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“Matthew Buckingham”

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By Holland Cotter

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“A Man of the Crowd,” the film installation that makes up Matthew Buckingham’s show, is based on a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, set in a dank, phantasmic, Ridley Scott-ish London. The narrator, recovering from some unspecified malaise, finds himself irresistibly drawn from passive people-watching to following an unknown older man through the city’s lower depths, a world of prostitution, gin mills and human degradation. The fevered journey, which produces in the narrator a sense of high-minded moral revulsion, comes to an inconclusive end, like an interrupted dream.

Mr. Buckingham tells the same story, but slightly altered. Instead of London, a city Poe never actually saw, he shoots his film in a sunny Vienna, undistinctively antique, a middle-European anywhere. The two characters are casually dressed, the young stalker in a T-shirt, the older man in a light suit. They are joined by a third character, the camera, which follows the follower.

This is not always easy to do. The man pursued, driven and self-absorbed, is prone to sudden stops and starts, changes of direction, dodging tactics. When the two men finally confront each other, the older merely brushes past the younger, rubbing his shoulder against him, and moves on. Later he appears outside a cafe where the young man is sitting, first reflected in a window, then in person, an effect neatly matched in the exhibition’s use of coated glass to project the film on the gallery wall in mirror images. The pursuit begins again, but now its nature is clear: this is a protracted two-way seduction.

Much of Mr. Buckingham’s earlier work deals with a similar attraction-repulsion dynamic. This was true of his documentary-style account of the heroic and dishonorable history, past and future, of the carvings at Mount Rushmore, and of his politically interpretive tour, cheery and damning, of Native American and European settlements along the Hudson River. In “*A Man of the Crowd*,” he transports another fraught American tale to a Hitchcockian Old World of suspense, faded glamour and Freud, and comes up with the same conclusion: truth and fiction are indistinguishably strange, mutually dependent and constantly changing places.