THE DECAY OF MEMORY AND MATTER:
MATERIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE NEW ARTISTIC ARCHIVE

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By

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This project emerges from questions about how American society approaches film archiving and preservation, particularly in relation to the materiality of the image objects such an activity is predicated on. In the current moment, traditional film archives engage in a paradoxical endeavor: preservation. In an ideal sense, institutional archives strive to protect as many of their film holdings in the most original, pristine condition as possible. Yet such a mission is intensely problematic given a host of contemporary complications such as the natural instability of material film objects, changing concepts of how memorial processes operate, the rise of a digital remix culture, and the ever-increasing glut of moving images to be archived and preserved. Given this confluence of contextual concerns that traditional archives are confronted with, this project repositions the postmodern techniques of montage, collage and sampling as new, alternative archival forms. These strategies, which draw directly on the preexisting detritus of culture for source material, yield illuminative recombinations of the past – and present. In contrast to the traditional modes, these approaches do not attempt to ward off decay but instead embrace the gradual transformation of its source materials as both an aesthetic and perhaps more importantly, as a necessary stage in the cycle of cultural creation. This project ultimately argues that these new forms of archiving represent effective alternatives to
traditional methods of archiving, particularly as these new approaches align with contemporary understandings of memory, history, decay and remix culture.

The project begins by historicizing the traditional modes of non-commercial film archiving; the material decay problem, particularly of nitrate film; and the shift in thinking about cultural memory. Much of this initial chapter takes cues from the work of film archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai. The following section explores new methods of creative archival work across media, as well as the cognizance of materiality that such varied work reflects. This section builds on critical theory of Walter Benjamin and historian David Lowenthal, as well as artists and theorists who address appropriation art, techniques of bricolage and montage, waste culture, forgetting, the use of found objects and contemporary remix culture. The following chapter concerns the centerpiece case study of Bill Morrison’s Decasia: The State of Decay, a 2002 film that serves as a foundational piece of new archival work. The project concludes with an exploration of the implications and consequences of recognizing new methods as archival in nature with particular attention to contemporary digital culture.
For my family and friends.
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INTRODUCTION

The frame pauses briefly before the projector’s lamp, and then moves on. Our lives are accumulations of ephemeral images and moments that our consciousness constructs into a reality. No sooner have we grasped the present, it is relegated to the past, where it only exists in the subjective history of each individual. The images can be thought of as desires or memories: actions that take place in the mind. The film stock can be thought of as the body, that which enables these events to be seen. Like our own bodies, this celluloid is a fragile and ephemeral medium that can deteriorate in countless ways.¹

- Bill Morrison, introduction to his films

For some the notion of storage conjures memory (things saved become souvenirs), for others history (things saved become information). And yet for others, storage is a provocative spectacle of material culture that hails the virtual as an ideal form of relief from the everyday problem of what to do with all this stuff. In short, the idea of storage cannot be easily contained.²

- Ingrid Schaffner, “Digging Back into ‘Deep Storage’”

The opening sequence of Bill Morrison’s 2002 film Decasia: The State of Decay includes an image of film reels slowly unspooling strips of celluloid into a trough of developer. The camera shot tightens. Then, from out of the frame, a hand reaches into the scene, breaking the calm surface of the wash. The disembodied fingers pull a strip of film from the trough, give it a cursory surface inspection and just as quickly let it dip back into the fluid. In an era when moving images are captured and stored digitally, the cinematic moment is startling as it depicts film as inextricably material: a medium to be physically touched and manipulated. As Morrison writes, this celluloid media is delicate – and decays in any number of ways.

Although the images, narratives and aesthetics of film are more often than not a primary source for academic research and study, the physical properties of the medium

are seldom considered. This attention to the medium as tangible, ephemeral material is at
the heart of this project, ultimately with regard to questions about how such works are
archived and preserved. As Ingrid Schaffner remarks, given the multiple layers of
memory, history and relief, an inclusive idea of storage is not easily rendered. Such a
characterization can be extended to the complex archival activities that surround moving
images, particularly those of the film variety.

In the current moment, traditional film archives engage in a paradoxical activity:
preservation. In an ideal sense, institutional archives strive to protect as many of their
film holdings in the most original, pristine condition as possible. Yet such an endeavor is
intensely problematic given a host of contemporary complications such as the natural
instability of material film objects, changing concepts of how memorial processes
operate, the rise of a digital remix culture, and the ever-increasing glut of moving images
to be archived and preserved. Given this confluence of contextual concerns that
traditional archives are confronted with, this project repositions the postmodern
techniques of montage, collage and sampling as new, alternative archival forms. These
strategies, which draw directly on the preexisting detritus of culture for source material,
yield illuminative recombinations of the past – and present. In contrast to the traditional
modes, these approaches do not attempt to ward off decay but instead embrace the
gradual transformation of its source materials as both an aesthetic and perhaps more
importantly, as a necessary stage in the cycle of cultural creation. This project ultimately
argues that these new forms of archiving represent effective alternatives to traditional
methods of archiving, particularly as these new approaches align with contemporary
understandings of memory, history, decay and remix culture.
Although the project draws from a variety of different disciplines and thinkers, the theoretical grounding lies in notable scholarship from three areas: film archiving, critical theory and a growing body of work concerning the aesthetics and methods of cultural recycling. The work of Paolo Cherchi Usai, the Director of the National Film and Sound Archive in Australia and co-founder of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House, demonstrates a philosophical shift away from the tendencies of traditional approaches to archiving and preservation. Walter Benjamin’s theoretical writings, specifically *The Arcades Project* and “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” provide the theoretical underpinnings for considering non-linear conceptions of history in the wake of mass-reproducible technologies of representation. The area of cultural recycling is informed by thoughts on film, “rubbish,” and postmodern aesthetics and methods, but perhaps the fundamental cornerstone resides in the work of David Lowenthal of the University College of London whose work advocates the use of physical fragments as an alternative to material preservation.

The construction of this project takes a number of cues from Lisa Gitelman’s 2006 book *Always Already New* as a model for historicizing a technological medium. Although this project is concerned primarily with film, it also addresses the growth of digital moving images, particularly with regard to the continuity between the material complications that arise in both analog and digital media in the areas of archiving and preservation. The format of this work builds on Gitelman’s framework by beginning with a historical overview, in this case, non-commercial institutional film archives in the United States, and then shifting to a more contemporary iteration with an argument for new forms of artistic archiving. As such, the project comprises three major chapters that
cover the historical trajectory of traditional film archives, the positioning of artistic methods as new archival forms, and the in-depth case study of experimental filmmaker Bill Morrison’s 2002 work *Decasia: The State of Decay*. The project concludes with a discussion of the implications for digital culture and the political consequences that result from a new conception of archiving in the current moment.

Chapter I of this work serves as a multi-faceted introduction to the historical state of film archiving in the United States. An in-depth look at the origins of such institutions reveals a sense of fundamental instability across the field. That is, there has never been a clear, resolute foundation from which film archives work. This section provides the essential definitional work regarding archiving and preservation as a means of demonstrating the inherent paradox of such work. The complicated notion of archiving in an absolute sense becomes especially clear with an exploration of the material quandaries of celluloid film, as well as a short overview of literature concerning the changing conception of how memory and history are affected by technologies of representation.

The project then moves to an exploration of more contemporary artistic methods across media (film, visual arts and music) in Chapter II. The postmodern sensibilities embodied in the strategies and ideas of montage, collage and sampling depend on the open hybridization of preexisting materials from any source and media, particularly that which is obscure, ignored or forgotten. These methods reflect not only openness to the slowly decaying detritus of the past, but a reliance on the historical connotations and meanings that such materials can represent. As such, these activities resonate with an inherent archival sense, as it is often essential for artists employing these methods to have
extensive, hands-on understandings of the historical value, context and meaning of the materials they use.

Morrison’s *Decasia*, a work about which the celebrated filmmaker Errol Morris once stated: “This may be the greatest movie every made,”[^3] is the subject of Chapter III. The work provides a rich, densely layered case study for exploring the issues of memory, history and by extension, film archiving both in traditional and contemporary contexts. The film, which Morrison pieced together from the fragments of decayed films found in American film archives, not only demonstrates the methods of montage and an awareness of the importance of using appropriated or found film, but more importantly acknowledges the cycle of creation and re-creation in which material decay plays a fundamental role.

This project begins with an analysis of archiving film as a physical medium, i.e. celluloid with a definite, observable tactile presence, but it ends in Chapter IV with projections for those image objects that appear to be immaterial. Although the problems at the heart of film archiving and preservation may immediately seem to be localized to tangible objects, digital culture also yields similar, if not more pronounced material complications. The conclusion of this work loops forward by exploring the implications that new archival methods signal for the future of digital moving images, as well as the democratizing consequences that such strategies embody.

Figure 2: A piece of film damaged by Hurricane Katrina from the work of experimental animator/filmmaker Helen Hill
CHAPTER I

THE PARADOX OF PRESERVATION:
FILM ARCHIVING AND CHANGING APPROACHES TO CULTURAL MEMORY

In order to better understand the state of traditional film archiving in the current moment, it is useful to begin with an exploration of its past. By doing so, it becomes clear that the field itself, which was created in the 1930s, has historically been one in almost constant flux. Since the field’s earliest iterations, the political questions of how to preserve film and what films to designate for such archival protections were seldom defined. Instead, a smattering of archivists, historians and film lovers at a handful of institutions with varying missions undertook the monumental task of saving any and all materials they could get their hands on. Throughout the 20th century these archival attempts to store and preserve as much as possible have evolved. Although in many cases traditional archives instituted processes for selection, these criteria were and still are very much dependent on economic forces, especially those from the commercial movie industry. Despite the creation of what appear to be more stringent policies of selection, the rhetoric of many in the field still reflects a troubling tendency – the inherent archival desire to save everything.

Perhaps as important if not more than the political questions of selection are the material problems that film objects present for archivists. At all stages of the traditional process, the institutional driving forces for preservation ultimately appear incompatible with the reality of saving what is ineffably ephemeral. It is not simply a matter of choosing what films to preserve, but in the larger context, the gradual, unstoppable erosion of film itself compromises the entire archival endeavor. This confluence of issues: the field’s historical instability, the politics of selection, the archival “fever” to try
to save everything, and the materiality of film itself, are ever-more complicated by changing discussions about cultural memory, specifically in how viewers cognitively and creatively experience images of the past through the technology of film.

In an overarching sense, this chapter provides a historical overview of three foundational concepts at work in the project: film archiving and preservation, the materiality of film itself, and cultural memory. This approach demonstrates the growing need to confront the traditional modes of thought about film archiving so as to develop new concepts of what it means to archive in the 21st century. In the context of participatory culture, there is mounting evidence that the contemporary artistic methods of montage, collage and sampling reflect an archival nature. These postmodern sensibilities signal a shift away from static, passive notions of history in favor of active engagement with the past. The traditional paradigm of an archive as simply reactive gives way to the interactive. In order to construct the foundation for this larger argument, it is necessary to explore the broad scope of archiving and preservation, the materiality of film, and current thinking about cultural memory.

The chapter begins by establishing a working concept of an institutional film archive as well as delineating between an archive and its primary function of preservation. A short exploration of the origins of film archives follows with specific attention to the stated purposes and missions behind the development of such institutions. Included in this discussion are some of the various historical arguments and rhetoric about the politics of selection. The chapter then shifts to address the material problems of film itself and the implications that such deterioration holds for traditional archives. The third section of this chapter concerns the inextricable connection that persists between
film objects and memories of the past. Contemporary scholarship about cultural memory production provides important context for the potential of institutional archives, but perhaps more importantly lays the conceptual groundwork for establishing a consideration of new forms of archival activity.

A WORKING CONCEPT OF THE FILM ARCHIVE

Since the origins of film archives in the 1930s, there has never been an all-encompassing definition of what such an institution is or what its activities should be. Penelope Houston argues that there is “no typical archive,” as all archival institutions, both commercial and public (educational), have individual missions, approaches and capabilities.⁴ Although many institutions belong to umbrella organizations such as the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), none adhere to a single mode of thinking when it comes to archiving and preserving films. For the purposes of this project, exploring a concept of what is meant by “film archive” and its activities, namely “film preservation” establishes a sense of the traditional archive, as well as what sorts of long-standing activity such institutions engage in, specifically with regard to what such a concept and its activities connote.

A working concept is founded on a definition of archives in general as found in Lewis and Lynn Bellardo’s, *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers*, where they describe archives as encompassing three interrelated concepts: 1) the documents from an organization being preserved because of their continuing value, 2) the building where the documents are located, and 3) the program or

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⁴ Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 5.
responsible for archiving, preserving and making available the archived materials.\textsuperscript{5} By extension, a definition of film archives reads: “Records/archives in the form of motion pictures.”\textsuperscript{6} Such a definition is useful as a baseline for considering the three major components of an archive, but as Karen Gracy notes, it is also problematic given that films are not merely documents, rather they exist as mass-reproduced commodities and subsequently have multi-faceted value.\textsuperscript{7} The simplified definition is also complicated by the fact that a single organization does not create all films, but rather a sprawling industry comprising multiple entities generates moving image materials.\textsuperscript{8}

In addition to these nuances, it is essential to consider why the term “archive” was originally settled upon. Houston states that the word itself implies a sense of “solidity and safe-keeping,” connotations that early archivists were eager to exploit as many executives in the film industry were skeptical that film libraries (as they were previously referred to) might devolve into film-lending sites.\textsuperscript{9} In a traditional sense then, film archives can be thought of as institutions for safekeeping, rather than the distribution or exhibition of films, which in most cases are collected from a wide variety of sources and producers. This project also generally limits the discussion to non-commercial institutions as opposed to industry archives. As this project demonstrates, this long-held connotation of safekeeping is ultimately problematic in light of the delicate material qualities of film itself. Despite all efforts by film archives to fulfill those standards of solidity and safekeeping, the activity of film preservation can be viewed as paradoxical.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 14
\textsuperscript{7} Karen Gracy, \textit{The Imperative to Preserve: Competing Definitions of Value in the World of Film Preservation} (Dissertation University of California Los Angeles) (Michigan: Proquest Information and Learning Company, 2001), 30.
\textsuperscript{9} Houston, 2-3.
Film preservation though has long been considered the most important goal of film archives.\textsuperscript{10} The emphasis on preservation distinguishes archives from film libraries, as well as institutions that work with archival documents, books, etc. Given the fragile materiality of film, film archivists’ priorities, in both the traditional and current stages, center on preserving archival moving images. In a general sense, film preservation is the work that ensures that a film is still viewable. Gracy makes an important distinction though that is particular to the nature of film preservation itself:

When archivists talk of a film having been preserved, they usually mean that a series of procedures has been performed which ensures that a film is 1) viewable in its original format with its full visual and aural values retained, and 2) protected for the future by preprint material through which subsequent viewing copies can be created.\textsuperscript{11}

Film preservation not only implies storage and appropriate care, but the activity demands a careful attention to the film’s “original format” and its “full visual and aural values.” The idea of protecting an image object for the future is tantamount to the activity of preservation. The stated mission of ensuring what amounts to an authentic, original film object is inherently problematic given the deterioration that archivists face with every piece of celluloid in their collections. This project hinges on the intrinsic contradiction between film preservation and the realities of decay. As this section demonstrates, there is an underlining paradox that traditional archivists are faced with: preserving that which ultimately undermines all preservation efforts. Despite such a seemingly futile predicament, the archival drive to save film remains firmly entrenched in institutions. Subsequently, the next logical step in exploring this area is to consider what motivates such an activity.

\textsuperscript{10} Houston, 8.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 7.
WHY ARCHIVE FILM?

We all have a responsibility to preserve the past for the future. The intentional burning of books and paintings is regarded as a cultural crime. How will future generations learn about the 20th century, if through our neglect, its greatest art form is lost?12

- Martin Scorsese

The origins of American film archiving are found in the 1930s, about fifty years after the first motion pictures were produced and exhibited. A number of archivists, film theorists and historians have commented on those early days, particularly on advocating the importance of saving films. Whether their reasoning was founded in nostalgia for the silent films of cinema’s earliest days, a belief in the medium as a source for historical research, or quite simply to compile a complete sense of film history itself, a critical mass of concerned film appreciators pushed for a new sort of institution, one solely dedicated to film. Their insights and arguments not only shed light on the origins of film archiving, but they also mirror arguments from more current history about the fundamental reasons that societies archive film.

One of the earliest advocates for film archives was Iris Barry, a founder and curator of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library. In her article, “The Film Library and How It Grew,” she describes a sense of the cultural context in the 1930s and provides an argument for preserving older films:

It was, I think, the advent of the talkies and – by that time – their prevalence which had slowly made us realize what we had lacked or had lost. . . . Should we never again experience the same pleasure that Intolerance, Moana, or Greed had given with their combination of eloquent silence, visual excitement, and that hallucinatory ‘real’ music from “real” orchestras in the movie theaters which buoyed them up and drifted us with them into bliss? No question but that had furnished an experience different in kind. . . . How could movies be taken

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12 Robert Smither, ed., This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film (Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2002), ix.
seriously if they were to remain so ephemeral, so lacking in pride of ancestry or of tradition?13

Barry’s passionate belief in preserving film reflects a longing for a time of film that was in the distant past. At the heart of her argument is a fear of loss, a threat that even the remaining traces of cherished experiences are destined for destruction. Her reasoning, what appears to be a justification for a more respected status for the medium itself, is entirely based in nostalgia for a film experience that can never actually be reclaimed.

One of the early hurdles that film archivists faced was the challenge of convincing society at large of film’s aesthetic importance. Steven Higgins describes the decision to include film in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art by its founding director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (Iris Barry’s boss), as it was “the only great art form peculiar to the twentieth century.”14 Higgins states: “the simple fact of their emergence from the cultural ferment of the modern age gave them such a place in such an institution.”15

Although in the earliest days of film archiving the driving forces were based more on aesthetic and cultural reasoning, since then many other archivists and scholars have come to value film from a historical perspective. For them, motion pictures are not simply artistic creations, but they are simultaneously laden with information about the past. In his article “Film as a Source Material: Some Preliminary Notes Toward a Methodology,” Martin Jackson asserts that film archives provide “priceless source material for the study of modern civilization” that is both new and provocative.16 His

15 Ibid.
16 Martin Jackson, “Film as a Source Material: Some Preliminary Notes Toward a Methodology,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History Vol. 4, No. 1 (Summer, 1973): 73, 80 [journal on-line] available from
argument rests on what he views as the two functions of film: It can be viewed simply as a visual record or taken as representative of public opinion in the particular moments that are depicted.\textsuperscript{17}

This power of film as a means of awareness of history is mirrored in the work of Tom McGreevy and Joanne Yeck. Their book, \textit{Our Movie Heritage} dramatizes the impact of losing a significant part of film heritage – not those films that are currently being produced (they claim those are being properly preserved) – but those that were produced before the studios took an interest in preserving them. They quote from Frank Hodsoll, the former chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts:

\begin{quote}
Every film is a time capsule which tells us how we saw ourselves, and how others saw us, at a point in our past. The disappearance of a film or archival videotape is therefore not only a loss of an artistic object, it is also a partial obliteration of our nation’s history.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Francis Ford Coppola emphasizes this argument when he states: “In the end, all we have is our history. And these films constitute a major portion of the history of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{19} As evidenced by these remarks, for many people films serve as important windows into the past, as they can capture and reveal visual details about a particular society and culture. But undergirding this rhetoric is a line of reasoning in which image objects can persist in a sort of static “time capsule” state, unchanging, simply waiting for some interested party to take the films out of their containers to delve into for research.

Given the historical inclination of film companies (and archives themselves) to wantonly

\textsuperscript{17} Jackson, 79.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 98.
dispose of old films, as well as film’s inherent ephemeral nature, such traditionally held reasoning seems to be very much in a bind.

In historical and traditional terms, the overarching argument is, simply put, that film is worth saving. Although the reasoning begins with the declaration that films retain value as films, for many their worth can be measured in aesthetic terms as pieces of art and as historical documents of modern civilization. These material objects that were screened in theaters long ago still have some bearing, meaning and value on the present. The loss of those objects translates to a loss of those meanings and value. Or as Martin Scorsese has described it, the loss amounts to a form of “cultural suicide.” In a traditional sense, the discourse of archiving is one that values films as documents and precious pieces of art. The rhetoric belies a concept of film as a material that can be preserved in a close semblance of its original state – as whole, original, protected, preserved. Again, this fundamental belief in the preservation of objects as connoting a sense of safekeeping and solidity is ultimately problematic.

**What to Save?**

Given the difficulties that early archivists faced in defending their motivations and beliefs in the film medium itself, the political questions of what to save were of little consequence. Instead, those pioneers worked to collect and preserve as many films as possible. While a brief historical overview of the politics of selection demonstrates how such questions of selection have evolved, it also shows that in an overarching sense, the archival tendencies to save everything remain very much the same. Such an approach is also essential in exploring how traditional archives have never enjoyed full autonomy.

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20 McGreevey and Yeck, 131.
from industry connections, nor have they have ever had a clear, resolute sense of what evaluation criteria should be used in deciding what materials to archive. The historical foundation for traditional archives reflects a sense of instability, which in itself presages a shift that appears to be occurring in contemporary archival activities.

In his work *Burning Passions: An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema*, Paolo Cherchi Usai argues that archivists were limited as to their options of what to collect and that in order to understand why so few early films were preserved, one must look at the social context of film at the time.

It was an extremely arduous task to try to persuade most intellectuals that cinema is an aesthetic phenomenon with its own dignity, worthy of being spoken and written about with the same respect given to a play, painting, an architectural structure or musical work.\(^{21}\)

He asserts that this status of film has been theoretically overcome, but in the early days, archivists simply collected as many films as possible, stored them as best they could, and then screened them.\(^{22}\) Subsequently, the personality of individual archivists or curators at the various fledgling institutions drove the processes of selecting films for inclusion in archives, deciding on films to be preserved from existing collections, working with particular donors on new acquisitions, and the subsequent funding and donation arrangements. Generally speaking, most early archives were faced with massaging a connection with the film studios in order to obtain materials. As a result, such corporate enterprises wielded a definite influence on decisions at non-commercial institutions. In this current moment some might be concerned with the political impact the job of archivist has with regard to the cultural productions that are preserved for the future, i.e.

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22 Ibid.
what stories get saved for the next generations, but in the earliest iterations of the
profession, the ultimate say was not in the hands of neutral archivists, rather they were at
the mercy of the film industry.

Where Usai outlines the harsh realities of the earliest archives, Ivan Butler
describes a more open-ended conceptual approach to how archival decisions were made:

The basic criterion is a very simple one. Anyone assessing a film for preservation
in the Archive is asked to view it with one question constantly in the forefront of
his mind, from sequence to sequence, from shot to shot: namely: Is there any
conceivable reason of form or content, or of external association of any kind, why
the loss of this film, fifty years hence or five hundred years hence, would be
regretted? If the answer is “yes,” then this may be a justification for keeping it: if
it is an emphatic “Yes,” then it certainly will be so.23

Butler’s simple criteria represent an open-minded, if not openly vague, approach to
selection. To some degree it harkens back to Iris Barry’s original nostalgia for film
experiences of the past, particularly when he employs the word “regretted” to describe
how one might characterize the potential loss of a film. Such an open criteria not only
reinforced a tendency toward erring on the side of saving everything rather than selecting
particular films, but it placed a great deal of autonomy and control in the hands of
individual archivists. Houston echoes the realities of such an approach when she
describes the professional world of film archivists as one in which “so many decisions
have to be taken on trust.”24

The notion of film archivists as trying to save everything has been addressed
somewhat within the field, particularly given how so few of the earliest films produced,
i.e. those that are in the highest danger of being lost, still exist. This is to say that as a
result of the material realities of archival film, archivists have been forced into making

23 Ivan Butler, “To Encourage the Art of the Film” (London: Robert Hale & Company), 62.
24 Houston, 7.
decisions about their selections. McGreevy and Yeck state: “Eighty percent of the movies produced before 1929 are gone. Fifty percent of the movies produced before 1950 are gone.”25 As a result, they propose that the first priority for archivists automatically becomes the millions of feet of celluloid that archives across the country do not have the funds to preserve. McGreevy and Yeck go further by describing standard criteria that Robert Rosen of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television uses when diving into unpreserved nitrate material: “uniqueness and rarity, condition, and historical, sociological and artistic significance.”26 The issue of rarity is highlighted as it is a requirement institutions must prove in order to receive federal funding for a particular preservation project.27

In his article “Film as a Museum Object,” John Kuiper, a former Head of the Motion Pictures Section of The Library of Congress, posits that archivists take a more nuanced approach when considering the rarity of film objects. He argues that the films that most interests to scholars, researchers and archivists end up being treated in the same manner as museum objects. These film artifacts “exhibit a rarity or special value that makes them suitable for acquisition, preservation, and exhibition.”28 But he also makes a distinction when it comes to the idea of rarity, as that term implies a sense of exclusivity.29 A far more important criterion upon which films are selected is “authentication.”30 This search for a sense of “authenticity” drives the mission of archivists and preservationists as they investigate a particular film’s provenance, physical

26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 41.
character, history of its production, structural character, and the social, political and artistic contexts in which they were created and exist.\textsuperscript{31} In short, archiving a film becomes a search for its origins, for locating the film as an object within a definite sense of its original context. Kuiper’s work is instructive as it demonstrates a distinction in thinking about selecting films not simply because they are rare, but rather because they have some other meaning or value.

Where the original film archives were in a position to try to save as much as possible in order to overcome the issue of little access to films themselves, in the current moment, archives are very much faced with an overflow of material to preserve, but not enough resources to save them all. The tendency to save may still be very much at work, but again, the realities on the ground necessitate selection.

In her recent dissertation work, \textit{The Imperative to Preserve}, Karen Gracy describes a complex network of decisions about condition, marketing and licensing value, “entertainment value,”\textsuperscript{32} actual use value (how often a film might be projected), historical and cultural significance, questions of editing, and ultimately funding that are at work in contemporary film archiving.\textsuperscript{33} Gracy’s insight is important as it shows how commercial film interests ultimately outweigh other influential factors in driving preservation and archiving. While many of the other writers work at the question from more theoretical positions or briefly mention financial constraints on archival practices, Gracy’s work directly acknowledges the economics surrounding non-commercial film archiving. Given her research on the economic limitations, it becomes more apparent just how closely non-commercial archives are tied to commercial studios and the film industry. Archivists may

\textsuperscript{31} Kuiper, 41.
\textsuperscript{32} Gracy, 141.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 246.
claim autonomy as they engage in their own sets of reasoning and justifications for selecting films for preservation and inclusion in their collections, but the political questions about control and choice are indirectly raised given many archives’ reliance on industry for material and funding.

One of the animating questions for this project focuses on this question of control, particularly as film is often viewed as a source for history. That is, this project is inherently concerned with how decisions are made about what moments of history to preserve and what shall be lost. Given that “historical material” is one of the purported reasons that non-commercial archives preserve film, Gracy’s work sheds light on what can be viewed as an underlying conflict as commercial interests have such a strong influence on decisions about the materials that are considered to be representative of history.

In addition to the underlying industry pressures there is still an archival tendency to attempt to try to save as much as possible. In the keynote address to the Orphans 6: A Film Symposium in March 2008, archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai remarked that the idea that all moving images should be collected and preserved for an undefined posterity is still ingrained in the mentality of film archivists. Although he argued that archivists should learn to exercise selection and become more comfortable with being held accountable for their decisions instead of erring on the side of inclusiveness, he did not offer any sort of standards or notions of what that process of selection should entail. Given that many of the attendees of the symposium were actively involved in collecting, rescuing and preserving obscure films, there was a palpable sense of resistance to Usai’s admonitions about the lingering tendency of an all-encompassing, inclusive concept of film archiving.
A SHIFT IN THE CURRENT OF ARCHIVING

Throughout the research for this project, a common thread appears in which archivists and thinkers in the field actively reconsider their roles in the archival process, question the very nature of their profession, as well as wonder out loud about what the future of institutional archiving will look like. These various perspectives (economic, theoretical, spiritual) all point toward a shift in thinking about contemporary film archiving. While there is no clear consensus about what form the shift will ultimately take, it is apparent that in the current moment the traditional modes of archiving and preservation are being reconsidered.

In an essay entitled “Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?” Hugh A. Taylor presents a case for understanding a new conception of archives by way of metaphor: Transformer toys. Taylor describes that traditionally, many archivists thought of their work as putting together jigsaw puzzles. He describes this as an approach that would lead one to believe that there is an overarching landscape in which all of the pieces must fit correctly, i.e. a right way. But now archivists might think of themselves as working with Transformers. That is, archival materials and objects can fit together in any number of ways and can transform into new and different forms. Taylor’s metaphor is useful in considering the historical shift in how archivists regard their work. No longer does the traditional thought that there is only one way of viewing a particular film reign. If one takes the metaphor further though, this shift results in a much

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34 Hugh A. Taylor, “Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?” in Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor, eds. Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 107.
35 Ibid.
more complex situation for archivists as they are forced to consider a host of new or different perspectives. In the current moment in which billions of new moving images are being produced every year, the job of putting the pieces together is even more difficult.

Taylor, whose speeches and essays were collected by Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds, has been thought of as “the first philosopher of archives,” specifically because of his imaginative approach to archiving, as well as his belief in what they can accomplish for societies, cultures and humankind. In their introduction, Cook and Dodds describe a Taylor-inspired conception of what future archives could ultimately constitute. Their approach depends on a fundamental difference between an archive’s value and meaning. They describe value in the sense of a collection of artifacts considered valuable as the result of their relation to cultural memory, accountability, historical accounting, etc. Archives have meaning as they can serve as a direct link or “open window on our common humanity.” Their concept of a new form of archives is not simply an administrative creation, but also a spiritual one, i.e. one that can demonstrate “a means for transcending this mortal sphere.” This conception is clearly utopian, particularly given the realistic problems (economics, materiality of artifacts, storage, presentation) facing modern archivists and institutions, but it also belies a firm belief in the power of what archives might be able to do for society. Although Cook and Dodds do not offer much in the way of substantive evidence of how this might actually transpire, the idea remains very much at the heart what appears to be the coming shift in archiving.

36 Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds, eds., Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 19.
37 Cook and Dodds, 19.
38 Ibid.
One of the more immediately pressing concerns is that of the economics driving archival efforts, particularly the tenuous relationship between a film’s aesthetic and/or historical importance and its presumed market value. This commercial pressure is at the heart of Karen Gracy’s argument of how non-commercial archives will transform in the coming years:

Film preservation will become a type of work controlled more by the market for economic goods than that for symbolic goods; moving images will be preserved and made available only as the mass market will bear the costs of such activities. It is increasingly likely that the film archive will evolve into a new type of institution - a hybrid which no longer “produces for other producers,” but must strike a balance between preserving films which interest only a limited audience - archivists, scholars, and aficionados, and saving films which hold appeal for the general public while being lucrative for the studios.\(^{39}\)

The economic driving force that Gracy presents is problematic as it indicates that commercial interests will dictate what sorts of films are ultimately preserved and archived. Subsequently, her argument sets up a scenario in which films of immense importance in a historical research or aesthetic sense but were not financially lucrative will languish in archives and be left to decay.

Anthony Slide mirrors Gracy’s argument that non-commercial archives will have to rely on commercial outlets in order to fund future archiving and preservation projects, but his book, \textit{Nitrate Won’t Wait}, historicizes the relationship by highlighting the fact that it has existed since the inception of film archives. Slide also looks to the future though by coupling the economic issues with the development of new technologies. That is, he asserts that the future of film preservation rests on a combination of the two. But he argues technology will not solve all of the preservations issues and that archivists will

\(^{39}\) Gracy, 2.
have to relinquish their hopes of saving everything.\textsuperscript{40} That is, they will have to be highly selective. Although he states that their decisions must be based on “strong, valid opinions,” he does not offer any sort of criteria or guidelines for that decision-making.\textsuperscript{41} Ultimately Slide presents a skeptical view of the current generation of archivists, describing them as “not interested in film preservation, only in self-preservation.”\textsuperscript{42} That is, focused not so much on the films, but building up their own professional reputation. Slide’s work complicates the picture of current film archiving with the addition of technology, as well as his comments about what might be called the human factor of archiving. His work ultimately adds to a sense that the field is changing, whether it is the result of technology, archivists’ personal agendas or links to the commercial industry.

For many though, the concerns of selection are not as dire as the issue of the all-encompassing deterioration that is at the heart of many of the more theoretical arguments concerning archiving. In short, regardless of whether or not a film has been preserved, it is only a temporary fix as film stock is in a state of perpetual decay. The work of Usai is essential to such current discourses. His book, \textit{The Death of Cinema}, is compelling in that he prescribes a new approach to archiving that seems antithetical to the prevailing ideas of that very activity, i.e. preservation. He writes: “Moving image preservation will then be redefined as the science of its gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like the physician who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient’s life.”\textsuperscript{43} For Usai, not only is compiling the entirety of film history impossible, but to fight the inevitable destruction of film is

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\textsuperscript{40} Slide, 161. \\
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 7. \\
\textsuperscript{43} Paolo Cherchi Usai, \textit{The Death of Cinema} (London: The British Film Institute, 2001), 105.
\end{flushleft}
illogical. *The Death of Cinema* reflects on archiving as the art of letting go. Usai’s work is important as it philosophically reorients archiving and preservation away from the traditional connotations of solidity or safekeeping.

This conceptual turn of actually acknowledging loss that Usai suggests is mirrored in the thoughts of other contemporary theorists outside the archiving community. In an article entitled “Material Preservation and Its Alternatives,” David Lowenthal takes the idea further by suggesting that societies embrace other means of archiving, specifically by moving away from the societal obsessions with collecting “whole pieces” and instead archive “fragments.” Although Lowenthal’s article appeared in *Perspecta*, an architectural journal, his ideas are directly applicable to conversations about film archiving as he addresses the psychology of archiving and preservation. Lowenthal’s work speaks directly to the preoccupation societies have with the past – and then particularly with attempting to preserve that past. He characterizes preservation as a “rampant cult,” which has been fed by “disappointed expectations of progress and looming fears of decline and impending catastrophe.”44 His argument is not that material preservation is inherently bad, but that it “exacts costs and engenders problems,” as well as it “virtually excludes other ways of valuing tradition.”45 He asserts that perhaps instead of continuing the belief in the “illusion” of preservation (that material objects can be preserved forever, a notion that results in a serious attachment to relics), that we should find new ways of thinking about interacting with the past. In terms of a solution, he offers up the concept of saving fragments as opposed to whole works – a reasonable solution to

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45 Ibid., 68.
him as it practically saves resources and offers new forms of insight into the past as opposed to the artifacts themselves. For Lowenthal, preservation is not about the relics, but the ideas contained within them. This article is useful in establishing a theoretical model for thinking about how film archives might adapt their preservation strategies, as well as the emergence of new archival activities that are creative as opposed to passive.\footnote{Lowenthal, 73.}

This section has served as a brief primer for looking at the history of non-commercial archival institutions, along with an introduction to the varied aspects of the complex activity of film archiving. Although much of this history sheds light on the political issues and questions surrounding the selection of films for inclusion in archives, the questions that emerge now though are more fundamental. The shift in thinking that is occurring in the current moment asks the questions of why do we archive now and what are the very foundational purposes of archives? As much of the scholarship states, these questions partly emerge out of political and economic aspects of archiving. While these issues are of the utmost concern, for the purposes of this research, what is seemingly at stake may be all rendered moot given the materiality of the films that are in question. Paolo Cherchi Usai’s assessment that archiving now becomes about managing loss rather than preservation in the traditional, all-encompassing sense is essential to thinking about the future of how institutions archive film, but also begins to lay a foundation for discussions about non-traditional means of archiving. In order to fully connect those ideas to film, it is necessary to look at the materiality issues inherent in film preservation.
Film archives are ultimately dependent on the activity of preservation. Simply put, they would not exist without the active processes of preserving film artifacts for the future. Similar to the implied “safekeeping” that comes with a term like archiving, one might immediately think that traditionally the activity of preservation connotes a sense of insurance that institutions do not let films fall into disrepair so that future generations may use them for historical research and appreciation. As the earlier archiving section alluded to, this sense of stability is unfounded in reality. Given the problems of materiality that come with film stock, especially that which was produced before the 1950s, this protective sense one might read into preservation is equally as shaky.

But it is also easy for researchers and thinkers in this field to accept the material problems without fully engaging them. Leo Enticknap, a university lecturer and former moving image archivist who specializes in practice and ethics of archival film preservation and restoration, argues that in order to have a full understanding of how film and its images work, one must be informed on how the technology of film operates. In the introduction to his work, *Moving Image Technology*, he asserts that those who have an informed understanding of the materiality and technology of film are usually considered outsiders when it comes to the academic arena of explicating the role of moving images in society. He provides anecdotal evidence of how a lack of this “insider” knowledge can lead to fundamental misreading of film imagery. The following discussion about the problems of materiality take cues from Enticknap’s assertion that in order to understand the implications of film preservation, it is vital to understand how the technology of film operates, particularly that of cellulose nitrate and cellulose acetate.
Photographic film is still the most widely used format for feature film production, making it “the one and only form of moving image media to have remained in continuous, mainstream use for over a century.”47 In order to understand the full implications of such a material, it is necessary to define its qualities, particularly in its primary formats: cellulose nitrate and cellulose acetate.

In its earliest iterations, film was made from a highly unstable blend of organic materials: a base of cellulose nitrate, a liquid formed by dissolving a wood derivative of cellulose in nitric acid; a layer of adhesive gelatin; and a light-sensitive emulsion, which was usually a suspension of silver salts in gelatin. Both Leo Enticknap’s *Moving Image Technology* and Usai’s *Burning Passions* provide detailed overviews of the technical compositions of nitrate film. For the purposes of this project, it will be useful to work with definitions developed by Ernest Lindgren, the first curator of what was to become the National Film Archive in Great Britain. His work, *The Art of Film*, provides an introduction to the prevailing mechanics and techniques of filmmaking, including a glossary of sorts for the materials involved. He describes cellulose nitrate as a “flexible transparent plastic, known also as celluloid, used before 1951 for the manufacture of standard cinematograph film, despite its high inflammability, because of its resistance to wear and tear.”48

Although nitrate films were quite durable, a prerequisite for such materials to be shipped across the United States from printing plants and studios to exhibition sites, of

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primary concern for archivists are their flammability. In his introduction to *This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film*, Robert Smither characterizes nitrate as the lifeblood that sustained the first 50 years of film, but also a material that has given archivists “their biggest perceived headache during the second half-century.”

The major complicating factor in nitrate films is the nitrate itself. Jean-Louis Bigourdan provides a detailed description of nitrate chemical decay in his article, “From the Nitrate Experience to New Film Preservation Strategies.” In short, modified forms of cellulose such as nitrate tend to “unmodify” and return to their original state. The natural chemical reaction of this process releases heat, moisture and nitric acid, making nitrate chemical decay autocatalytic (the acid the decay produces encourages further decay). Once such a film is produced, it immediately starts deteriorating, an automatic process exacerbated by exposure to heat and humidity. The decay of nitrate typically moves through various stages that result in a film shrinking and becoming brittle, images becoming discolored and oxidized, and eventually the emulsion starts to liquefy into a sticky goo. In many cases this gooey stage gives ways to hardening as entire reels solidify

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49 Smither, xii.
50 Jean-Louis Bigourdan, “From the Nitrate Experience to New Film Preservation Strategies,” in *This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film*. ed. Robert Smither. (Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2002), 55.
(some archivists call such films “hockey pucks”) and then finally turn to a still highly flammable dust.

At all stages, nitrate films have a low ignition point, hence the extreme fire risk. For archivists, the breakdown of nitrate is compounded by the fact that most old films are contained in canisters. As breakdown ensues, it speeds up the destruction of the rest of the film, as well as threatens films stored nearby. This potential for destruction is coupled though with the startling visuals that such an organic material could capture. In his preface to Usai’s *Burning Passions*, Kevin Brownlow describes the effect of having viewed original nitrate films:

> I am old enough to have seen silents in their original nitrate form, shown during the 1950s and 60s, and I have never forgotten the impact of the razor-sharp exteriors, the gauzed close-ups, the ravishing use of tints and tones, and the sheer depth of the image.\(^1\)

Brownlow’s statement underscores the dual nature of nitrate film and it is a testament mirrored by many archivists and film lovers. Hence the cry of “nitrate won’t wait” that became a rallying cry for many in the archival field to garner resources to ward off the ever-encroaching effects of nitrate decay. Usai brings the argument back to the realities

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\(^1\) Usai, *Burning Passions*, 1.
of archiving and preservation though as he states: “Decay can be slowed but not stopped, and that is why archivists are fighting to prolong the life of nitrate film until it becomes possible to duplicate it onto another base.”

In the 1950s archivists thought that the invention of cellulose acetate was the solution to eviscerate the problem of nitrate decay. That is, the prevailing idea was that old films could be copied to cellulose acetate, what was thought to be a more stable base for preserving images. Lindgren describes this new material as “a flexible transparent plastic used since 1950 in the making of cinematograph film, and always used for all sub-standard film, because of its slow combustibility.” Cellulose triacetate, a form of cellulose acetate that was called “safety film,” turned out to be only an ineffective stopgap measure. Not long after many nitrate films were transferred to acetate, archivists discovered a “pungent odor of acetic acid emanating from some safety films, evidence of the film stock’s deterioration.” This “vinegar syndrome,” which takes its name from the smell of decay, turned out to be prone to the same environmental effects of heat and humidity that nitrate film was susceptible to. Some archivists have put the lifespan of acetate films at only 50 years, significantly shorter than that of nitrate film, the material they were originally hoping to preserve.

**Traditional Approaches to the Material Problem**

Many archivists and researchers have addressed the inherent material problem of film preservation, but so far no ideal solution has been developed. In his article, “From the Nitrate Experience to New Film Preservation Strategies,” Jean-Louis Bigourdan, a

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53 Lindgren, 218.
54 Slide, 159-160.
researcher with the Image Permanence Institute at the Rochester Institute of Technology, gives an in-depth analysis of nitrate film, its history, problems with its preservation, and suggestions for new approaches to film preservation. One of the major thrusts of his article is that although nitrate is inherently susceptible to damage and fire, given optimal storage conditions (temperature and humidity being the major factors), films of such material can have a longer lifespan. Bigourdan ultimately attempts to dispel the defeatist attitude that preserving nitrate film is a lost cause. This reframing of the nitrate problem as one that can be mitigated is reinforced in Smither’s work. He suggests that perhaps the situation of nitrate film deterioration is not as dire as originally thought. That is, the outcry about the potential loss of such nitrate films has been countered by the surprisingly good condition that many are found in when stored at proper archival conditions, as well as the discovery of “the vinegar syndrome” in acetate copies.\(^5^5\) That being said, the common archival approach to nitrate films is that they will not last forever, regardless of how good the storage conditions may be. While Eileen Bowser, a former curator of the Department of Film and Video at The Museum of Modern Art, asserts that proper storage facilities is the key to saving nitrate as opposed to the creation of a new film format or stock, she also dramatizes the loss that will inevitably come:

> I am sure I am not the only archivist to have had the strange and lonely experience of watching the last projection of an original nitrate print. I imagine turning the last pages of the last real book as it crumbles into dust, leaving only electronic words alive in the world.\(^5^6\)

As a counterpoint to Bigourdan, Smither and Bowser, it is worth exploring another historical alternative to preservation: the active destruction of old films. To begin,

\(^{55}\) Smither, xii.

the initial misunderstanding of the long-term possibilities of safety film had far-reaching consequences for the very existence of nitrate films. Many archives destroyed their nitrate holdings once they had transferred them to acetate, a move that at first seemed to be disastrous considering the unforeseen deterioration of acetate stock. But historically speaking, this strategy of simply discarding potentially hazardous film materials was actually considered to be a reasonable solution to the nitrate problem.

David Pierce describes the phenomenon of junking old films in his article, “The Legion of the Condemned – Why American Silent Films Perished,” but he asserts that much of this destruction occurred at the industry level, before most archival work. He begins his article by citing how few early films have survived: of 10,000 released before 1928 only a small portion survives. He describes how this was the result of a number of factors: prints were intentionally destroyed to recover their silver content (perceived as the only material value from a film already presented to the public), prohibitive storage costs for studios, indifference and general neglect, and nitrate film fires. Pierce argues that all of these reasons compounded, particularly for studios. Generally speaking, the industry was focused on short-term profits, rather than a sense of history – or even a more long-term plan for films of the past. As a result, only industry organizations and archives were able to step in and begin the process of preserving films.

In his article, “The Library of Congress and Its ‘Nitrate Problem’; or, It Was Necessary to Destroy the Nitrate in Order to Preserve It,” Paul C. Spehr recounts the era in film archiving during the late 1950s in which disposal was the answer to the “Nitrate Problem.” Spehr, the former Assistant Chief of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and

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57 David Pierce, “The Legion of the Condemned – Why American Silent Films Perished,” in This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film, ed. Robert Smither (Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2002), 144.
Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress, argues that the forced weeding of any and all decaying nitrate films from the archives actually helped preserve other films that were not yet in danger of deterioration.\textsuperscript{58} This calculated destruction of already damaged films drastically reduced the deterioration rate of the other films in the archive as it helped eliminate preservation costs, reduced the threat of fire, and allowed for the acquisition of new nitrate films in preservable condition.\textsuperscript{59}

Historically there have been alternatives to the more traditional preservation strategies. Although outright disposal has since been discounted as a reasonable solution for the problem of nitrate, in this current moment there is still a sense of confusion and immediacy within the field of film archiving about what is to be done with the problem of decaying films. As previously mentioned, many archivists believe that storage is the primary factor in ensuring longevity for nitrate films. But there is no comprehensive approach or definition of what film preservation should consist of. Given the prohibitive time and costs, as well as severe lack of funding for film preservation that Gracy describes, few films are ever preserved at even the basic level of being viewable in their original format and securely protected for the future.\textsuperscript{60} Although institutional archivists are very much at the mercy of film’s material limits, preservation in the traditional sense seeks to avoid what is ultimately unstoppable: the inevitable deterioration of film. Given the economic pressures and the materiality of film, it appears that such long-standing modes of thinking about preservation and archiving are on the cusp of change.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[58] Paul Spehr, “The Library of Congress and Its ‘Nitrate Problem’; or, It Was Necessary to Destroy the Nitrate in Order to Preserve It,” in \textit{This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film}, ed. Robert Smither (Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2002), 236.
\item[59] Ibid.
\item[60] Gracy, 7.
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THE CHANGING CONCEPT OF CULTURAL MEMORY, CONNECTIONS TO FILM

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was.” . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.61

- Walter Benjamin,
“Theses on the Philosophy of History”

Benjamin’s assertion about the “true picture of the past” is essential as it stakes out an oppositional claim to traditional ways of viewing the past and subsequently history. From the earliest iterations of film archives, practitioners have detailed their intentions to preserve media for historical research. The concept of film as a document is aligned with Benjamin’s phrase “the way it really was.” In this line of thinking, the moving images of films are windows through which to peer into the past, glimpses that are easily decoded for their precise depictions of what has occurred, evidence of what days gone by looked like. But for Benjamin, this is not a true picture of the past, nor is it possible to attribute such a definitive evidentiary status to film. Rather, one might seize fragmentary glimpses of the past – flashes of instant recognition that are “never seen again,” – only in moments of danger. For this project, Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” is the beginning of a conceptual shift in thinking about societies’ interactions with the past through memory. The discussions in this section address scholarship pertaining to current conceptions of cultural memory, as well as the effects film technology realizes on the landscape of that memory.

Contemporary concepts of cultural memory in are characterized by their striking differences from the traditional, monolithic, “this is the way it was” notion that Benjamin

argues against. Current literature about cultural memory suggests a variety of concepts about how memory operates, specifically with regard to its intersections with technologies of representation. The work of Susannah Radstone provides a broad contextual approach to assessing the literature in this area. She begins her work, *Memory and Methodology*, with a statement by Paula Hamilton that: “contemporary societies appear fascinated by, if not ‘obsessed by’ memory.” She posits that this resurgence of memory studies is related to a crisis in the ideologies of progress and modernization, and the way technology changes how society views time. She relies on the thoughts of Andreas Huyssen who describes technology as “collapsing the boundaries between the past and present.” Radstone positions the result as a conception of memory aligned with “subjectivity, invention, the present, representation, and fabrication.” This belief in memorial practice as a kind of creative process is essential to many of the thinkers in the field. The work of Marita Sturken, who posits that memory operates as a narrative; Peter Krapp, who asserts a rethinking of forgetting; and Alison Landsberg, who introduces memory as a sort of prosthetic sense, are particularly useful in forming a working concept of memory as a creative process, as well as in relation to the overarching questions of archiving that center this project.

Marita Sturken’s work, *Tangled Memories*, posits a theory in which memories are best viewed as narratives rather than a collection of fixed replicas of past experience that can be exactly recalled. Her primary concern is to explore the process of cultural memory as one that can actually come to define a culture but is subsequently “bound up in

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63 Ibid., 3.
64 Ibid., 7.
65 Ibid., 9.
complex political stakes and meanings . . . in which different stories vie for a place in history.” Of particular use to this project though is Sturken’s attention to how memory is produced through contemporary means of representation that take the form of photographs, moving images, television and cinema. Such technologies are not simply vessels or holders of memories, rather they are media through which memories are “shared, produced, and given meaning.” She quotes from Andreas Huyssen in saying that as such, memories might be seen “as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity.” Her main argument asserts a shift to a new view of how memory is created and how members of a culture come to understand such practices. She states that “postmodernism’s relationship to the past is not ahistorical or amnesiac.” Instead in this current epoch we are in a constant dialogue with the past, i.e. a negotiation about whether or not “we can ever know the past other than through its textualized remains.” Much of Sturken’s work is productive when applied to questions of film archiving, particularly if we begin to think of memory as a narrative, rather than as a “replica of an experience that can be retrieved and relived.” Sturken’s conception of memorial practice is antithetical to one of the primary functions of traditional archives, i.e. preserving objects, rendering them perfectly frozen in time, simply waiting for moments in which to be recalled.

An aspect of memory production that is less often discussed is that of forgetting. Sturken only quickly addresses the function when she writes: “All memories are ‘created’ in tandem with forgetting: to remember everything would amount to being overwhelmed

67 Ibid., 9.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid, 17.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 7.
by memory. Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory."⁷² The activity of forgetting is the centerpiece of Peter Krapp’s introduction to *Aberrations of Cultural Memory* in which he works to establish a new understanding for the function of forgetting. He relies on a quote from an Andreas Huyssen in which she states that typically memory is prized by cultural historians, while “critics deplore amnesia as a cultural virus generated by the new media technologies.”⁷³ Krapp then states:

Too often, forgetting is understood as a disarticulation of the present from the past, or of an intentional object from its field. . . . Although closely associated with disappearance, the fact is that forgetting returns time and again, and produces certain effects.⁷⁴

For Krapp, forgetting is an essential function of learning in that it helps in quantifying memory itself, as well as providing a site for adapting to the new “by way of loss or suppression of the old.”⁷⁵ Ultimately he argues that those in the field of media studies should advance past the dichotomy that equates memory with culture and forgetting with loss and regression.⁷⁶ Krapp’s insights push an idea that saving with the intent of not forgetting is inherently oppositional to the way that memory in societies operates in lived reality. By suggesting that forgetting be no longer viewed as regression but rather as a productive activity, Krapp shows a shift within the field of memory studies that is similar to the phenomenon that Usai describes in film archiving. That is, both are concerned about the overriding traditional discourses of attempting to preserve everything – that nothing should be forgotten – and instead suggest that the realities of both memory and

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⁷² Sturken, 7.
⁷⁴ Ibid.
⁷⁵ Ibid., xii.
⁷⁶ Ibid., xiii.
film archiving become more about rethinking the very foundations of those activities with
the acknowledgement of loss taking on a more prominent role.

Alison Landsberg’s work, which introduces her concept of prosthetic memory, is
not so much about the act of forgetting, but more so about memory in another
nontraditional sense: as a practice that helps individuals cross the boundaries of
consciousness, particularly in the face of modernity and new technologies of
representation and reproduction. In her work, *Prosthetic Memory*, she argues that a new
form of cultural memory “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical
narrative about the past,” which can occur at a particular site or when experiencing a
film, etc.  
She calls the new form “prosthetic” and describes it as a challenge to
traditional forms of memory that are based on claims of authenticity, i.e. lived
experience. Landsberg’s work complicates existing notions of how technologies of
representation operate on memory in the current moment. Although her theory may not
directly apply to questions of archiving, it speaks to a change in how memory now
operates in mass culture and the political power that such a conception of memory can
have. Her work is instructive in relation to Radstone’s overarching sense that memory has
collapsed the line between past and present and is now wrapped up in invention,
representation, subjectivity and fabrication.

While Benjamin, Radstone, Sturken, Krapp and Landsberg highlight
nontraditional conceptions of memory, other theorists in the field recognize such a shift
in thinking but then address how those new concepts result in a sort of societal backlash.
Two of those writers, Paul Grainge and Jeffrey Pence, connect these new sorts of

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78 Ibid., 3.
memorial practices directly to film. The implications of their work can be applied to the shift in archiving. While some archivists are beginning to acknowledge the fundamental problems with the traditional discourse of preservation, others hold on to such historical practices and view new approaches to memory as inherently problematic, even to the point the comes to represent a threat.

In the introduction to Memory and Popular Film, Grainge establishes memory “as a specific framework for the study of popular film, intervening in growing debates about the status and function of memory in cultural life and discourse.” He relies on Michel Foucault and Marita Sturken in defining memory as a political force, one that is socially produced and tied up in struggles for national identity formation. At the heart of his argument is that the political question of what is or is not remembered is essential to discussions of popular representation, i.e. film. He also asserts that a concept of memory as authentic, stable, reassuring and constant is highly problematic, but that there is a cultural desire for such a form as it provides those comforting sensations in the face of forgetting, fantasy, instability and unreliability. Grainge acknowledges that developing a new concept of memory raises a host of issues, principally those associated with artificiality, historical blockage, etc., but that inevitably such concerns do not account for new ways of actually engaging or expressing the past through “developing forms of technology,” in this case film. Grainge is not so much arguing against the new forms as he is acknowledging that because of their presence, an overriding cultural desire for a sense of stability is strengthened despite its impotency to actually be fulfilled. This line of

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80 Ibid., 2.
81 Ibid., 5.
82 Ibid., 8.
thinking can be applied to film archiving in that the emergence of ideas that represent
instability cause a sense of confusion operating within the traditional approach.
Subsequently, the long-held notions of traditional preservation end up actually being
reinforced as a way of resisting the new.

This desire to stick to the old ways of archiving might also be drawn out of the
conclusions of Jeffrey Pence’s article “Postcinema/Postmemory.” Pence argues that the
current era in film history should be considered the “End of Cinema” in that it is
“undergoing a displacement from a cultural pre-eminence that, in the wake of modernity,
is still figured in being toward the future.”83 Pence rests much of his argument on the
emergence of new media technologies, specifically that of the videotape. But he is also
concerned with the subsequent impacts such a significant shift has on memory. He takes
much from Fredric Jameson, particularly in how he links a desire for memory to a
regressive form of nostalgia. Pence characterizes the postmodern era as one that has
exploded the notion of the monumentalized/traditional past, but the ensuing confusion
about identity and memory has in effect compelled cultures to actually desire a return to
those very guidelines of those traditions. This approach can be applied to the question of
why societies archive, particularly with the intent to preserve in the traditional sense.
Although this project ultimately presents new ways of thinking about archiving in the
current moment, it is essential to recognize that there are alternatives and seemingly
conflicting practices still firmly entrenched in the minds of those working in the field.

An exploration of literature concerning traditional film archiving, the materiality
of film and changing notions of how cultural memory is processed develops a sense that

83 Jeffrey Pence, “Postcinema/Postmemory,” Memory and Popular Film, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester:
Manchester University Press, 2003), 239.
the field of archiving is currently experiencing uncertain times. Archivists and theorists
describe the state of the field in a manner that is perhaps best characterized as being at a
crossroads of sorts. It is not immediately clear as to what is at the root of this uncertainty,
but there are some apparent precipitating factors. The history of the field reflects a variety
of practices and approaches that seem pieced together – bricolaged even – from various
resources. Although many believe in the importance and power of archiving, there is a
consensus that archives will be forced to change in this current historical moment. Some
suggest that it is a symptom of the postmodern epoch and the resulting ways of thought
that destabilize traditional modes of thinking about documentation, history and the
creation of cultural memory. Simultaneously there are the impending problems of the
materiality of film itself, the ever-encroaching decay that creeps into all film archives
regardless of facilities. This project considers the culmination of those ideas as the
foundational opportunity for thinking about the activity of archiving in creative, artistic
ways that reflect a break from the traditional modes.
Figure 5: Dario Robleto,
*At War With The Entropy Of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want To Come Back*, 2002
CHAPTER II
COLLAGE METHODS AND WASTE MATERIALS: FOUNDATIONS FOR A NEW ARTISTIC ARCHIVE

Traditional film archives have quickly become the convergence site for questions about the ephemeral materiality of film itself, the changing nature of memory’s relation to history and future of the field of archiving itself. Although the traditional mode of archiving offers the appearance of stability and safekeeping for its protected objects, ultimately such a method of operation proves to be a paradoxical practice. These traditional connotations are only temporary, if not altogether impotent when confronted with the realities of film’s ephemeral qualities. Given the disconnect between the methods of traditional archiving and the materials that such a practice is predicated upon, we can look elsewhere for archival strategies that demonstrate a cognizance of film materiality, as well as how memory and technologies of representation interact to form a shifting sense of history. This is not to say that traditional archives cannot or should not adapt, as in many cases institutions are actively developing new programs to address such issues. Outside the institutional walls though, a host of individuals are producing new hybrid works that while predicated upon discarded source materials from the past simultaneously generate new creations, meanings and understandings of history.

The following chapter provides an extensive exploration of methods that while primarily artistic in intention are also inherently archival in nature. That is, this project argues that strategies employed by artists, as well as the products that they create should be considered new forms of archiving that are alternative to traditional, institutional models. This new concept of an archive is one that no longer depends on the persistence of static collections of objects as entirely reflective of history. Instead, these
contemporary methods – the lived activities through which individuals engage directly with the physical materials of the past – represent interactive, rather than reactive understandings of history. The resulting works are new, dynamic manifestations of historical understanding that simultaneously acknowledge their very materiality. Such practices and their subsequent works reflect a concept of history as nonlinear and non-monolithic. Crucial to this discussion is the importance of decay as a function of these new archival methods, particularly with regard to the materials that they draw upon to produce such alternative perspectives of archival history.

An interdisciplinary overview is useful in exploring the critical thought concerning strategies of montage, collage and sampling, as well as how such techniques have been employed in praxis by filmmakers, artists and musicians. Such an approach not only demonstrates the widespread acceptance and employment of this new archival sensibility, but it in itself embraces hybridity as a working, intellectual endeavor. In the current moment, the larger concept of sampling, a method of hybridization in which new creations are constructed from fragments of preexisting materials, resonates as a viable working practice across music, film and the visual arts. Although this project primarily concerns issues of moving images, it is informed by other media with particular attention to discussions of music sampling and hip-hop DJ techniques. New film creations very much exist within the pervasive, multidirectional context of remix culture.

The primary thrust of this chapter is to explore the methods and principles that artists use to integrate materials of the past into new works – and then how such creations represent contemporary, nontraditional modes of archiving. Subsequently, the overarching structure of this chapter is broken into two sections. The first describes how
historical and contemporary methods of hybridization can be viewed as new creative archival practices. The second section focuses on waste materials as crucial sample sources for such social practices. The methods section draws on critical thought and analysis across media: art theory in relation to combinatory techniques of bricolage, collage and assemblage; Eisensteinian film theory with regard to montage; and music theory concerning remix culture, specifically that of the hip-hop DJ and producer. The materials section that follows builds on research and critical theory that begins with Walter Benjamin and the animating factors behind his work, *The Arcades Project*; then moves to contemporary ideas concerning “rubbish” and the shifting sense of value placed on material objects; and concludes with a look at how artists and musicians depend on fragments and waste materials as a base for generating new historical perspectives.

**METHODS:**
**COLLAGE AS A CONTEMPORARY ARCHIVAL APPROACH**

By most accounts collage is the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation in our century.  

- Gregory Ulmer,  
  “The Object of Post-Criticism”

In a formal sense, the general idea of collage, regardless of media, seems quite simple. As a technique it requires assembling disparate elements together, combining, mashing and juxtaposing them so as to form a unified piece of work. It is a method of hybridization that takes different names depending on its particular media or discipline. In film it is typically referred to as montage, the visual arts generally call it collage or bricolage and in music it is sampling. On a technical level, such techniques are a “limited

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business” in the words of Sergei Eisenstein, one of film’s greatest thinkers. But as a concept and as a principle, collage can generate much more than the sum of its parts. This section of the project aims to describe collage in more than the terms of its generic conventions by investigating its methods, its strategies, and perhaps most importantly, the theoretical underpinnings for those techniques.

The methods section works chronologically as it begins with the visual arts and the approaches of collage and bricolage. This provide a foundation to then survey the foundational thought concerning the principles of film montage, specifically those of Eisenstein, one of its strongest and earliest champions. The focus then moves to address the vocal criticism of such techniques that emerged during the shift from modernism to postmodernism. The section proceeds to the current moment with an analysis of music sampling as an indicator of a larger remixing culture. In an overarching sense, sampling will be analyzed through the contemporary paradigm of hybridization as characterized by participation and multi-sourced appropriation. A discussion of Walter Benjamin’s methodology behind The Arcades Project then serves as a bridge to the materials section that follows. Throughout all of these stages, the primary idea remains that hybrid methods not only produce something new but also retain a strong cognizance of what has come before. In the creative act, such practices reflect a living engagement with the materials of the past. Hence their designation as new, dynamic forms of archival practice.

**Collage in the Visual Arts**

In the visual arts, the term “collage” refers to a method or activity of creative practice, as well as a genre of art. This project investigates collage not so much in terms
of its generic conventions, but more so in its methods, its strategies and its techniques, as well as the discourse surrounding its practice. Primary to this discussion is how such combinatory art methods produce something new from a variety of preexisting materials. While collage serves as a classifying term for the products of those who mix media and source materials to create art, many artists eschew that designation in favor of terms that more accurately describe their creations and techniques. This section considers all of the works and working practices described as ready-mades, combined art, assemblages, bricolage, combines, poem-objects, appropriation art, photomontages, rubbish models, spectoramas, etc. as related under the umbrella heading of collage. Such techniques have a long history, but for the purposes of this project, the discussion originates in the era of modern art, specifically during the Dada movement. This not only grounds the ideas of collage in a more contemporary context that roughly parallels other media (film and music), but also opens the conversation to the criticisms that such methods and art have historically faced, particularly during the shift to postmodern aesthetics and thought.

The idea of collage seems intentionally open, a catchall, all-purpose. Kim Levin writes, “The concept of collage absorbs ideas the same way the technique fuses stray images, objects, and materials.”85 In order to grasp this adapting, all-encompassing technique and way of thinking, it is necessary to begin with a baseline definitional concept. Gregory Ulmer, whose work on hypertext and electracy has its origins in methods of hybridity, draws on a seminal French manifesto of sorts, Collages, in order to describe collage as an activity: “To lift a certain number of elements from works, objects, preexisting messages, and to integrate them in a new creation in order to produce an

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original totality manifesting ruptures of diverse sorts.”\textsuperscript{86} This practice entails four principles: “decoupage (or severing); preformed or extant messages or materials; assemblage (montage); discontinuity or heterogeneity.”\textsuperscript{87} The method is very much about recontextualizing disparate fragments severed from their original states by rearranging them, repositioning them in new relationships. Much like montage in film, the method can result in new, unexpected meanings.

Ulmer positions collage as a radical innovation, that is, a revolution in formal representation as the method makes a sharp break from traditional aesthetics of perspective, depiction and expression. He states that as a technique, collage can be traced to ancient times, but it was not introduced into the “high arts” until Braque and Picasso incorporate around 1912 it as a way of solving problems that emerged from cubism.\textsuperscript{88}

![Figure 6: Pablo Picasso, Still Life with Chair Caning, 1912](image)

But perhaps the most visible demonstration of the startling rupture from tradition comes as a result of what some have called “the anti-aesthetic” of the Dada movement. In his work, \textit{History of Collage}, Eddie Wolfram characterizes Dada as “best understood not simply as a stylistic and visually aesthetic manifestation but as an all-embracing cultural

\textsuperscript{86} Ulmer, 84.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
and social revolt against nineteenth century attitudes,” i.e. the establishment, formalism, traditional conceptions of the beautiful and perfection, the art market, and the state of civilization in the early 20th century. Collage was seized upon as an artistic vehicle by this movement as it already embodied the connotations of “outraging established pictorial conventions and giving free rein to intruder ideas and elements, sanctifying the most lowly trash-can bric-a-brac by dubbing it art and vice versa.” This aesthetic, while seemingly anarchic in comparison to conventional mores, provided a gaping entrance point for new ways of thinking about the very nature of art. Collage became a primary technique in breaking down the barriers of high and low art as it thrived on the inclusion of “intruder ideas and elements” and “trash-can bric-a-brac.”

In a formal sense, the idea of breaking tradition is reflected in the act of decoupage that can be thought of as one of the principles of collage. The act of cutting out a particular image or object from its immediate environment renders that material as a disconnected fragment, no longer connected to the context or tradition that it once belonged to. As a result such fragments become fodder for new expression.

Figure 7: Jean Arp, *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1916-17

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90 Ibid.
For example, Jean Arp, a Dadaist poet, sculptor and painter, made abstract shape collages from heterogeneous materials such as wallpaper, box lids, paper and timber that had been mechanically cut into rectangles, triangles, squares, circles, etc. In his work, “Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art,” Donald Kuspit argues that a sense of fragmentation always inhabits a piece of collage art – and that this quality implies a cycle of existence:

The incongruous effect of the collage is based directly on its incompleteness, on the sense of perpetual becoming that animates it. It is always coming into being; it has never ‘been,’ as one can say of the more familiar, ‘absolute’ type of art. It is always insistent yet porous, never resistant and substantive. … There is always something more that can be added to or taken away from its constitution, as if by some restless will. The collage seems unwilled, and yet it is willful. The collage is a metaphor of universal becoming.  

For others, the principle of decoupage indicates a larger unmooring from established order, that is, a physical severance from any organizing factors. Hoffman remarks: “For some, this breaking away from an established order implied a sense of chaos, and the vocabulary of chaos – disintegration, fragmentation, dislocation.” But we can look at the method in dialectic terms. Just as such works connote chaos, they simultaneously signal their antitheses: integration, unity, relocation. The original break and the ensuing chaos beget opportunities for new forms that build on, meld and blend with other forms. Just as Kuspit asserts, a sense of incompleteness always resides in a collage, but it is this very quality that animates the work. The seeming chaos signifies an acknowledgement of a cyclic process. A collage piece may be considered a “finished work,” just as it also

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depicts a restless evolution, a reminder that disintegration forms the basis for regeneration.

Collage may begin with the principle of decoupage, but the method also ventures toward a sense of unification in the principle of assemblage. The fragments of preexisting material become elements to explore, not only as individual, constituent parts, but also as potential for developing connections among them. While much of the Dada rhetoric was anarchic, resistant, violent and destructive, in retrospect there was also something quietly powerful about its reliance upon collage. Marcel Janco, one of the founders of the movement described his sculptural collages as attempts to “bring entirely diverse materials together in mystical, poetical relationships.”

Collage also destroys the idea that life is a stable whole, indivisible – or rather, that the division of life will destroy it. Life still exists in fragments which afford

Figure 8: Marcel Janco, *Untitled (Mask, Portrait of Tzara)*, 1919

This act of uniting disparate elements, whether it is materials, shapes, textures, media, etc., reflects larger creative uncertainties and unexpected moments of understanding.

Again, Kuspit furthers the relation of the concept of collage to life processes:

Wolfram, 73.
new opportunities for experiencing it, new opportunities for finding meanings in it. Art and life become unexpected in the collage, which gives us the opportunity for a creative relationship with both of them. Neither is destroyed by having traditional ideas about it undermined. The disintegration of such traditional ideas which collage represents – for both life and art – does not disintegrate either. On the contrary, in collage what is most essential in both is revealed: their reality as creative fluxes. They have the same root: the relativistic, creative flux of democratic being.\textsuperscript{94}

Kuspit’s comment here is significant as it recognizes the duality of collage, that it can simultaneously signal a seeming destruction and creation. Although collage may explode the notion of life as stable and whole, it does not simply leave us with chaos and destruction. Collage actually provides the strategy with which to take the fragments and creatively rebuild, both art and life. While the method may blast apart tradition, it also builds upon it, that is, collage integrates what has come before into its new creation. The activity very much reflects reality as flux, or as Kuspit describes it, “creative flux.”

In the context of the literature concerning memory, collage operates in a similar manner to the cognitive processes of interacting with images of the past. We are always in a state of flux, unconsciously generating new recollections of past moments – and then recontextualizing those fragments, creatively assembling them with all the rest, ultimately rendering new understandings and meanings. Such behaviors and working practices might be considered a theoretical foundation for interacting with the past that not only acknowledges the fluctuations of memory, but also the ways in which creative constructions occur. In this sense, the collage method begins to reveal an inherent archival nature, a natural predilection for collecting history, but instead of trying to shelter it in a static manner, collage allows for the active interaction with the past.

\textsuperscript{94} Kuspit, 53.
EISENSTEIN’S THEORIES OF MONTAGE

We also discover that the montage principle as used in cinema is only a partial instance of the application of the general principle of montage, a principle which, properly understood, goes far beyond the limited business of gluing bits of film together.  

- Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage 1938”

As an entrance point for looking at collage-like techniques in film, it is useful to explore some of the earliest writings on film, particularly the theoretical work of Sergei Eisenstein, as he is one of the first to assert the sort of inherent visual power of montage in its combinatory capabilities, that is, of juxtaposing images, events and ideas. Early in his filmmaking and film theory career, Sergei Eisenstein outlined what he viewed as the multitude of possibilities that erupt from the collision of seemingly disparate visual elements. In his words, montage at its base level is simply “gluing bits of film together,” but that the products of such an activity are much more explosive. In his 1929 essay, “The Dramaturgy of Film Form [The Dialectical Approach to Film Form],” he places filmmaking in the company of other creative forms of production, stating that the foundational philosophy of art is conflict in a dialectic sense: “The basis of this philosophy is the dynamic conception of objects: being as a constant evolution from the interaction between two contradictory opposites. Synthesis that evolves from the opposition between thesis and antithesis.”

Montage, film’s “basic nerve,” stands as a primary visual form of such an approach: “But in my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision

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96 Ibid.
between two shots that are independent of one another.” Eisenstein describes a creative event that surpasses the rational justification of montage. Instead, his approach yields more than just a sum, a linear act of addition, but rather a dynamic, unified product.

Almost 10 years later in a work written in 1938, he again asserts that the primary property of montage is that “any two sequences, when juxtaposed, inevitably combine into another concept which arises from that juxtaposition as something qualitatively new.” His language begins to eschew the more philosophical discourse of dialectics in exchange for an awareness of montage’s cognitive effects. Again, for Eisenstein, montage does not equal the sum of its constituent elements, rather their combination unites in a conceptual product. He cites the example of two shots: one of a woman, the other her black dress. Although each of those shots depict objective representations, the product of their juxtaposition produces the idea of a widow, a concept that “is not capable of being objectively represented; it is a new perception, a new concept, a new image.”

The questions of representation and image that are inherent to the visual arts are also worth examining in light of Eisenstein. In his line of thinking, montage not only blazes a route to new cognitive perceptions but also to entirely new forms of thought. For Eisenstein, montage is a principle that addresses the issues of “depiction” and “image,” the two levels on which representational works of art can operate. That is, a problem for a filmmaker is “how to get beyond depiction and organize the material before him into images which are not only aesthetically satisfying but also succeed in crystallizing within

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98 Eisenstein, “The Dramaturgy of Film Form,” 28.  
100 Ibid., 297.
them the truth of the object represented.”¹⁰¹ For Eisenstein, montage as an act of collision and juxtaposition allows for filmmakers to do just that. Geoffrey Newell-Smith elaborates on Eisenstein’s theory as a means of discovery: A “heuristic in the sense that the finding of a new image creates a new form of knowledge rather than merely replicating something already known.”¹⁰²

For Eisenstein, montage begins with a simple action, but can have illuminative results. There is the very basic action of creating a montage: the activity of splicing together separate pieces of film, physically placing and then sealing the images together. As he asserts, this method yields not a sum, but a conceptual product. The very act of montage is predicated on the use of images of the past, i.e. every shot is of a particular time and space, frozen images and static moments of what has already happened. So then this theory also stresses the idea that the outcome of its practice is not simply the recreation of the past, but rather a new form of perceptual knowledge and understanding of what has come before. This conceptual approach to such a seemingly simple activity of cutting and splicing then becomes a very powerful working method. Eisenstein’s thinking demonstrates how at the very heart of filmmaking lies a predilection for not just combinatory thinking, but combinatory thinking about what previously exists – and how to propel what is static into forward action.

Strictly defined, the word “montage” refers to film editing, an activity with “strong practical and even industrial overtones.”¹⁰³ In the words of Nowell-Smith though, “Montage and assemblage are also terms used in art practice to describe ways in which

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¹⁰² Ibid., xvi.
¹⁰³ Ibid., xiii.
materials from different sources are put together to produce an object."\textsuperscript{104} So as a principle, theory or concept, we can view montage as an underlying method for artistic creation of all disciplines. Montage is a practice endowed with the connotation of hybridity, of openness to blending across media. For some, film may be considered the medium in which cinema “finds its highest expression,” but “montage as a principle is not limited to cinema: it is found in literature, in theatre, in music, in painting, even in architecture.”\textsuperscript{105} Eisenstein’s work on montage and the critical thought surrounding his theories are essential in laying the groundwork for discussions of similar, more contemporary practices. By observing how such techniques operate in other media, we can then return to film with an awareness of its wider context: remix culture. Chronologically though, such a perspective only becomes clear after a discussion of how many theorists considered the rise of postmodern methods and sensibilities as ahistorical.

\textbf{Criticisms and Complications for the Collage Method}

Hence, once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.\textsuperscript{106}

-Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”

Although the techniques and principles of collage originated as a project of modernity, particularly in its seeming capabilities to render new meaning from the juxtaposition of disparate elements, with the shift to postmodernity, the collage method’s

\textsuperscript{104} Nowell-Smith, xiii.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, xv.
reliance on source material from the past became problematic. From a different critical perspective, particularly that which is in the vein of Fredric Jameson, who assails works of postmodern art, collage work is devoid of creativity or newness and in short, equates to regressive appropriation. Others such as Clement Greenberg dismiss collage as purely “decorative” effect and as technique exploited by artists for its purported “shock value.” In order to fully assess collage as a viable working method, it is necessary to look at the critical thought that contests its strategies and thinking.

In his essay, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson frames methods such as collage with the term “pastiche,” a term with negative connotations as it refers to works created from a hodgepodge method. Such pieces are similar to collage in that they draw from a number of sources, but in pastiche, such a technique renders products that are highly imitative. Jameson writes: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive.” In this line of thinking, if art has been reduced to imitation and regressive nostalgia, it no longer generates any sort of forward momentum. Jameson asserts that as a result, new art remains imprisoned in the past. He concludes by connecting his argument about the failure of postmodern aesthetics to the emergence of what he calls “late, consumer or multinational capitalism.” He characterizes this particular system by its erasure of any traditional sense of history:

Our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual

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109 Ibid., 125.
change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.\textsuperscript{110}

Jameson’s argument that pastiche’s reliance on imitation reflects a mass historical amnesia via the failure of contemporary aesthetics to situate present-day culture in its own time or its own place in history is a refrain for many others who are critical of collage work and postmodernism in general.

Douglas Crimp, whose work “On the Museum’s Ruins” concerned the status of institutions after the inception of postmodernism, places 20\textsuperscript{th} century art in the context of mass reproduction, i.e. film, photographs, and art replicas. He writes:

Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence . . . are undermined.\textsuperscript{111}

Crimp begins with a reference to Walter Benjamin’s slippery concept of an artwork’s purported “aura.” In this case the use of the term makes it synonymous with originality, authenticity and presence – terms that imply relevance in a historical context. That is, a sort of utopian, romantic idea that an individual, one-of-a-kind piece of work embodies a specific sense of historicity, an authentic existence over a span of time, as well as a presence in space and time that no replica can recreate. Crimp specifies that reproductive technology, the means with which many postmodern artists operate, dispenses with the “fiction” of aura and undermines traditionally held aesthetic values. Again, the complications arise with collage’s qualities of replication, reproduction and perhaps its very use of preexisting materials. Given the context, these aspects were very well

\textsuperscript{110} Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 125.
antithetical to a modernist way of thinking, particularly as that intellectual paradigm depends on notions of pure originality, authenticity, i.e. the fiction of aura.

The idea though that such modernist beliefs could be damaged by contemporary art proved to be strong – and the subsequent reactions to the apparent loss of those traditionally revered qualities was just as vehement. Primary to these arguments is that postmodernity represented an ahistorical stance and that as a result, a sense of stasis had pervaded contemporary culture. This is evident in Jameson’s assessment, specifically in his assertion that the contemporary social system exists in a “perpetual present.” John Welchman reinforces the idea of society’s flat, horizontal trajectory as reflected in its aesthetics in his overview of appropriation art. He describes appropriation as a simplistic strategy that should only be viewed as a reaction to the structures of modernity – and that despite the longevity of its influence, it enjoyed its “plateau” during the Dada movement in the 1910s.\textsuperscript{112} Welchman goes on to describe postmodern art as “circumspect” and again chimes in the refrain of appropriation methods as lacking authenticity and originality, as well as demonstrating a “social passivity and political disengagement or overstatement.”\textsuperscript{113} So from this perspective, not only do the methods of collage work represent a lack of progression, its very status as a genre foundered over 100 years ago.

In her work, \textit{Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film}, Vera Dika sets out to explore such vehement criticisms of the regressive nature of pastiche. She writes that her intentions are to uncover sites of resistance to “this culture-wide pull to the past.”\textsuperscript{114} She refers to a seeming challenge asserted by Jameson when he remarks on what he

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{114} Vera Dika, \textit{Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.
views are the difficulties of overcoming this backwards inertia: “Only by means of a violent formal and narrative dislocation could a narrative apparatus come into being capable of restoring life and feeling to . . . our capacity to organize and live time historically.”\textsuperscript{115} Although Jameson refers to literature as a site for potential resistance, Dika tracks a more delicate balance that exists in postmodern works, particularly in the film medium. She states that: “The film is an ‘ongoing present tense’ (unlike the photographic fragment, which stops time), but it is also a ‘time machine,’ a carrier of once-lived worlds into the present, a quality that connects us to the past by what Barthes calls a ‘skin’ of light.”\textsuperscript{116} For her the physical experience of watching film contributes to its relative inability to substantively rupture the sense of an ongoing present tense that is simultaneously closely linked to the past. Dika demonstrates the beginnings of opposition to Jameson’s arguments, but her work acknowledges how deeply entrenched his opinions of the postmodern are in aesthetic criticism of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

In the current moment, these modernist critical assessments encounter resistance – not simply from postmodern theory, but also from the continued dynamism that many contemporary works, particularly those of collage methods, display. That is, the work itself demonstrates the falsity of relegating postmodern methods of appropriation, assemblage, collage, etc. to the Jamesonian frame of imitation and reproduction. His criticism fails to resonate given its modernist stance, specifically in its inherent reliance on a sort of utopian desire for linearity, for a future that is somehow always brighter than its past, for a trajectory of aesthetic progression that only celebrates an ultimately impossible sense of undiluted individuality, originality and authenticity. The modernist

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\item[116] Dika, 7.
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viewpoint cannot actually sustain its aesthetic foundation, particularly in the face of postmodernity. That vein of thought fails to recognize how “the new” seldom emerges from a vacuum. Artists of subsequent generations always build on the work that has come before them, i.e. what already exists, not necessarily by means of imitation, but more so as incorporation. The products of such a process can then be thought of as always, already new – not as pastiche or imitation. Perhaps the most compelling argument for such a perspective can be found in the sampling methods of remix culture, specifically in contemporary musical creations.

**REMIX CULTURE: THE HIP-HOP/DJ APPROACH TO MUSIC SAMPLING**

There’s no such thing as a good DJ who’s historically ignorant. If you don’t know what the politics were of the moment that produced that sound, and so, politics transforming into certain sounds, then why would you take that sound and put it next to this sound? If you don’t know the history, you’re just making a jumbled mess. So sampling actually offers a way out of the criticism of this generation because sampling insists that you know your history. That you actually engage with it. That’s why I’m so compelled to know my history.

- Dario Robleto, “The Magic That’s Possible”

For Robleto, a contemporary conceptual artist whose work draws on the use of disparate, discarded source materials, the techniques of sampling are the backbone of his philosophical approach to creating art. The sampling method, an extension of the musical collage productions developed by hip-hop musicians in the early 1980s, relies primarily on sounds from preexisting materials, most famously those etched into the grooves of vinyl records. In the current moment, the method has emerged as one of the primary working strategies of artists across media – and has been adopted by contemporary

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musicians from all genres as a prevailing aesthetic in the 21st century. As Wesley “Diplo” Pentz, a DJ and hip-hop producer describes it in a 2005 interview:

I think a lot of kids that like music live in a postmodern era where everything is everything. We're all hip-hop kids, we're all from the hip-hop generation, and hip-hop at this point is everything. . . . Hip-hop is the ultimate form of music, it's everything. We're like postmodern DJs in a way, we're just doing something that [connects] back to everything that's happened.118

For many musicians working in this culture, the idea of hip-hop is pervasive, inescapable even. Not only do the techniques of sampling and DJ culture thrive on an openness to diverse, disparate source material as a means for creative enterprises, they also point to the larger context of remix culture. Pentz’s comment speaks to the idea that such a movement may rely on an all-encompassing openness to hybridity, but such a sensibility also “connects back to everything that’s happened.” Despite the approach’s leveling of boundaries, the method relies on an understanding of how contemporary works build off the preexisting meanings of the materials it employs. The new directly melds with the old, signifying both. In order to understand the spread of such a movement, it is necessary to start with the method’s emergence and subsequent approach as a social practice.

Sampling as a principle still has much to do with the origins of its methods. That is, as a production mode, the techniques largely formed as an extension of the street-level hybridization that occurred with hip-hop DJs. Although the culture and music has evolved since then, as a sensibility, sampling still very much identifies with the creative spark of the earliest days of hip-hop. In the early 1980s, party DJs in the Bronx such as DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, raided their parents’ music collections and record bins across New York City looking for the perfect beats for the dancers who patronized

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their neighborhood events. These progenitors of hip-hop culture discovered that certain songs would fill dance floors, especially during “the breaks,” i.e. when all instrumentation would cut out save for the drums, leaving breathing room for funky drummers to bang out solo drumbeats.

The hip-hop DJs began experimenting with the existing music technology at the time, namely direct-drive turntables to develop a new form of musical practice – the art of playing the breaks. As such snippets of songs were usually short, DJs invented a practice of physically looping the beats by using mixing equipment to shift between the audio from two record players.

By having two copies of the same breakbeat, a DJ could play one break while cuing up the same drum fill on the other deck. Mixers, electronic devices that allow for manipulating and combining multiple audio signals, enabled DJs to quickly flip back and forth between the two records, conceivably repeating the same break for much longer than their original recorded duration. Such rhythms quickly became the backdrop for party chants and the improvised poetry of hype-men turned rappers. Soon afterward, DJs became producers as the thumping drum breaks formed the foundation for studio-engineered productions. Hip-hop producers began exploiting the capabilities of
sophisticated, but relatively cheap digital samplers to overlay the beats with sound snippets culled from any and every sound source, primarily that which preexisted on vinyl.

The sampling method evolved from a performative cultural practice – the activity of DJing. In conjunction with samplers, audio technology that allows the user to record, store, loop, filter, overlay and sequence sound fragments, hip-hop producers developed an entirely new way of constructing songs from prerecorded material. For example, take the aggressive sonic backdrop for Public Enemy’s song from 1989 “Fight the Power.” The song, which was featured in Spike Lee’s film *Do the Right Thing*, draws on sound material ranging from the sweaty funk drumming from multiple James Brown recordings; Washington, D.C. go-go styles by the 1980s group Trouble Funk; rock guitars and vocals from rockers Uriah Heep and Eric Clapton; as well as direct references from seminal hip-hop songs such as “Planet Rock” by Afrika Bambaataa among others. The technique is entirely appropriative as it relies on recorded sounds from the past as source material. But, in the words of Robleto:

> Sampling is not about passive consumption. It is the creation of new meaning out of shard of the past. An alchemical liberation of the magic trapped inside dead commodities. A voice retrieved from the destruction. The ability to both devalue and re-invest the heritage of a dead cultural past.119

Sampling explodes Jameson’s depictions of the postmodern as an aesthetic mired in the past and devoid of historical awareness. As Robleto states, as a method, sampling demands a vast, extensive knowledge and understanding of what has come before, not in terms of styles and genres to imitate, but rather to reinvigorate and remix. A DJ or hip-

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hop producer needs an acutely attuned appreciation of how fragments with such disparate origins and sound qualities can be assembled into a new whole. Sampling is an active, creative technique that yields products that move far beyond passive renderings of the past. The products are not just re-creations, rather they are remixes: reworkings of materials from other artists done in such a way that those materials are not destroyed but incorporated so as to form new structures, relationships and sounds. Such an approach to music making demonstrates an appreciation and detailed knowledge of history. Many hip-hop producers are walking libraries – archives – of arcane musical knowledge. Subsequently, their work simultaneous embodies and expresses this sense of historicity.

Although the underlying principles of music sampling – the cut-and-paste aesthetic and deliberate awareness of disparate source material – are similar to those found in the methods of collage and montage, the exuberant burst of creativity that accompanied hip-hop and DJ culture has proved to be a source of inspiration for musicians across genre, as well as artists across media. Entire music movements, genres and subcultures have sprouted from hip-hop and transmitted along with them is the creative power of sampling. In the current moment, the ideas of remixing and hybridization extend to the widespread scene of dance culture; underground movements such as dubstep; and global variations on the hip-hop model such as funk carioca, grime, reggaeton, to name only a few. Artists in other media (film, literature, visual arts – especially graffiti and street art), such as Bill Morrison, Jonathan Lethem and Dario Robleto have either adopted or recognized how the techniques of sampling and assemblage are at work in their creative practices. The spread of sampling as working method is ultimately reflective of a burgeoning remix culture, a pervasive,
multidirectional well of creativity that is open to participation from all who employ its methods. In other words, the hip-hop aesthetic has transformed into an all-encompassing remix aesthetic adhered to by so many who work in other musical genres, media and disciplines. In the words of Robleto:

If we as a generation have been given nothing but the wreckage of the past, then I say thank God for that. Because what has blossomed is akin to turning shit into gold. . . . We are all social archaeologists now – mining raw history and actively participating in its critique and reconstruction/re-enchantment.\footnote{Robleto.}

Sampling operates in a similar manner to the more historical activities of montage in film and collage in the visual arts. But it appears that it is only in the current moment that a more widespread cultural recognition of such practices has begun to be taken seriously. Perhaps part of this acknowledgment can be attributed to the political implications that such a practice embodies, as evidenced by Robleto’s comments. Sampling thrives on an underlying tone of inclusion and empowerment, not just in terms of its openness to disparate source material, but also in its accessibility as a method for creating art. In short, remix culture is also participatory culture.

Rap, the vocal element of hip-hop music, has long been considered a lyrical means to speak truth to power, but sampling offers more than just a musical vehicle for expression. It provides a conceptual framework for aesthetic resistance as it proposes an inclusive, alternative form of historical engagement. The histories and stories that hip-hop tell are in many cases, intensely local and personal, as they concern communities and people that grew up far from the dominant Anglo-European existence. While some cynically claim that postmodernism lacks a sense of history, sampling persists as an antidote to such thinking. Such a perspective is essential in this project’s consideration of
the film medium, particularly as it is ultimately argued that that particular medium is perhaps best suited for enacting change as a result of its capabilities to hybridize images of the past and bring them into the present. Film capitalizes on the sampling framework, very much in the vein of Eisenstein’s original conceptions of montage to produce images that not only reflect the past, but also present a revolutionary sense of the future.

Like its counterpart’s montage and collage, sampling relies on the use of past materials. In particular to this project, the use of waste. As the materials section argues, the combination of sampling and the materials they sample from provide a substantive base for viewing such methods and materials as alternative forms of archiving.

**MATERIALS:**
**THE DETRITUS OF THE PAST AS NUTRIMENT FOR THE ARTISTIC ARCHIVE**

All of the players in past history are dead, some sooner, some later. But the material traces of their lives are still with us. . . . These things are charged, and can be dangerous. But their persistence as material objects in our present does not allow us to forget that we are accountable for how we spend our days, for our work, for our time, for the traces that we leave behind in the material world. Stored objects are not the only way to signal that accountability, but they are one way. They teach us that things matter.  

- Susan Buck-Morss, “Researching Walter Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*”

For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.  

- Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

*The Arcades Project*, one of the last intellectual undertakings that Walter Benjamin worked on before his death in 1940, was very much an archival investigation

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[122] Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255
of a new cultural phenomenon, the development of the arcades in Paris. His approach to the project was an act of literary sampling as he collected thousands of quotes, observations, descriptions and written details and began assembling them in a voluminous work. He imposed little narrative or order on the written scraps, rather he employed the technique of montage to link them all together. The results read like a massive collection of fragmented moments loosely grouped, but in almost all cases, purposely juxtaposed so as to reveal a greater sense of not just Benjamin’s method, but more importantly, his thinking about the arcades themselves and their cultural and historical significance. Although his collage technique was primary to his conception of how history itself operates, attention to his methods only illuminates part of his thinking. That is, the details that Benjamin collected – the very source materials he preoccupied himself with until his death – were crucial to generating an alternative, or in his mind “true,” archive of history.

Although the previous section addressed how the techniques of montage, collage and sampling conceive of a methodology that can be considered inherently archival in nature, such an argument necessitates an analysis of the actual materials that are used in such creations. Just as Benjamin’s archival method and resulting literary work relied on what he called the detritus of culture, so are contemporary techniques of collage, montage, sampling and their subsequent products. This section explores the animating questions of what is it about these waste materials that makes them so valuable to artists’ creative processes, their desired products and ultimately their potential status as archives?

Benjamin’s theories provide an initial foundation as evidenced by his above quote. That is, he was concerned with the idea that material objects provide opportunities
for engaging with the past and that the lived process of working with them, transmits the past into the present. By not doing so though, those particles of the past are irretrievably lost. So this section begins with a further exploration of Benjamin’s thoughts on discarded objects as source materials for developing new historical perspectives, particularly with regard to the organizing concepts of *The Arcades Projects*. Then the discussion moves to more contemporary theory concerning the mutating values of “rubbish,” as well as the significant presence that fragments of the past have in the process of cultural recycling. Such a discussion provides important context for the questions of materiality and value that are at the heart of the materials discussion and this project. The next section shifts from more theoretical perspectives to praxis in that it analyzes the creative approach some artists use when working with decayed, discarded, discovered source materials.

**THE BENJAMINIAN APPROACH TO THE DETRITUS OF CULTURE**

In her work, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss describes Walter Benjamin as a theorist “who took seriously the debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth,”¹²³ and that his unfinished work, *The Arcades Project*, “presumes only an openness to the proposition that the common, everyday objects of industrial culture have as much of value to teach us as that canon of cultural ‘treasures’ which we have for so long been taught to revere.”¹²⁴ Benjamin’s intent with his work on the Arcades was to blast apart what he considered the false myth of the present and the

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¹²⁴ Ibid., xi.
continuum of history. He believed that such an explosion was possible given what Buck-Morss describes as the “antidote” of historical knowledge:

In the era of industrial culture, consciousness exists in a mythic, dream state, against which historical knowledge is the only antidote. But the particular kind of historical knowledge that is needed to free the present from myth is not easily uncovered. Discarded and forgotten, it lies buried within surviving culture, remaining invisible precisely because it was of so little use to those in power.\textsuperscript{125}

More traditional methods of history impose forced linear coherence on what in many cases is not coherent and is non-linear. As a result societies exist in a “mythic, dream state” that Buck-Morss refers to. For Benjamin the consequences are political, as in the process of the bourgeois defining what comprises history (or what those in power say “ought to be history”), essential stories, details and materials that point to a truer sense of the past are obscured. In the process of defining history by traditional means, things simply get lost, glossed over or intentionally ignored. \textit{The Arcades Project} was Benjamin’s attempt at a drastic realignment, a destruction of the prevailing notions of history. For him, the foundations for such a fight, the necessary historical knowledge that combats such illusory visions of the past, were found in the fragmented, detritus of existing culture.

A concept that Benjamin’s refers to throughout his work is that of “historical apocatastasis,” a moment in which the entirety of the past, particularly the forgotten traces, fragments, so-called negative elements, is brought into the present.\textsuperscript{126} This restorative moment would erase the socially enforced partitions in history and pierce the mythic dream state of the present that Morss refers to. For Benjamin, the previously discarded materials of the past serve as the substrate for this moment of illumination. The catalyst for such a reaction though depends on the individual who is able to formulate the

\textsuperscript{125} Buck-Morss, \textit{The Dialectics of Seeing}, x.

methods by which to reach that moment of simultaneous past-present. In Benjamin’s case, the approach was one that should by now sound familiar: montage. He declares his strategy in *The Arcades Project*:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t *say* anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory, but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own; by making use of them.\(^{127}\)

Buck-Morss elaborates on this statement when she writes: “Benjamin was at least convinced of one thing: what was needed was a visual, not a linear logic: The concepts were to be imagistically constructed, according to the cognitive principles of montage.”\(^{128}\) In the end, the principles Benjamin seems concerned with were open-ended. The structure of *The Arcades Project* depends on lists of quotes and thoughts that are only loosely grouped. Although there are general guiding themes, the individual pieces are seemingly placed at random. The technique yields juxtapositions, an essential aspect to Benjamin’s work as it allows the “rags, the refuse” to come into their own. It is in the very absence of structure that meaning, individually and collectively, takes shape. Again, these meanings are entirely predicated on the materials that such an approach draws from. For Benjamin, it was essential that the source base consisted of forgotten elements of culture, the discarded bits and pieces that existed outside traditional, institutions of history. It was only through such materials that an alternative, yet whole, understanding of the past could be creatively rendered in the present.

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\(^{127}\) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 460.  
RUBBISH THEORY

Resurrected fragments became nutriments for new metamorphoses.\textsuperscript{129} 
- David Lowenthal,  
“Material Preservation and Its Alternatives”

While Benjamin’s ultimate concern for the use of discarded materials reflected what he viewed as their inherently political capability, this is not to say that this should be considered their only function. On the contrary, waste materials encompass multiple layers of residual meaning, traces of value that have accumulated over time. Sifting through these layers is not always an easy task, but contemporary “rubbish theory,” as described by Michael Thompson, provides an overarching framework through which to assess the various values that waste can take on at different times.

Thompson’s work, \textit{Rubbish Theory}, concerns the value of objects, materials and artworks, not as an intrinsic sort of worth can be embodied, but rather as determined by the social milieu that surrounds them. In this line of thinking, a particular thing may take on positive value, negative value, or no value whatsoever (a sort of in-between status). The theory itself is predicated on a sliding scale of value. Most objects are culturally assigned into one of two categories that correspond to the level of value they take on. That is, objects that are in the “transient” category decrease in value and are finite in lifespan, while “durable” objects increase in value and are believed to have infinite lifespans.\textsuperscript{130} These categories have everything to do with the way in which people react to the particular objects, which in itself is entirely dependent on the perspective that a person brings to the object. For example, many people treat objects that are perceived as valuable entirely different from those that are believed to be worth less and in that

\textsuperscript{129} Lowenthal, 72.  
\textsuperscript{130} Michael Thompson, \textit{Rubbish Theory} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 7.
difference of action, the objects are unconsciously placed in their respective categories.\textsuperscript{131} But, as Thompson asserts, using this fixed category model does not offer an explanation as to how value for a particular object can change. That is, we know very well that values are malleable and change depending on the assessor, the particular circumstances, etc., but how? Hence, his creation of a third “covert” category, the limbo state of rubbish that correlates with neither a positive nor negative value.\textsuperscript{132} The value of objects and materials moves across the boundaries of category by entering this in-between state of rubbish. Hypothetically, a transient object should eventually reach a zero point in both its lifespan and its value. In reality we can observe that objects persist in a holding pattern of sorts, continuing to decay as rubbish until at some time they either disintegrate and completely disappear or are discovered, revitalized and hence, infused with new value.\textsuperscript{133}

Although Thompson uses his theory primarily as a means to explore the sociological implications of waste products, his framework is also valuable in exploring the ways in which social value operates with regard to art, particularly with regard to the source materials drawn upon for new works. First, the theory is instructive in its assertions that a particular object’s value is not necessarily an endowed trait, but rather that which a culture or society endows it with. Secondly, Thompson’s work serves as a contemporary perspective through which to observe how objects and materials that were once considered precious can so easily and precipitously fall into disrepair, but then also be resurrected to have unprecedented value based upon their very decayed state. For so many rubbish is just that, rubbish, waste materials that should be discarded and expunged. For others they serve as reminders that have the potential to take on immense

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\item \textsuperscript{131} Thompson, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 9.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 10.
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value, particularly when brought back into the present in a Benjaminian manner. Ultimately, rubbish theory helps show how value can change.

From a traditional archival perspective, the potential for value in waste objects that Thompson’s rubbish state represents is intensely problematic. Given the inherent connotations and aims of preservation, it might compel some with a penchant for collecting to try to save any and everything so as to be discovered once again in the future – to be reclaimed, reprocessed and revalued. Some have argued that this was perhaps a motivating factor behind Walter Benjamin’s preoccupation with the Parisian arcades. In a comment that addresses both Benjamin’s aims and the possibilities for archives of the 21st century, Ingrid Schaffner writes:

The archive was also Walter Benjamin’s great unfinished project: an attempt to organize the tidal waves of an ensuing modernity into a cohesive architecture of information and imagery. The inherent futility of this attempt, as each fragile structure slips beneath the crushing weight of the next oncoming wave, makes for an appropriately unstable paradigm in an age of project reproduction that is itself giving way to the juggernaut of the information superhighway.\(^\text{134}\)

Schaffner’s point addresses a paradox of preservation: the drive to preserve, knowing that such a project is utterly impossible. Acknowledging this paradox reinforces the foundation for establishing alternative ways of thinking about preservation and ultimately the project of archiving. As David Lowenthal argues, such different conceptions are predicated on the physical nature of rubbish, that is objects, specifically “fragments” of objects are ultimately useful because of their damaged materiality rather as opposed to when they have been preserved in some pristine, original form.

\(^\text{134}\) Schaffner, 18.
In his work, “Material Preservation and Its Alternatives,” Lowenthal asserts that the fundamental concept of preservation is counter to the ideas of actually interacting with the past in a substantive manner:

Setting preserved things apart forecloses other ways of using them. Such remnants seldom inspire new creation; they are valued as sacred relics, not for how we might reshape them. . . . Unable to use the past creatively, we further isolate what we preserve; what we make may conform with treasured relics but seldom extends their virtues; what we save is property and artifacts rather than ideas or culture.135

For Lowenthal, this form of preservation leads to a certain passivity when interacting with the artifacts and that as a result, the process of generating – or even understanding – history is countered. One of the alternatives then to the traditional modes of archiving lies in the active use of fragments, both in archival practice and subsequent creative engagement. Such materials are purposely kept incomplete, not only to save precious archive space, but to free their caretakers from “the same obsessive fidelity to original integrity as wholes.”136 In Lowenthal’s thinking: “Fragments surpass wholes in joining the past dynamically with the present. Mutilated and incomplete, they impart a sense of life ‘from the evidence of their struggle with Time . . .’137 Whoever discovers these rubbish objects and then uses them is afforded the capabilities to “activate myriad connections between what is and what was.”138 In a theoretical fashion similar to Benjamin, he asserts that fragments are a vital force in “transmitting a reshaped past” into the present through creative, not passive, means.

A driving concept at the core of rubbish theory and the archival significance of fragments is that of cycles. For Thompson it is about the cycle of worth as objects slide

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135 Lowenthal, 71.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid., 72.
138 Ibid.
through the malleable boundaries between categories of value. Lowenthal, like Benjamin, is concerned with a dynamic cycle that circulates meaning and understanding of the past into the present through creative uses of essential rubbish materials. These cyclical processes that begin with physical materials connect directly to a greater sense of cultural recycling, or in a term already familiar to this project, cultural remixing. This cycle of creation, existence, destruction, recreation, etc. functions entirely on materials that have not been preserved, i.e. fragments, or as Matt Locke describes them “dust:”

If we are to encourage new kinds of creative expression, we have to accept that this will only happen if we allow our content to degrade into dust. Remix culture requires flexibility – the ability to reduce content to the single atom that can then be reconstructed into a hook, a loop or a collage.139

As the next section demonstrates, these theories and ideas are some of the inherent motivating factors behind a generation of artists across media who are actively involved in reshaping the past through the active use of waste materials.

FRAGMENTS AND DUST AS SOURCE MATERIALS FOR NEW WORKS OF ART

The transition and exchange between subject and object, however, are not just fanciful experiments in the artistic process. To put oneself into the position of the objects, to derive subjective meaning from inanimate objects, to ascribe vivid power and new significance to the material: these are central moments of creative work, especially when artists collect objects as traces, memories, or documents.140

- Ingrid Schaffner,
“Digging Back Into ‘Deep Storage’”

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140 Schaffner, 24.
I get worried when I start these pieces because some of the materials I use need to be dealt with so delicately. . . . Turning to dust in poetry is one thing, but really turning to dust in front of you is another thing. It moves me because I have to earn the respect of the material.

- Dario Robleto, “The Magic That’s Possible”

Although theoretical perspectives about rubbish, fragments and dust are instructive in their considerations for the potential of damaged source materials, it is just as productive to observe how they are actually put to use. The work of many artists across film, visual arts and music demonstrate hands-on interaction with such materials. Knowledge of their creative engagements not only reinforces theory, but also augments it. The methods of montage, collage and sampling resonate with theories about materials as these strategies directly draw from waste products – in many cases because they have been discarded. For many artists working in these modes, having a perfect, preserved object or material is useful, perhaps even ideal for their creative purposes, but in a larger sense, the overarching theories of sampling and its context of remix culture are predicated on that which has been cast-off, lost, given up for forgotten. As the next chapter pertains directly to a study of film, this section primarily addresses artists’ who work in the visual arts, particularly Dadaists, as well as musicians who draw on sampling methods.

For many artists, drawing upon physical objects opens up artworks to an array of meanings that are directly associated with their materiality. An analysis of the use of discarded materials, as well as thoughts from the artists concerning their use, helps answer the animating question of this section: what is it about these objects that makes them so valuable to the artistic process and then ultimately new concepts of archiving? Comments from many of the artists in the Dada movement provide an understanding of

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Camacho.
how these source materials connect to formal aesthetic ideas, as well as concepts that are more pertinent to this project, those that concern questions of physical existence.

From a formal perspective, the use of materials adds depth not necessarily in terms of depiction, but rather in providing a tactile depth, a deeper tangible dimension of texture. Tristan Tzara, a Romanian poet and co-founder of Dada, describes the power of assemblage as product of the disparate, found materials the method draws from:

A shape cut out of a newspaper and incorporated into a drawing or painting is a veritable embodiment of that which is universally understandable, a piece of everyday reality which enters into relationship with every other reality that the spirit has created. The diversity of the materials, which arouse tactile sensations, gives the picture a new depth.\[142\]

By incorporating a physical scrap of material in the piece, the artist produces a definite, tangible depth – not just a depiction. The fragment also operates on another level of depth, particularly in the artwork’s combinatorial structure. In this specific case, the newspaper, which has been crafted as an integral part of an artwork, is significant given its original status, i.e. as a record of what has occurred in its particular society. Hence, the material generates a connotation of historical documentation, a meaning that, although becomes modified by the artist, nonetheless remains in some form. When taken in combination with the other aspects of the piece, this meaning becomes juxtaposed with that of the other materials. New relationships among the materials are discovered, relationships that are produced from their perceived “everyday” status. Such is the depth that Tzara addresses. From an archival perspective, we can view this use of materials as a different sort of record that not only observes everyday reality, but also generates something new from their combinatorial use.

\[142\] Wolfram, 98.
Raoul Hausmann, one of the co-founders of the Berlin Dada movement, worked primarily with cut-up photographs to produce collages – and then photomontages (photographs of photographic collages).

Figure 10: Raoul Hausmann, *ABCD*, 1923-1924

Hausmann’s manifesto, *Synthetische Cino Der Malerei*, which is critical of traditional methods of art making, asserts that the combination of the materials of lived reality relates to a greater acknowledgement of an internal state of human existence:

The doll a child throws away, a brightly coloured scrap of cloth, are more essential expressions than those of all the jackasses who wish to transplant themselves for all eternity in oil-paints into an endless number of front parlours. . . L’Art Dada will offer them a fabulous rejuvenation, an impulse towards the true experience of all relationships. . . . In Dada you will recognize your true state: wonderful constellations in real materials, wire, glass, cardboard, cloth, organically matching your own consummate, inherent inwardness, your own shoddiness. 143

143 Wolfram, 80.
As creative practice, not only do the collage methods of Dada rejuvenate the objects themselves, but their creative use can demonstrate a rejuvenation of lived, past experience. The depth that Tzara explicates now seems to drop even further into the inward state of existence. Throwaway possessions and discarded materials are indicative of that “true experience,” as well as a reflection of “shoddiness,” a reference to the very ephemeral nature of life itself. That is, just as those rubbish materials are in a state of decay, their creative combination allows viewers to then realize their own presence in that cycle of entropy. The rejuvenation that Hausmann describes is the result of that very understanding – the acknowledgement of that organic, “true state” as opposed to the sort of eternal illusions offered in “oil-paints.”

These attempts to articulate the cognizance of existence are enhanced by their very use of waste materials. What might immediately look haphazard or messy, i.e. collage works of discarded objects, actually represents a carefully thought-out process that deliberately embraces those qualities. In the words of Jean Arp: “I had accepted the transience, the dribbling away, the brevity, the impermanence, the fading, the withering, the spookishness of our existence. Not only had I accepted it, I had even welcomed transience into my work as it was coming into being.”

The thoughts of the above Dada artists shows their motivations to bridge a gap between art and life, that is, to achieve representations that might help people better understand their existence as opposed to the sort of false representations that attempt to crystallize existence in frozen, pristine time capsules. In comparison to the traditional connotations of archiving, i.e. whole, entire, original, this alternative notion embraces their opposites: fragments, incompleteness, the

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ephemeral, entropy, decay. To return to Hausmann’s comments, as well as Lowenthal’s theory on fragments, in the creative use of discarded materials, “you will recognize your true state.” These particular collage works operate as archives that acknowledge decay as an inevitable and integral aspect of the creative process, as well as of everyday life.

The works and discourse of the Dada movement demonstrate the relationships between collage methods, discarded materials, and their creative products: representations that adhere to the inherent, entropic nature of life. Some contemporary sampling work in music works with these same themes. Music remix culture, specifically that in the overarching idea of hip-hop also demonstrates how such creations are reflective of a deep historical knowledge that is very much based in recorded, material objects, namely vinyl records.

As the methods section outlined, sampling production techniques stem from the practice of hip-hop DJing, an activity that at its inception was based on the use of records. Although sampling has extended into the digital realm, as vinyl is no longer the only source base like it once was, nonetheless, for many hip-hop purists, the notion of ending the use of vinyl for DJing or production is anathema. Their approach, which might be described as an ideology of the medium, has much to do with hip-hop’s traditional roots, i.e. the significant role that records played in the origins of hip-hop culture.

Competition has always been one of the motivating forces in hip-hop – a factor that also has something to do with the original days of hip-hop DJing. That is, the earliest DJs were always working to outdo each other, whether it was the size of their sound system, mixing skills on the turntables – or who had the most obscure, unknown records. Subsequently, searching for records or “digging in the crates” as it is referred to in hip-
hop culture was a requirement for any good DJ or producer.\textsuperscript{145} This search can be seen as an act of surveying the landscape of recorded music productions. That is, the choices that DJs and sampling musicians make are far from arbitrary. In many cases, the selections are predicated on an individual’s level of musical knowledge, which itself is often carefully cultivated within DJ culture. If something was produced on a record, chances are some DJ at some point has pondered over it in a dingy record store, garage sale, flea market, thrift shop, family basement or pawnshop.

Although many hip-hop songs derive from samples of popular songs from the past that are still immediately recognizable and easy to find, just as many, if not more are constructed from records that were discarded long ago. Such original source materials may have failed to sell when they were first released and subsequently ended up in a box in a basement of a record store or perhaps they were simply obscure to begin with. The songs from the local high school funk band that produced a run of 500 45s (7-inch singles), the failed side project from a well-known singer that a major record label disavowed, a handful of Indian Bollywood albums that an immigrant arrived with – all of these sounds are fodder for the hip-hop DJ. Crate diggers develop extensive, categorical, downright archival knowledge of these little-known, forgotten artists and their music. In the words of Dario Robleto:

DJ culture/sampling implies one very simple but powerful idea. The idea that even if all we have is the wreckage of the past, so what – we are still going to make something out of it. DJing is about showing how something so plain and forgotten can suddenly be transformed into this strange entity. That there are possibilities within the limitations of everyday life, for the things we have looked at as disposable.\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{146} Robleto.
In a practical sense, these works that Robleto describes as a “strange entity” not only demonstrate a powerful, motivated sense of potential that can arise from discarded objects, but they can also reflect a deep understanding and respect of recorded music history. As such, the new sample-based hip-hop song stands as a historical document of sorts, not just of its own particular moment in time, but also of all the music that it draws from. Just as say, how Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* album stands as a substantial new musical statement that simultaneously reflects the wide swath of knowledge of preexisting jazz and classical styles, motifs, scales, etc. of its performers, sample-based songs can demonstrate that same sort of archival musical knowledge given their actual use of sound fragments from the past.

Although hip-hop sample techniques are not primarily concerned with the ephemeral qualities of the source materials they are predicated upon, it is still possible to circle back to issues of transience, as records exist in perpetual state of decay. The very act of playing a record contributes to its destruction. Phonograph needles simultaneously release the musical vibrations etched into a record and erode the very grooves the sounds are stored on. DJs are especially cognizant of this material quality as the act of scratching records and playing them night after night stresses their integrity. Although new vinyl records are still being produced, most are only bought and sold in used record stores, pawn shops, thrift stores, garage sales, and flea markets – sites that deal in rubbish. Josh “DJ Shadow” Davis, who some have called “The King of Digging,” describes the experience of searching for old rubbish records in a dark, dirty record store basement filled with stacks and stacks of vinyl, as well as mummified bats and natural gas:

> Just being in here is a humbling experience to me because you’re looking through all these records and it’s sort of like a big pile of broken dreams in a way. Almost
none of these artists still have careers really, so you have to kind of respect that in a way.¹⁴⁷

![Figure 11: Josh “DJ Shadow” Davis among stacks of vinyl](image)

Davis’ characterization of record stacks as a “pile of broken dreams” speaks to the philosophical connection that many artists bring to the materials they engage with. In this case, not only is the comment indicative of a respect for the music and its creators, but given Davis’ serious approach to searching for records, his remarks also reflect a deep respect for the physical objects as they languish in unseen, seldom visited basements. It is a very Benjaminian approach to the detritus of culture. For artists like Davis, Dario Robleto, Raoul Hausmann, Tristan Tzara or Jean Arp, these materials function as much more than just waste, rather they provide the essential fragments for new ideas, meanings and understandings of both the past and the present. While generating the new, their works simultaneously encompass a different sense of history, one that not only embraces the forgotten, the discarded, the cast-offs, but also transmits them into the present.

As the methods section asserts, the processes of montage, collage and sampling produce products reflect genuinely new creation, but not in a traditional, modernist sense. In conjunction with the analysis of source materials, that is, these methods’ dependence on physical fragments of the past as means for new creation, we can instead return to the

¹⁴⁷ *Scratch*, dir. Doug Pray, 92 min., Palm Pictures, 2001, DVD.
description of such products as “always already new,” particularly within the larger context of remix culture. Specific to this project though is the issue of materiality, the state in which the source materials are discovered. In contrast to the traditional film archiving paradigm in which the aim is to preserve films in their whole, entire, or original state, these contemporary ways of thinking embrace the concepts of fragments, transience, incompleteness, the ephemeral, entropy and decay.

At first, this use of decayed materials appears to develop an internal paradox. That is, as the works address decay and transience, they also immediately seem to “freeze” those very instances of disintegration. For example, the act of sampling captures a fragment, a particular moment of sound and isolates it. Now as a digital snippet, an iteration, saved in a piece of music equipment, it can be understood as a snapshot of the decaying material, i.e. the original record. In a sense, it is as if the acceptance of those transitory, ephemeral qualities is rendered moot, therein an apparent paradox. But, as the process unfolds, that fragment is assembled with others, and inevitably returns to the cycle as a finished product whether it is a compact disc, mp3, vinyl record, etc. Regardless of format, this seemingly “frozen” product begins an inevitable contribution to material decay that it was originally predicated upon. DJ Shadow refers again to the “big pile of broken dreams” as he describes the act of making music as part of a larger cycle: “If you’re making records and if you’re a DJ and putting out releases, whether its mixtapes or whatever, you’re sort of adding to this pile whether you want to admit it or not. Ten years down the line you’ll be in here.”148 The cycle of recycling cultural products, ideas – and their very history continues, as subsequent generations build new meaning of the past through their work.

148 *Scratch*. 
This is not to say that anything derived from old materials is necessarily an archive of sorts, but rather that the archival potential is present. What invigorates this waste, these discarded objects is the artists’ active engagement with the material itself. The methods, the techniques and the strategies reflect archival processes. In other words, it is one thing to simply collect, store, preserve and shelter materials or historical ideas, but it is quite another to rework them, to acknowledge their materiality and then build new sites – new archives – for knowledge and understanding. A mass collection of static film, whether they are pristine or damaged, may be a significant collection, but it perhaps its true value lies in its potential for future engagement. Methods of montage, collage and sampling should be considered as new archival activity because of their active integration of the past into new creation. Such an activity resonates with the issues of ephemerality and entropy that traditional archives struggle to overcome. Instead, active engagement with the past acknowledges the impossibility of the pristine, the static, the unchanging, the linear and instead embraces their opposites. But rather than try to discard a sense of history, new works remain laden with such meaning, they capitalize on these endowments. The methods resonate with contemporary understandings of memory as well, particularly with the cognitive process with which we create our sense of what has come before, what has transpired – even of those moments that we have personally lived and may think that we remember as they exactly were. We actively forget, our memories mutate and decay, we creatively build our understandings of what has come before. Just like memory, the past does not remain static, nor does history remain monolithic, simply waiting for us to access and grasp its meaning. Rather we are forced to engage with it, mull it over, and seek out our own reformulated interpretations and understandings. In the
process we might be forced to consider our own presence – not just as individual, personal archivists, but as humans participating in larger cycle of existence.

As the case study of this project ultimately demonstrates, these momentary reflections of the ephemeral represent new meaning on the dual levels of archiving and that activity’s connection to human existence. Such artistic projects conceive a new way of thinking about archiving, one that does not simply tell us about the past, but actually provides entrance points for creatively interacting with it. Secondly, such creations reflect an inherent understanding of the life cycles of products. That is, they point us toward a conception of archiving that not only helps us understand the past, but also how we go about creating and recreating it – in a cycle that is very much like our own existence – a continual cycle of existence, decay and rebirth, existence, decay and rebirth.
Figure 12: Still of a boxer fighting film decay from *Decasia*
CHAPTER III
METAPHORS OF DISINTEGRATION:
IMAGES OF FILM DECAY AS MEMORY AND HISTORY

A DERVISH, WHIRLING. A massive bank of projectors relentlessly unspooling their reels into long canals of developing fluid. A volcanic crater, belching smoke—a craggy shore, the waves breaking. An indecipherable welter of rotted, coursing shapes, and presently, through the pox-veil, a geisha gingerly approaching a screen. A butterfly pinioned against the coruscating surface. A mottled, pullulating mass: the frenzy of moths at twilight. Semen. Cells dividing.

A procession of camels making their slow way across a desert horizon. . . . A man rescued from drowning. A grown man being dunked into a river for baptism. . . . Lovers melting into embraces that are themselves melting and coming undone. A baby emerging from a womb and then cradled in a tub of water (developing fluid?). A mine collapse; a shack gone up in flames. A young boxer, gamely jabbing at boiling nothingness. A lonely old man ambling through a mission plaza.

The empty sky, dappled with corrosive specks from which gradually emerge sputtering aircraft, droning on, circling and presently releasing further specks—sperm? No, parachutists, who slowly float down to earth. The projectors unspooling. The dervish, whirling. 149

- Lawrence Weschler, description of Decasia

In 2002, filmmaker Bill Morrison released Decasia: The State of Decay, a film composed entirely of decayed source material culled from film archives across the United States. The film’s eerily beautiful visuals stem from the unpredictable interplay between the original images and the film’s material decomposition: the physical deterioration of the cellulose film stocks they were originally created on. Most of Morrison’s source materials were films from the earliest period of the medium, a time when the standard format was an organic combination of nitrate cellulose, gelatin and emulsion of silver salts. The various prints and negatives from which he drew from had been carefully preserved in monitored storage facilities, but inevitably these films proved unstable and entered a state of advanced deterioration. André Habib describes the irony of the

149 Weschler.
phenomenon: “It is a beautiful and tragic paradox that the art of film, which captures the movement and flow of life, has had to grapple with its material mortality more than any other artistic medium.”

Although fending off decay is considered to be a top priority for film archivists, that is, they are concerned with preserving pristine, original copies of films for posterity, Morrison’s creative process depends on a different conception of how the decay of film operates, as well as how their resulting images create meaning.

Technologies of representation, in this case film, are inextricably linked with concepts of memory and history, as they are considered formative materials in the creation of our understandings of the past. This chapter operates as an in-depth case study of Decasia, specifically in how Morrison’s filmmaking demonstrates engagement with the material corpus of the past as an artistic act of archiving. This engagement and its output not only embody an alternative stance to conventional approaches to film archiving and preservation; They also acknowledge the very life cycle of creation, destruction and re-creation that it participates in.

This chapter explores Decasia as an intersection site for the primary concerns of this project: film archiving, decay and cultural memory. More specifically, Morrison’s film can be read as a visual and conceptual metaphor for the cognitive act in which we create memories and the subsequent manner in which our perceptions of history are constructed. In the current moment, a mass of critical thought indicates a breakdown of traditional perspectives on these cognitive processes, i.e. that individually or culturally we regard memories as “the-way-it-was” or that linear conceptions of history are accurate

representations of the past. The work of Walter Benjamin, specifically the organizing concepts behind *The Arcades Project* and theoretical ideas within “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” serves as the crucial critical thought that frames this shift to new considerations of memory and history. Such an approach provides a foundation for new ways thinking about creative forms of archival activity.

As a film (or perhaps “sequence of moving images” is a more apt description), *Decasia* features two levels of content: The visual interaction that occurs between the medium’s decay and its recorded images; and its overall form as a material image object. This chapter looks at images from the film based on their content, as well as the overarching structure and materiality of the film itself. This analysis appears within the context of the project’s larger considerations of film, memory and history. To accomplish this, the first section of the chapter contextualizes Morrison’s work within the avant-garde and orphan film genres, but more importantly develops his approach to working with found, decayed image fragments as a Benjaminian method of operation. The chapter then moves beyond analysis of Morrison’s work techniques and his materials to consider the film itself, both as a collection of images and as a product. This section first concerns decay as a visual aesthetic, but more important to *Decasia*, as a visual representation of the processes of memory creation and history production. The discussion shifts to the film’s material significance as a physical image object that exists within a cyclical concept of memory and history. Ultimately this exploration demonstrates that in the current moment, a work such as *Decasia*, in all its mutilated visual imagery, serves as an essential counterpoint to traditional perspectives of how memory and history are constructed, as well as the traditional discourses of film archiving and preservation.
Film and video constitute a memory that can be reproduced on a massive scale. In effect, it organizes publics that share ephemeral moments of imagery. However conflictive the meanings that are constructed between viewers may be, moving images nonetheless powerfully shape cultural imaginations.

- Emily Cohen, *The Orphanista Manifesto*

Since the earliest days of film, filmmakers, theorists and archivists have lauded the capabilities of film to represent the past. Perhaps because of their mimetic quality, film images have been looked to as the physical remnants of lived reality. They serve as the visual residue of the past. As such, film fundamentally changed not only our remembered past, but it has altered our concepts of "memory" and "past" themselves. In the words of Morrison, “Cinema has had a huge hand in shaping the way we are and the way we think and the way we dream in the last hundred years.”

So then perhaps it is not a surprise that cultures have approached the activities of archiving film materials with the intention of safely storing and preserving them for posterity. Such documents then become installed as a material collection of the past – a collection premised in the belief that the past should remain static, regardless of the change that occurs around it. But given film’s material qualities, particularly those of the earliest nitrate films from which Morrison draws, such a proposition is revealed to be extremely difficult if not impossible.

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This fear of the loss of memory materials is a significant spur to preservation, particularly for those who believe in film’s capacity to restore the past. Emily Cohen writes:

For many, the mass destruction of films is simultaneously the destruction of a nation’s cultural heritage – hidden truths of a history untold, buried in piles of decaying nitrate reels. On the brink of imminent demise, an old decaying silent film provokes an emotional landscape of urgency.¹⁵³

But, film decay, akin to that of other media, can also be a necessary state for regeneration, a platform to perpetuate the creative cycle. Habib describes how corroded film actually serves as an “aesthetic opening” for new works: “Many filmmakers have in fact made films out of broken fragments found in film archives, working on the poetic, plastic and historical value of decomposed film.”¹⁵⁴ Artists, filmmakers and theorists as varied as Joseph Cornell, Ken Jacobs, Bruce Connor, Orson Welles, Guy Debord, etc., have all produced films from preexisting content that was in many cases appropriated from film archives. Employing this technique, Morrison operates within the longstanding artistic tradition of using found footage to produce new film.

In recent years, this tradition of using found footage has come to be recognized as related to a broader movement in cinema circles, that of the orphan film. According to Paolo Cherchi Usai, an orphan film can be thought of very simply as a film that for one reason or another no one can claim legal ownership of.¹⁵⁵ Such works are typically in the form of stock footage, “outside commercial preservation programs, newsreels, silent

¹⁵³ Cohen, 719.
¹⁵⁴ Habib, “Thinking in the Ruins.”
films, avant-garde works, documentaries and others.”¹⁵⁶ These abandoned works usually belong in the public domain and subsequently, more often than not, are languishing in archives with no affordable protection. Archivists and film aficionados who seek to preserve them are faced with a difficult situation, as there are limited resources to protect films that are neither copyrighted nor proven to be commercially viable. In the film preservation community, of which many members identify themselves as “orphanistas,” the cry of saving orphan films has eclipsed “nitrate won’t wait” as a motto for generating support for preserving such ephemera.¹⁵⁷

Morrison has been described as the cinepoet laureate of the movement and his films are often screened at orphan film festivals. This designation is curious because while his artistic method is clearly dependent on the persistence of archival materials, his films revel in their material’s damaged state. This is not to say that all orphanistas view film preservation in an entirely traditional sense, i.e., all films should be restored and preserved to pristine, original condition, but the movement itself is ultimately concerned with protecting what has been abandoned. Morrison’s approach transmits remainders of the past into the future, but by physically creating something with their materials. In the larger scope of this project, this seeming paradox resonates with the idea that Morrison’s work serves as an example of a new archival activity, one that not only interacts with historical materials, but simultaneously demonstrates a cognizance of their limited materiality.

While Habib asserts that there are “many filmmakers” who have seized upon film decay’s aesthetic opening, there seem to be few predecessors to Morrison’s specific

¹⁵⁶ Usai, “What is an Orphan Film?”
¹⁵⁷ Cohen, 722.
aesthetic of working with severely damaged film. Many avant-garde artists may sift through film archives for source material, but few appear to have the focus on the material decay of such image objects that Morrison’s work captures. Morrison is typically classified as an avant-garde filmmaker – and his aesthetic is akin to that of Stan Brakhage. For example, there are visual similarities between amorphous shapes of film decay in Decasia and Brakhage’s piece “Mothlight” in which he physically taped moth wings onto clear film and then rendered prints. But where Brakhage visually explored the materiality of film by deliberately marring its physical structures, Morrison traverses the same territory through careful collection and presentation. Instead of attacking film itself, he searches out fragments in archives that already exhibit the visual markers of time.

In interviews, Morrison has acknowledged that a primary inspiration for his work, both in terms of aesthetic and working method, stems from Peter Delpeut’s Lyrisch Nitraat (known in the United States as Lyrical Nitrate), a Dutch film released in 1991. Delpeut assembled his work entirely from film fragments discovered in the personal attic archive of Jean Desmet, a former theater owner and film distributor in Amsterdam. The collection was transferred to the institutional archive of the Film Museum of Amsterdam where Delpeut found the films from which he began constructing his six-part work. Lyrical Nitrate has much in common with Decasia: both are based on decayed, found footage and each of the films provides a loose, visual narrative about the nature of cinema and the passage of time.

It is difficult to view the two films as counterparts though, as Morrison’s work goes significantly farther into exploring material film decay, both as a visual aesthetic and as a conceptual theme. Delpeut’s work does not fully emphasize the material
corrosion of film, rather it builds to a visual acknowledgment of decay that manifests in the work’s conclusion. It is only in these final moments that the viewer gains a full sense of what the degeneration of film actually looks like. Decasia, on the other hand, provides an immediate and overwhelming visual engagement with the violent, intensely beautiful process of film's dissolution.

**BILL MORRISON’S MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In order to fully contextualize Morrison’s working techniques and develop an understanding of his reliance on deteriorated celluloid, it is useful to return to some specific arguments about Walter Benjamin’s approach to the materials of history, particularly in his use of montage and its specificity toward fragments. By doing so it becomes clear how closely related Morrison’s methods and materials are to the Benjaminian approach to understanding the past through material objects and memories. As evidenced by Decasia, Morrison’s thought process behind his techniques and the objects he draws from are inextricably linked. This is to say that it is not necessarily easy or productive to clearly distinguish between these two essential elements of his work. Instead, by applying theory from Benjamin, as well as that of David Lowenthal, Morrison’s concentrated use of film fragments can be rendered in a different light.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin’s staunch belief in the “debris of mass culture as the source of philosophical truth” took the throwaway material of industrial culture to be as important as the artifacts traditionally stored in museums and archives. Such a theory is ultimately predicated on the belief that serious collection and analysis of a society’s detritus destroys the dominant ideology of an imposed, linear history. For

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Benjamin, this attack subsequently illuminates a sense of history that is truly complete, inclusive of the essential but forgotten aspects of the past.

The political necessity for building on the ruined fragments of the past can be coupled with the qualities such materials can affect on the mental borders between the past and the present. David Lowenthal writes:

Fragments surpass wholes in joining the past dynamically with the present. Mutilated and incomplete, they impart a sense of life, ‘from the evidence of their struggle with Time,’ in Malraux’s phrase. . . . Fragments that are merely transient evoke the past with peculiar intensity. Seeing the unreconstructed fragments of mutilated paintings, for example, shocks the viewer into a double apprehension, of its presumed original state and of its ineluctable decay into bricolage.¹⁵⁹

The emotional shock that manifests with transient materials resonates with Benjamin’s reference to “historical apocatastasis,” the illuminative instant in which the entirety of the past rushes forth, piercing the mythic dream state of the present.¹⁶⁰ Lowenthal’s passage also addresses how the visual aesthetic of fragments apprehend the viewer, dually evoking in them a dialectic sensation of what that material might have once looked like while simultaneously reflecting its dramatic erosion. His insight into this dual nature of fragments, their persistence as simultaneously embodying a sense of both past and present, is essential in helping to consider Morrison’s work in relation to Benjamin.

Significantly, however, whereas Benjamin was much more interested in the political possibilities of the fragment, Morrison is largely concerned with their aesthetic value. Morrison came upon the idea of using film fragments as source material when he was struggling with his own artwork. Early in his career as a painter, he was searching for a new way to control more than just the ephemeral moment of a single painting or individual frame of film. In an interview he states that the emotions he wanted to convey

¹⁵⁹ Lowenthal, 72.
in his art became easier in the film medium because of the control he was able to exert over a series of many pictures, the accompanying music and the length of time that a viewer was intended to look at it.  

161 He began working with archival film footage as it had a quality of “having been touched by time, by a non-human intervention that is organic.”  

162 Following the release of Decasia, Morrison commented in a number of interviews that although the decay of film evoked a number of visual sensations, he was primarily fascinated with its visual impact; simply put, he liked the way it looked. Whereas Benjamin was much more interested in the political possibilities of using fragments, Morrison seems largely concerned with their aesthetic value. This is not to say that Decasia should not be seen in relation to Benjamin’s thoughts, as in the end, the work is laden with layers of meaning that point directly to Benjamin’s concerns with memory, the passage of time, and ultimately history. Again, Lowenthal’s comments also place Morrison’s work and Benjamin in the same context.

In terms of construction, that is, the assemblage of fragments, Benjamin was clear about his belief in the cognitive principles of literary montage as a method by which the “rags and refuse” of culture could come into their own. Much like the theoretical arguments of Eisenstein, Benjamin’s montage provides an explosive sense of revelation as new connections suddenly emerge from the juxtaposition of disparate elements. Morrison works with similar principles in mind, particularly in his approach to sifting through the stockpiles of ruined films at archives – and then applying the techniques of bricolage and montage in order to generate new moments of visual meaning. His technique reflects an intentional, physical interaction with the source materials.

161 Habib, “Matter and Memory.”
162 Habib, “Thinking in the Ruins”
Eschewing a digital production process, Morrison worked with his film by hand, assembling and editing *Decasia* on a traditional flatbed editor. In an interview he states: “I think there is something to the physicality of film, being able to hold it, that we’re losing and, of course, I’m someone who’s talked about that: how film interfaces with the material world.”

Morrison was also deliberate about not manipulating the images of his source materials. While some reviews of his film have suggested otherwise, Morrison did not use digital reconstruction or post-production visual effects to augment the images of decay. What the viewer observes in the film is as close a copy as possible of time’s organic mutilation of the source films.

![Still of celluloid film in developing fluid from *Decasia*](image)

On the other hand, Morrison does employ an intentional structure to his montage, an overarching narrative of sorts, specifically based on the content of the images. Lawrence Weschler’s eloquent summary of *Decasia*’s visual arc at the beginning of this chapter reflects how the sequence makes an inherent statement about life cycles. The film begins and ends with “a dervish, whirling,” an image that frames the entire work. At the film’s beginning, the dervish is followed by another circular visual, that of “projectors

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163 Le Cain and Ronan.
164 Habib, “Matter and Memory.”
relentlessly unspooling their reels into long canals of developing fluid.” The depictions of turning wheels recall the physical apparatus of the cinema. Not only has film often been thought of as a medium that projects unified, continuous representations of the world, but in a physical sense, it operates within a greater cycle encompassing creation, existence, and then the inevitable slide into ruin. While this may seemingly lead to an unavoidable terminus, in this cycle there is no endpoint, but rather only a sense of return as symbolized by the continual loop of the projector reels.

From these images Decasia takes on a meditative quality as images and decay blend into one another rendering a 67-minute visual journey through visual immolation. Breaking waves crash then liquefy behind a jellied veil. A crater looms as the foreground erupts, gushing smoke or sand or liquid. The view shifts to microscope footage of cell division. A lone Monarch butterfly appears as it is also scraped from existence. A fluttering moth mass ebbs and flows in the same manner as the varying corrosion that eventually eclipses it. Camels amble across a dark, shifting desert on a trajectory toward oblivion. A lone man walks through the ruins of a graveyard. Perhaps his path is similar to that of the young girls who walk two-by-two under the ominous care of nuns. A man nearly drowns but is saved by his companion. Somewhere in Asia a man twirls thread on a solarized spinning wheel. Then a rack of film slides into a trough of developing liquid. The rocket pods of a merry-go-round blast out of an encroaching corroded ulcer as a rickety Ferris wheel flickers, intermittently blacked out of the picture by decay.
The Sufi dancer returns, his whirling profile outlined in solar highlights. Hands lift newborns from a liquid abscess of chaos. Children ride the bus and every so quickly grow into adults. Two lovers lean into one another, melding into a single being admiring the twilight. An angry old monster-woman argues with a judge as she sublimates into amorphous liquid decay. Now the nuns supervise young boys during a bought of filmic
smog. A boxer attacks a pillar of blistering distortion that he cannot defeat. Dead men are
dragged from a mine, a woman’s river baptism follows. A series of mottled men make
unwanted advances on young women. Airplanes fly across an increasingly faded
newsprint sky, releasing parachutists that eventually become blemishes, flecks of decay.
The camels turn from their destination returning to their origin. The sun sets on the desert
and the dervish whirls.

Whereas Benjamin’s theory of montage focused on the effects of unintentional
juxtaposition, Morrison purposely selected and sequenced the images of Decasia,
arranging them in a particular order that suggests a complete return, a full cycle.
Benjamin claims that he “needn’t say anything.”\textsuperscript{165} While Morrison never offers any
explicit commentary in the film, his editing, sequencing and deliberate structure becomes
his statement. The themes of origins, life, death, violence, redemption, passage,
destruction, creation and rebirth are inherent in his choice of images. Despite the
ambiguity of specific details, their trajectory and placement within the cycle becomes
apparent. The moments of visual uncertainty produce a feeling of continuity, a sensation
of blend and flow. There is a clear relation between the methods of both Benjamin and
Morrison. Where Benjamin might rely on the lack of structure as the primary source of
meaning, Morrison’s montage employs a more deliberate control over the fragments of
found footage so as to reinforce the circuit of life.

A second source of Morrison’s control emerges with the slow-motion effect that
occurs as a result of his direct manipulation of the prints themselves. In a 2004 interview
with Andrè Habib, Morrison states that typically he would find the original negatives,
prints or archival safety masters of his source material in varying degrees of deterioration.

\textsuperscript{165} Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 460.
In order to use those images, he would first have a copy made, usually in the form of an optical negative that was “stretch printed, in other words, it was slowed down.”\footnote{Habib, “Matter and Memory.”} Mechanically speaking, each frame of the original was printed three times, the result being a slow-motion viewing effect that creates a different visual sensation of time, a molasses feel. If the film were slower, it might devolve into a slide show of sorts as viewers would see the same image three times instead of once. Morrison asserts that he slowed the prints so that viewers would be able to fully grasp the images of decay. The subsequent impact is that his decision not only emphasizes the overall theme concerning the material decay of film, but also begins to make a statement about the passage of time. By changing the pace, it calls attention to the passage of time itself.

Much of this meaning is reliant on the film’s structure as Morrison’s work deliberately generates a statement about the flow and cycle of time, both cinematically and metaphorically. This is to say that Morrison works very much in a Benjaminian style of using found objects and employing the principles of montage. Although their creative intentions may differ, the effects are very much the same. They address larger cultural ideologies and themes concerning life and the passage of time. They are both intentionally involved with collecting the leftovers of culture and then presenting them in bricolage form. As the next sections of the project demonstrate, as a result of Morrison’s creative decisions, \textit{Decasia} fits within a visual aesthetic that immediately connotes the past and then, more importantly becomes a visual metaphor for the issues that most concerned Benjamin: memory, the passage of time and ultimately history.
IMAGES OF FILM DECAY AS VISUAL AESTHETIC

Cinema is the art of moving image destruction.\(^\text{167}\)

- Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*

Time’s wear and tear on celluloid is an unavoidable byproduct of the actual cinematic process. Once developed, a film begins the descent from its perceived perfection, its unmarred, pristine shape. Although the celluloid medium is durable enough to be shipped from city to city and looped and dragged through any number of projectors, its body is not invulnerable. Much like the auto-destructive act of digging a diamond-tipped phonograph needle through the delicate vinyl grooves of a record, the apparatus of the film projector also gradually wears down the stock of a film. As Usai writes, “Cinema is the art of destroying moving images.”\(^\text{168}\) That process, as visually and orally evidenced by its accrued blemishes – its clicks and pops, scratches and lines, the warm crackle of collected dust – endows film with an aura of time and pastness. A film that endures these gradual attacks bears witness to time itself and seems to emit a certain character, a presence and embodiment of its passage that grows with each subsequent showing.

This has even become a popularly recognizable code of film. Visible wear to the surface of the film connotes a sense of pastness that viewers instantly comprehend. We might say that all film fundamentally constructs a historical impression. After all, every film depicts the ineffable imagistic residue of moments that occurred in the past. But images of film decay can operate as a more deliberate visual aesthetic, as evidenced by its use in any number of films. Two examples worth looking at are the works *Planet Terror*, Robert Rodriguez’s 2007 foray into the exploitation genre known as “grindhouse,” and

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 7.
*Be Kind Rewind*, Michel Gondry’s fictional story of a videotape rental store in Passaic, New Jersey that was released in 2008.

In the case of *Planet Terror*, Rodriguez incorporates real celluloid damage – images of iodine-tinted nitrate film dissolving into acidic bubbles – into the opening titles of the film. Out-of-sync vibrations and yellowed discolorations blend with the images of an unhappy go-go dancer as she hypnotically writhes in a seedy strip club. The film was made in 2007, but the visual decay – the grainy, visual static – in conjunction with the subject matter and graphic design of the film projects the imagery directly into the 1970s schlock of the grindhouse genre, low-budget films that appealed to those with interests in graphic action, wanton violence and sex.

The film enthusiastically embraces degradation in a visual sense. For example, in the middle of the work, a the film negative appears to burn up in the projector leaving only a sticky web of destroyed celluloid and an insertion of “MISSING REEL,” a visual trick referencing both the work’s perceived materiality and the fact that few copies of such films exist. Rodríguez employs the decay aesthetic as a way to not only celebrate a cult genre that persisted largely in the shadows of mainstream cinema, but also as a centerpiece of the film’s narrative. The protagonists struggle against mutating zombies that were created by exposure to a manmade decay agent. These men-turned-creatures exist in a perpetual state of instability as their bodies slowly liquefy, degenerating into a bloody, bubbling mess. Such physical renderings of human bodies falling apart compliments the graphic decay of the film and ultimately its regard for a genre that was largely ignored, left for forgotten.
Michel Gondry’s work resonates with the idea of celebrating what is forgotten, but in the particular case of *Be Kind Rewind*, it has more to do with the creative capabilities of the outdated VHS medium as opposed to a specific cult genre. The plot of the film begins with a freak accident in which all of the tapes in a rundown video rental store are demagnetized, leaving them blank. Instead of replacing the tapes with new copies, the employees decide to “swede,” or videotape by hand, their own versions of popular films such as *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Ghostbusters*, *Robocop* and *Rush Hour 2*. When the employees are threatened with federal copyright violations and the shuttering of their storefront, the entire Passaic community embarks on a pseudo-historical project documenting the life of jazz legend Fats Waller in their neighborhood. In order to create the visual sensation of archival footage, one of the characters invents a bulky contraption that physically moves strands of string in front the camera. These obstructions generate a look that mimics the scratch lines that historical footage typically contains. Gondry’s film argues for the power of communities to invent their own narratives from the fragments of the past, even if these new stories conflict with objective fact. In this case, Fats Waller was never a resident of Passaic despite the insistence of the community’s lovingly-produced handmade film. A fundamental aspect of this argument is Gondry’s reliance on the conventions of the visual decay aesthetic both as a storytelling device and to deliberately generate nostalgia for a sense of community and personal connections. The media relics, in this case VHS tapes, are well suited for capturing a sense of collective action that has somehow been lost, and for personally and physically engaging with the past in a creative, albeit ultimately false, manner.
The use of the decay aesthetic by Rodriguez and Gondry corresponds with the similar issues of nostalgia and “pastness” that are inherent in Decasia. Rodriguez’s work represents a celebration of an oft-dismissed film genre, Gondry pays homage to the homemade creativity enabled by antique video recorders, whereas Morrison’s film meditates on the passing of the very material corpus of celluloid. In the introduction to their 2006 interview with Morrison, Maximilian Le Cain and Barry Ronan describe his work as a lament “for vanishing relics of cinema’s origin.” But such an approach is often met with the familiar skepticism of the modernist perspective that views nostalgia as retrograde. Some may find Decasia’s mottled images intrinsically beautiful in all of their abstract, pulsing glory, but ultimately regard them as backward-looking, as they seem to reflect a longing for a utopian time that can never be lived again. Morrison’s work does generate an undeniable elegiac feeling of nostalgia. The very aesthetic of the images are coded with pastness, as their imagery immediately harkens to film’s earliest subject matter: the pure movement of a boxer, the meditative scenery of a desert horizon, the speckles of airplanes in flight. And, after all, Morrison’s original source materials are some of the earliest films made. As wave after wave of visual decay blots out the screen, the film evokes a sense of mourning. There is an immediate shock at the realization that the original films, the images that are gradually metamorphosing into destructive abstraction, will never exist as they once did. They are gone, reduced to a sticky emulsion, eventually turned to a toxic dust and then noxious gas.

Despite this inherent layer of nostalgia, the images of decay might also be read as a strong argument to the contrary. Although the very idea of the cinema itself can

169 Le Cain and Ronan.
embody a utopian ideology in its capabilities to represent what is ultimately an illusion of the idyllic, life as perfected in images, *Decasia* depicts a severe threat to such a vision of wholeness. The film may be a meditation, but not one of a quiet stillness. It is a mantra of an ever-encroaching chaos: the entropy that all life is subject to. Habib writes:

> These images are often the stage of a strange fight between a concurrent series of forces, the image and the matter of the image, tension between impression and decomposition, between history and nature, and between narration and ruination. These films are agonizing, precisely because they oscillate between life and death, on the threshold between survival and disappearance. There is a conflict between the image and the base in which it is held – and on which it does not always take hold.\(^{170}\)

The original subject matter of the source material focuses on the wistful, idyllic days of film, that is, the work is endowed with the very qualities of nostalgia that are in question. But a swirling stormforegrounds these images, interrupting their passive consumption. The visual static demonstrates the fundamental flaw of such utopian thinking, that is, it can be read as the overwhelming defeat of such reminiscing. This impression is emphasized by the accompaniment of the orchestral soundtrack as its base of grating, detuned strings performs a controlled, discordant crescendo, ever propelling the viewer farther away from a comfortable state of reverie in the past. *Decasia* operates very much as a dialectic as its images signal the destruction of the nostalgic ideology while simultaneously expressing the base it springs from. It evokes a horrific sort of longing for what is no longer, at the same time as it shows the fallacy of believing in that longing. The reading of nostalgia is both affirmed and destructed.

Even though Morrison’s work reflects a dual argument about visual representations of nostalgia, it still brings to mind a larger question of what is it about dying images of the past that can be so gripping? What is it that underlies this nostalgia

\(^{170}\) Habib, “Thinking in the Ruins.”
and can evoke such enthrallment when confronted with visual decay? As the next section demonstrates, explanations for such questions may lie in the film’s inextricable connections to memory and subsequently history. In addition to the issues that arise from its visual aesthetic, Decasia also serves as a compelling metaphor through which to explore the process of how memories are created – and how this cognitive act is linked with a formative sense of human history.

**IMAGES OF FILM DECAY AS METAPHOR FOR MEMORY**

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, the invention of the written word is viewed with suspicion: An aid to memory, it is criticized as a luxury that can only weaken men's minds. Philosophy and critique typically view technologies of representation with ambivalence, if not disdain: Film and photography is no exception. Although considering a film such as Decasia as a metaphor for memory may immediately seem appropriate, especially given Morrison’s own introduction to his films, the notion of actual film or photographic media serving as forms of memory is more open to critical discussion. Even the nuanced view of such media serving as memory-objects, i.e., image objects that trigger memory, is strongly questioned. In his work *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes states: “Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory, . . . but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.”[171] Benjamin echoes such a sentiment in his work, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” as he quotes Georges Duhamel: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving

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images." This approach toward technologies of representation persists into the current moment as Geoffrey Batchen in his 2004 work *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance*, builds on the critical thought of Siegfried Kracauer when he asserts that photography:

> Captures too much information to function as memory. It is too coherent and too linear in its articulation of time and space. It obeys the rules of nonfiction. Memory, in contrast, is selective, fuzzy in outline, intensively subjective, often incoherent, and invariably changes over time – a conveniently malleable form of fiction.\(^\text{173}\)

Although Batchen’s comment about photographs belies a firm belief in the illusory mimetic qualities of such image objects, his final description of memory sounds very much like the visual imagery of Morrison’s work. A film such as *Decasia*, with its amorphous visual decay as directly reflective of the invariable wear and tear of time, complicates such traditionally held boundaries between notions of nonfiction and fiction, as well as where film ends and memory begins.

In the current moment, there is significant critical thought that shows a shift in thinking that allows for and even embraces the blurring of lines between film and memory. For some the concept is essential to their views of contemporary memorial practices. Alison Landsberg argues that film can generate empathetic understandings across cultural borders because of their very capabilities for memory production. She states that such media actually serve as sites where viewers can form “an intimate relationship to memories of events through which one did not live.”\(^\text{174}\) Film, photographs,\(^\text{172}\)


moving images, etc. produce and disseminate memories that she names “prosthetic,” as they were not created through the natural process of actual lived experience, they operate much like an artificial limb, they can be exchanged, and they are useful in generating empathy toward another’s experience. For Landsberg, memories are in a large part constituted by such technologies of representation. Marita Sturken also supports such a view of technology and memory in her work, Tangled Memories, where she explores the concept of memories as narratives, particularly as they are produced through technological mediations. Such media are not vessels or memory holders, but rather devices through which memories are “shared, produced, and given meaning.” José van Dijck further advances Sturken’s concept in his article “Memory Matters in the Digital Age” where he connects memory theory to cognitive studies:

Memory objects are not simply technological or material prostheses of the mind. . . . Personal cultural memory . . . is neither located strictly within the brain nor outside in technological artifacts or in culture, but is the result of a complex interaction between brain, material objects, and the cultural matrix from which they arise.

Van Dijck echoes Sturken when he states: “Memory is not simply triggered by objects, but happens through these objects; brain/mind and technology/materiality are inextricably intertwined in producing and revising a coherent picture of one’s past.” Such assertions afford technologies of representation a very different position in the process of memory-making than in traditional perspectives.

175 Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory, 2.
176 Sturken, 9.
178 Ibid., 361.
Metaphorically, *Decasia* represents the intersections Van Dijck outlines, particularly in the context of Benjamin’s conception of seizing the past through memory. The following passage from his work “Theses on the Philosophy of History” clearly resonates with the form and content of *Decasia*:

> The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was.” . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.  

Benjamin’s statement employs similar language to that of the introduction Morrison provides to his films where he describes the experience of film: “*The frame pauses briefly before the projector’s lamp, and then moves on. . . . No sooner have we grasped the present, it is relegated to the past, where it only exists in the subjective history of each individual.*”

In a metaphorical sense, viewing Morrison’s film visually exemplifies Benjamin’s theory on how we experience the “true picture of the past” through flashes of images and memories. The moving images of *Decasia* wash over the viewer. Although the amorphous, flashing deterioration is immediately apparent, there are moments of recognition – and repetition. The subject matter of the source material floats in and out and through the decay, providing a flitting sensation of concrete depiction and surface understanding. Specific images repeat throughout the film, for example, projector reels, the whirling dervish, nuns supervising the procession of children, camels walking the desert horizon. In other cases, images blend and disappear, then reappear in the form of new, but similar shapes. Such apparitions spark an initial moment of recognition, but then

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179 Benjamin “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.
180 Le Cain and Ronan.
disorientation. The visual sensation mirrors the cognitive act of remembering as described by André Habib:

Repetition, like the act of re-membering, is not the return of the same, which would simply be redundancy. Repetition, or the return of certain images, shows us that as it comes back, it’s not the same image. . . . These images work like your own memory in a way. In your memory process, images re-appear.181

In Decasia, the destructing images quite literally depict Benjamin’s moments of danger. In many cases, the emulsion suspending the images is so far deteriorated that the underlying images themselves are obscured. Both the film stock and the images contained within teeter on the brink of nothingness. It is in these moments that we might understand our recognition of past experience. The act of remembering particular moments or events is notoriously imprecise. In Benjamin’s words, we hope to recall “the way it really was,” but inevitably that cannot be the case. Hence the visual images of decay as metaphor for our own memorial process. Just as the images are haunted by blank spots, wear and tear, and the effects of time, so are our own memories. In a Benjaminian sense, such a viewing experience can be read as a true picture of the past as it is not one of clear coherence, but rather a montage of mutated images – visuals that move and can never be recalled, replayed or understood in exactly the same way again. This is not to say that Decasia is a truer sense of what actually occurred. It is not a more accurate reflection of an actual past. Rather, the film operates as a more transparent representation of the very processes of how memory is constructed and subsequently our sense of history is created. Memory is a creative process in a constant state of flux, always recombinating. The images of Decasia are entrancing in part because they represent something that is so familiar. Contained within those flickering frames is the

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181 Habib, “Matter and Memory.”
recognition of the malleability of mental images themselves. These film images simultaneously evoke nostalgia, mourning – and the startling acknowledgement of the fragility of memory, the past, history.

The traditionally held views of the relationship between media representations and memory are that the two are disconnected – and perhaps even anathema to each other. In the current moment though, there is a shift in thinking about memorial practices, particularly in how they are symbiotically linked – or in van Dijck’s words “intertwined.” Traditional perspectives such as that of Geoffrey Batchen acknowledge the mutability of memory, but still view its gradual change as separate from technologies of representation. Although the traditional view decries media in its capabilities to affect or even counter an individual’s memory, such views do not take into account the very changing materiality of such media. At the heart of a discussion concerning memory is an acknowledgment of life’s constant change and perceptual mutability – and in relation to time, the inevitable progression of material decay. Film and photographs decay over time, just as memory and the mind itself deteriorate. As such, we might think of memory and media existing in a sort of object/mind feedback loop in which image objects and mental images, i.e. memories, continually reflect one another. Over time, both the image object and its associated memories evolve and the relationship between the two changes, but they remain inextricably linked. This primacy of materiality is the central theme of Decasia, as reflected in both its form and content. While watching the film, these two levels collapse into each other, yielding to the film’s greater theme and concern for decay, which is primarily visual, but in an ultimate sense, physical. Decasia may operate as a visual metaphor for memorial processes, but as the next section will demonstrate, the film
is also a physical reminder of life cycles in which decay does not signify an end point, rather the origins of new creation.

THE DESTRUCTION OF FILM MATERIAL AS A CREATIVE PROCESS

Then, one fine day, it all disappears.  
- Éric Rondpierre, “A Fascination with Decomposition”

Waste, decay, elimination, need not be condemned: they are necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life.  
- Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power

Perhaps the centerpiece sequence of Decasia is that of a lone boxer sparring with an inhuman foe: a morphing blob of film decay (see Figure 12, page 92). This memorable device, in which the boxer defends the left side of the frame while creeping deterioration spreads over the entire right half, exemplifies the paradoxical nature of the film and that of the human condition. Despite the knowledge that such a fight is futile, we still struggle against the ever-increasing effects of entropy. We may delay its onset, but ultimately it will overcome even the most physically fit. This particular sequence of images visually depicts a very human struggle against the effects that inevitably emerge with the passage of time. Perhaps the original scene was two opponents, or maybe a lone fighter shadowboxing. But now, he vigorously attacks the encroaching enemy, decay that he seems to inflict little or no damage on. With each slow motion roundhouse and head feint, the boxer’s mortality becomes more obvious. He will be swallowed, engulfed in the visual wave of entropy. Eventually there will only be nothingness.

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182 Éric Rondpierre, “A Fascination with Decomposition” in This Film is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film, ed. Robert Smither (Belgium: International Federation of Film Archives, 2002), 607.
This narrative of struggle against the inevitable is underscored throughout the entire film. Almost all of the images in some way are endowed with the connotation of inevitable destruction; an effect that Roland Barthes might emphasize as the always present punctum of time, the “that is dead and that is going to die” quality that inhabits all photographs. But the film does not suggest that deterioration in and of itself results in a terminal conclusion, rather it positions decay as a natural and necessary element of the life cycle. The final outcome of decay is not seen as an endpoint, but instead becomes another part of the sequence of events in a larger process of recycling. This point becomes clear when considering the overall trajectory and content of the film, as perhaps best described in the earlier summary of Decasia by Lawrence Weschler. From his textual narration, which moves from one image to the next, common images and themes such as birth, passage, death and then ultimately return, rebirth and recycling emerge. As such, the film can be seen now as not only a metaphor for memory, but also in a sense of how the decay of memory and film exist within the larger continuum of life, death and birth, destruction and creation.

This overarching idea of cyclical memory and decay fits directly with a concept mentioned earlier, that of Benjamin’s spiritual notion of “apocatastasis,” a moment in which all things from the past are restored within the present. As previously discussed, his method of working with ruins and fragments relies on their capabilities to perform that very function of joining the entirety of the past with the present. David Lowenthal’s thoughts on preservation are helpful in extrapolating Benjamin’s concept further, connecting it to human consciousness. He writes:

184 Barthes, 96.
Resurrected fragments became nutriments for new metamorphoses. And in restoring the fullness of the past the humanist reassembled himself as well, reconstituting out of the fragments of his own memory, his own history, an identity that combined an old consciousness with a new one. Such resurrection demanded not simply the rebirth but the replacement of the past, for “the dead must be devoured and digested before new life can ensue.” In organizing fragments, the present preserved and transmitted a reshaped past. . . . Destruction and preservation are, in the most profound sense, bound up in a cyclical process.\textsuperscript{185}

\textit{Decasia} displays distorted, but beautiful images of the past, salvaged from the ruins of film archives so as to have a new life in the present. Again, in the sort of metaphorical sense its images play out the act of combining past and present to create a recombinant consciousness, a new awareness and understanding of how the blurring of those temporal boundaries occurs. As a physical piece, a creation in the material sense, its very nature depends on the processes of decay that it cinematically visualizes. That is, simultaneously as an image object itself, \textit{Decasia} as a film, a material thing, physically participates in such a process of deterioration as well.

Hence, a return to the problem of the delicate materiality of film itself at the center of \textit{Decasia}, specifically in the context of the archive. Although Morrison’s work does not make a direct comment about nature of film archiving, it does serve as a platform for exploring the inherently paradoxical activity that is at the heart of such institutional activities. Is it possible to save that which is ultimately ephemeral? As the creation of \textit{Decasia} attests, the realities of fulfilling the traditional ideal of preservation – original, pristine copies of archival films – are difficult to overcome, as the costs and time involved in restoration and preservation are prohibitive, particularly for non-commercial institutions. Morrison’s unearthing of his source materials in such facilities stands as visible evidence that works of importance fall through the cracks. But the rhetoric and

\textsuperscript{185} Lowenthal, 73.
intentions of preservation remain. The notion of letting films simply decay is anathema, especially as many that currently persist as rubbish are also now seen having potential value – culturally, historically – and inevitably commercially.

In the context of the cyclical processes that Decasia celebrates though, pristine original copies of films – while they might be valuable and beautiful to watch – are not just an illusory ideal, but in some regard do not contribute to the re-creation of human understanding that manifest with deteriorated fragments. That is, detritus materials are what push the cycle of creation forward. Works like Decasia that are built on forgotten cultural traces represent a challenge to the long-reinforced narratives of the past, the versions of history that Benjamin might describe as “untrue.” It is curious to think that we might look to artistic manifestations, products typically described as subjective, unreliable, even biased, to be more accurate accounts of history. Accurate not so much as a reference to an indexical image of the past, but rather, more reflective of the very nature of the cognitive processes that occur when viewing or interacting with the past; an activity that produces and activates memory, and subsequently helps construct more complete narratives of history. Such a conception places works such as Decasia in a new light. No longer are they only artistic works, but they operate on another level as they acknowledge an acute historical awareness, as well as a cognizance of how the process of looking at the past is fraught with a constant evolution. Such an approach toward memory and history eschews static construction – and as such it aligns with the realities of human existence. Whereas the traditional notions of film archiving strive for a sense of the perpetual – of long-term storage and preservation – new creative forms also reflect an
archival strategy: One that does not resist the inevitable, but rather foregrounds the struggle with decay to express a truer sense of the paradoxical human condition.
CHAPTER IV
THE POLITICAL AND THE DIGITAL:
IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE ARTISTIC ARCHIVE

Artists are like the guardians of culture. I’m totally obsessed with the idea of human value. I feel that I’m contributing to my culture, posting certain questions about living and the pressures of living today.\(^\text{186}\)

- Robert Longo, multimedia artist

The professional boundaries between academic, archivist, and artist are best blurred.\(^\text{187}\)

- Dan Streible, “The Role of Orphan Films in the 21\(^{st}\) Century Archive”

This project emerges out of the paradoxical activities of archiving, particularly in the area of film. That is, the strong cultural tendency to try to preserve what is ultimately ephemeral. As many of the earliest archivists and theorists document, the field of film archiving and preservation is constructed on an unstable foundation. Its history reflects a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches to how to best protect film for posterity and what films should be selected for preservation. Most institutional film archives engage in a common goal of preserving and presenting film documents that are representative of a particular heritage as based on their artistic, historic or cultural value, but there are few overarching standards for such endeavors. In the current moment, the traditional approach to film archiving – the notion of preservation in an absolute sense, i.e. static, pristine, original copies of films – is called into question as the result of a confluence of new ideas and complications: the limited materiality of celluloid, the exponentially growing body of digital moving images to be potentially archived and


preserved, and the shifting discussions about how human memory works as well as the subsequent processes of how cognitive understandings of history are created. Such issues all point toward an opening for rethinking what constitutes an archive as well as what actions constitute an archival endeavor.

This project argues that instead of looking to institutions as the only sources for archiving, alternative forms of creative, artistic activity should be considered as archival in their methodological approach, particularly based on their use of fragmented source materials from the past. As demonstrated by the case study of Bill Morrison’s *Decasia*, such works not only produce new, more inclusive understandings of the past, but also reflect a cognizance of those materials’ physicality within the cycle of actual creative practices. In short, they embrace decay not only as an aesthetic, but as a necessary element to perpetuating new meaning that actually builds on the materials of the past.

The approach also resonates with the changing concept of human memory and subsequent understandings of history as continually mutating in lived experience. The idea of an artistic sensibility reflecting an inherently archival nature, whether it goes by the name of collage, montage or sampling, signals implications for archival activities. The designation of such creations as new forms of archiving begets questions of their political impact, specifically with regard to erasing the boundaries to who and what can be involved in archiving history, as well as point to a host of questions about the rapidly expanding field of preserving moving images, particularly those of the digital variety.

This project concludes by addressing some of the consequences and unanswered questions that such a sensibility yields, most of which fall primarily into two areas: the political and the digital. This section of the project first takes into account how the
methods of collage, montage and sampling rely on the detritus of culture in order to address how such projects openly challenge traditionally held notions about archival control and access. As they provide opportunities for more inclusive, everyday engagement in history making, they point to political questions about whose memories will be preserved – and the form that those archival materials should take. Then the discussion moves to an exploration of how Bill Morrison’s work serves as an entrance point to explore many of the complications that emerge with archiving in the digital domain. Despite the perceived immateriality of digital objects, the central problem that the archival community grapples with in the current moment is still the issue of preserving material objects. At first, a work such as Decasia may seem to speak only to its particular medium, but in fact the concern it reflects for film materiality resonates within a larger consideration of moving images in general, particularly those that now exist in the digital domain.

**Political Implications of the Creative Method**

Our past belongs to us. We can change it if we want.\(^{188}\)

- “Miss Falewicz,” Be Kind Rewind

Cinema . . . can rearrange reality and combine that reality with the artist’s own subjective consciousness or dream in a way that no other art form can do. In its formal structure cinema can act as a means of empowerment through a narrative re-construction of the past as memory and recollection. Through movement, time becomes immanent in the sense that through montage, it is conceived as pure duration or process akin to that dream reality which is a world onto itself. And that time of cinema . . . is a great spiral through which the past and present can give way to a revolutionary future.\(^{189}\)

- Jean Antoine-Dunne,
  “Introducing Eisenstein’s Theory”

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\(^{188}\) Be Kind Rewind, dir. Michel Gondry (New Line Cinema, 2008).

In one of the pivotal scenes of Michel Gondry’s film *Be Kind Rewind*, a crowd from the neighborhood of Passaic, New Jersey, surrounds a video store that had been invaded by federal agents who destroyed the store’s entire collection of homemade videos. An actual steamrolling of the store’s holdings stemmed from supposed copyright violations as the tapes were considered to be unauthorized remakes of popular films, albeit shoddy, poorly acted but entirely compelling. The crowd comes to the aid of the store’s owner, Mr. Fletcher to convince him that instead of giving up on his business, the community should make their own movie that is not based on a preexisting Hollywood blockbuster. Mike, one of the store employees, proposes a story based on Fats Waller’s life in Passaic. At first Mr. Fletcher refuses, saying that such a movie would make a fool out of him as he had spent years falsely claiming that Fats was born in the building that his video store resides. In a moment that sways Mr. Fletcher and the gathered crowd, a woman, Miss Falewicz, yells out, “Our past belongs to us. We can change it if we want. Sure, my mom, my mom saw Fats Waller playing, playing piano right here in the Passaic Theater.” Without any hesitation, other community members join in an entirely creative retelling of Waller’s life and within days the film is made.

The incident, which on its face demonstrates a communal act of historical revisionism, reflects a deeply rooted yearning for a different sort of community engagement with the past, one that actively rejects the notion of history as only an institutionally directed entity. All of the characters acknowledge that their creation is entirely founded on a fictional account of history, but yet that fact does nothing to diminish their efforts to creatively interact with the past. In this particular case, the made-
up movie might be read as a reaction to the threat of the movie industry to dictate who has the right to tell — and sell — stories and their resulting images. In a larger sense, the situation speaks to the political empowerment such a creative act embodies. No longer does the past belong to an industry, but instead a group of independent individuals claim the past through their retelling. Through the means of the Passaic video production, not only is the community treated to a sense of group involvement, but also to a document of sorts of their participation. Their activity reflects an archival activity of digging through the past, reformulating it, subsequently bringing it into the present. The activity also generates the material creation of their efforts, an archival piece of material: the videotape that contains their combined efforts.

Such an example stands in stark contrast to the traditional model in which a limited number of institutions are charged with deciding what film materials of the past are to be preserved and how they should be presented. This is not meant as criticism of the work that occurs at institutional archives as many are actively involved in trying to save as many materials of the past as possible (including the detritus such as orphan films), but given the financial and time restraints, inevitably even the most diligent preservation efforts fall short. As Morrison’s film demonstrates, so many materials of the past with potential value are on the brink of either discovery or dust, regardless of whether they reside in a film archive. Although the images he drew from were purported to be protected in such a safe house, for one reason or another they were considered to not be of immediate value and subsequently relegated to seldom-trafficked storage areas — or even the trash heap. They lingered long enough to be rescued, but more often than not similar materials are destined to be discarded, excised from archival holdings. The
sampling method not only reclaims such waste from traditional sources but builds on materials found everywhere. Many DJs unearth their favorite records in flea markets, artists seize upon garbage as source materials, and a growing cadre of filmmakers are searching not just archives, but family basements, Internet sites, thrift stores and the like for images. Much like the materials of the flaneur, a person strolling the arcades in Paris in order to experience the forgotten, unrecognized moments of modern experience in Benjamin’s work, the detritus of culture from a variety of sources becomes the fodder for new creations that produce entirely alternative, illuminative versions of the past.

The sampling method establishes a foundation for embracing these cast-offs, the imperfect, the damaged and decayed, that which is typically discarded. These rubbish materials, which were left to be neither preserved nor presented are then reinserted into the present. In a Benjaminian sense, it explodes the prevailing domination of a linear concept of history and produces a move toward his desired moment of historical apocatastasis. Katherine Hoffman’s work, “Collage in the Twentieth Century,” also positions collage artworks to be entirely capable of demonstrating the multifaceted nature of life by she drawing on Marcel Proust: “Instead of seeing a single world, our own, we see it multiply until we have before us as many worlds as there are original artists – more different from each other than those which revolve in space.”\(^{191}\) Practically speaking, such a sensibility expands the envelope of what is to be considered history, as well as democratizes who can engage in such creative interactions with the past. The questions of what should be saved and what should be discarded are no longer solely in the hands of institutional archives. Rather, such creative engagements with the past validate the

persistence of what may not be institutionally approved or sheltered – and opens the decisions that surround such materials to a wider swath of individuals who desire an active involvement in history-making. Although traditional archivists are involved in the institutional renderings of history, the sampling method empowers individuals of all sorts, particularly the artists, filmmakers and musicians who employ its techniques, to participate, albeit in a non-traditional form.

Such a proposition does leave unanswered question with regard to implications for traditional archives, as well as issues of copyright. Do these new forms necessarily represent a substantive challenge to the realities of traditional archives? In his work, “In Focus: The 21st Century Archive,” Eric Schafer states that the increased emergence of personal archives, new repositories of information, potentially detract from the usefulness of institutions. Given that financial support for institutions is very much dependent on their use, the new outcroppings of archival activities could potentially diminish the stretched resources available at traditional sites. On the other hand, the methods of experimental filmmakers and those with an interest in decayed or obscure film are such that traditional archives might enjoy an increased, but different sort of use as artists dig through the holdings for source materials. The institution then serves as a revitalized site for re-discovery as it provides an essential link in the process of hybrid re-creation.

In reference to the appropriation of materials that the sampling method employs, the use of preexisting films, music and artworks opens contentious debates about copyright. It is one thing for artists to create with the materials of the past that already

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exist in the public domain, but quite another to engage with those sources whose rights are legally held by some individual, corporation or group, regardless of whether or not such materials had been previously discarded. Remix culture is dependent on the freewheeling recombination of the past, but as demonstrated by the storyline of Be Kind Rewind as well as so many actual instances of copyright litigation, such an activity is not always readily accepted, particularly by those who have potential revenue interests to protect. There is a growing movement to increase opportunities and legal exemptions for experimental works that build on the sampling method, but at this time, a “permissions culture” persists with potentially stifling effects. Many have argued that the current climate is one in which an artist has to worry first about getting permission to appropriate a particular preexisting work as opposed to focusing on free artistic creation, regardless of source material. Navigating the complicated area of legal and artistic contention is not an easy task and at this juncture, this project does not attempt to do so. Suffice to say, further study in this area will be important for future iterations of art archives.

There are potential tradeoffs that arise as a result of considering specific works done in the montage, collage or sampling method as archival. Such an activity can be altogether empowering, particularly as it allows new perspectives to enter what is considered to be history and creates opportunities for those outside the traditional archival community to engage with the materials of the past. But new archival work also signals trouble for traditional sites of archival work, institutions that are still a vital source for the materials of the past. Furthermore, works built through collage and sampling may be entirely historical in their approach, but as a method they involve the appropriation of material that although previously thought of as rubbish might still be
protected by copyright. As a result, such works may serve as new archives of the past, but simultaneously encounter legal resistance for their very structure. In his article “God’s Little Toys,” cyberpunk writer and cut-and-paste acolyte William Gibson asks: “Who owns the words? . . . Who owns the music and the rest of our culture?” His blunt reply: “We do. All of us.” Despite such claims from those on the cutting-edge of participatory culture, the remix, the collage, the montage are all still caught in a web of intellectual property and copyright.

**The Material Problem of the Digital Film Archive**

This project primarily looks at creations that reflect what is perceived to have a more tangible materiality, that is, a hands-on remix approach to media such as celluloid, sound as produced on vinyl records, etc., but such works can also be considered to serve as the predecessors to their digital counterparts. For some, a wave of digital storage and preservation seems to hover on the horizon, providing hope for archival efforts to overcome the ephemeral physical qualities of film. Although digital iterations may carry the connotation of being immaterial, the ever encroaching problems of decay that assault their predecessors are just as much at work in the digital domain. As such they produce a host of complications for the future of archiving – institutional and non-traditional alike.

The ideology of digital culture that technology “promises a new future rife with limitless possibilities” can be understood within what André Habib calls the “hyperbolic discourses on immortality” that have existed since the inception of film and

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194 Ibid.
subsequently its theory. In an essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” from his seminal work *What is Cinema?* André Bazin asserts that film is successful in creating “an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny” and that as such man is able to have the “the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures.” In short, the moving images of film resolve an innate human desire to perpetuate a lasting image of oneself through time. As a counterpoint, *Decasia* forcefully exposes the failure of such a resolution as the film presages the imminent destruction of a celluloid immortality. In relation to digital products, the boundless concept of an infinitely prolonged life for digital images resonates with these original ideas of film – and is just as fallacious.

But at first there does appear to be a certain irony in watching *Decasia*, a film about the material decay of organic film, on DVD and with a digital projector. It immediately seems that the film celebrates a material aesthetic and cycle of decay that will soon come to an end. In her work, “The Materiality of Digital Collections: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives,” Marlene Manoff writes: “Early theorists of the electronic environment made much of the ostensible immateriality of digital objects.” With regard to the film medium, the idea of such immateriality initially signaled a potential for severing the reliance on the material format of celluloid. But Manoff continues, stating, “More recently critics have acknowledged that electronic objects are

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196 Habib, “Thinking in the Ruins.”
198 Habib, “Thinking in the Ruins.”
as dependent upon material instantiation as printed books."\textsuperscript{200} In a 2001 speech on digital decay that corroborates Manoff’s statement, Bruce Sterling further debunks the myth of digital immateriality saying that it goes against the laws of physics, i.e. matter cannot be destroyed nor created: “Very little materiality, is very, very far from no materiality at all. Total immateriality is a metaphysical illusion.”\textsuperscript{201} He continues by addressing the idea that the fundamental composition of digital products fully exists in the material realm:

\begin{quote}
A stream of bits is not just ones and zeroes. Ones and zeroes are numbers, and even if arithmetic is immaterial, computers aren’t. Bits are not different from atoms: bits are bits of atoms. Bits are not ghosts or spirits or good intentions, bits have to be measurable, observable physical objects, like a Greek vase.\textsuperscript{202}
\end{quote}

Digital platforms have the connotation of the immaterial, but even at their most infinitesimal level, they are vulnerable to the familiar conditions of material decay. With regard to deterioration in a more immediately visible sense, Sterling’s comments acknowledge that material “bits” exist within a system of hardware, in this case, computers, that are very much susceptible to the wear and tear of time. Plastic housings eventually break down and hard drives corrupt. Despite the prevailing ideology and subsequent discourse that circulate about digital technologies, hard disks, magnetic tape, DVDs, CDs, MPEGs, etc. all inevitably fall apart. In the digital age, the overpowering force of entropy still enacts costs on image objects. In this context, the irony that initially surfaces while watching a copy of \textit{Decasia}, a DVD about the decay of celluloid, wears thin. Instead Morrison’s work quickly becomes an entrance point to address the future of

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\textsuperscript{200} Manoff, 312.\textsuperscript{201} Bruce Sterling, “‘Digital Decay’ (Keynote address) for ‘Preserving the Immaterial: A Conference on VariableMedia,’” [speech transcript on-line] available from http://variablemedia.net/pdf/Sterling.pdf; Internet; accessed 14 Dec. 2007.\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 19-20
\end{flushright}
not just film, but the larger area of study of moving images in general. The work presages the material complications of digital archiving and preservation.

In the case of digital images, many argue that decay actually occurs at a faster rate than that of nitrate films for a number of reasons, the primary being the rapid change of digital capabilities that makes entire formats, hardware and software obsolete in years or even months. For example, a particular moving image may exist in a format that can no longer be played back because the larger industry and culture shifted to the next platform. Although this sort of “decay” is not necessarily a product of material erosion, it still represents what many say is the largest obstacle to overcoming digital deterioration. In some cases this situation can be overcome by “translation,” the migration of one file type to the next, but this method of copying results in the same loss of image quality and resolution that occurs with analog film. For many though, this system of replication is still not a reliable method of operation, particularly at the institutional level. Robert Rosen, former director of the UCLA Archive, states:

When you are dealing with thousands of films, you can’t take your whole archive and re-master it every 20 years. Right now, if I have film and I can store it properly, I know it is going to last a lot longer than anything I put on digital.

Rosen’s comments though do not completely discount the advancements that digital can provide for film archiving and preservation. Digital manipulation of film allows for improved restoration of damaged film negatives and prints. Many in the community also believe that in the long-run, digital storage and preservation will eventually become a standard practice, but only after entire systems are brought in line

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204 Ibid.

with one another – and that such a standardized archival format has been proven to be
equivalent and adequate for “long-term retention of the electronic image.” In addition,
many argue that the current generation of digital films, those that were generated by
digital means and inserted into digital storage and preservation systems, seems to be
relatively well-protected, but that the storage and preservation costs are drastically higher
than traditional means. A recent article from The New York Times puts the costs of
preservation for one entirely digital film at “$208,569 a year, vastly higher than the $486
it costs to toss the equivalent camera negatives, audio recordings, on-set photographs and
annotated scripts of an all-film production into the cold storage vault.” In his 1995
article that began championing of digital as an eventual solution, Michael Friend writes:

Theoretically, all of these systems [video formats, equipment, display systems,
storage media] will be interoperable in the digital domain, but when, how and at
what cost remain open questions as the digital domain continues to evolve without
the slightest regard for archival stability.

One of the other unanswered questions is just how effective such a digital system might
be for dealing with those moving images that currently only exist on celluloid. Again,
digital proposes an ideal solution: images that rival if not match the original film; digital
restoration and image manipulation to correct blemishes, faded colors and decay; infinite
storage capabilities given the eventual standardization or interoperability of archival
formats and equipment. In the current moment few celluloid films have actually entered
such a system, primarily because of the limited resources that archives have for such
work – and the prohibitive costs and time involved in transferring the works.

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Internet; accessed 1 April 2008.
208 Friend, 43.
In a statement that succinctly sums up the potential consequences of digital prospects in the archiving arena, Charles Piller writes in the *Los Angeles Times*: “Much like global warming, the [digital] archive problem emerged suddenly, its effects remain murky and the brunt of its effect will be felt by future generations. The era we are living in could become a gap in history.”\(^{209}\) Just as the longevity of thousands of celluloid films stored in archives remains uncertain, so is the potential for moving images in digital formats. Given that issues of materiality are at the root of both analog and digital objects, as a way of concluding this project, the discussion loops back to the material question that surrounds creative archival works like *Decasia*, and the subsequent implications the creative approach signals for archiving and preservation in a general sense.

“*LET US GRIND THEM INTO DUST!*”

Although this project addresses specific topics such as the intricacies of film archiving, the inevitable destruction of celluloid, the empowerment of participatory culture, the fallacy of digital ideologies, etc., the overarching thrust and questions of this project center are general – and inherently political in nature: How does a culture decide what to keep? What formats should those objects be kept in? Why should we try so ardently to preserve anything at all, even when we know it will eventually decay?

By applying this line of questioning to a specific instance, in this case Bill Morrison’s *Decasia*, the proposed answers are not always immediately logical and in fact, they can reflect a paradoxical stance. It is one thing to theorize that certain creative methods and their subsequent products are conceptually archival in nature, but then it is

something else to rationalize the implications of such a proposal. For example, at first it seems quite natural to want to archive such a work in the traditional sense – to have the capability to forever transmit its visual reminder of life’s constant movement toward mortality into the future for subsequent generations. That very action has been taken as Decasia was chosen for inclusion in the Film and Media Collection of the Museum of Modern Art among others. But given a project like Decasia with its theme of the creative cycle of decay and its reliance on the near-destructed materials of the past, perhaps the essential question is not one of why, but rather how should such a work be perpetuated? Should it be preserved in an absolute sense, i.e. housed in the most original, pristine condition as possible in order to be protected and shown only on select occasions? Or would it be more appropriate to let it contribute to the cycle of decay and subsequent creation?

As this project demonstrates, much contemporary thought signals a shift away from the traditional practices of archiving and preservation. That is, the paradox of such activities becomes more apparent given the relationship between the traditional discourse of preservation and the realities of inevitable deterioration. Many archivists reconcile the situation by prolonging the process of decay through carefully designed storage facilities, holding out hope for the promise of digital technology, or simply doing the best they can with the materials and resources that they have. To return to earlier comments by Paolo Cherchi Usai, which suggest an approach that has perplexed many in the archival community:

Moving image preservation will then be redefined as the science of its gradual loss and the art of coping with the consequences, very much like the physician
who has accepted the inevitability of death even while he continues to fight for the patient’s life.210

A film archive then becomes an entirely different sort of institution. Usai suggests the concept of an orphanage as an alternative term as it better describes “the reality of what is going on in this place.”211 That is, film archiving ought to become the art of gradually letting go, of cautiously protecting films, all of which face a potential future of abandonment in the face of digital film. Such a shift ultimately necessitates a shedding of the rhetoric and mission of absolutely warding off the inevitable.

In an interview, Bill Morrison provides thoughts that resonate with that of Usai as he elaborates on the increased archival activity that he has personally observed in recent years:

We are accumulating all this stuff, again, that not many people are going to watch. And of course we are terrified of losing it, and it’s always considered a tragedy when we lose something. But what are we actually doing? We are just building up this residue of our existence and somehow cherishing it as a record, and its insane.212

Taken out of context, Morrison’s statement reads as an almost nihilistic approach to preserving film. He shortly thereafter clarifies his point, but still challenges the notion of an absolute system of archiving:

I’ve shown Decasia in archival symposiums, and archivists rushed up to me afterwards and were saying: “But you must document what all these are.” But I agree that somehow that would defeat the purpose. And it would make it seem a plea for preservation which I’m not actually doing. Certainly none of this work would exist without preservation. I am greatly indebted to them but I’m not saying it is necessarily tragic that time erodes these things because, hey, that’s what happens. It might be tragic if we allocate too much money towards saving stuff that we don’t need to save. There’s some stuff that absolutely should be

210 Usai, The Death of Cinema, 105.
211 Usai, “What is an Orphan Film?”
212 Habib, “Matter and Memory.”
saved. And there’s other stuff that shouldn’t just be saved because it’s old. We should do our best to give it a house where it can live.\(^{213}\)

Morrison states that it is not necessarily the preservation of film that concerns him, but rather that it is what he calls the “objectness of preserving film,” a sort of fetishization, that needs to be rethought when it comes to archiving. Both the comments from Usai and Morrison present an alternative line of thought to the traditional film archiving and preservation, particularly in what they have come to represent in the current moment. The words “archive” and “preservation” connote a sense of safekeeping, permanence, stability and immutability. Not only are such impressions of those activities unrealistic from an operational standpoint, they also fail to connect with the larger issues of the natural materiality of image objects and their inevitable decay. In the context of Walter Benjamin, a view of history and method of remembering that archives offer, a past that is simply frozen in time or “the way it was,” is contradictory to the lived process of memory. In the current moment, human engagement with technologies of representation breaks down the cognitive boundaries between past and present. Participatory culture is entirely dependent on direct experimentation with the material traces of the past. To return to the comments from Matt Locke’s essay, “Let Us Grind Them Into Dust!” “If we are to encourage new kinds of creative expression, we have to accept that this will only happen if we allow our content to degrade into dust. Remix culture requires flexibility.”\(^{214}\)

Again, this project is not meant to suggest that nothing should be kept and that traditional archives should fold up their shops. By no means should a work like Decasia be relegated to the dustbins. Instead this work ultimately proposes that work such as

\(^{213}\) Habib, “Matter and Memory.”

\(^{214}\) Locke.
Morrison’s should stir vigorous thought and debate about those overarching questions: What to archive? How to preserve? Why archive? The answers to such questions may not ever be entirely conclusive, but as this project suggests, much contemporary thought expresses a cultural need to embrace in some way the ideas of transience and change, of decay and re-creation.

The project concludes by way of an introduction. The opening statement Bill Morrison provides in the DVD release of Decasia reads: “Like the film, our bodies will eventually be reduced to what essentially forms us. What they contain is who we are: our thoughts, dreams, and memories. These will be reprised as something new, and hopefully, more lasting.” Archivists, artists and individuals embody a yearning for an alternative to creatively express the past through found objects and methods that no longer rely on the traditional concepts of history as static and unchanging. Instead they build on the physical limits of their source materials and the subjectivity of human understanding of what has come before. Those that are cognizant of the very materiality of the sources they draw upon are positioned to help us understand the very nature of those past materials, the formats and media that were once new. Their creative interaction with the impermanent becomes part of the cyclical process that encompasses physical materials and beings. In this sense, we can look to these hybrid products, as well as the artists, to serve as a form of living archives that tell a very different and beautiful story of the forgotten pasts they spring from. That is, they retell new stories and create old narratives in new ways. The archival concept becomes malleable: it adapts and changes. In an inextricably and unavoidably physical manner its products continue the cycle and it
is their very dust, their further degraded residue that then becomes fodder for the next stage of recontextualization and another new form of creation.
Figure 17: Still of the whirling Sufi dancer that concludes Bill Morrison’s Decasia
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ILLUSTRATIONS


Figure 10: Raoul Hausmann. *ABCD*, 1923-1924.


Figure 13: http://bp0.blogger.com/_ZN1roDj0ks0/RoBL9gSUvMI/AAAAAAAAACs/s3QrVxE0g0/s1600-h/decasia_01.jpg http://endechas.blogspot.com. Website. Available from http://endechas.blogspot.com/2007/06/decasia.html. Accessed 9 April 2008.


