

Holden, Stephen. "A Monument Crumbling With All Its Dark Secrets," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2006.

"The Decay of Fiction" was shown as part of the Avant-Garde Visions series in the 2002 New York Film Festival. Following are excerpts from the review that appeared in *The New York Times* on Oct. 12, 2002. This unrated film opens today at the Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue at Second Street, East Village.

If there were more experimental films as entertaining as "The Decay of Fiction," Pat O'Neill's luminous Hollywood ghost story, the notion of a thriving avant-garde cinema might not be so intimidating to the moviegoing public.

The 73-minute movie is a semiabstract film noir shot largely in the empty corridors and bare peeling rooms of the Ambassador, a once-grand Los Angeles hotel that went spectacularly to seed after closing in 1989. The Ambassador was the site of some of the early Academy Awards ceremonies in the 1930's and of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. But instead of concentrating on that public history, the film uses the building, emptied of its furnishings, to imagine its mythical shadow history and its status as a metaphor for old Hollywood, in all its fabulous glamour and corruption.

While depicting the relentless passage of time with a power that few other films have captured, "The Decay of Fiction" sustains a mood of almost gothic sadness. Actors dressed in period garb from the 1930's, 40's and 50's, filmed in black-and-white and double exposed against color sequences of the hotel, appear and vanish like ghosts in fractured vignettes that never quite cohere into stories.

Those views of the hotel (both inside and out) depict it as a proud, ruined citadel housing a million dark secrets. Against the speeded-up color photography, in which clouds race above the building and shadows creep up and down the facade, the ghosts move at normal speed, caught up in their individual dramas, oblivious to time. But occasionally the tempos are reversed, especially in scenes of the Ambassador staff tearing around the bowels of the hotel like frenzied, hyperactive little robots.

The more intriguing characters, including a blond siren and a pair of detectives, tend to be film noir and gangster movie archetypes, spouting enigmatic nuggets of hard-boiled dialogue lifted from vintage Hollywood films.

"The Decay of Fiction" is so infatuated with vintage film lore that it leaves you with a disturbing sense of the power that the Dream Factory exerts on the historical imagination. It is a little scary to realize that before the rise of television, consuming old movies — even bad ones — was probably the closest we may have come to experiencing life in a particular time and place.