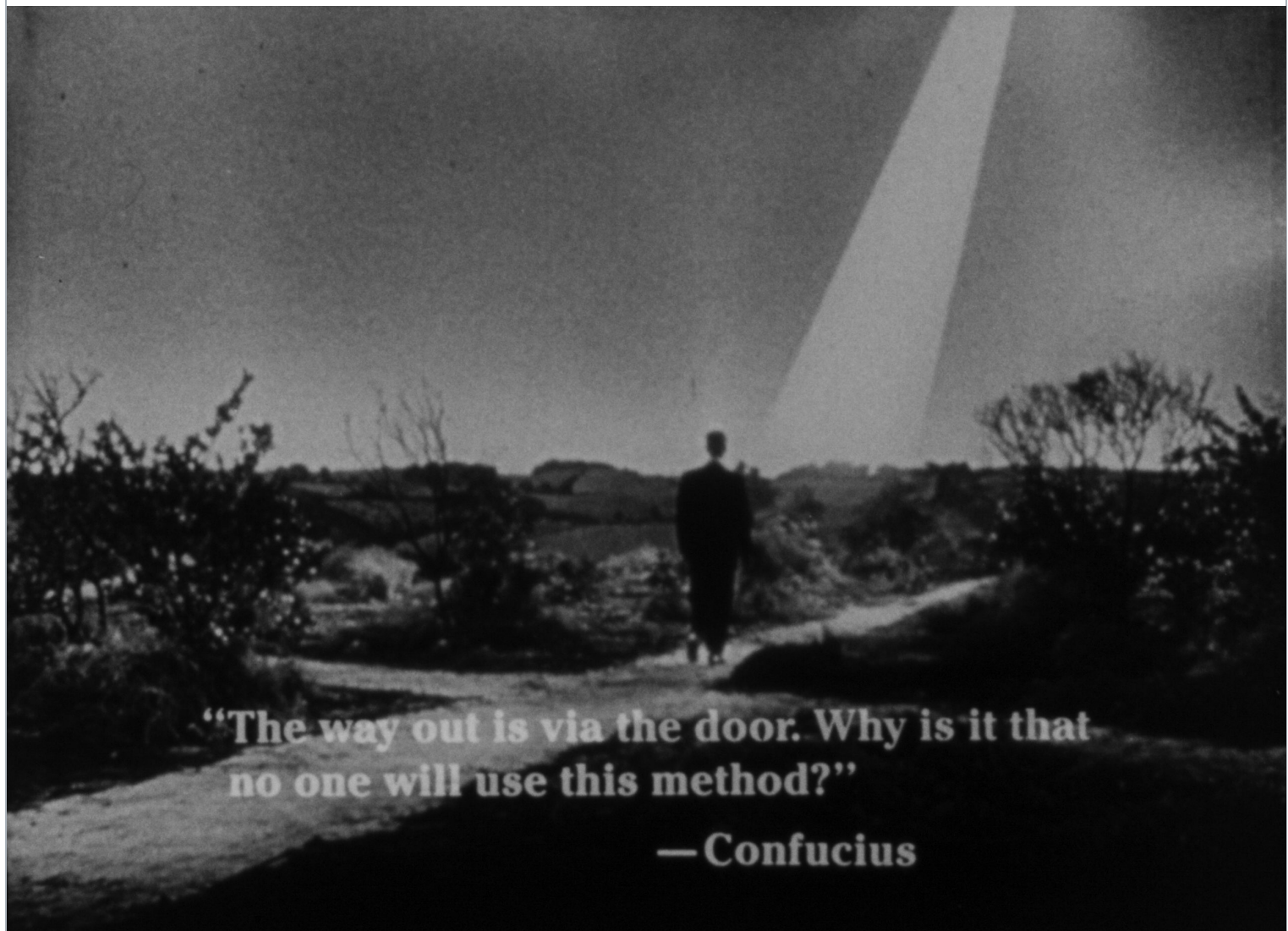


Image: Michael Wallin, *Decodings*

The film begins with a quote from Confucius: "The way out is via the door. Why is it that no one will use this method?" This text overlays a fleeting vision, perhaps drawn from a low-budget religious picture. A man calmly walks away from us, following a shaft of light as if it were a tractor beam: surely some revelation is at hand. The narrator's vocal delivery suggests a sermon, so it's all the more striking that midway through the film he describes a sexual encounter with a young marine using not the language of shame and transgression but of filial piety: "I decided...to show the good manners I'd learned as a child. Keeping in mind how proud my parents would be, I knelt on the ground and told him to drop his pants. Not surprisingly, he obeyed. I held him tenderly and placed my mouth over his already hard cock." (The conflation of sexual and familial rites engenders a double take.)

The film returns again and again to perverse depictions of homosociality, with Wallin taking on the role of an alien investigating the odd rituals of masculinity. This is the eponymous "decoding," the queer work of looking beyond the "normal" surface of things to find the dark drives and hidden emotions lurking in the shadows. Male desire masquerades as violence and thereby eradicates the potential for love. Who are these strange creatures and how could

one ever dare to lie naked next to one, when it seems that all of society would crumble at the slightest gesture of affection? How can one tame these beasts that would sooner kill another man than accept his kiss? An interlude describes the scientific phenomenon of “pseudo-cutaneous linkage” – which I take to mean, simply, touch – and describes how most men struggle with it, while only the most enlightened see it as healthy and beneficial. One sequence shows men whose hands have been amputated – replaced with metal hooks – buttoning up their formal jackets. We only see their torsos, not their faces, and this close attention to their prosthetics defamiliarizes the act of getting dressed, and touch itself. At the end of the film, another metal implement – a scalpel – digs into another torso, naked this time, whose skin is taut and plastic. The narrator intones, “The world is full of miracles. We stand up, we lie down. We chew and swallow. After we end something, we begin something else. It seems only natural.”

Let us look again at the opening narration considering the time and place in which the film was made: 1988, San Francisco. The queer mecca at the height of the AIDS crisis. Bodies are threatened, regimented, and brutalized in Wallin’s film, but always at a historical remove: the wounding imagery is located in the relative safety of the postwar black-and-white past. The closing narration seems to reflect Wallin’s perspective: “A boy lies on the back seat of his parents’ car, staring up at the trees rushing past. Illuminated by street lamps, they seem huge and powerful, yet comforting. The trees are always there, they can be counted on, and nothing whatever is expected of them. Nothing at all.” This is a gloriously cinematic vision of history, in which the images that rush by leave a tangible yet ambiguous residue. It is perhaps no surprise that the film’s visual material originates in the era of Wallin’s childhood, the 1940s and 1950s, when his psyche was in formation. Speaking about the film’s images, Wallin claimed they were suffused with “all the resonances and subtexts of things we were forbidden to talk and think about when I was growing up.”¹ Called on to speak in the harsh present of 1988, they conceal as much as they reveal. The result is an affective portrait of what it was like to live through the fear, horror and devastation of the first decade of AIDS, rather than an illustration of it.

My appreciation for *Decodings* and its eerie emotional complexity deepened when I watched Wallin’s youthful film, *The Place Between Our Bodies* (1975). Here Wallin does not conceal himself in others’ images and voices; instead he speaks in the first-person with his body taking center stage, revealing all. The film is a diaristic account of Wallin’s experiences with San Francisco’s public gay sex culture, where every sexual fantasy one could imagine – fuelled by images in a panoply of gay porn films and magazines – is potentially met by a different man encountered in the street, or at a bar or bathhouse. Momentarily sated, however, it is only a matter of time before desire returns, becoming a matter of habit or obsession, a high to be chased in circles. The variety on offer is overwhelming, leading Wallin to a kind of consumer fatigue; repetition results in frustration. Among the libidinal smorgasbord, Wallin does not think he will ever meet a lover who will last, but, lo and behold, he meets a man in a bookstore: the blond to his brunette, the one.

Here the film’s tone turns from “compulsive franticness” to unabashed romanticism, with Wallin filming his boyfriend with a celluloid gaze of total adoration. The pair exhibits the self-obsession of the early days of love, the camera triangulating the couple and acting as witness to their affectionate poses, domestic rituals, and candid conversations about their lovemaking. The perfection of their union in these playfully erotic home movies is emblemized by their mutual orgasm; after they both climax they run outside to a veritable Garden of Eden teeming with life. A string of post-coital cum catches the light, transforming base matter into a metaphysical string between self and other. For generations of queer men, the explicit unprotected sex on view in films like Wallin’s can be a source of blistering

pathos, visceral reminders of a seemingly utopian state of sexual experimentation, openness and pleasure that AIDS would brutally shut down. Gay sexuality would never be free from fear and anxiety again.²

In this earlier film Wallin looks lustily at the living, breathing bodies of other men in order to find himself and a language to articulate his desires, rather than at the dusty cinematic scraps of American life that makes up *Decodings*. The old black-and-white films in *Decodings* may not have the same degree of immediacy, but the film is arguably just as much about “the place between our bodies” when one takes into account the intense erotics of collaboration taking place behind the scenes. Rather than the stability of a single speaking subject, the author’s voice in *Decodings* is refracted in three: while the film’s authorship is Wallin’s, he handed the task of writing the narration to Michael Blumlein (after finding his own initial draft to be “too confessional, too obvious”³), which is read by yet another man, William Graves. The “I” here, which is arguably poised between child and adult, innocence and experience, is multiple, a threesome. Similarly, both films express an erotic orientation towards the multitude; while this gives way to the sanctity of the couple in *The Place Between Our Bodies*, the potential of sexual contact – lost, obscured but not forgotten or irretrievable – seems to haunt every frame of *Decodings*.

Jon Davies is a curator, writer and PhD candidate in Art History at Stanford University. Between 2008–12 his curated retrospective *People Like Us: The Gossip of Colin Campbell* toured widely. In 2011–12, he curated the large-scale group exhibition *Coming After* while Assistant Curator at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto. His book on Paul Morrissey’s film *Trash* was published in 2009 and he co-edited *Little Joe #5* with Sam Ashby in 2016.

Michael Wallin and Barbara Hammer’s “Boys & Girls Together Film/Video Party” invitation