

The Documentary Encounter:
Memory, Materiality, and Performance in Contemporary Visual Culture

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to mami and papi

Abstract

My dissertation is an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural study of what I call the ‘documentary encounter’: that moment when human beings come upon the material objects—such as photographic material, places, and personal effects—through which we are accustomed to constructing our sense of the past. Philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (1995) and Pierre Nora (1989) have contended that the twentieth century was characterized by a need to archive objects. If that is the case, then we could say that the twenty-first century is characterized by a rather different relationship to materiality, one of ‘waste management.’ As our worlds are glutted with more and newer material objects, we are afflicted by a parallel concern for loss and obsolescence. Objects appear out of date as soon as we possess them. Decay suffuses the material world, and proliferates faster than we can stop it. The accelerated obsolescence of technology, global anxieties over toxic dumping, and the widespread recycling of personal effects all indicate that we have entered an age in which the objects that surround us are volatile and resistant to mastery.

Rooted in the comparative methods of visual cultures, my research is the first attempt to draw together two fields, Film and Performance Studies, that have been similarly preoccupied by the historiographical concepts of ‘memory’ and ‘archive’, but which have remained largely isolated from one another. Employing a cross-cultural, multi-media approach—focusing on the installations of German-born, Canada-based artist Iris Häussler, a photographic archive depicting my mother’s childhood in Puerto Rico, and the ruined architecture of Havana, Cuba—my dissertation weaves together these discourses on memory and the archive and brings them to bear on a chaotic material landscape. In investigating the effects wrought by a changing materiality on contemporary life, I seek to account for a concomitantly shifting landscape of memory, in order to provide an enriched and expanded set of terms for thinking about material culture and memory practices in the present.

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See when you come to think of dying
That no gravestone stands and betrays where you lie
With a clear inscription to denounce you
And the year of death to give you away.
Once again:
Cover your tracks.

(That is what they taught me).¹

¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'Handbook for City-Dwellers', lines 24-30. Reprinted in Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*. 1973 (London: Verso, 2003), 59.

Chapter 1 : A Certain Kind of Encounter

‘Reality is not preservation of the same. Reality is the decay of living matter.’²

There is a scene in the documentary *A Certain Kind of Death*³ that has preoccupied me, perhaps more than is healthy, for the past few years. The LA County Coroner’s Office receives a call about a dead body in an apartment, and appears at the scene to investigate. This is the kind of thing they do—these officers trade in forgotten bodies, in smells drifting through doorjambs, betraying something they are too late to prevent.

A Certain Kind of Death traces the agency’s encounters with remains. More banal than macabre—or perhaps macabre because of their banality—its activities reflect the love affair with paper-pushing that is the province of bureaucracies. The job of the LA County Coroner’s Office, the film tells us, is to recuperate the abandoned dead and take on the tedious task of putting affairs in order—it locates the assets, notifies the next of kin, makes the burial arrangements. Its job is historiographical; commissioned with the decidedly unglamorous task of sorting through the detritus of the forgotten dead, this office carries out a kind of state-sanctioned mourning enacted through documentary reconstruction.

² My friend Paige Sweet said this to me one day while I was trying to verbalize a very embryonic critique of documentary representation. At the time, we were celebrating her dissertation defense with a boozy brunch at a local restaurant. Given that this project is partly motivated by my antagonism towards intellectual sobriety, I take a perverse pleasure in founding my inquiry in a statement uttered by a friend, on the fly, over bloody marys.

³ *Certain Kind of Death, A*. Grover Babcock and Blue Hadaegh. Video. New Box Media, 2005. DVD.

It's the mountain of abandoned stuff that drives the investigations. In the scene that preoccupies me, an officer walks through the apartment of one Ronald Tanner (whose corpse has been discovered on the bedroom floor), itemizing personal effects. Six chairs. One—no, two—end tables. One sofa. On the kitchen table is a sea of papers—bank statements, birth and death certificates, ID cards—that someone, presumably Ronald, has left out.

I'm curious about the documents that are amassed here. Why do they look forlorn, like a dog without its owner? If the man died alone, for whom are they meant? Most importantly, what will the person who finds them *do*?

It is appropriate that I begin this project with a corpse. For, in many ways, I am concerned not so much with the end of things, but more with the ways in which such endings persist in the form of material remains. As much as we might want to hold stock in the irrevocability of death, the unbridgeable rupture signaled in 'after,' we often fail to acknowledge how the recalcitrance of material remains resists the very notion of an ending, of rupture between past and present. As it passes from life into death, from subject into object, the corpse bridges the gap between past and present, and demands that we interact with it as we do with the other material objects that the dead have left behind.

Through their very existence, material remains signal everything that is missing; they are suffused with disappearance. The corpse is a body coming undone, an intermediary substance between what was and what is, between presence and absence. In

this sense, a corpse testifies to the way in which loss, decay, and disappearance are not simply negative or reductive, but in fact are fundamentally *constitutive* phenomena. In *The Logic of the Lure*, art theorist John Paul Ricco writes that disappearance is, paradoxically, an absence with catalytic power:

[...] disappearance is what never happens and what always occurs yet never enough. Disappearance keeps on disappearing without ever completely becoming-disappeared. If the potential that it poses, if its threat would simply disappear, if only becoming-disappeared could become being-disappeared, we might find contentment; but *disappearance refuses to disappear*. Disappearance, then, is not an event, yet it makes every event possible.⁴

For Ricco, disappearance is characterized by a paradoxical, simultaneous elusiveness and efficacy; better put, disappearance is efficacious *because* it is both ‘never’ and ‘always’. Disappearance threatens, yet ‘makes every event possible’ by virtue of its seemingly illogical recalcitrance. Similarly, performance theorist Rebecca Schneider (whose work has proven foundational for this dissertation) has famously advocated that we attend to remains’ stubborn persistences.⁵ For both Ricco and Schneider—and centrally, for me—there is something agitating in

⁴ John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 65.

⁵ See Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011); ‘Performance Remains,’ *Performance Research*, Vol. 6, Issue 2 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2001) 100-108.

remains, something that makes us act. That ‘something’ depends on disappearance.

Reality is not preservation of the same: on documentary remains

Consider a series of common scenarios: 1. A rare film print is suffering from mold and vinegar syndrome. There are no funds to restore it, so the canister remains in a vault, too fragile to be screened, too ‘significant’ to be destroyed. 2. A loved one dies suddenly, leaving a house packed with a lifetime of personal belongings; the house must be sold, its contents reckoned with. 3. A library quietly deaccessions its 16mm film collection, unburdening itself of images no one seems to want to see anymore. 4. The family of a compulsive hoarder orders her to choose—it’s the mess or us. Unable to release herself from the chokehold of her belongings, she chooses the mess. 5. In the middle of a landfill, a village springs up, its inhabitants driven by the promise that there is still something of value to be extracted from the miasma.

In the following pages, I investigate what I am calling ‘the documentary encounter’—those moments when we come upon the material remains, human and non-human, of past events. I consider these remains in terms of their ‘documentary’ capacities because of the particular kinds of uses—evidentiary, instrumental—to which they are habitually put in contemporary culture. As I see it, the documentary encounter is catalytic, propelling the past in the service of possible futures. I wish to consider the concept of encounter in its broadest sense, to include a seemingly disparate range of acts: cleaning house, inheritance of an estate, assessment of a natural disaster, discovery of a

lost item, disposal of an archive, and many other activities that can be included under such a rubric. Any displacement of bodies or objects, whether banal (taking a walk) or cataclysmic (losing one's home), constitutes an opportunity for documentary encounter. Such encounters are alternately distressing, motivating, onerous, or thrilling, but universally efficacious.

This dissertation is a byproduct—a documentary remainder, if you will—of a diverse set of encounters with documents from a range of fields: film studies, performance studies, critical theory, urban studies, memory studies, and other quarters. All of my interlocutors (or, rather, the documentary encounters that generated them)—are, in some way or another, preoccupied with the questions that animate this project. What happens when the human body comes upon documentary remains? What does this encounter have to tell us about memory, temporality, and experience? Is it symptomatic of something particular to our contemporary moment, and if so, what? Is there a politics to this encounter? An ethics? What are we to do with remains—and why is this question so fraught?

Neither this introduction, nor the project that it initiates, can answer these questions fully. However, in the following pages I do hope to account for the concepts that animate the inquiry I am about to undertake:

document

performance

archive

decay

memory

body

ruin

materiality

encounter.

I could begin with any one of these terms. They all have their place. At times one surfaces and drives the discussion; at times it shrinks into the background; at times one or more bump up against one another and agitate (or reconcile) a problem. Insofar as one of the chief claims of this project is that documentary encounters are characterized by contingency rather than predictability, then it is also attuned to the rather serendipitous ways that concepts can present themselves, and the capriciousness of associative thought. If it makes for a rather dizzying read, then so be it; I can only hope that whatever peripatetic tendencies this project may have are alloyed with an accompanying intellectual precision, such that the wandering to come is provocative, if perhaps a little bit useless.

After all, aren't I supposed to ground my terms, like all good scholars do? Isn't the ground the guarantor of rationality and sense? Doesn't the earth beneath our feet grant the comfort that all good things have their proper place?

No.

The ground is no great stabilizer. The ground is an unrealizable aspiration.

(But the ground is real! I can prove the ground!)

No. Yes. The ground is there. The ground is missing.

One of the chief propositions of this project is that the material world is inassimilable to human aims (and that, as much as we might like to posit ‘the human’ *outside* materiality, it is little more than a particular accumulation of matter, a way station from one material state to another). In this sense, this project stands in contrast to the work of researchers who see materiality as stabilizing, serving as the connective tissue of human relations. Anthropologist Daniel Miller’s study *The Comfort of Things*, an ethnography of a single London street that describes the affective attachments of people to their belongings and one another, is a good example of such work. In Miller’s study, things serve as prostheses for human identity, inanimate expressions of our desires and experiences, our idiosyncrasies and foibles. He describes the ways that individuals arrange personal objects ‘into a form by which they have chosen to express themselves.’ Whether displayed meticulously or in ‘higgledy-piggledy’ fashion, ‘these things are not a random collection. They have gradually accumulated *as an expression of that person or household*. Surely if we can learn to listen to these things we have access to an authentic other voice.’⁶

While I am sympathetic to the way that Miller identifies a longing to locate oneself in the world through objects, he fails to question whether such self-location is

⁶ Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (London: Polity Press, 2008) 2. Emphasis mine.

actually possible. Such work ignores the ways that objects frequently *deny* comfort, rather than provide it. Furthermore, Miller's position is eerily in step with a nostalgia industry predicated on the consumerist desire to find sanctuary in ownership (much as a spotty suburban teenager might argue that his music collection 'is me'—or better yet, as a record company might market the promise of self-expression via the purchase of said music collection). As cultural critic Brian Dillon describes,

Whole industries exist to convince us of the essential serenity and comfort of such an instant: the warm glow of a memory lovingly caressed. But there is something terrible, too, about the way a dumb artifact can lead us back to the past, if only because its very existence is at odds with the passing of the bodies to which it might have once have attached itself, or with which it once shared the space of daily life.⁷

In keeping with Dillon, I wish to understand the 'something terrible' of a 'dumb artifact's' persistence: I intend to explore the way that documentary remains menace as much as they comfort, and confound as much as they explain. Therefore, while this project is attuned to the *performativity* of the documentary encounter—that is, its catalytic generation of future experience—at the same time, it refuses the notion that such experiences are guaranteed to be satisfying or comforting in nature. In other words, documentary remains are in no way participant in the constitution of a coherent or stable human identity. They are just as likely to undermine such an aspiration as to fulfill it.

⁷Brian Dillon, *In the Dark Room: A Journey In Memory*. (Dublin: Penguin Ireland, 2006) 54.

The trouble with materiality as a concept is that it is a rather amorphous thing (is it even a thing? Isn't a thing too specific?). 'Materiality' is cumbersome. It lands with a thud; it weighs on the tongue. The following definitions of the word only serve to underscore how undifferentiated materiality is:

materiality, n.

1. That which constitutes the matter or material of something.
2. a. The quality of being composed of matter; material existence; solidity.
b. That which is material; (in *pl.*) material things.
3. Material or physical aspect or character; outward appearance or externality.
4. The quality of being relevant or significant.⁸

In these definitions, materiality is solidity, physicality, significance. It amounts to stuff—all the stuff, anywhere—and it matters.

So what?

Materiality, it seems, could use some refining.

As an irritated mother might say to the slothful son parked on her sofa in the middle of a dinner party, in what follows I am going to demand that materiality 'make itself useful.' I will do so by drawing attention to a particular type of material remains—the document—and what I have identified as its three distinct, but intersecting uses to which it is conventionally put: (1) evidentiary, (2) historiographical, and (3) archival. In doing so, I hope to communicate the ways in which documentary remains—such as the

⁸ "materiality, n.". OED Online. September 2012. Oxford University Press. 27 September 2012 <<http://www.oed.com.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/view/Entry/114928?redirectedFrom=materiality>>.

papers on Ronald Tanner's living room table—provoke acts of intercession in those who encounter them. At the same time, by unpacking the document and its uses, I hope to show that the document, as we conventionally understand it, promotes a fundamentally impoverished attitude towards the material world. By subsuming materiality to a merely utilitarian logic—by making it useful, as the document does—I believe that we exclude the ways that the documentary encounter is characterized by contingency, ineffability, and turmoil rather than utility, instrumentality, and legibility, and miss an opportunity to attend fully to the consequences of such encounters.

Document One: the evidentiary use

A document is a tricky thing. It is a thing, yes. But it is more (or less) than a thing; it is also an object. In his essay 'Thing Theory,' critical theorist Bill Brown makes a distinction between objects and things. We could say that an object is a sort of subset of a thing; it is a thing made purposeful. Like looking through a window, Brown argues that we 'look through objects because our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, by contrast, can hardly function as a window.'⁹ Things exceed purpose (more on this excess later), while objects do not. Objects exist in relation to a subject, signaling the (human)

⁹ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory,' *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 28, No. 1. *Things*, (Autumn 2001), 1-22: 4.

subject's desire to instrumentalize the material world: 'Objects are in some sense always *for* a subject for whom the object is an objective, a use.'¹⁰

The word 'document' connotes a special type of object, charged with a special use: evidence. The document suggests the possibility that we might name and know the events in which the document has played a part. In its adjectival form, 'documentary' is also inseparable from the tradition of documentary film. As a mode of filmmaking, documentary begins in the late nineteenth century with the invention of analog photographic technology, and is contemporaneous with the development of modern techniques of scientific observation.¹¹ As a field of study, documentary suggests an academic discipline which developed in earnest in the 1990s, but which has its precedents much earlier, in writings by such figures as John Grierson, Dziga Vertov, Paul Rotha, and many others. Both documentary filmmaking and documentary theory are indebted to the legacy of objects-as-evidence, a desire to believe that the technologies of the camera are uniquely able to register the world's realities through the mechanisms of photographic capture. Despite repeated attempts in documentary film theory to complicate the notion of filmic evidence, the evidentiary aspiration remains central to the field, most obvious in the naming of the preeminent book series and the field's annual international conference 'Visible Evidence.'

In 'The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription,' documentary film theorist Brian Winston charts the intimacy between the invention of photographic technology and

¹⁰ George Henderson, 'What Was Fight Club?: Theses on the Value Worlds of Trash Capitalism.' *Cultural Geographies* Vol, 18, No. 2: pp. 143-170: 145.

¹¹ See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Boston: MIT Press, 1992).

modern scientific practice, describing how science deployed the camera as an instrument of inscription, capable of mechanically registering information about the material world in a disinterested and accurate way. The promise of inscription, Winston argues, was at least as significant as the photograph's aesthetic functions, and did much to grant the photographic image an authoritative power that has proven foundational for documentary film. A cultural investment in the scientific authority of the photographic image persists, despite the protestations to the contrary by many a documentary filmmaker. Winston writes:

All the [documentary] filmmakers' off-screen denials of objectivity, all off-screen protestations as to their own subjectivity (should they make them) are contained and, indeed, contradicted by the overwhelmingly powerful cultural context of science. As the *Encyclopedie française* puts it: "The photographic plate does not interpret. It records. Its precision and fidelity cannot be questioned." However false this might be in practice, the *Encyclopedie*, without question, accurately sums up the nature of photographic authority, as it is popularly understood. The centrality of this scientific connection to documentary is the most potent (and sole) legitimation for its evidentiary pretensions. Thus, documentarists cannot readily avoid the scientific and evidential because those contexts are "built-in" to the cinematographic apparatus.¹²

¹² Brian Winston, 'The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription'. *Theorizing Documentary*. Michael Renov, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 41.

In Winston's formulation of the intimacy of science and film technology, we can see that the 'evidentiary pretensions' that he describes are foundational to documentary film and video to such an extent that they continue to dominate the expectations of filmmakers, viewers, and theorists alike. Though it was initially legitimized technologically, the notion of visible evidence continues to operate on an ideological level that exceeds any practical challenge. Therefore, although we might be inclined to say that the advent of digital technology renders moot any residual investment in photographic 'precision' and 'fidelity,' the promise of mechanistic world-capture continues to dominate our expectations of all photographic media, digital *and* analog.

While he is less explicitly interested in science per se, documentary theorist Bill Nichols highlights documentary's indebtedness to evidentiary rhetoric by linking it to what he terms 'discourses of sobriety': 'science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare.' Such discourses, Nichols writes, 'assume they have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences.'¹³ With Winston's explication of scientific inscription on the one hand, and Nichols' description of documentary's aspirations to instrumentality on the other, we have the crystallization of documentary's primary orientation to the material world: with accuracy, sobriety, and objectivity, the camera captures materiality and enlists it in the service of human agents. The material world is not merely to be depicted; it is to be marshaled.

¹³ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991) 3.

This project's orientation to documentary film theory is always vexed, at times antagonistic. As a field of study, I believe that documentary is most interesting as a kind of failure, a symptom of an ultimately unrealizable desire (to borrow from the title of Brian Winston's book) to 'claim the real.' Best put another way, in my estimation documentary film is most interesting when it exceeds its own intentions, resulting in a landscape that *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott recently called 'heterogeneous almost to the point of anarchy.'¹⁴ Though I do not doubt that many theorists of documentary would disagree with this statement, I believe that my claim that documentary becomes most interesting at the moments of its own undoing is borne out through a symptomatic read of the field of documentary studies. Contemporary documentary theorists often focus their attentions on the filmmakers and films that challenge a brutish, knee-jerk documentary realism. For example, auteurist studies of luminaries of the genre—from 'founding fathers' (Robert Flaherty, John Grierson) to essayists (Joris Ivens, Chris Marker) to leaders of cinema vérité (Jean Rouch) or direct cinema (Richard Leacock, the Maysles brothers), to 'reflexive' filmmakers (Ross McElwee, Nick Broomfield)—frequently make these filmmakers into exemplary figures precisely because their work reveals the goal of capturing reality as a *problem*, and not a *given*, thereby undermining the very idea on which documentary pins itself.

¹⁴ A. O. Scott, 'Documentaries (In Name Only) of Every Stripe', *New York Times* 13 October 2010.

Apart from a few dissenters (such as Noël Carroll)¹⁵ who continue to hold stock in classical documentary values, the majority of documentary theory tends to refer to reality in perpetual scare quotes; ‘reality’ persists, but in a state of continual questioning. In one sense, this project could be seen to participate in that goal of troubling documentary reality. However, such critiques have yielded limited results in part because they have remained shackled to a representational economy, where the image, in particular the photographic image, is evaluated first and foremost through its indexicality—its ability to testify to an ineluctable presence ‘in the world’ in front of the camera.¹⁶

This emphasis on representation, and in particular, a representation predicated on resemblance (a photograph’s worth is relative to its ability to look exactly like the world) has a number of consequences. The indexical linking of image and world paradoxically presumes a hard and fast distinction between the two, as if the image were not already in the world, and the world not already in the image. Therefore, documentary’s attempts—to borrow from one of Direct Cinema’s chief proponents, Richard Leacock—to convey ‘the feeling of being there’ only results in reaffirming that divide. For a representation cannot, by definition, become the thing that it represents; more than ever, the image is an

¹⁵ Noel Carroll, ‘Documentary Film and Postmodernist Skepticism,’ *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

¹⁶ There are many writings on indexicality, often sitting astride the contentious boundary between documentary and film theory more broadly. The two major theorists of the photographic index and cinematic ontology are Andre Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’ and ‘The Myth of Total Cinema’, *What is Cinema?* (1967) and Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volume 6: Scientific Metaphysics* (1935). A useful secondary source on Bazin is Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (2001); for Peirce, see Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (2002); See also footnote 162 for an elaboration on the relationship between Bazin and Peirce. For a more explicit theorization on documentary film and its indebtedness to indexicality, see Gregory Currie, ‘Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57(3), 285-298.

image, the world is the world. 'Being there' eludes us, and at best, the documentary image gives us the feeling of 'seeing there.' Trapped in this representational economy, the documentary aspiration to claim realist privilege runs up against an insurmountable obstacle, and the documentary project is undermined at its very core.

Consider Bill Nichols' contention that 'our access to historical reality may only be by means of representations.'¹⁷ If by this statement Nichols means that there is no such thing as unmediated reality, I agree with him, and would simply extend this claim beyond representation and into experience itself. However, if it is safe to assume that the phenomenon Nichols calls 'historical reality' involves our bodily engagement with the material world, his statement implies that there *is* such a thing as an immediate, transparent 'historical reality' that the virtuality of the film image can never hope to capture. Such a configuration suppresses the image's material existence, and reduces the world 'out there' to a bland literalness.

Document two: the historiographical use

I have already mentioned the 'vexed' relationship this project has to documentary theory; the same could be said for film theory writ large. I begin here with documentary because it is a subset of film theory where the question of realist representation is most thoroughly debated; however, this question has proven central not just for documentary theory, but for film theory as a whole. Much as I read documentary theory symptomatically here, my treatment of film itself is symptomatic, a case study among

¹⁷ *Representing Reality*, 7.

different documentary encounters. At its heart, this dissertation both is, and isn't about film; I investigate the traffic between film as image (its representational function) and film as thing (its material existence).

As a verb, 'to document' extends the observational, evidentiary tendency in documentary film and renders it historiographical. For many filmmakers, the promise of photographic capture is better described as the promise of photographic *record*: to produce a material remainder that (a) testifies faithfully to the circumstances of a given historical event, and (b) endures after that event has passed. Alanis Obomsawin, director of *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, narrates the historiographical dimension when she discusses the moral imperative she felt to record the events of a 1990 standoff between Mohawks and Canadian police as they were unfolding: 'I felt it's my duty, it has to be documented by one of us. I wanted to transmit what I felt and what I saw there, and what the story was, and what it was like, so that whoever's looking at it can understand what that story is.'¹⁸ Obomsawin's statement conveys an investment in the political and ethical capacities of photographic record, and a belief that such recordings will faithfully and transparently transmit this event to a later audience.

The notion of the camera as historical register abuts one of the central themes in film theory, that of film's preservative faculty. In his essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image,' Andre Bazin famously argues that the cinema distinguishes itself from other arts such as painting by virtue of its ability to stop time, to seal the living

¹⁸ Interview, *Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary*. Dir. Pepita Ferrari. National Film Board of Canada, 2008. 90 min. Video.

world away in a tomb of its own making: ‘photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.’¹⁹ Therefore photography is, in its most fundamental essence, a preservative. It pickles the world, suspending its moments. For Bazin, the promise of the capture of the profilmic world on the one hand, and its preservative potentiality on the other, add up to what he calls ‘change mummified.’ This photographic mummification is rooted in a human obsession to halt time’s inevitable progress; it offers us the tantalizing possibility of cheating death.

As I demonstrate in detail in Chapter 3, this is the root of our investment in the indexical function of the photograph. Crucially, Bazin recognizes that this promise is merely *aspirational*, not actual; it is, at its heart, an impossibility. The desire to embalm time is an ever-elusive obsession which we, as spectators, project onto the photographic image; in the end, Bazin’s ‘mummy complex’ is a fundamentally unrealizable desire. To quote Philip Rosen, a contemporary theorist whose work has done much to challenge Bazin’s reputation as a crude realist:

[...] we find in Bazin the postulate of a subject existing in a time-filled universe, one predisposed to a defensive stance against time. On the plane of representation, this institutes an impossible desire to make the past present, a pursuit of referential pastness that will make the time-filled universe timeless. The privileged signifying mode of such a subject is the indexical trace, which involves a persistence from the past to the present.

¹⁹ André Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image.’ Hugh Gray, trans. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4. (Summer, 1960), 4-9: 8.

“Change mummified” is the trope intertwining the time-filled with the timeless, and Bazin formulates it as a key specificity of cinema.²⁰

In Rosen’s characterization of Bazin, film plays into our ‘defensive stance against time’; unfortunately, while Bazin’s focus on preservation helps us to chart this anxiety to stop time, it does little to assist us in understanding time itself. Bazin’s formulation gives us a cinematic temporality predicated on fixity and not on change. Within this preservative rubric, we are unable to consider the difference between the desire to stop time and time as it is actually lived.

Alongside indexicality, this preservative function is, I believe, partially responsible for a tendency in film studies (spurred on by the advent of digital technology) to emphasize the projected image over its material substance. We treat the filmic image in terms of its visual content, and de-emphasize cinematic experience as an event that happens in and with a body—both the human body of the spectator *and* the body of the film as it moves through the projector—that is negotiating materiality and temporality at once. Therefore, while film produces material remains for future encounter, it is ultimately inadequate to the task of understanding the significance of those same remains. In other words, film’s indebtedness to a representational economy on the one hand, and to a preservative faculty on the other, combine to create the following axiom:

Reality is preservation of the same.

²⁰ Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 40.

Perhaps, then, film offers me little in my quest to reconfigure the human relation to documentary remains. What does it mean to understand film not as being *about* the world, but as being *of* the world? How is lived experience filmic, and how is film lived and experienced?

Reality is the decay of living matter: the remains in the document

Like Bazin, Paolo Cherchi Usai well understands the preservative impulse of the mummy complex. However, unlike Bazin, Cherchi Usai argues that just as foundational for cinema is the impossibility of stopping time. A leading figure in contemporary film preservation and restoration practices, Cherchi Usai believes that cinema is better conceived in terms of its ongoing decay. Despite all our preservative impulses and efforts, photographic images are decaying faster than we can ever hope to stem their loss. In *The Death of Cinema*, Cherchi Usai connects the material decay of cinema with the loss of memory itself:

‘Experience teaches us that loss of memory is as inevitable as anxiety for the future. In the hopes of avoiding both, the maker of moving images fabricates memories or visions of what is to come in the cherished belief that they will exist forever in an eternal present of the spectator’s will.

Exposing the spectator to a single viewing of that moving image is enough to reveal the futility of such ambition.’²¹

²¹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 35.

For Cherchi Usai, our viewing of cinematic images is an encounter not only with the aspiration to stop time for all eternity, but also with an equally important confrontation with death. While Bazin's formulation gives us a cinema that runs from death, Cherchi Usai gives us a cinema that embraces it. Despite our best wishes for the photographic image to catapult us out of time, cinema is, at heart, a destructive medium: it is, in Cherchi Usai's words, 'the art of destroying moving images.'

Cherchi Usai's declaration enables us to re-orient the notion of film as preservative towards a notion of film as degenerative. In considering film as fundamentally constituted by decay, we reconfigure film and its significance from the projected image to the filmic object (as both projected image *and* filmic substrate, film canister, thing to be archived), from seeing (film is about seeing the past come to life) to being (film is about experiencing the past in the present). Rather than opposing film and the material world it depicts, we can see how film, materiality, and the human body all exist in a state of ongoing decay, thus arriving at a second, more appropriate axiom:

Reality is the decay of living matter.

This formulation circumvents the representational economy that has stymied film theory. Body and film are brought into a productive confrontation.

In advocating a turn toward decay for understanding film and, more importantly, the documentary encounter, I wish to stage an attendant encounter between film theory and performance theory, with particular regard to the problem of disappearance (decay's double, we might say). Like film theory, much of performance theory is preoccupied

with historiography, memory, and the problem of the past. However, performance theorists have approached these issues in an almost oppositional manner, frequently pitting performance against the impulse to document live events that has proven so central for film. In fact, a cursory understanding of these two fields might view them as incommensurable, with the filmic apparatus producing the sorts of material remains that threaten to undermine performance itself.

The classical anti-documentary stance in performance theory is, in large part, due to the frequent affiliation of performance with disappearance (and by contrast, of documentation with persistence). Perhaps the most extensive and frequently cited theorization of this tendency can be found in Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, which argues that performance is ontologically characterized by disappearance. According to Phelan, 'performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented [...] Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance'.²² According to this argument, performance happens, quickly gathers itself, then vanishes, leaving no traces; it is unrepeatable, uncontainable, and, most interestingly to me, undocumentable. This thinking produces a hard and fast opposition between performance and documentation, in which performance is always due to disappear, while documentation is either degraded or dispensed with as a futile attempt to retrieve the irretrievable. According to this logic, any document rewrites the event of performance, scripting its meaning in absentia; thus, any attempt to 'know' the event of performance via documents is at best flawed, and at worst, a sort of

²² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 146.

perversion. Performance art historian Roselee Goldberg explains the problem in this way:

How to conserve such work? How to stop time and put a frame around the dynamic ripple effects of such fragile material, the traces of which will be erased the moment the artist goes home? How best to cobble together documentary bits and pieces of these and much earlier performances, including photographs, notation, posters, recording or costumes, in such a way as to transform such disparate collections of information into visually absorbing exhibitions?²³

For Goldberg, the dilemma presented by performance's documentary remains is that such material is fundamentally bent on conservation. With echoes of Bazin, Goldberg argues that documentary remains seek to 'stop time,' thereby doing violence to the time-bound erasures of performance.

An exchange between performance theorists Amelia Jones and Catherine Elwes serves as a good example of the tension between the live event and its documentary remains. In her essay "'Presence" in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,' Jones criticizes the prevailing tendency in performance studies to award primacy to the live event over the document, arguing against the privilege of 'being there' (echoes here of the 'being there' of Leacock's aspiration for documentary film) during the original performance: 'there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to

²³ Roselee Goldberg, 'One Hundred Years', *Live: Art and Performance*. Adrian Heathfield, ed. (London: Tate, 2004), 177.

any kind of cultural product, including body art.’²⁴ In response, Elwes attacks performance researchers like Jones who make use of documentation to carry out their work. Such criticism, Elwes maintains, operates in search of a kind of ‘critical distance’ that replicates patriarchal discourse:

Once the work is photographed, documented, and defused, the commanding position of the performer is usurped by the commentator who can now predict, contain, and reinvent the work from the disembodied security of her desk. She can invest the detritus of the live event with whatever narratives most appeal to her or are currently advantageous to her career strategies.²⁵

In other words, to write about performance via documentation is to *re-write* it—to script a new, arbitrary narrative which compromises the integrity of the original live event.

If Phelan, Elwes, and others²⁶ are right in suggesting that disappearance is the province of the live(d), and that documentary remains, by implication, offer little beyond a benign presence that communicates nothing of that loss, of what use are such documents to anyone? Given performance theory’s tendency to oppose events and their documentary remains, and this project’s investment in understanding the uses that we make of such remains, it would seem that performance theory might offer me little.

²⁴ Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,’ *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 4, p. 11-18. Winter 1997: 12.

²⁵ Catherine Elwes, ‘On Performance and Performativity: Women Artists and Their Critics’, *Third Text*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, 2004, 193-197: 196.

²⁶ See also Catherine Elwes, ‘On Performance and Performativity: Women Artists and Their Critics’, *Third Text*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, 2004: 193-197.); Roselee Goldberg, ‘One Hundred Years’, *Live: Art and Performance* (2004); Adrian Heathfield, ‘Alive’, *Live: Art and Performance* (2004).

However, the blind spot of the equation of performance with ephemerality, as Rebecca Schneider has beautifully demonstrated, is that it opposes disappearance and remains too readily. Unlike Phelan and her compatriots, Schneider does not affiliate performance with disappearance (what Schneider calls ‘flesh’), nor documents with remains (or ‘bones’). Rather, Schneider observes the convoluted trafficking between disappearance and remains. For Schneider, performance is a relentlessly citational practice attendant to the interpenetration of what has already happened with what has yet to be. Performance is never wholly new, yet also not the same: ‘It challenges, via the performative trace, any neat antimony between appearance and disappearance, or presence and absence through the basic repetitions that mark performance as indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and remaining.’²⁷ As Schneider puts it, performance does not entirely disappear, leaving no traces: ‘performance remains, but remains differently.’²⁸ For Schneider, ‘disappearance is not antithetical to remains,’ but rather, the two are mutually constitutive, such that ‘Disappearance, that citational practice, that after-the-factness, clings to remains—absent flesh *does* ghost bones.’²⁹

Schneider’s intervention in the performance-as-disappearance debate enriches our understanding of the effects of disappearance on materiality. As Marcel Proust demonstrates in his novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, the encounter with the simultaneity of disappearance and remains is paradoxical, confounding, and powerfully

²⁷ *Performing Remains*, 102.

²⁸ ‘Archives Performance Remains’, 102.

²⁹ *Performing Remains*, 102.

evocative. Consider this passage, in which the narrator describes wandering down the Guermantes Way, and coming upon a ruin:

Nothing was left now but a few stumps of towers [...] emblems of a past that had sunk down and well-nigh vanished under the earth that lay by the water's edge now, like an idler taking the air, yet giving me strong food for thought, making the name of Combray connote to me not the little town of today only, but an historic city vastly different, seizing and holding my imagination by the remote, incomprehensible features which it half-concealed beneath a spangled veil of buttercups.³⁰

To be ‘seized and held’, at once, by something ‘remote’, ‘half-concealed’, ‘incomprehensible’—is this not paradoxical? Is it not curious that the trigger of the imagination should be something that is missing? Simultaneously effective and opaque? Historian Pierre Nora writes that ‘our relation to the past is now formed in a subtle play between its intractability and its disappearance, a question of a representation radically different from the old ideal of resurrecting the past.’³¹ This feature, intractability, implies that documentary remains are not merely left over—they are stubborn, ingrained, and insistent. They are *at work*, with and through the past’s disappearance.

In this project I wish to take on performance’s ephemeral invitations, its ability to make us consider the constitutive aspects of loss. At the same time, I intend to re-orient the focus from the performing body (so often the starting point for performance theorists)

³⁰ Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way*, Book One of *The Remembrance of Things Past*. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, trans. 1922. (London: Penguin, 2000), 197-8.

³¹ Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*.’ *Representations* 26, Spring 1989, 7-25: 16.

to that body's (always already material) interaction with other material forms. I am interested in investigating what we might be able to do with documentary remains if we view them not as antithetical to performance, but as always already subject to similar processes of loss and disappearance as those that constitute performance. We need to, on the one hand, recognize that documentary remains do not promise an authentic retrieval of the past as it really occurred, and agree to work with the impossibility of such a return. At the same time, we need to recognize that the past is never totally lost, for it is always returning to inform and drive our present actions. In this oscillation between the irretrievability of the past and its constant repetition in the present, we can begin to understand the documentary encounter as an encounter with a recalcitrant materiality that is simultaneously suffused with disappearance.

Memory, materiality, and the body

In its emphasis on the occurrence of live events, performance is also a fertile site for considering embodiment and its relationship to temporality, specifically memory (as performance theorist Herbert Blau puts it, 'Where memory is, theater is').³² Through its emphasis on lived action—happenings, ritual acts, repetition, the event—performance theory emphasizes that the performing body is a body in action, engaged in a temporally inflected experiencing of the material world.

In its predisposition to an embodied understanding of temporality, performance also echoes Henri Bergson's philosophy of human perception as fundamentally informed

³² Hebert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 382.

by time. For Bergson, memory exists in the service of action; our impressions of the world facilitate our bodily movement through that world. He writes that ‘we may speak of the body as an ever advancing boundary between the future and the past, as a pointed end, which our past is continually driving toward the future.’³³ The perceiving body, animated by memory, exists perpetually at the horizon between past and future. Unlike a spatial understanding of time, which seeks to locate moments in past, present, or future, Bergsonian time situates the perceiving body at the horizon of these distinctions.

The consequences of Bergson’s temporal reconfiguration of perception are too extensive for me to enumerate in full detail here. Bergson interests me primarily because his emphasis on memory enables me to consider the catalytic nature of the documentary encounter in temporal terms. More specifically, Bergson’s formulation introduces a fundamental indeterminacy between the human body and the world it perceives, a radical challenge to the conventional opposition between idealism (reality is ‘in our heads’—the rationalist model) and realism (reality is ‘out there’ in the world—the empiricist model). As I have previously stated, this dualism continues to pervade discourses such as documentary theory, which frequently appeals to the ‘immediacy’ of social experience as opposed to the ‘mediation’ of the image. As Brian Massumi describes it, Bergson’s indeterminacy poses a fundamental challenge to any notion of the concreteness of experience (or, by consequence, the immateriality of a concept):

The charge of indeterminacy carried by a body is inseparable from it. It strictly coincides with it, to the extent that the body is in passage or in

³³ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. 1913. (Boston: MIT Press, 1991) 88.

process (to the extent that it is dynamic and alive). But the charge is not itself corporeal. Far from regaining a concreteness, to think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension *of the body*. Of it, but not it, Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct. If this is “concrete,” the project originally set out on will take some severe twists.³⁴

The body is both incorporeal *and* corporeal, at once. In introducing indeterminacy to human perception, Bergson circumvents the dualism of idealism and realism, thereby forcing us to consider the ways in which embodied experience is neither concrete nor immediate, but rather suffused with, and driven by, indeterminacy.

Given that the documentary encounter occurs between a body and material remains, Bergson’s notion of indeterminacy also requires a reconsideration of the effects of time on materiality itself. To Bergson’s emphasis on temporality as essential to human perception, I would add that there is a temporal residue to documentary remains; they are marked by their participation in what has previously transpired, and by their own being-in-duration. Therefore, both the human body *and* the material world are alloyed with past events (hence, an immaterial aspect to material remains). Part of what undoes us in the documentary encounter—and what drives us to take action amidst this undoing—is the confrontation between these pasts.

³⁴ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

In considering material remains as catalysts for being-in-time, I continually return to the work of two writers: Toni Morrison and Marcel Proust. In both Morrison's *Beloved* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, the material world plays a pivotal role in precipitating past events in the present; objects are capable of retaining characteristics of the events in which they once participated, and have a powerfully destabilizing effect on anyone who might happen upon them, even when those events have long faded into obscurity. These objects are more than mere evidence or inanimate adjudicators of the circumstances of past events. For Proust, objects actually absorb human experience and hold it prisoner:

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and thus effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognized their voice the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and return to share our life.³⁵

In this configuration, objects are not solely capable of triggering the past so that it can be observed in all its splendor (as in the oft-repeated case of the *petite madeleine*); more importantly, these material remains proffer an intermingling between the human and the non-human, a metamorphosis of the 'souls of those

³⁵ Proust, 57.

whom we have lost' into some 'inferior being.' Thus, the documentary encounter destabilizes us in part because it involves a confrontation not between the human and the non-human, the living and the dead, the animate and the inanimate, but rather, with the precariousness of such a distinction. As Brian Massumi would put it, 'on the list of distinctions it becomes difficult to sustain in any categorical way are those between artifact and thing, body and object—and even thought and matter. Not only do these relay in reciprocal becomings; together they ally in process. They are tinged with event.'³⁶ For Proust, documentary remains possess a distressing allure because they precipitate the impossible—the triumph over death, and the return of the past in all its plenitude.

According to Proust, even our own past experiences splinter off into the material world, eluding us until the moment of encounter. However, such encounters cannot be predicted or orchestrated—it is a matter of total contingency:

And so it is with our own past. It is a labor in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die.³⁷

³⁶ Massumi, 11.

³⁷ Proust, 57.

Here we have a version of subjectivity that maintains no mastery over the material world. Materiality *and* human beings are governed wholly by chance, rather than human reason.

Here, we begin to see how Bergson's notion of bodily indeterminacy, when alloyed with Proust's description of human-object metamorphosis, offers a potential revision of extant understandings of the relationship between personal and collective memory. Scholarship in memory studies has, in large part, engaged in a certain amount of semantic laziness, tending either to reify an opposition between individual and collective memory, or to use the two interchangeably without considering their specificities. For both Bergson and Proust, memory forms the foundation for embodied perception. At the same time, documentary remains act as complex interlocutors between individual and collective memory. Documentary remains are not only central to memorial experience; they enable individual memories to be entwined with those of others, thereby building a collective memory which is different from, but indebted to, individual memories.

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* offers a further layer of complexity to the individual-collective memorial relation. There is a moment in the story in which Sethe, the escaped slave who has killed her baby girl rather than give her up to the slave owner who has tracked them down, explains the concept of 'rememory' to her surviving daughter Denver. Sethe tells Denver that some events have the capacity to cling to particular places long after those who experienced them have gone. She explains,

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. [...] Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. [...] The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.³⁸

Rememory, as Sethe characterizes it, is both inside the person who generated it (the indexical referent of that memory), and capable of repeating itself to witnesses who come upon the remains of the event, even in the face of the absence caused by passing time. The memory persists in its ability to tell the witness something about the past by virtue of an absent presence, a physicality that we 'bump into' without having to encounter its owner.

Morrison's configuration enables us to conceive of material remains to which we have no direct experiential connection—which refer to events that happened not to us, but to others—could still destabilize us in the unforeseen moment when we 'bump into' such

³⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004) 43-4.

remains. Rememory reveals a slippage whereby we can revisit events (in *Beloved*, US slavery), not as spectators but as implicated agents. In rememory, past events are not merely observed by present actors, they are *relived*—as Sethe puts it, ‘it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.’ The past is not something that can be disinterestedly narrated by a present interpreter; it is viscerally and undeniably experienced. It is an *event*, not a representation.

Here, the documentary encounter goes beyond the human-object relation, and encompasses the individual-collective relation. The object is not simply an interlocutor between past and present, but between me and you. What happened to ‘them’ also happens to me—it is repetition with a difference. This slippage between us and them, between what happened then and what is happening now, is what makes performance practices such as re-enactment so compelling from a historiographical standpoint. Re-enactments fascinate because they fail spectacularly at repeating the unrepeatable past; they draw attention to the impossibility of resurrecting the dead, and to the necessity of taking responsibility for such losses, however removed from them we might like to think ourselves.

Due to the indeterminacy of the human-object distinction, we begin to see how other distinctions—between individual and collective, past and present—are similarly compromised. This project orients itself towards the unsustainability of such distinctions. Much as Bergson sought to find an intermediary between realism and idealism, this project’s objects, and its conclusions, are not either/or, but neither/and: an unsustainable dualism, one that undoes dualism itself. In this spirit, the project traffics across several

dualisms that haunt documentary remains and the bodies that encounter them: materiality and immateriality, presence and absence, loss and plenitude, body and world.

The documentary performative

The blond woman wears latex gloves and sifts through the documents Ronald Tanner has accumulated on the table, slowly picking up leads. Two bank statements reveal an inheritance; a death certificate points to a brother's suicide. Soon she makes a major breakthrough; it concerns Ronald's burial plot. On the table there are photos of his mother's grave. Along with the prints is a drawing, a sketch of the Tanner family gravesite (Figure 1.1). The blond woman picks up the drawing and examines it. It appears that Ronald has taken pains to render this place in his own hand. Outlined in black is a row of headstones with names scrawled on them. In between two headstones, however, there is a gap, and in the gap, a name: 'Ronald Tanner'.

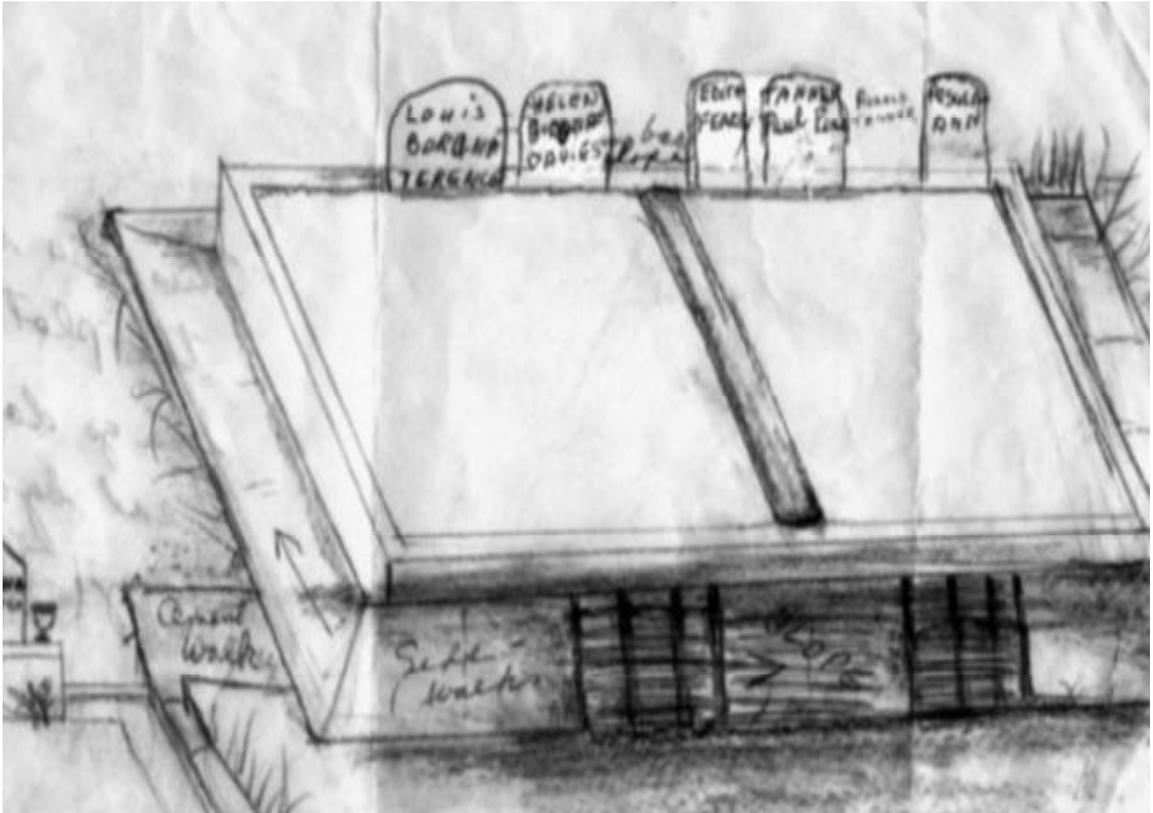


Figure 1.1. Ronald Tanner's graveyard sketch.

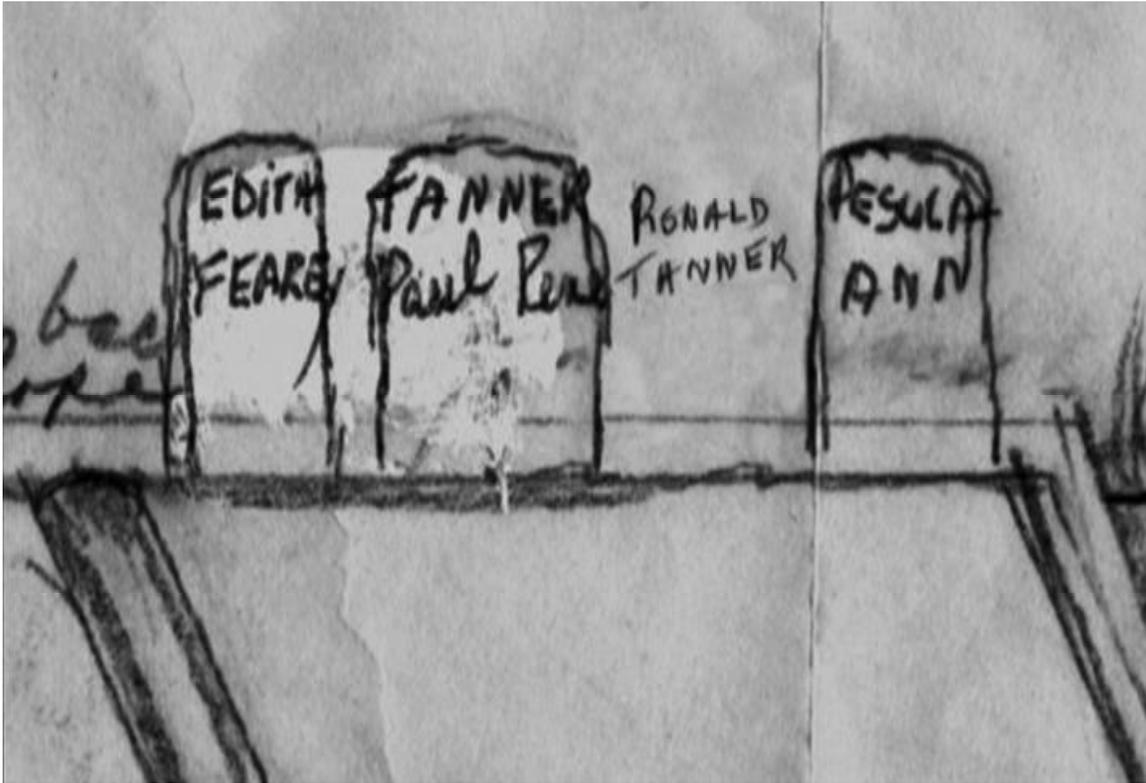


Figure 1.2. Ronald Tanner's graveyard sketch (close-up).

This sketch, so tantalizingly situated at the center of Ronald Tanner's personal effects, appears to appeal for something; but for what? What are we to do with Ronald's bequest?

Bequests always come with strings attached. They are conditional gifts, enveloped in caveats and fine-printed stipulations. Bequests are gifts wrapped in demands. They are requests for intercession. Ronald Tanner's graveyard sketch externalizes this: 'Whosoever finds this drawing is charged with the task of my burial. I want to be laid to rest here, between Tanner and Pesula.' Presumably Ronald is telling an

unknown someone where he wants to be buried; this is the obvious, instrumental function of Tanner's drawing.

In this drawing, we have some facts. We have the fact of the scrawled text, and the contrasting rectitude of the straight lines that mark the borders of the burial plot. We have the fact of the drawing's placement on this particular table, in this particular apartment, on this particular day. But there is something else that keeps me revisiting this sketch. I scrutinize it, worrying over its details, fascinated by the creases of the page (Did Ronald fold the drawing? Was he planning to send it off somewhere?), and bright blotch under two of the gravestones (is it White-Out? Did Ronald mis-bury a relative?). Meanwhile, the wavering text reading 'Ronald Tanner' evades my capture, hovering in this empty space between gravestones. It gestures towards Tanner's stiffening corpse, an ineluctable presence that exceeds our understanding even as it appeals for our intercession.

The documentary encounter is *pre*-historiographical; when we happen upon the remains of a past event, we perceive the opportunity to construct an understanding of that event. At the same time, the encounter does not prescribe the nature or the outcome of that construction. We can do any number of things with documentary remains: we can sell, preserve, neglect, abandon, fetishize, or re-purpose them. None of these activities guarantees that we will know the past; they only ensure that we will continue to act. In orienting ourselves to the documentary encounter, we shift our focus from what we *know* of the past to what we *do* with (or despite) it, from knowledge to performance.

At the end of the first chapter of *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida narrates a curious incident.³⁹ He describes a Bible which Jakob Freud bequeathed to his son Sigmund. Through this Bible, Derrida fleshes out the relations between the father of the father of psychoanalysis, the patrilineal handing down of knowledge, and the genealogical request for remembrance. In the book's inscription Jakob Freud writes:

I have presented it to you as a memorial and as a reminder [a memorial and a reminder, the one and the other at once, the one in the other, and we have, perhaps, in the economy of these two words the whole of archival law...] of love from your father, who loves you with everlasting love.⁴⁰

This patriarchal love seals the deal between the dead and the living; this inscription, this Bible, this document is what renders Sigmund Freud bound—tied up, guaranteed—to remembrance.

In fleshing out the documentary performative, I want to extract a fragment of this inscription and scrutinize it: 'I have presented it to you as a memorial and as a reminder'. 'Memorial' and 'reminder'. Freud wants this Bible to serve two distinct functions. First, to memorialize: is this the act of scripting meaning onto the document, of consigning memory to this receptacle, like ashes in an urn? Next—and this is most curious to me—the Bible shall 'remind'. A reminder, as we know, is a trigger, a jumping-off point for memory to get to work. But there is a secondary component here that interests me. The 'reminder', as I have considered it, appears to function insofar as it *sets up a future*

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Translated by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 23, italics and text in brackets Derrida's.

experience through the encounter with this memory. The reminder, then, appears not only to be an optimistic orientation or alertness towards the future, but in fact to *produce* the future. As Derrida puts it, ‘the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.’⁴¹

Rebecca Schneider writes that theatrical documents—such as the text of a play or production notes—often function as a blueprint or script for performances that have not yet occurred. This attention to the ways that documentary remains not only function as traces of the events in which they have already participated, but also as ghostly remnants of a future that has not yet happened, gets at the catalytic performative force of the documentary encounter: ‘The past remains both as trace and as a matter for the deferred live of its (re)encounter.’⁴² Document, then, also signals an invocation to action. It’s here, in this request via bequest, that the document gets rethought; through performativity, remains document a future that has yet to happen. As Derrida puts it, ‘The archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge, a token of the future [...] Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives.’⁴³

Photography, the most central medium for performance’s documentation, begs its own special mention here. Rebecca Schneider tells us that rather than photography simply being a mechanism of stillness and death, a representation of an irretrievable

⁴¹ Ibid, 17.

⁴² Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 45.

⁴³ Derrida, 18.

moment, it is rather an instance of ongoing, perpetually unfolding event. Like Freud's Bible, in Schneider's estimation the photograph 'hails' the future, inclining itself towards a future it has precipitated but not prescribed. Such a re-orientation of the photographic from static to durational depends on a notion of time itself as mutable and shifting, disrespecting the conventional divides between then and now, living and dead.

It may be that reading the photograph as a record of time gone by, never to return, misses the point of our temporal cross-fashioning, our calls and responses across a time that is not (or not only) linear and nonrecurring. The question is actually simple: when we habitually read documents as evidence and evidence of indication of a past supposedly gone by, do we overlook the liveness of temporal deferral, the real time of our complicities?⁴⁴

It is here that encounter arises and interrupts, becomes the repeated eruption of the past and the present. It depends on, as Schneider writes (following Sue Ellen Case) the repeated traversal of the boundary between life and death, and an investment in 'passing' rather than ontology.⁴⁵

Document Three: the archival use

In addition to its evidentiary and historiographical uses, we have one final use of 'document' to consider. On the one hand, a document is a thing, a substance that our

⁴⁴ Schneider, *Performing Remains* 141-2.

⁴⁵ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 141.

bodies engage as we move through the world. On the other, it also signals that thing's passage into discourse, into a socially and culturally determined set of preconceptions about its utility and meaning. In the representational economy that I have just outlined, there is a seemingly contradictory need to house the (material) objects from which such (immaterial) meanings are derived. The objects need a home, 'an empty box, a place, a site or an institution, whose special role is the guardianship of the document.'⁴⁶ That home is the archive. Concomitant with and indebted to the notion of document-as-evidence has been the rise of the archive as the modern locus of material instrumentality *par excellence*.

Since the mid-1990s, many theorists interested in the relationship between materiality, memory, and knowledge production have focused their energies on the archive. As I demonstrate in detail in Chapter 2, theorists writing across a wide array of disciplines⁴⁷ have revealed the ideological scaffolding of the twentieth century archive, arguing that the archive is not only the guardian of historical knowledge, but its enabling and legislating force. As Jacques Derrida explains in *Archive Fever*, 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.'⁴⁸ He who controls the archive, then, controls what we can know about the past. For example, Diana Taylor, Irit Rogoff, and Thomas Richards have amply elucidated the ways that the modern archive was not merely a value-neutral site for housing memory, but rather a central instrument for

⁴⁶ Arjun Appadurai, 'Archive and Aspiration,' Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (eds.), *Information is Alive* (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing/NAI Publishers 2003) 14 – 25: 15.

⁴⁷ such as philosophy (Foucault 1972, Derrida 1995), cultural theory (Steedman 2002, Appadurai 2003), performance studies (Blocker 1999, Schneider 2001, Taylor 2003), anthropology (Ghosh 1994), film preservation (Cherchi Usai 2001), and heritage studies (Mansfield 1995)

⁴⁸ Derrida, 4.

colonial conquest, whereby the control of information was central to the control of bodies, lands, and resources by imperial agents.⁴⁹ In other words, the archive as the final resting place of documentary remains becomes not only the location but also the producer of knowledge about the past.

Pierre Nora argues that the twentieth century was characterized by its creation of, and dependence on, what he calls *lieux de memoire*, or sites of memory. For Nora, modernity's transition from agrarian to industrial societies is characterized by a loss of *milieux de memoire*, or environments of memory; what was once a collectively-held, embodied knowledge of the past shifted in the 20th century into a dependence on particular sites of memorial deposit, such as archives, museums, and monuments. As communities were fragmented by modern life, Nora argues, they depended increasingly on *lieux de memoire* to anchor the memories that define them.⁵⁰ Hence, for Nora, modernity signals the 'conquest and eradication of memory by history;' where memory 'is life [...] in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting,' history is 'a representation of the past' whose 'true mission is to suppress and destroy' memory via 'analysis and criticism.' Paradoxically, this threat to memory has resulted in the rise of institutions dedicated to memory's safekeeping, the very same institutions that facilitate history's operations: 'We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. [...] if history

⁴⁹ See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Irit Rogoff, 'An-Archy,' *Lost in the Archives: Alphabet City No. 8*, Rebecca Comay, ed. (Toronto: Alphabet City Media, 2002) 668-681; Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁵⁰ Nora, 7.

did not besiege memory, deforming and transforming it, penetrating and petrifying it, there would be no *lieux de memoire*.⁵¹ In its assault on memory, history's primary weapon is the material trace (the document); hence the emergence of the archive.

Documentary encounter as waste management

Though it draws on these studies of the archive, my dissertation also departs from them, arguing that our contemporary moment is defined by a rather different relationship to documentary remains. While I strongly believe that the sepulchral aspirations of the archive—the need to locate, fix, and preserve materiality—retain significant ideological heft (see Chapter 3), I also seek to conceive of materiality's dynamism and volatility, to understand our contemporary moment in terms of the *dispersal*, rather than the *centralization*, of documentary remains. In other words, if the modern world has been shaped by the need to archive, it might be said that our postmodern world is shaped by waste management.

This is a claim that surely begs unpacking. What is this shift that I am marking? What precipitates it? What characterizes it? Postmodernity's causes and characteristics (or, indeed, the question of its very existence) have been debated *ad nauseum* elsewhere, and I have no intention of repeating them here. However, I do wish to spend some time attending to this shift in order to better account for the increasingly volatile materiality suffusing our contemporary existence. In his essay 'Postscript on the Societies of

⁵¹ Ibid, 12.

Control,' Gilles Deleuze argues that the modern 'disciplinary societies' elucidated by Michel Foucault have given way to what Deleuze terms 'societies of control.' In the disciplinary societies, Deleuze argues, power was consolidated through strategies of spatial and intellectual enclosure, where the school, the factory, the prison, the hospital, the home, and, indeed, the archive all functioned as spaces where bodies could be housed and disciplined in the service of modern capital. Capital maintained its hold by enforcing the clear demarcation of the border surrounding these enclosed spaces, and policing the boundary between inside and outside was paramount. However, with the dawn of postmodernity and the transition from industrial to finance capital in the 1970s (where the corporation replaced the factory), Deleuze argues that control societies ushered in the breakdown of divisions on which modern society depended—public/private, inside/outside, work/leisure, etc. In other words, whereas modernity emphasized order, the rationalization of space, the compartmentalization of uses, and the eradication of the old in order to usher in the new, for Deleuze this process of containment has given way to a 'crisis of interiority' in which power operates via dispersal, rather than enclosure: subjects are no longer constrained but dispersed, and capital subsumes every aspect of life itself.⁵²

This notion of capitalism's adaptation from enclosure to dispersal signals one of the reasons why waste is, for lack of a better word, suddenly useful. The late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen an upsurge in interest in waste in various quarters: as an increasingly pressing ecological concern (e.g. toxic dumping, overflowing landfills), as

⁵² Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control,' *October*, Vol. 59. (Winter, 1992): 3-7.

material for art-making (e.g. Ilya Kabakov's detritus-filled installations or Agnès Varda's 2000 documentary *The Gleaners and I*, which I discuss in Chapter 3), as fodder for pop-cultural rubbernecking (e.g. multiple reality TV shows and a landfill's worth of books on compulsive hoarding), as an opportunity for new forms of material re-commodification (in the rise of 'custodial industries' such as thrifting, recycling, and discount stores), and as manifest in the recent publication of a whole host of texts across divergent fields in academia.⁵³ While waste, excrement, filth, garbage, and all other manner of material excesses do not originate with postmodernity (what would the human be without shit, after all),⁵⁴ we *can* point to the rise in postmodernity of what David Harvey has called a 'throwaway' society. For Harvey, the accelerations of late capitalist production caused the whole of culture to take on a cast of disposability: 'It meant more than just throwing away produced goods (creating a monumental waste-disposal problem), but also being able to throw away values, lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being.' This throwaway society, Harvey argues, is characterized by an accelerated transience and volatility, an

⁵³ A representative but by no means exhaustive bibliography: Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory* (1979); Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004); Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (2005); *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, eds., 2003); *Waste-Site Stories: The Recycling of Memory* (Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve, eds.: 2002); John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (2005); a special issue of *SubStance* in 2008 on 'Waste and Abundance: The Measure of Consumption,' Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree N. Reddy, 'The Afterlives of "Waste": Notes from India for a Minor History of Capitalist Surplus,' *Antipode* Vol. 43, No. 5 (2011) 1625-1658.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Susan Signe Morrison's study of early modern shit in *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics* (2008).

experience of ‘accelerated turnover’ characterized by ‘disposability, novelty, and the prospects for instant obsolescence.’⁵⁵

Obsolescence and custodianship

As our worlds are glutted with more and newer material objects, we are afflicted by a parallel concern for loss and obsolescence. Objects appear out of date as soon as we possess them. Decay suffuses the material world, and proliferates faster than we can stop it. This rapidity of obsolescence implies the accumulation of trashed matter at the other pole, breeding what geographer David Clarke has called ‘junkspace.’⁵⁶ Death and disappearance are everywhere, in the form of the stubborn remainder of waste that refuses the oblivion which is its supposed fate. Paradoxically, ‘now, it is the turn of the useful part to be short lived, volatile, and ephemeral, to clear the stage for the next generation of useful products. Only the waste tends to be (alas) solid and durable. “Solidity” is now a synonym of “waste.”’⁵⁷

In other words, materiality exists along a multi-directional continuum of usage and disposal. Objects fall in and out of favor, and as they do, they are likely to find their way in and out of any number of quarters including the archive, the private home, the museum, the landfill, and the shopping mall. As Aleida Assmann puts it, archives have a ‘reverse affinity with rubbish dumps’, such that ‘archives and rubbish are not merely

⁵⁵ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 1992) 286.

⁵⁶ David Clarke, ‘The Ruins of the Future: On Urban Transience and Durability’, in Anne Cronin and Kevin Hetherington (ed.) *Consuming the Entrepreneurial City* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 127–42.

⁵⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) 89.

linked by figurative analogy but also by a common boundary, which can be transgressed by objects in both directions.⁵⁸ In this sense, the project analyzes an *an-archic*⁵⁹ materiality, orienting itself towards the archive's back doors and exits, its failures and losses.

Documentary remains' accelerated traffic along the continuum of usage and disposal precipitates an attendant anxiety regarding custodianship. If objects are at increased risk of abandonment, then questions arise around the politics and ethics of care for them: Who has the power to determine what is worthy of custodianship? How should such custodianship be defined? Is it to be relegated to a specialized class of caregivers (archivists, for example)? Given the impossibility of preserving everything on the one hand, and the inevitability of loss and disappearance on the other, how might extant archival practices be insufficient to the task?

Both Chapters 2 and 3 attend to the issue of custodianship in different, but related ways. **Chapter Two, 'Yes, There Is a Joseph Wagenbach: History and the Performativity of What Might be True,'** examines the case of Joseph Wagenbach, a reclusive German immigrant who was found in his home upon suffering a stroke in 2006. When city officials entered the house, they discovered that Wagenbach had packed his house with hundreds of sculptures. Unsure whether or not Wagenbach's work was worthy of safekeeping, The Municipal Archives of the City of Toronto opened the house

⁵⁸ Aleida Assmann, 'Beyond the Archive.' *Waste-Site Stories: The Recycling of Memory*. Brian Neville and Johanne Villeneuve, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002) 71.

⁵⁹ Rogoff, Irit. 'An-Archy', in Rebecca Comay (ed.) *Lost in the Archives: Alphabet City No. 8*, Toronto: Alphabet City Media, pp. 668-681. 2002. I address the etymological significance of Rogoff's term in further detail in Chapter 2.

to the public, inviting visitors to determine what, if anything, of this man's personal effects merited preservation. In this chapter, I study *The Legacy* as an *an-archic* space, troubling the stability of the archive as a site for the production of historical knowledge. I expand on the notion that the archive maintains itself, and our notion of 'proper history,' via repeated acts of inclusion and exclusion, by designating and policing a boundary between inside and outside, legitimate and illegitimate, trash and treasure. Joseph Wagenbach, as a potentially archivable historical figure, sits precariously astride this boundary. Therefore, Wagenbach's house, and the objects within it, are situated at the *threshold* of a value judgment that is foundational for archival practice, and for the historiography it engenders: what, if anything, deserves to be saved?

Examining the public tours at the heart of the project, the chapter argues that the Wagenbach house's anarchic disposition was distinguished in part by its encouragement of a collectively authored, incipient historiography generated by the house's visitors, in acts of material encounter. Drawing from more than 30 hours of video documentation of the tours as well as material remains such as the project's guest book, I demonstrate the ways in which a collective belief in Wagenbach's existence enabled a form of historical understanding that was as effective as it was contradictory and inaccurate.

Chapter 3, 'Still-Moving: Photographic Decay as Opportunity' expands on the questions opened up by Chapter 2 through an analysis of the precarious state of the analog film archive. One of the aspects of postmodernity that has previously gone unmentioned is the increased role of immateriality in everyday life. While we could point to this phenomenon's manifestation and effects in various quarters—for example

through new forms of ‘immaterial labor’⁶⁰—the supposed dematerialization of digital culture is most relevant to this project. One of the paradoxes of the digital film image is the simultaneous marginalization and reification of film’s materiality, such that one could argue that the issue of photographic materiality is at once outdated and contemporary, anachronistic and urgent. Once a banal, inconsequential occurrence, the material encounter with a printed photograph, slide, or reel of film is becoming the province of the aficionado, the archivist, or the artist. We are increasingly distanced from the tangible experience of analog photographic media in our daily lives, even as contemporary culture is suffused with nostalgia for just such an experience.

At the same time, the fragility of both nitrate and cellulose film, coupled with an increasing ideology of obsolescence around analog photographic technology as a whole, have resulted in a global crisis of the photographic archive. Despite all our preservative impulses and efforts, photographic images are decaying faster than we can ever hope to stem their loss; by some estimations, more than 75% of all US films have already disappeared.⁶¹ Our relationship to the analog photograph is increasingly defined in terms of an ethics of custodianship, on the question of care—a quandary of what we should do about decay.

Encountering decay

⁶⁰ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁶¹ In *Nitrate Won’t Wait: Film Preservation in the United States*, Anthony Slide writes, ‘It is often claimed that 75 percent of all American silent films are gone and 50 percent of all films made prior to 1950 are lost [...] there still remains more than 100 million feet of nitrate film of American origin awaiting preservation.’ (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 1992) 5.

This concern with ‘the custody of disappearance’ summons another connotation of waste that I have left buried, as it were, until now. It is worth remembering that ‘waste’ is a verb as well as a substance. In its most common connotation, (to) waste suggests an act of squandering, the kind of profligate expenditure that, according to Georges Bataille, is inherently *unproductive*, and as such, is horrifying to the bourgeoisie (and profoundly appealing for Bataille).⁶² At the same time, waste-as-verb has another, less-used connotation, signaling a different kind of loss—progressive decay (‘to waste away’). In other words, one of the things that makes waste distressing is its transitional status *en route* from life into death, and from present into past. Given that this project is concerned with the documentary encounter as an occurrence between humans and, as I have already stated, ‘a recalcitrant materiality that is simultaneously suffused with disappearance,’ the concept of decay is central here.

In **Chapter 3** I investigate the effects of decay on a particular kind of analog documentary encounter. In the fall of 2008, my parents undertook the rather Herculean task of moving a twenty-two-year accumulation of personal belongings, in order to facilitate the remodeling of their house. Buried amidst this biographical detritus, my mother discovered a cache of several hundred slides and sixteen 8mm films that she had inherited from her father at some unknown date. The films and photos, several hundred slides and sixteen 8mm films in all, are in varying states of decay: some are barely

⁶² ‘The hatred of expenditure is the *raison d’être* of and the justification for the bourgeoisie; it is at the same time the principle of its horrifying hypocrisy.’ ‘The Notion of Expenditure,’ *Visions Of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 176.

legible, while others are vivid and clear; some have suffered mold, while others are the victims of color fading; some depict recognizable people, locations, and activities; others are anonymous and vague. In cataloguing these documentary traces of my family's past, I investigate the effects of decay and destruction of photographic images—both still and moving—on our understanding of their epistemological possibilities. In addition, I point to the degree to which conventional archival custodianship is governed by an imperative to mitigate decay at all costs, at the expense of all other forms of engagement with these images.

If our contemporary moment is suffused with the burdens of ruined things, then it follows that such shifts are also paralleled in ruined environments. **Chapter 4, 'The Sky is Falling: Architectural Ruin and Daily Life in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*,**' begins from the premise that the almost total disappearance of industrial capitalism in the Global North has produced a whole host of architectural leftovers, whether in the form of derelict factory sites,⁶³ ghost cities such as Detroit,⁶⁴ or the accelerated abandonment of suburban malls in favor of new forms of mixed-use commercial/residential/entertainment sites. More recently, the economic crash of 2008 precipitated the pre-emptive ruination of what geographer Cian O'Callaghan (following economist David McWilliams) has called 'ghost estates'—planned communities which were abandoned before they were even completed, as a consequence of the spectacular bursting of the housing bubble.⁶⁵

⁶³ such as those investigated by Tim Edensor in *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

⁶⁴ See Jerry Herron, *AfterCulture: Detroit and the Humiliation of History* (1995); Michael Chanan, dir, *Detroit: Ruin of a City* (2005).

⁶⁵ Cian O'Callaghan, 'Crisis and dereliction in "Namaland": Renegotiating Ireland through the "new ruins"'

While O’Callaghan focuses his attentions on post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, such ‘pre-ruins’ are a visible reminder of the way in which neoliberal capital does not simply reject ruination as its abject other, but instead, simultaneously produces and depends upon it, via a palimpsestic shuttling back and forth between past, present, and future. We see capital’s love-hate relationship with ruin most obviously in the dereliction that simultaneously feeds and stymies gentrification. As George Henderson puts it, ‘capital reaches a moment, in a certain fin-de-siecle, urban development logic, where it *must* appear in disused, edgy, and subcultural form in order for it to regain its attraction.’⁶⁶

Chapter 4 explores this kind of neo-liberal flirtation with ruin (what I call the ‘gentrification of decay’) via a rather different context—the rapidly shifting built environment of Havana, Cuba, as depicted in the documentary *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* (*Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins*, 2006). The architectural precarity of Cuba’s buildings is extreme: at best, the plaster falls from the ceiling and the plumbing is shot, and at worst, the entire building is susceptible to collapse at any moment. At the same time, the Cuban government’s turn to free-market policies in recent decades has spurred a multitude of restoration projects in the city. While Cubans negotiate the daily hazards of life in decrepit buildings, since 1993 the Havana-based government agency Habaguanex has invested millions of dollars in foreign capital to restore ‘historically significant’ buildings across Habana Vieja (Old Havana) for the growing tourist industry. Therefore, while Habana Vieja is now home to many pristine hotels and museums, it also

of the post-Celtic Tiger.’ Unpublished paper, presented at the American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, 26 February 2012.

⁶⁶ Henderson, 152.

houses some of its poorest residents, whose own dwellings continue to degrade. With renewal juxtaposing ruination, I argue that we might consider Havana's ruined state not so much as an anomaly, but as symptomatic of the postmodern city's ontological ephemerality, an ephemerality bred by capitalism's emphasis on consumption; as David Clarke puts it, 'change is the one constant of the city. Far from being marked by permanence, the city is pure transience itself.'⁶⁷

In keeping with this project's interrogation of the relationship between representation and reality, this chapter could be said to analyze two documentary encounters: the ongoing, durational documentary encounter of inhabiting ruined space, and the documentary encounter of watching the film that depicts that inhabitation (which, I argue, mirrors the tourist's encounter with the city, which is frequently mediated by the prosthesis of the camera). In other words, the film is not a window through which we see the ruined Havana, but is participant in the careful construction of what I call a Picturesque ruin aesthetic. In its attachment to this aesthetic, I argue that *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* disenfranchises the inhabitants of Cuban ruins in precisely the ways it claims that the Cuban government has done, and ultimately facilitates the viewer's voyeuristic experience of ruin-tourism.

Encountering excess

⁶⁷ David Clarke, 'The ruins of the future: on urban transience and durability.' *Consuming the Entrepreneurial City: Image, Memory, Spectacle*. Anne M. Cronin and Kevin Hetherington, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 128-9.

On the one hand, this project contends that our contemporary moment is distinguished by unmanageable excess; however, it also contends that this excess constitutes an opportunity as much as a pressing matter of concern. If we consider the question of excess as central to the documentary encounter, then we might begin to attend to the ways that materiality resists the documentary uses to which humans wish to put it. It is worth returning for a moment to Bill Brown's discussion of the difference between objects and things. Brown writes that thingness can be defined

as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence [...] Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects).⁶⁸

In contrast to the object, which matters according to its ability to be put to a predetermined use, the thing carries with it an excessive quality that is, by definition, useless; as George Henderson puts it, 'ostensibly it is "thingness" that is revealed when an object's use runs out and its matter remains.'⁶⁹ Similarly, in an essay on Russian Constructivism and printed matter, Nicholas Thoburn points to ephemeral printed forms such as the pamphlet as a kind of 'Communist object,' 'an inorganic material entity that destabilizes the commodity attributes of property *and* utility and their correlated patterns

⁶⁸ Brown, 5.

⁶⁹ Henderson, 145.

of subjectivity and association. It posits instead an excessive materiality in a communism of organic and inorganic processes.’ Thoburn is invested in the ‘capacities of objects to have transformative effects on human sociality and thought that *are not predetermined by the form of the human subject.*’⁷⁰

I am interested in the possibilities afforded by this sort of material indeterminacy. While on the one hand, wasted matter might be considered burdensome, it only exists as such for the human subject. Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the collector is worth considering here. For Benjamin—a figure who does much to remind us that the underside of modernity’s aspirations to order and rationalization were wreckage, detritus, and fragmentation—the collector is a figure who, as Benjamin puts it, ‘takes up the struggle against dispersion.’⁷¹ In this sense, he might be aligned with the archivist, who is similarly invested in containing materiality. However, there is a crucial distinction between them, which Thoburn points out:

the collector is also attuned to the dissipative properties and destructive processes of matter. Against the delimiting temporary patterns of commodity circulation, the collector’s mode of relation thus opens to the many and singular durations of things, so displaying an “anarchistic, destructive” passion, a “willfully subversive protest against the typical, classifiable.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Nicholas Thoburn, ‘Communist Objects and the Values of Printed Matter.’ *Social Text* Vol. 103, No. 2. Summer 2010: 6. Emphasis mine.

⁷¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Collector.’ *The Arcades Project*. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 211.

⁷² Thoburn, 7-8.

This figure is remarkable because his acquisition of objects ‘entails the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful.’⁷³

To think of documentary remains’ intimacy with waste might seem to imply an impoverished, compromised materiality that has suffered a loss of value, on several registers: it has less monetary value (it cannot be bought or sold for a meaningful amount), less utilitarian value (it is broken, is a bad instrument), and less evidentiary value (it can no longer testify to a past event with accuracy). However, such configurations risk understanding waste as merely ‘less than.’ Waste may be useless—but it is no less efficacious. For Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree N. Reddy, waste is best defined as a ‘material excess that is unruly and improper.’⁷⁴ This configuration makes it possible to understand how materiality exceeds the instrumental functions to which we humans wish we could put it. Instead of seeing waste as that which does nothing (or less than it should), I propose that we consider waste as that which does *what we do not want it to, and therefore makes us do things we did not anticipate.*

Contingency and the encounter

This project is driven by a conviction that documentary encounters happen every day, in a multitude of quarters: in institutions and private homes, in open and in secret, in regimented and casual ways. Documentary encounters are, in other words, ubiquitous, and we would do well to start noticing them with regularity. With this in mind, I have

⁷³ *The Arcades Project*, 209.

⁷⁴ Gidwani and Reddy, 1627.

chosen to focus my attention on a range of documentary encounters that may at first appear to have little to do with one another. Given my desire to attend to the ways in which documentary remains exceed archival logic, it is incumbent upon me to trace the contours of those excesses in unexpected ways.

Several friends and advisors have asked me to explain my emphasis on the word ‘encounter’ to describe the sort of unanticipated occurrence I have just mentioned. Why not ‘event’? The answer is important, if relatively straightforward. Much like ‘document’ is more pointed than ‘materiality,’ enabling me to identify cultural problems to be analyzed (as opposed to cultural phenomena to be examined), I find the word ‘encounter’ to be more precise, and therefore more productive, than the word ‘event.’

To compare the two definitions:

event, *n.*

1. The (actual or contemplated) fact of anything happening.
2. Anything that happens, or is contemplated as happening; an incident, occurrence.

encounter, *n.*

1. A meeting face to face; a meeting (of adversaries or opposing forces) in conflict; *hence*, a battle, skirmish, duel, etc.
2. The fact of meeting with (a person or thing), *esp.* undesignedly or casually.
3. An idea that suddenly presents itself, as it were by accident; a happy thought.

The documentary encounter, as I am imagining it, is characterized by three key traits: (1) contingency; (2) material recalcitrance via disappearance; and (3) struggle. In the documentary encounter, we are faced with an undeniable, insistent pastness that

causes a shock to the system. It may happen quietly, as a small shudder, or totally, as a cataclysm; in every case, in the documentary encounter we greet our own disintegration. And yet, even as these moments destabilize the placidity of the everyday, they are crucial for precipitating our actions in the world, in ways we could not have previously anticipated. This notion of the unanticipated nature of the documentary encounter aligns itself with Louis Althusser's discussion of contingency in his discussion of 'aleatory'⁷⁵ materialism.' He writes, 'the encounter may not take place, just as it may take place. Nothing determines, no principle of decision determines this alternative in advance; it is the order of a game of dice.'⁷⁶ The event of encounter, while transformative, is also completely outside human control.

While I find Althusser's notion of the encounter fertile for its embrace of contingency, my project seeks to account for something rather different in that it regards the confrontation—again the struggle that distinguishes 'encounter' from 'event'—between human subject and inanimate object, an object whose sheer blunt presence places unexpected demands on that subject. The documentary encounter could be said to precipitate a simultaneous unmaking and a re-making of the subject, in the face of this demand—rather than pre-existing (and mastering) documentary remains, the human subject is a *consequence* of this encounter. In other words, the documentary encounter could be defined as an unanticipated incidence of struggle between human subject and

⁷⁵ Both 'contingent' and 'aleatory' connote this sort of chance element (and indeed, Althusser uses both, although he ultimately prefers aleatory). Unlike 'aleatory,' however, 'contingent' has a secondary connotation—suggesting the touch of two objects in mutual confrontation—that makes it doubly suited to my interest in the meeting of object and human.

⁷⁶ Louis Althusser, 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,' *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87* (London: Verso, 2006), 174.

recalcitrant object, which threatens the subject and ultimately catalyzes unanticipated behaviors on the part of that subject.

Ritualizing disappearance

A Certain Kind of Death ends with two final acts of mortuary bureaucracy: cremation and burial of the anonymous dead. By this point, the LA County Coroner's Office has exhausted all possible leads. Those who make it this far are unburdened by worldly possessions or familial ties. Their personal effects have been sold; they have no next of kin; their homes have been emptied, sanitized, and made available for new occupants. There is only one last thing: disposition of the corpse itself.

Having complied with its responsibilities, the Coroner's Office hands Ronald Tanner's body over to the County Morgue. Inside the morgue, we see city employees marching through each stage of the process: drain the body of blood and other fluids. Cut away the bundle of clothing accompanying the deceased. Put the clothes in a bin designated for hazardous waste. Rewrap the body in a plastic sheet, and tie cotton rope at several points along its length. Add it to the growing pile waiting for pickup. Verify that the right bodies have been chosen. Have another city employee do the same. Load the van for transport to the crematorium.

Day and night, the LA County crematorium's three ovens reduce flesh and bone into ash. The bodies are loaded, one by one, into cardboard boxes, then pushed into the ovens like loaves of bread. Even before the oven doors have fully closed, we can see the cardboard box engulfed in flames. Minutes later, the oven doors open. Except for a few

shattered bone fragments almost everything is gone. But some contours are still recognizable: eye sockets, the curvature of a brow, the empty hole in the shape of a nose. The skull is surprisingly intact (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3.

And then, in a matter of seconds, a city employee obliterates the skull with a metal instrument (Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.4.

It starts to become clear that the city is playing a very strange sort of game with these remains. The game involves reducing the corpse to its smallest constitutive part without erasing it entirely. Make the corpse *almost* disappear. Even after cremation, there still seems to be too much left over. Amidst the grains of ash are bigger shards of bone. Everything that has been extracted from the oven is now poured into a sort of body blender, a machine that pulverizes the steaming fragments into one tidy pile of dust. With

a small brush, the city worker meticulously pushes every possible grain into a small metal box. Once sealed, this box makes its way into a sort of library of cremated remains. It sits on a shelf, marked with the year of death, and awaits its final disposition.

After a period of at least two years, the city will finally get to this shelf, this box. On one day in December, they will bury all the unclaimed dead from a previous year. They will mark a white rectangle on green grass, and with a mechanical shovel they will dig a deep hole inside that rectangle. Between 1,500 and 2,000 metal boxes will be emptied into the hole.

The city employees who carry out the burial are dressed for the occasion. They wear white hazardous material suits, safety goggles, latex gloves, face masks, and shower caps. They dump the first three boxes. Immediately a white cloud billows from inside the grave. As they continue their work the cloud engulfs them. So much ceremony. So much precaution. So much regimentation. Such a need to hang onto the smallest unit of matter. *And most of it dissipates into the air before the grave is sealed* (Figure 1.5).



Figure 1.5.

We have arrived at the crux of the matter: death demands a series of ritual acts that are precipitated by an increasingly impoverished materiality. The objective is posthumous dispersal—of belongings, of relations, and finally, of the body itself. Paradoxically, the city ritually marks each stage of disappearance with a remainder. Intractability and disappearance. Loss and remains. Preservation and disintegration. Such is the play that governs the documentary encounter.

**Chapter 2: Yes, There Is a Joseph Wagenbach:
History and the performativity of what might be true**

Part 1: The Encounter.

‘But where does the outside commence? This question is the question of the archive. There are undoubtedly no others.’⁷⁷

For three months in 2006 the only indication that there was something amiss inside the modest house at 105 Robinson Street, Toronto, was the white wooden sign posted outside it: ‘Municipal Archives Assessment Unit’, it read. ‘All visitors please report to field office’ (Figure 2.1). Inside the field office, a small outbuilding attached to one side of the house, visitors encountered a woman dressed in a white lab coat. This woman introduced herself as Iris Häussler, Head Archivist of the Wagenbach Legacy Assessment. She explained that until recently the artist Joseph Wagenbach lived here, alone, until he suffered a stroke and was discovered several weeks later, disoriented and disheveled. After relocating Wagenbach to a Toronto nursing home, where he continued to live, city officials determined that Wagenbach, his house and his life ‘comprised an as yet to be determined cultural value’⁷⁸ and appointed the Municipal Archives to determine precisely what, if anything, could be of value in the house.

⁷⁷ Derrida, 8.

⁷⁸ Häussler, Iris. *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, www.haeussler.ca/legacy. Accessed 10 June 2009.



Figure 2.1. Outside 105 Robinson Street, Toronto.

If visitors happened upon this small house, Häussler or a member of her research team would ask them to put on lab coats over their clothes and latex gloves over their hands, then would invite them to pick their way through Wagenbach's private space.

Apart from a few small changes—the smell, the guide might mention, was much improved since the fire department came and rid the place of must and expired food⁷⁹—visitors were greeted by Wagenbach's house as he had left it. Inside the cramped quarters they encountered the accumulated detritus of an absent life. The place, like most houses, was encrusted with all the activities that had been regularly performed there; it was a historical space, weighted down with the past that crowded it.

What follows here is an elaboration of the tour that was offered to the Toronto public, free of charge, between 22 August and 12 November 2006. It is derived primarily from the virtual tour of the house, viewable on *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* project website.⁸⁰ The virtual tour approximates, but does not replicate, the tour one would have taken had one visited the house in 2006 (I myself never had that privilege). While I recognize the inability of any of us to return to the original space of such an experience or to recapture the sensory impulses of being present on that tour, I simultaneously intend to explore the generative possibilities of imagining the house of Joseph Wagenbach via the documentation available to us. I take as a point of departure Amelia Jones's contention that the event of performance 'should not be privileged over the specificity of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event.'⁸¹ I wish to explore the ways in which the event and its documentary traces exist together in a productive tension. In this sense, the virtual tour helps us to consider a major theme of the

⁷⁹ Häussler, Iris. 'Documentation of tour.' *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, video, 2006.

⁸⁰ Häussler, www.haeussler.ca/legacy. Accessed 10 June 2009.

⁸¹ Jones, 12.

Wagenbach project as a whole: the possibilities and pitfalls in constructing any history via the detritus that remains in the wake of an event.

Thus, what you will read here is something of a virtual tour of a virtual tour, which makes no pretence to authentic reportage but is more like a performance of documentation itself. As we tour this house, several degrees removed from its period of initial exhibition, I will reconstruct *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* and the public uproar that erupted in Toronto midway through the project's exhibition. In producing a history of a project that is, in many ways, about the impulse to write history, I will offer up a version of events that is imperfect and speculative but nonetheless functional. In doing so, I wish to draw out the historiographical performances at the heart of *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, performances that simultaneously address and undermine the primordial site of historical knowledge production in Western modernity—the archive. As I stated in Chapter 1, the archive is a site where the documentary remains of events are not only housed but also interpreted. While *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* performs the archive's legislative office, at the same time it throws the archive, and the history it produces, into question. In particular, it invites us to consider documentary remains not in terms of their facticity—their ability to testify to a past occurrence—but rather in terms of their efficacy—their ability to catalyse hitherto unanticipated experiences.

In the previous chapter, I defined the documentary encounter as 'an unanticipated incidence of struggle between human subject and recalcitrant object, which threatens the subject and ultimately catalyzes unanticipated behaviors on the part of that subject.' This

chapter is dedicated to an exploration of such ‘unanticipated behaviors’ and the histories that they generate. That is to say, as members of the public pick their way through Wagenbach’s private space and encounter the remains of his absent life, they begin to produce a collectively-generated, contradictory historiography of what-might-have-been. This is a history that we might call *performative*, a form of historical belief that may or may not be true, but if authorized in a felicitous context, precipitates a whole host of future actions.⁸²

1.1. The living room.

And so we begin. Clad in our white coats, we pass through the front door into the living room, the first stop on our tour. We see a battered sofa that does not invite sitters, a table lamp, and all the other accoutrements typical of such a simple dwelling. Almost immediately, however, we start to notice that this is, in fact, a most unusual house. Scattered throughout the room is a veritable army of sculptures; atop a wooden box, lying on its side, is a creature made of grey cement that resembles a small dog or an earless rabbit (Fig. 2.2). It lies as if asleep or dead. A closer look reveals a cream-colored string tied in a delicate bow around its neck, hanging from which is an identifying tag that reads ‘Assessment—Joseph Wagenbach’. A strange sort of specimen, surely.

⁸² See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1965.



Figure 2.2.

But as we continue examining this room, it becomes apparent that there is much more than this little creature that is of interest to the Head Archivist and her Legacy Assessment. Standing in corners, resting on every surface, and spilling from drawers are sculptures—many, many sculptures. (Fig. 2.3) In curvy, undulating shapes, their dimpled surfaces suggesting dermatological imperfections and geological phenomena, these disconcerting lumps crowd and squeeze the otherwise neutral space. They trim the doorjambs, like talismans or ropes of garlic meant to ward off otherworldly intruders. Some of the sculptures look as if they are growing some sort of mold or vegetative

material. With their primitive aspect, these organic figures seem to have lives of their own.



Figure 2.3. The living room.

Immediately we are filled with the urge to identify and categorize this stuff. What are these things? Where did they come from? What kind of person would live like this? Faced with so many questions, we find ourselves acting out the archival impulse that, many have argued, constitutes one of the defining characteristics of modernity.⁸³ Like our guide, we feel the thrill of archeological promise and the solemn responsibility of such a

⁸³ Nora (1989), Foucault (1986), Hyussen (2003), Derrida (1995). See Chapter 1 for further discussion of the relationship between modernity and the archival impulse.

task. Perhaps most importantly, we begin to appreciate the great power that the Municipal Archives wield in this process of making sense out of this accumulation of old crap.

In the following pages, I wish to consider *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* and the house in which it was staged as an archival, that is to say historiographical, space. During the three months it was open to the public, *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* was exhibited in two distinct phases. Some visitors only experienced the project's first phase, some the second; the luckiest had the privilege of experiencing both. In an effort to echo the double nature of the project, and to allow these two phases their due as well as to re-evaluate them in cooperation with one another, this chapter is similarly broken up into two parts. 'Part One: The Encounter' charts *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*'s mimicry of the archive's conventional processes of legitimization, through which documentary remains are designated as worthy of inclusion or exclusion. It demonstrates how *The Legacy* project is paradigmatic of the archive's juridical role in the Western imaginary, and the intimacy of political power with the knowledge the archive supposedly protects. This legislating force designates what can and cannot be considered to be proper historical knowledge. As many theorists have argued, the archive maintains itself, and our notion of 'proper history', via repeated acts of inclusion and exclusion, by designating and policing a boundary between inside and outside, legitimate and illegitimate, trash and treasure.⁸⁴ Joseph Wagenbach, as a potentially archivable historical figure, sits precariously astride this threshold.

⁸⁴ See Derrida (1995), Mansfield (1995), Schneider (2001), Taylor (2003).

‘Part Two: The Reveal,’⁸⁵ then explores how in the project’s second phase of exhibition, the Wagenbach house turned archival logic on its head, and became a most *improper* site of historical knowledge production. Examining the historiographical performances in which visitors participated, I argue that visitors’ encounters with Wagenbach’s material traces catalyzed seemingly spurious and illegitimate pasts that are repudiated by conventional archival practice. In particular, I argue that *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* precipitates a documentary encounter with history that is not predicated on representation (narrating the past ‘as it was’), but rather on enactment (experiencing the past in the present). This shift, I argue, is crucially dependent on what I call the *performativity of belief*, i.e. the generative consequences of believing in the truth of a given historical event. In analyzing the catalytic capacities of belief, I argue for a notion of historical understanding that sidesteps a tidy fact/fiction divide, and draw attention to the material effects of belief in what *might* be true about the past.

1.2. The kitchen.

Passing into Wagenbach’s narrow little kitchen, the first things we notice are the hanging sculptures (Fig. 2.4). Suspended from black wires, bulbous brown forms dangle like sides of beef. Their grotesque appearance reminds us of the abjection of spoiled food, of growing mold, of the congealed detritus of a meal that clings to a dinner plate. Across the kitchen counters we can see yet more sculptures.

⁸⁵ I use the term ‘reveal’ rather than ‘revelation’ deliberately; while ‘revelation’ is the more commonly recognized noun, ‘reveal’ is the term used by Iris Häussler to describe this phase of the project, and so I have decided to adopt it for the sake of accuracy.



Figure 2.4. The kitchen.

Faced with this sculptural takeover, we might feel that there is something compulsive about this artist's practice, that he creates because something inside him makes him do it, like a serial killer who cannot apologize for his crimes because, after all, his mind was not his own. And yet, there are signs of normalcy here. We open a cupboard to find neatly stacked, if seriously aged, canned goods. A roll of paper towels hangs on the wall, strung on a makeshift holder formed with a bit of wire. Kitchen utensils lie in drawers. This oscillation between the absolute banality of this place and its singular pathology reminds us that in order for a place to be disturbing, it must still be able to reference its original function (Freud knew this when he wrote that the uncanny is

a powerfully unsettling experience of being at home and not being at home, at the same time, ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.’)⁸⁶ Thus, the kitchen is strange by virtue of the fact that we know that it is still a kitchen, albeit one populated by the wrong sort of stuff. We judge Wagenbach for his disorder—who lives like this?—but the continued recognizability of the kitchen as a lived space lends pathos to our faint mental sketch of him. In giving over his kitchen to a new purpose, he seems a man who directed all his energy toward care for his art, rather than for himself.

Looking around at the unholy mess that Joseph Wagenbach has left behind, it is difficult to think of this house as archival in any proper sense. Is this house—indeed, is any house—an archive? The archive aspires, after all, to order, categorization, naming; given the indiscriminate overabundance of stuff that populates the house, we might be inclined to think of this space as resolutely *anarchic*.⁸⁷ However, if Jacques Derrida is right, the relationship between house and archive is both a metaphorical *and* a historical one. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida describes the oldest archive in Western civilization. In ancient Greece, the archive’s guardians were the *archons*, magistrates charged with keeping guard over its contents. Traditionally, documents were kept in the archons’ own

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*. 1919 (New York: Penguin, 2003) 124. Freud states that only in the German is the true meaning of ‘the uncanny’ graspable. In German, the root of the word *unheimlich*, *heim-*, means ‘house;’ as Freud writes, the term *heimlich* can be defined as both ‘belonging to the house’ and ‘not strange.’ Here we have the conventional association between home and familiarity—the house is supposed to be the space of a well-worn security which grounds us in everyday life. To Freud, the uncanny terrifies us precisely because it renders the unfamiliar strange, but not unrecognizable—there are traces of the known in the unknown. With the slightest of shifts, *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*, and we are not at home in our own home. Therefore, the haunted house is ‘perhaps the most potent’ possible example of uncanniness. (148).

⁸⁷ See Chapter 3 for an extended analysis of the relationship between anarchy and archive.

homes, quite literally housed—lived with, protected, sheltered from public life. This process of ‘domiciliation,’ as Derrida calls it, involves the imprisonment of documents in the name of the law, what he calls a form of ‘house arrest.’ In other words, if to live in a home is also to impose one’s particular form of order on it, one’s particular law, we can see how the act of domiciliation is one of *domesticating* the archive’s contents, in a disciplinary sense. There *is*, after all, an organizing principle in this house. What may seem like a pell-mell way of living has conformed to Wagenbach’s archival proclivities.

1.3. Archive, Empire, and the Western Historical Imaginary.

The archive has always been a juridical space, a site of epistemological legislation, determining what constitutes proper historical knowledge. Derrida tells us that the archons’ office enabled them to determine not only what the archive held, but also what it *meant*:

The archons are first of all the document’s guardians. They not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives.⁸⁸

For Derrida, the archons’ primary task—that of guardianship—facilitates a deeper purpose: the production of knowledge itself. Archontic power signals to us that the housing of documents is not value-neutral, but rather is always a political act, in which the gathering together of documents in a particular place—what Derrida calls

⁸⁸ Derrida, 2.

‘consignation’, a ‘gathering together [of] signs’—involves the symbiotic interweaving of power with knowledge, and of signification with materiality.

As Derrida puts it, ‘there is no political power without control of the archive.’⁸⁹ In order to think through the intimacy of archive with political power, let us visit another archive which, like Wagenbach’s house, is marked by a seemingly overwhelming indiscriminacy. I first came across the case of the Geniza in Amitav Ghosh’s ethno-autobiography *In An Antique Land*. Located inside the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo, Egypt, the Geniza was a repository for all the documents, large and small, official and banal, of centuries of Jewish tradition. Filling a space two stories high, it ‘was a place where the members of the congregation would throw all the papers in their possession, including letters, bills, contracts, poems, marriage deeds, and so on. [...] These bits and pieces were thrown haphazardly into the Geniza, and over the centuries the people who occasionally cast their hands into the chamber disarranged them even more.’⁹⁰

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Geniza’s documents began to be pilfered by merchants and scholars who anticipated their potential value on an international market. Ghosh narrates how one Cambridge University scholar, Dr. Solomon Schechter, was particularly instrumental in the dispersal of the Geniza’s contents. Upon receipt of what appeared to be a fragment of the book of Ecclesiasticus in the original Hebrew, Schechter traveled to Egypt, armed with a letter of introduction from the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge. With the whole of British colonial might

⁸⁹ Ibid, 4.

⁹⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler’s Tale* (New York: Vintage, 1992) 94.

behind it, this letter ‘was no mere piece of embossed stationery: it was the backroom equivalent of an imperial edict.’⁹¹ The colonial authorities gave Schechter carte blanche to ‘remove everything he wanted from the Geniza, every last paper and parchment, without condition or payment.’⁹² Within a few short years, the Geniza had been hollowed out and dispersed to the West, its contents making up the special collections of the libraries of Europe and the Americas.

The Geniza’s fate reminds us that the European colonial project was an intellectual as much as a military, religious or economic one; when the merchants, soldiers, priests, and government officials began to infiltrate the Middle East, so too did the scholars. In particular, the British Empire distinguished itself by investing hugely in forms of conquest that were markedly intellectual in character, and was ‘more productive of knowledge than any previous empire in history.’⁹³ For Thomas Richards, the British pursuit of knowledge was not merely subsidiary to the imperial projects of military or economic conquest; rather, knowledge *surpassed* these goals, and figured ‘not as the supplement of power but as its replacement in the colonial world.’⁹⁴

Here, the archive emerges not only as a site for the scholarly justification of conquest, but also for the constitution of an imperial imaginary. Rather than a value-neutral repository of historical remains, the archive becomes, in Irit Rogoff’s words, a ‘purveyor of Imperialist fictions,’⁹⁵ or as Richards describes it, ‘a fantasy of knowledge

⁹¹ Ibid, 91.

⁹² *ibid*, 92.

⁹³ Richards, 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

⁹⁵ Rogoff, 674.

collected and united in the service of state and Empire.⁹⁶ One of the chief fictions of the imperial archive was its aspiration to a cohesion that was impossible in actuality. The unsustainable goal of *actually* encompassing the whole world under the banner of the British Empire was realized *fantastically*, through the archive. Thus, ‘the archive was not a building, or even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledge of metropolis and empire.’⁹⁷

Underlying this kind of imperialist appropriation of the archive is the paternalism of imperialism itself. For Ghosh, ‘the irony is that for the most part they [the Geniza’s contents] went to countries which would have long since destroyed the Geniza had it been a part of their own history. Now it was Masr [Cairo], which had sustained the Geniza for almost a millennium, that was left with no trace of its riches: not a single scrap or shred of paper to remind her of that aspect of her past.’⁹⁸ Paradoxically, the notion that colonial powers are best equipped to be the stewards of history has ensured the simultaneous preservation and decimation of the pasts of its colonial subjects.

It may not seem that the woman in the white lab coat standing in the kitchen of a little house in central Toronto would have anything to do with a British colonial magistrate in 19th century Cairo or, for that matter, the archons of ancient Greece. However, whether she knows it or not, our officious tour guide’s task is inextricable from the intimacies of archive and empire. Tasked with the

⁹⁶ Richards, 6.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁹⁸ Ghosh, 95.

assessment of Wagenbach's archival worth, our Head Archivist is complicit with the state's long archival reach. Häussler and her team carry out the municipal cooptation of whatever of Wagenbach's biographical detritus might serve the interests of the powers that be. Wagenbach, a debilitated, impoverished immigrant, has as little say in this process as the subjects of colonial Egypt.

1.4. Wagenbach and the Art Historical Archive.

Exiting the kitchen, we encounter a sort of alcove space fitted with a desk and chair. More signs of creative enterprise here: several smaller sculptures crowd the desk's surface, while hastily drawn sketches compete with each other on the walls. In one corner we see a stack of 1970s pornography, and our tour guide speculates that perhaps Wagenbach compensated for a lack of a live model by sketching from the pages of dirty magazines. We start to notice that this house is riddled with clichés about artistic genius that are foundational to Western art history: the artist is resolutely individualist, misogynist, tortured, reclusive, obsessive, and naturally gifted.

And then we pass into the room that the Head Archivist has dubbed the 'White Cube', and we see the crystallization of this man's relationship to art history at work. The White Cube is a sunroom at the back of the house, small and square in dimension. Suffused with natural light from the windows at its back, the walls and ceiling paneled with sections of white-painted cardboard, the White Cube glows with a cleanliness that sets it apart from the rest of Wagenbach's bric-a-brac house. Absent is the confluence of making and living that marks the other rooms. Instead, the White Cube has given itself

over to the logic of display. The sculptures are meticulously arranged on makeshift plinths so as to facilitate visibility, the taller pieces at the back (Fig. 2.5).



Figure 2.5.

The din of the sculptural chaos in the other rooms quiets here. We can focus our attention on particular pieces, separate them out from the quagmire (Fig. 2.6).



Figure 2.6.

The curatorial act that has arranged this space for us, the choice of elevating some sculptures onto plinths and not others, of selecting some works for display, makes explicit the process of historical legitimation in which we are participating. It is as if Wagenbach has anticipated our entry, and cheekily (or earnestly) facilitated the assessment process. Here, our tour guide morphs into a kind of museum guide, steering our interpretations of these objects in a more explicitly art historical vein. Directing our attention to sculptures that she has singled out as ‘significant’ in Wagenbach’s oeuvre, she reminds us of the institutional authority that frames our encounter by referring to an

anonymous team of researchers, represented by an amorphous ‘we’: ‘we see a lot of things, you know, in relation to, what we think, Brancusi, Flanagan, we even think Giacometti, just things you get in mind’, she says. This ‘we’ suggests that the art historical archons have already been at work here, locating Wagenbach’s art practice in a possible web of genealogical affiliation, of association with artists—Brancusi, Flanagan, Giacometti—with whom art history is already on a last-name basis. At the same time, the tour guide reminds us that Wagenbach’s place in an art historical pantheon is far from assured: ‘it’s not confirmed, and also it can be just classified as garbage. There is no judgment so far’.⁹⁹

The tour guide’s statement reminds us that one of the constitutive objectives of the archive is to append value. The archive maintains itself by performing an ongoing legislation of the boundary between trash and treasure. *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* project website makes this process of archival value judgment explicit:

As is usual, Public Guardians and Trustees entered the house for assessment and disposal, however it was discovered that the environment *may comprise an as yet to be determined cultural value.*

[...]

Due to its *potential significance*, it was decided by the Board of Trustees to conduct this as an Open Assessment for a limited time, in which visitors were allowed *limited access* to the site,

--in order to raise awareness of a structured process of legacy assessment,

⁹⁹ Häussler, Iris. ‘Documentation of tour’, *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. Video, 2006.

- to allow public participation in the decision making process of custodians of public interests,
- to facilitate a first-hand atmospheric experience of this environment,
- and to solicit additional biographic or other factual information about Joseph Wagenbach and the background and context of his work.¹⁰⁰

In staging the process of historical valuation for potential visitors, the White Cube also stages one of the founding questions of *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* as a whole, the artistic equivalent of the old ‘If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it...’ adage: if the work is produced in secret, is it art? As quickly as she suggests that Wagenbach may, indeed, be legitimated by the genealogies of influence that govern proper art history, the tour guide undermines this thesis by suggesting that ‘He was not an artist, actually, because he never exhibited, he was never recognized by his peers, he lived very reclusive, no one knew about this.’¹⁰¹ Implied in her statement is the conventional wisdom that for an artist to be considered worthy of art historical notice, he must, above all, have made the transition from private to public life. Wagenbach’s activities can only move from hobby/obsession to art practice if we can establish a record of public exhibitions and recognition by a group of ‘peers’, i.e. a select group of similarly respected artists. In short, the White Cube architecturally literalizes the quandary of Wagenbach’s potential inclusion in or exclusion from art history.

¹⁰⁰ Iris Häussler, ‘*The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach: The Archivist’s View.*’ Web. <http://www.haeussler.ca/legacy/archivist.html>. Accessed 18 June 2009. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰¹ Häussler, Iris. ‘Documentation of tour.’ *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. Video, 2006.

Wagenbach's artistic isolation—'he never exhibited, he was never recognized by his peers, he lived very reclusive, no one knew about this'—inhibits our ability to take Wagenbach seriously as an artist in the conventional Western sense. Ironically, however, his shut-in status simultaneously offers him up as a prime candidate for the title of 'Outsider Artist.' Outsider Art is an art historical genre that refers to work created in isolation from institutional artistic channels, and which would be considered, by the standards of traditional Western art, to be second-rate and unworthy of notice (yet, paradoxically, ripe for attention from an enterprising curator or collector)—precisely the kind of artmaking in which Wagenbach is engaged. At any given time, representatives of Outsider Art can be located in a multitude of other artistic genres, which James Elkins has enumerated in the following gasp-inducing list: 'Naïve Art, *Art Brut*, Raw Art, Grassroots Art, 'Primitive Art', Self-taught Art, Psychotic Art, Autistic Art, Intuitive Art, Vernacular Art, Folk Art, contemporary Folk Art, non-traditional Folk Art, Mediumistic Art, and Marginal Art.'¹⁰² Since Roger Cardinal imported the category of Outsider Art from Europe in the 1970s,¹⁰³ it has developed into a legitimate art historical category,

¹⁰² James Elkins, 'Naïf, Faux-Naifs, Faux Faux-Naifs, Would-Be Faux-Naifs: There Is No Such Thing As Outsider Art', *Inner Worlds Outside* exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Fundacion 'La Caixa,' Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art; London: Whitechapel Gallery 2006) 71.

¹⁰³ In its European configuration, 'Outsider Art' is known as 'Art Brut'—literally meaning 'raw', or 'uncooked' art—a term that was coined by French artist Jean Dubuffet in the mid-1940s. In 1972, art critic Roger Cardinal imported Art Brut to North America, calling it 'Outsider Art', presumably because the phrase was more evocative to an English-speaking audience. While the two terms have particular nuances, they are also frequently used interchangeably to refer to a multitude of art practices. I have elected to use the term 'Outsider Art' because it signals my chief preoccupation with the genre, i.e. the identification and preservation of a definable boundary between institutional (insider) and marginal (outsider) art practices.

with a vast bibliography of critical attention, frequent exhibitions of work by its chief practitioners, several major museums, and an annual Outsider Art Fair in New York.¹⁰⁴

Traditionally, the Outsider Artist satisfies a very particular set of biographical criteria that signals the genre's emphasis on a symbiotic interweaving of life and art; the 'true' Outsider Artist is untrained or self-taught, marginalized from society (living in either self- or societally-imposed isolation, such as a prison or mental hospital), frequently displays obsessive or mentally unstable tendencies, and develops a unique aesthetic across a vast and coherent body of artwork. In particular, the Outsider Artist could never self-identify as such, as the adoption of the Outsider Artist label would signal an awareness of the 'inside' of the art world, and a subsequent betrayal of his 'outsider' status. Therefore, Outsider Art sustains itself by policing the boundary between inside and outside on which it depends, with the 'insiders'—critics, collectors, curators, and educated artists—identifying and making use of the 'outsiders'. One of the many paradoxes dogging the genre is that its existence as a coherent category of art-making facilitates its entrée into conventional art channels, while trying to insist on the radical opposition of its chief practitioners to such channels.

We can see such a defense of the Outsider Artist's idiosyncrasy in the writings of Roger Cardinal, the art critic who gave Outsider Art its name in 1972:

¹⁰⁴ We can see the legitimization of Outsider Art as a bounded and legible art movement in the creation of museums dedicated wholly to its preservation and promotion. For example, Intuit: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art is a collecting museum in Chicago, Illinois, dedicated to 'promoting public awareness, understanding, and appreciation of intuitive and outsider art;' the American Visionary Art Museum, located in Baltimore, Maryland, is 'America's official national museum and education center for intuitive, self-taught artistry;' the Collection de L'Art Brut in Lausanne, Switzerland holds the collection of Art Brut proponent Jean Dubuffet.

Outsider Art is congenitally resistant to codification. All we can say about it is that its practitioners tend to be ferociously independent and that their life-work takes on an impressive amplitude and consistency. In other respects, the history of the field is one of continual surprise. We are consistently finding new art which undeniably deserves to be included in the canon, yet which is awkward, ambiguous, or downright indigestible. [...] Nothing could less resemble a disciplined movement or group style than Outsider Art.¹⁰⁵

In this passage, Cardinal's logic becomes so glaringly circular as to be comedic. On the one hand, Outsider Artists are distinguished by an inimitable idiosyncrasy; they are 'ferociously independent,' 'resistant to codification,' 'awkward, ambiguous, or downright indigestible.' On the other, such eccentricity is somehow sufficiently recognizable as to be included into 'the canon,' such that uniqueness is quite happily (yet inexplicably) 'cogenital,' handed down from one isolated artist to another. In other words, Outsider Art's coherence can be found in the utter peculiarity of its practitioners!

Outsider Art depends on the preservation of a traditional, exclusionary art history against which it can position itself—the outside needs the inside in order to exist. However, given its founding insistence, on the one hand, that its practitioners all operate in relative (ideally total) isolation from institutionalized channels of art education, production, exhibition, and commerce (as well as one another, thereby forming a group

¹⁰⁵ Roger Cardinal, 'Worlds Within', *Inner Worlds Outside*. (Madrid: Fundacion 'La Caixa'; Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art; London: Whitechapel Gallery 2006), 20.

that holds in common the fact that they have nothing in common) and on the other hand, its steady development as a movement that strives for inclusion in the worlds of art history and the art market, Outsider Art's existence as a tenable category of art-making confounds the divide between inside and outside on which it is predicated.

In this sense, Outsider Art is most interesting as a symptom, and by-product, of Western art history's desires and limitations. One of the key manifestations of this symptomatic function lies in the attachment of many of the genre's proponents to the Outsider Artist's supposed spontaneity, clarity of vision, and abiding engagement with his inner self. For the Outsider Artist, the creative act is a traversal of a vast interior landscape, sequestered from the concerns of the world at large. By plumbing the depths of the soul, the best Outsider Art demonstrates the visual realization of the artist's individual psyche: 'the self-taught artist most likely to impress will be the one who learns to transmit undiluted individualism across a corpus of distinctive, sharply wrought pieces.'¹⁰⁶

The outcast becomes the paradigm: the Outsider Artist comes to stand in for some of the most cherished aspirations in Western culture regarding art and creativity. In a culture that prizes the individual over the collective, the Outsider Artist reifies the belief in 'great art' as created by a select few, spontaneously gifted individuals whose unique gifts are rendered all the more pure by isolation from the contaminants of public life. Just as the archive emerges out of the Enlightenment imperialist fantasy, so too does the

¹⁰⁶ Roger Cardinal, 'The Self in Self-Taught Art.' *Self-Taught Art: The Culture and Aesthetics of American Vernacular Art*. Charles Russell, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) 77.

Outsider Artist. Linda Nochlin identifies this figure as a byproduct of the Western ideal of ‘the apparently miraculous, nondetermined, and asocial nature of artistic achievement; this semireligious conception of the artist’s role is elevated to hagiography in the nineteenth century, when art historians, critics, and, not least, some of the artists themselves tended to elevate the making of art into a substitute religion, the last bulwark of higher values in a materialistic world.’¹⁰⁷

1.5. But where does the outside commence?

The question at the heart of *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, ‘Is any part of this man’s life worth saving?’, is crystallized in the figure of the Outsider Artist, enabling us to see how central the issue of the archival boundary dividing inside from outside is to our understanding of the archive, and to the history that emerges from it. As an ideologically motivated entity, the archive demonstrates how the preservation of material remains, and the subsequent historical knowledge such remains engender, are subject to racial, economic, and gendered hierarchies: in the archive, marginal peoples receive marginal treatment. These kinds of hierarchies—where preservation of material objects depends on an individual’s social and cultural capital—are evident in what historian Howard Mansfield calls ‘The Wedding Dress Problem’: ‘Historical societies and house museums have many wedding dresses, but who saved the workday clothes?’¹⁰⁸ In a related vein, performance theorist Diana Taylor sees the archive as representative of

¹⁰⁷ Linda Nochlin, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ *Women, Art, And Power And Other Essays*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 155.

¹⁰⁸ Mansfield, Howard. *In the Memory House*. (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1993) 7.

Western colonial tyranny as a whole, which, in its emphasis on written documentary material, has reproduced the exclusion of indigenous peoples from history. In other words, for people whose cultures were preserved not through writing but through oral and performative modes, the archive produced their epistemological erasure in a manner that mirrored their physical and social extermination.

While Taylor is concerned mainly with the exclusion of indigenous people from the archive, her work is indebted in part to the culture wars of the late 20th century, which found their expression in debates about the politics of archival inclusion from any number of minoritarian quarters—Marxist, postcolonial, queer, etc. It is not merely coincidental that while such groups were banging on the doors of the archive, there was a contemporaneous dissolution of the very boundary of inside and outside that marked the archive's point of entry. The late 20th century witnessed the breakdown of binary divisions of all sorts—inside/outside, public/private, nature/culture, personal/political, and so on. The breakdown of interiority marked by the transition to neo-liberal financial capitalism¹⁰⁹ finds expression in the desire to hold on to an 'outside' to art while at the same time preparing that 'outside' for its debut on the global market. In the case of Outsider Art's categorical legitimation, we see global capital's subsumption of all exteriority. In the face of this subsumption, Derrida's question, 'Where does the outside commence?', takes on a deeper and more distressing untenability.

¹⁰⁹ See Chapter 1's discussion of the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control.

Part Two: The Reveal.

‘The pursuit of performance does not require historians to abandon the archive, but it does encourage them to spend more time in the streets.’¹¹⁰

2.1. Archival Performance.

In Chapter 1, I discussed how the documentary encounter’s contingent nature is symptomatic of the increased volatility of material remains in our contemporary moment. Specifically, I described how ‘extant archival practices’ have not sufficiently attended to the archive’s ‘back doors and exits, its failures and losses.’ If Wagenbach’s indeterminate status as an archivable figure can tell us anything, it’s that the archive’s legitimating role in determining proper historical knowledge through the housing of material remains is full of weaknesses; the archival aspirations driving Western historiography are vulnerable. If the archive is exposed as a fantasy of empire, a sieve, a place that can no longer maintain a tenable boundary between inside and outside, then where does that leave us?

¹¹⁰ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xii.

I believe that this archival vulnerability constitutes an opportunity as much as a crisis. To undermine archival aspirations is to question the nature of historical knowledge, to reconfigure our interventions in the archive, and in particular, to re-think the nature and consequences of the most elemental moment of historiography—the human encounter with documentary remains. As we tour Joseph Wagenbach’s house, we are engaged in this process of encounter; we are invited to consider the writing of history that emerges from the archive as an event, with distinct spatio-temporal characteristics. In order to understand this event and what it makes possible for us, I wish to spend some time considering *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*’s relationship to performance, a word which suggests to us the bodily, temporally inflected nature of documentary encounter.

The tour of the Wagenbach home is the crux of the *Legacy* project, and it is on the tour that the experiential and multi-temporal characteristics of performance come to the fore. When we first enter *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, we encounter a space that exists at the *threshold* of the value judgment that forms the archival substrate. It is the chief question the Archival Assessment asks: what, if anything, deserves to be saved? From the wholesale disarray that is Joseph Wagenbach’s house, we are invited to begin to categorize, to name, and ultimately, to include or exclude Joseph Wagenbach in the archive. Our tour guide asks our complicity in this act: on one tour, the Head Archivist asks the group, ‘Does it have cultural value? Does it have financial value? Or does it just cost the city to bring it to the dump? This is the question. It’s an open question.’¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Häussler, Iris. ‘Documentation of tour.’ *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. Video, 2006.

When we assume the costume of the white lab coat, we consent to a participatory shift, moving from spectator to performer. We assume the role of honorary archival authority. On the one hand, there is an implied democratization of archival assessment, demystifying the process of valuation underpinning all archives. On the other, our encounter in Joseph Wagenbach's house is nonetheless mitigated by archival orthodoxy. On the tour, visitors are highly circumscribed; they are discouraged from moving freely throughout the space, touching objects or otherwise physically disturbing the house; their engagement with the objects they see is mediated through the discursive frame of the tour; and lastly, and perhaps most importantly, visitors' entry to the house is predicated on the selfsame archival authority that the project's invitation to public participation appears to undermine. We are reminded that archival inclusion applies to people as well as documents, that it is not only a question of *what* populates the archive, but also of *who* is allowed to access its content. No one crosses Wagenbach's threshold without the archivist's say-so; while we might be invited in, ultimately we are not free to do what we will with Wagenbach and his legacy.

Video documentation of the tours reveals the degree to which the tours were carefully devised, and combined elements of scripted and improvised material. Beginning with a team of two researchers (which eventually grew to ten as the project became a word-of-mouth success), Häussler, the head archivist, trained volunteer guides to lead visitors from room to room, pointing out key objects and speculating on their prospective value. During their training, tour guides were given a sort of 'skeleton' script

to work from, in which they were instructed to mention a number of central ‘facts.’ To quote from this script:

The minimal biographical data that should be mentioned is:

- born in 1929
- emigrated to Canada in 1962
- moved into this house in 1967
- lived here uninterrupted since then
- suffered a stroke in June of this year
- now unable to manage his own affairs or even communicate
- legacy needs to be assessed in terms of its possible cultural or artistic significance

As they made their way, tour guides would recruit visitors’ participation in this act, regularly asking them to add their own speculations to the growing pile of historical possibilities. Drawing from their reservoirs of expertise, visitors would generate all manner of associations, at times historical, cultural or autobiographical in nature. For example, when presented with the figure of the hare, which serves as one of the central motifs in Wagenbach’s work, and which could be seen repeatedly throughout the house, viewers made connections to everything from Joseph Beuys’s seminal 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* to films such as *Donnie Darko* and *Gummo*.¹¹² Or when faced with the suggestion that Wagenbach had received no formal training as an artist, visitors brought up famous ‘outsider artists’ like Henry Darger. Still others

¹¹² Häussler, Iris. ‘Documentation of tour.’ *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. Video, 2006.

commented on Wagenbach's hoarding tendencies, perhaps best exemplified in the lives of the Collyer brothers, two New York shut-ins who were crushed to death by their own belongings in 1947.¹¹³ Visitors to the house seemed full of stories of people—mothers, uncles, neighbours, friends, who'd 'lived like this' (one visitor worried in the guest book that 'it freaks me out a bit as I've been catching myself becoming somewhat of a recluse').¹¹⁴

Precipitated in the moment of archival encounter, these sorts of improvised proto-historiographical utterances encourage us to consider the way that acts of history-making necessarily involve encounters not only between people and things, but between cooperating and/or conflicting times. Visitors to the Wagenbach house arrive with their own bodily archives in operation, storehouses of memories that are provoked as they speculate on Wagenbach's life and fate. Here, we have the repeated experience of simultaneous individuated memories colliding with one another. It's an occasion to see the way in which performance's historiographical potential is indebted to what Joseph Roach calls 'the abiding yet vexed affinities between performance and memory.'¹¹⁵

2.2. The antagonisms of performance and archive.

In Chapter One, I discussed the oft-repeated notion in performance studies of a supposedly antagonistic relationship between the document and performance, with the document predicated on preservation, and performance on disappearance. Such an

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Häussler, Iris. 'Project guest book.' *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. Consulted 12 June 2008.

¹¹⁵ Roach, 3.

opposition applies not only to documentary remains, but also to the archive that houses them; in Rebecca Schneider's estimation, the archive depends on a crude opposition between the 'bones' of documentary remains and the 'flesh' of the live, performing human body. As I mention in Chapter One, the archive cannot account for flesh, because it is due to disappear: 'the habit of the West is to privilege bones as index of a flesh that was once [...] Flesh itself, in our ongoing habituation to sight-able remains, supposedly cannot remain to signify 'once' (upon a time). [...] Here in the archive, bones are given to speak the disappearance of flesh, and to script that flesh as disappearing'.¹¹⁶ Such a fixation on the 'bones' of documentary remains to testify to the absent 'flesh' of live events has encouraged the notion 'that memory cannot be housed in a body and remain' and discredited forms of historical understanding such as 'oral storytelling, live recitation, repeated gesture and ritual enactment' that are not predicated on the evidentiary promise of the material document.¹¹⁷

Unlike those who maintain performance's ontological ephemerality, Diana Taylor, Rebecca Schneider, and Joseph Roach stand as thinkers for whom performance is precisely *not* subject to disappearance but rather is a practice through which knowledge of the past endures and is transmitted across communities and generations. For all three thinkers, the danger of the 'performance-as-disappearance' formulation is that it reifies the Western archive's obliteration of performance, and subsequently its patriarchal (for Schneider) and colonial (for Roach and Taylor) powers. If nothing remains in the wake

¹¹⁶ Schneider, *Performance Remains*, 104.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

of the event of performance, how is its power to be communicated to others? How does performance have any efficacy at all?

2.3. Memorial Performance.

If we return to Roach's notion of the 'vexed and abiding affinities between performance and memory,' we begin to see how the performing bodies that tour the Wagenbach home are themselves suffused with archival material. This is not to say that the performing body is an archive in the conventional Western sense (the body is not a sepulcher)—but rather that, as Schneider says, 'performance remains, but remains differently.'¹¹⁸ For Schneider, historical events are inscribed on and transmitted between the bodies of those in attendance through what she calls 'body-to-body transmission.'¹¹⁹ Similarly, Taylor argues that performance consists of an 'act of transfer' between performers and participants which is not archival per se, but nonetheless enables the communication and endurance of knowledge. This form of preserving knowledge through the embodied experiences of performance, which she calls 'the repertoire', therefore 'decenters the historic role of writing introduced by the Conquest [of the Americas]' and of which the archive is the chief representative. For Taylor, performance is an *episteme*, a legitimate site of knowledge production with distinct contours fundamentally different from those that underpin the archive.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 98.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 101.

¹²⁰ Taylor, 17.

Like Schneider and Taylor, for Roach past performances do remain and are continually being re-performed by communities engaged in commemorating their cultural pasts. These performances do not enable us to recall our culture or heritage ‘as it really was/is’; because memory is constituted by an unavoidable forgetting, this kind of restitution of an authentic past is impossible. This is not to say that forgetting renders memory ineffective; rather, memory works with and through forgetting. Therefore, Roach argues that performances of the past operate through what he terms ‘surrogation’, a process of substitution that becomes necessary in the face of mnemonic loss. This is a process of ‘auditioning stand-ins’, of ‘trying out various candidates’ that can offer themselves as ill-fitting but efficacious substitutes for the missing bodies and forgotten details of the past: ‘Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure [...] survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates’.¹²¹ This process of substitution is what, for Roach, explains the intimate relation between performance and memory: ‘Performance [...] stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and replace. Hence flourish the abiding yet vexed affinities between performance and memory.’¹²²

This emphasis on memory has multiple effects for reconfiguring historiography. First, it necessitates that we consider performance as a type of knowing imbedded in time. Above all, performance is an *event* which is suffused with liveness: ‘The artwork is alive. Such conditions, it seems, bring us as spectators into a fresh relation: into the now

¹²¹ Roach, 2-3.

¹²² Ibid, 3.

of enactment, the moment by moment of the present.’¹²³ Performance is a *doing*; performance is life as it happens (and makes future life happen). As a form of knowledge production, it is engaged not with the stasis of an artificially preserved past, but with the radical contingency of the past’s encounter with the present moment.

Here we can return to Peggy Phelan’s formulation that ‘performance’s only life is in the present.’ How can we reconcile this ontological ‘present-ness’ with Roach’s claim that performance is suffused with memory? While it may seem that performance’s existence in the present, as Phelan sees it, and its intimacy with memory, as Roach defines it, would be incompatible traits, this is only true if we believe that temporality involves the exclusion of the past from the present. However, if we believe Henri Bergson’s temporal formation that ‘we may speak of the body as an ever advancing boundary between the future and the past, as a pointed end, which our past is continually driving forward into our future’,¹²⁴ we can see how the embodied nature of both performance-as-event and performance-as-memory means that they are in fact cooperative traits of the same practice.

By maintaining the cacophony of artworks and objects in an immersive, domestic space, in its exhibited form *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* became less like an actual archive and more like the kind of artist’s museum, which, Häussler says, are plentiful in

¹²³ Heathfield, 8.

¹²⁴ Bergson, 88.

Europe but lacking in Toronto.¹²⁵ Writing in the guest book, visitors vehemently expressed their gratitude at being able to experience the Wagenbach legacy as a totality. Over and over again, visitors feared for the dispersal of the house's contents and begged that it be preserved in its entirety. One visitor proclaimed it 'a whole world, a cosmology'; another likened it to 'walking through someone's growing/decaying body'; and one visitor simply exhorted,

THIS HOUSE NEEDS TO BE CONSERVED IN THE EXACT WAY IT IS
RIGHT NOW!!! IF YOU CAN FIND SOMEONE TO PURCHASE THIS
HOUSE AND CONSERVE THE ARTWORK WITHIN -- THEY WILL MAKE
MILLIONS IF THEY CHARGE ADMITTANCE! PLEASE CONVERSE [sic]
THIS PROPERTY!.¹²⁶

This kind of impassioned public response also signals the ways in which the *Legacy* revealed a craving among the city's inhabitants for an encounter with history that was more haptic and open-ended than the archive or museum typically allows. While the tour encouraged the public's assistance in legislating one man's historical fate, it simultaneously offered visitors an opportunity to participate in an unfinished, preliminary historiographical foray. What emerged from this foray was a form of historical speculation—unconventional, contradictory, and even spurious—that sometimes informed, but many times resisted, the Municipal Archives' objective of affording Wagenbach a proper historical place. In the space left open by Wagenbach's absence—a

¹²⁵ Iris Häussler, personal interview. 11 December 2010.

¹²⁶ Iris, Häussler, 'Project guest book.' Häussler and Corvese would like to have kept *The Legacy* at 105 Robinson Street, but lack of funding made this impossible. The project currently lives on under the auspices of the Joseph Wagenbach Foundation: www.wagenbach.org.

space of collective contemplation populated by a fragmentary constellation of personal effects—an incipient and contradictory set of historiographical interpretations began to materialize. Visitors began to perform a kind of unverifiable yet meaningful history that the normative operations of the institutional archive must necessarily disavow.

If we consider performance with, and even in, the archive, we begin to see history rather differently. In performance as history, past, present, and future entwine. History gets repeated, but never replicated, through (re)enactment of the past. We begin to see how the performing body, so slippery and contingent, *is* a historical site, on and in which the past marks itself.

2.4. Archival fictions.



Figure 2.7.

We return to Wagenbach's kitchen, and notice another set of curious objects (Fig. 2.7). Hanging overhead from stretched cords are a series of once-clean white undershirts. These empty receptacles, missing their wearer, are the ultimate suggestions of what—or who, we should say—is absent from this scenario. In observing these hanging shirts—which are so much more evocative than folded laundry would be—we realize that we are witnessing belongings that never had an owner, clothing that never clad a body. For there is an element to *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* that I have previously neglected to mention, one that threatens to disqualify everything visitors have ever generated about

Joseph Wagenbach. What the public did not and could not know during the majority of those four months in 2006 is that

Iris Häussler, ‘Head Archivist,’ is an artist,
the house is her work,
and Joseph Wagenbach is the product of her imagination.

Häussler rented 105 Robinson Street, filled it with stuff and attributed it all to a reclusive German immigrant who never existed.

What happens to this story when we learn that Joseph Wagenbach is a fiction? Do the traces populating the little house lose their aura? Does this become just another story, a childish pack of lies meant to trick an unwitting public? Is there something indecent about inventing a man out of thin air and forcing us to wonder what became of him? Does Wagenbach, as a figment of our collective imaginations, have anything to teach us?

Here, we come to the most sensational aspect of the project’s reception, for cultural panic suggests a great deal about truth-telling and history. On 12 September 2006, Joseph Wagenbach made front-page news in the Canadian newspaper *The National Post*: ‘Reclusive Downtown Artist a Hoax,’ read the incendiary headline. The article appeared in violation of Häussler’s explicit request that the media not report on *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* until she could officially reveal it as an artwork. Häussler and curator Rhonda Corvese were in the process of organizing a public panel discussion

for that very purpose. As they saw it, *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* was a work-in-progress that necessarily involved two phases; first, Joseph Wagenbach and his house needed to be presented as a true historical discovery and second, his fictional status, and that of the *Legacy* as a work of conceptual art, needed to be revealed to the public. These two phases were codependent and integral to the work's unfolding—it was necessary that visitors first believe in Joseph Wagenbach's existence, then reconsider the work in its fictional state. Framing the project as first fact, *then* fiction would enable the public to ask many questions: what is the proper place of art-making? Does art only exist when it is named as such? How do we append value to the artworks inside this house, and to their author(s)? Is the oeuvre of a reclusive, working-class, male outsider artist more or less valuable than that of an educated, middle-class, female conceptual artist?

Unfortunately, *The National Post* was uninterested in such nuances. The word 'hoax', with all its inflammatory connotations about deception and trickery, made for a juicy story about a local artist playing fast and loose with the public's trust. However, in reducing *The Legacy* project to the 'h-word', the *Post* unwittingly tapped into a much more substantive issue regarding history's dependence on unbridgeable distinctions between fact and fiction, public and private. The anxiety at the heart of the *Post* article highlighted the untenability of those distinctions. Some of Western history's most cherished aspirations began to unravel: private/public, true/false folded in on themselves. History was no longer safe from the contagion of other forms of spurious historical knowledge such as myth, speculation or storytelling. More specifically, the document, so

fundamental to the Western historiographical tradition, no longer constituted the realm of the provable, legislating what can be considered true or untrue about a past event.

Of course, it is not until we find out that Joseph Wagenbach is Häussler's invention, that this loss is fully registered. Armed with the knowledge of the fiction, we look again at the photos of Wagenbach's hanging undershirts. We see that these empty shirts, much like the striped bathrobe that hangs on a peg in the adjacent laundry, are the clearest indicators of a destabilization of historical causality in *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. Wagenbach serves as the absent cause of everything we are encountering on this tour. The knowledge that we cannot attribute any of this stuff to an actual referent—for even though we could argue that Häussler is the actual cause of the work, she is not its referent—makes us question the appropriateness of calling this a space of memory. For, according to Ernst van Alphen's definition, memory is a type of knowledge that is *fundamentally indexical*, that is, in order for any kind of historical information to be termed memory, it must refer to the person that experienced the event that the memory represents.¹²⁷ If there is no Wagenbach, then whose memories have we encountered here?

2.5. The performativity of belief.

This question—'whose memories have we encountered here?'—gets at the very heart of the predicament that Wagenbach's non-existence presents. For how can we say

¹²⁷ Ernst Van Alphen, 'Second Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory,' *Poetics Today* 27 no. 2 (2006) 485.

that anything in this house is worthy of archiving, given the fact that the history they index never occurred? Performance returns, repeats, and re-appears in the answer to this question. In the *Legacy* project, performance operates as a sort of conceptual through-line that stages an encounter *between* the archival and the fictional—a reconfiguration of performance as historiographical suggests how we might re-think the opposition between fact and fiction that dogs *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. First, when we place performance itself within the archive, we shift our emphasis from the document to *our encounter with it*. This emphasis on documentary encounter undermines historiography's conventional dependence on representation—using documentary evidence to show us the past 'as it was'—and gives way to an emphasis on enactment, which does not, indeed cannot, depend on a tidy fact/fiction divide. In the documentary encounter, the performing body abuts a recalcitrant pastness that insists itself on the present but simultaneously remains ineffable to it. History is repeated, but never replicated. Historiographical performance is, to borrow from performance researcher Mike Pearson and archaeologist Michael Shanks, 'purposefully unauthentic.'¹²⁸

If we shift our attention from representation to enactment—from what a historical event was to what we do in our encounter with it, we come up against the question of performativity. In *How to Do Things With Words*, J. L. Austin famously argues that words do not just describe the world; they can change it. However, Austin also states that for a performative to be felicitous, that is, for it to successfully precipitate its intended actions, it must occur in a context in which the utterance and its result are conventionally

¹²⁸ Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (New York: Psychology Press, 2001) 119.

accepted. That is, those individuals present at the time of the performative utterance must agree that the given context legitimizes the efficacy of that utterance. In this particular case, the utterance in question is, ‘Joseph Wagenbach is real.’ This utterance is capable of precipitating further action *so long as* the conditions are right, enabling those involved in making and hearing that utterance to agree on it. Just as—in Austin’s now-famous example—the proper religious or civil context grants the necessary legitimating power to the performative utterance ‘I do,’ thereby sealing man and wife in matrimony, so should the overwhelmingly immersive context of the Wagenbach house ensure the felicity of belief in Wagenbach’s existence.

However, *The Legacy*’s queasy affiliations with fiction threaten the possibility of performative felicity. Let us revisit the moment in *How To Do Things With Words* in which Austin rather offhandedly remarks that one type of infelicitous utterance—that is, an utterance whose context precludes conventional agreement in its legitimacy—is that ‘said by an actor on a stage.’ Any explicitly theatrical utterance (along with those ‘introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy’) is ‘hollow or void,’ in short, to be dismissed:

Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language.¹²⁹

‘Parasitic’ (as opposed to ‘spurious’ or ‘false,’ for example) is a telling adjective. The theater actor’s declarations necessarily depend upon ‘normal use;’ they do not stand on

¹²⁹ Austin, 22 (emphasis in original).

their own. In Rebecca Schneider's reading of this passage, she argues that Austin's dismissal depends on a conventional association of theater with femininity, 'a matter of the debased copy, the woman or clown at the mirror making herself into an image, the vapid chicanery of the "second sex," the aping other, the off-kilter queer.'¹³⁰ Theatre rips off of ordinary life, twisting and contorting reality into a weakened, untrustworthy space of 'mere' imitation. In Austin's implication, we cannot trust the utterances of an actor on the stage any more than we can the manipulations of Woman.

For Schneider, Austin's mistake is twofold. First, he too readily assumes the transparency and authenticity of 'normal use' against which he debases the supposed inauthenticity of the theater. Instead, Schneider argues that inauthenticity, repetition, staging, and performing are all part and parcel of everyday, 'normal' experience: 'mimesis is what we *do*.'¹³¹ Secondly, Schneider chides Austin for his hasty dismissal of theatre's supposed hollowness, arguing that what might seem hollow or erroneous about the theatre is nonetheless efficacious—even parasites make things happen. She asks, 'what might a parasitical performativity actually achieve?'¹³²

Insofar as we could argue that the space Häussler created in the *Legacy* project is theatrical (theatre-like if not in fact occurring in a theatre), Austin's claims (and Schneider's critique) are pertinent here. However, there is a snag. Unlike the instances of explicit theatricality that Schneider analyzes in her book—i.e., situations in which everyone present in that context is in agreement that what they are experiencing is 'on the

¹³⁰ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 68.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 69.

stage,' whether the stage in question is a proscenium or a battlefield—by contrast, in the Wagenbach house no such consensus necessarily exists. The stage is elusive, and therefore the experience disturbs the codes of performance convention that lend security to the theatre's staginess. Sited as it is in Wagenbach's or in someone's real home, connotations of privacy and domesticity frustrate any suggestion of theatricality (now off-stage), while at the same time the White Cube's plinths and waiting sculptures wink suggestively, as if to nudge us into recognizing that we are the intended audience (now on-stage). On the tours, visitors become performers (now on-stage) but do not necessarily recognize themselves as such (now off-stage), while tour guides are both actors (now on-stage) playing at/with/on the role of the archivist, and themselves (now off-stage) at once. The liminal context of the *Legacy* project—its situation astride the divide between theatre and everyday life (among many other such categorical divides)—troubles the strictures of Austin's distinction between the theatrical and the ordinary, exposing what Schneider calls the 'creepy crawlspace between the so-called theatrical and the so-called real.'¹³³ It might seem that this space, trafficking as it does between performance and everyday life, is a most infelicitous context for any kind of performative utterance.

In *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*, it is not simply a question of *where* we might locate the stage—the framing of the curtain call or the yelling of 'Action!' on a film set, for example—but rather that the act of staging itself is in question. Here, the utterance 'Joseph Wagenbach is staged' does not merely refer to a recognizable theatrical

¹³³ Ibid, 47.

production (i.e. with the theatre's imitative codes intact and legible), but rather to *an experience that people believe to be true* (i.e. where visitors do not necessarily distinguish imitation when they see it). In other words, the project moves beyond the supposed imitations endemic to the theatre and into the outright inventions of the hoax.

This traffic from imitation to invention is crucial in unpacking the question of historical performativity in *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach*. In order to do so, I want to linger for a moment on another characteristic of theatricality that haunts the 'hollowness' and 'parasitism' that Austin is so suspicious of: that of error. In *Performing Remains*, Schneider takes great pains to consider the ways in which error—the possibility of 'getting it wrong'—accompanies any performance practice invested in historical occurrence. For Schneider, all historical performances—from Civil War reenactments to historical plays to re-stagings of canonical performance artworks—are subject to the inescapability of error; to do the past 'again' is to fail by necessity, for repetition of the past can only occur with and through difference. Stumbling alongside imitation, error is one of the things that makes performance such a slippery place for anyone invested in locating the historical real, and which for Schneider, makes performance such a rich site for understanding the efficacies of error; where others would dismiss the wrongness of trying to repeat the unrepeatable past, Schneider sees an opportunity. To quote Tavia Nyong'o, another performance theorist interested in 'getting it wrong':

Most accounts of historical memory are preoccupied with truth: the possible deviation from the recorded truth that memory affords, the performative acts of reconciliation that truth-telling ostensibly effects, or

else the higher truth that embodied, experiential memory somehow obtains over dry, written documents. By contrast, I am preoccupied not with the virtues of getting it right but with the ethical chance that may lie within getting it wrong. What does it mean to mistake a memory, to remember it by mistake, or even to remember a mistake?¹³⁴

Nyong'o asks a very prescient question here, one that often gets shunted in the desire to separate the truth from the mistaken that underscores the conventions of the archive (allowing us to archive the truth and dispense with the mistaken). It is interesting that Nyong'o frames his question in terms of 'ethical chance.' Nyong'o is exposing the overhasty alliance between truth and virtue, or 'rightness' on the one hand, and mistake and 'wrongness' on the other. The moral imperative to right the wrongs of memory's mistakes occludes the very important effects of such mistakes—the performativity of wrongness, as it were. Nyong'o seems to be asking us to consider that there is an ethical opportunity in asking, what's right about getting it wrong? What *happens* in the space of error and mistake?

It's curious that Nyong'o does not counterpose truth with fiction, but rather with mistake. With Wagenbach, we have to make a crucial distinction between two kinds of afactuality, between *mistake* ('we got it wrong') and *fiction* ('we made it up'). What separates these cousins of untruth—for both of them address some-thing that did not happen—is the question of intentionality. Mistakes are accidents; fictions are products of deliberate action. This distinction gets at the heart of the cultural panic around hoaxes.

¹³⁴ Qtd. in Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 17.

It's not so much that the author of the hoax is wrong—it's that she knew she was wrong, but told us she was right. In the event of belief, mistakes are forgivable; fictions are not.¹³⁵ Joseph Wagenbach, as we now know, is a painstakingly wrought fiction, deliberately presented as fact to hundreds of people, for several months. This begs several important questions. Is the difference between error and fiction a difference in degree or in kind? Can whatever Nyong'o means by the 'ethical chance that may lie within getting it wrong' also apply to 'getting it faked'? How does the intentional nature of Häussler's act of untruth modify a notion of performativity here? What is the performativity of believing in an untrue statement? Ultimately, what does belief in Joseph Wagenbach's existence *do*?

¹³⁵ A highly publicized incidence of the shame that awaits the author of any fiction presented as fact occurred in 2006, when Oprah Winfrey took author James Frey to task on her show for altering and manufacturing details about his life in his memoir of addiction, *A Million Little Pieces*. After Winfrey selected the book for her Book Club in 2005, it catapulted to the top of the New York Times bestseller list, eventually selling more copies than any other that year. In 2006, an exposé entitled 'A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction' appeared on the website *The Smoking Gun*. The article claimed that Frey had either embellished or wholly invented many key events in his tumultuous life, including crimes he had supposedly committed and deaths he claimed to have witnessed. In the wake of the article's publication, Oprah brought Frey on her show and lambasted him for 'betraying millions of readers.' The vehemence of Oprah's dismissal of Frey is interesting because it shows the profound ideological heft of truth-telling. The anxiety attending deliberate historical misconduct is so great that it effectively occludes the possible effects of believing Frey in the first place.

<http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/celebrity/million-little-lies?page=0,5>, accessed 11 August 2011.

2.6. The bedroom.



Figure 2.8.

We are now ready to enter the last and presumably most private space on the tour: the bedroom (Fig. 2.8). In this space, which our tour guide would tell us had been sealed off with tape for approximately thirty years until the Municipal Archives' intervention, we encounter what Häussler has termed the project's 'orgasm.'¹³⁶ Only after having surveyed this room and its contents—chief among them being a life-sized sculpture of a reclining female and personal items all dating from the 1970s—are we directed to a map

¹³⁶ Iris Häussler, personal interview. 2 May 2010.

hanging on the wall. It is a map of Germany. On this map, if we look closely, we can see a tiny, hand-drawn 'X' (Fig. 2.9). This 'X,' we are told, marks the site of Wagenbach's boyhood home. Not far from this mythical house is a very real historical site: Bergen-Belsen, one of the most notorious of the Nazi concentration camps. Häussler's positioning of her character near the camps (he would have been a teenager during World War II) opens up some difficult questions. Did Wagenbach know about the camp? What was his family's relation to the war? Did Wagenbach's family, who were not Jewish, participate, actively or passively, in the genocide? How might this detail, encapsulated in a tiny 'X,' have affected Wagenbach? Is the Holocaust meant to be a feature in his life, his work? Is Häussler using this mark exploitatively to create an emotional undercurrent for her project, or is it a means of adding gravitas to the 'unauthentic' past?



Figure 2.9.

It is either an uncanny coincidence or no accident at all that Wagenbach's fictional biography is entwined with the Holocaust, given that this very real historical event serves as a lynchpin in many debates about the slipperiness of historical truth. As an event that has served as the twentieth century's limit point for horror, the Holocaust is a paradigmatic moment for those wary of the postmodern configuration of truth as multiple, contradictory, or in any way entwined with fiction. According to this argument,

any questioning of the identity of truth with fact offers a terrifying opportunity for those who would eradicate genocide from the historical record.¹³⁷

The problem with such anxiety is that it sidesteps an opportunity for reconfiguring the role of fiction in historiography. The question is not whether the Holocaust occurred (it did) or whether Joseph Wagenbach exists (he does not) but whether the story we are told about Wagenbach's potential connection to this paradigmatic event can enable us to understand it more deeply. In other words, in sidestepping the question of historical fact, we are forced to consider the very real effects of what *might be true* about Joseph Wagenbach's story. Wagenbach's legend constitutes what Michelle Citron terms a 'necessary fiction'—a story about the past that, while reductionist, misguided or even outright untrue, nonetheless 'spins the web of narrative through which life moves.'¹³⁸ In this reconfiguration, truth is no longer a matter of fact but of efficacy, a question not of 'is this story true?' but of 'is this the story I am living with?'

This notion of 'necessary fictions' suggests that the problem is not so much the establishment of historical occurrence—yes, things happen—but in understanding how the processes by which we learn about these happenings are events in themselves. On the tour, the necessary fiction of Joseph Wagenbach engenders a host of new behaviors in those who encounter it. In this sense, belief in Wagenbach's existence, while utterly disprovable, is nonetheless catalytic.

¹³⁷ See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) and Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001).

¹³⁸ Michelle Citron, *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*. Visible Evidence, v. 4. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

Recently, Häussler shared with me an anecdote about a visitor who, upon learning that Häussler had revealed that *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* was an artwork, confronted her outside the Field Office. In Häussler's retelling, the man was incensed, not because he felt he had been duped, but because he was convinced that Wagenbach was real and that Häussler had stolen his work and was passing it off as her own. 'I know this man,' he told her. For decades, he said, his father had been delivering groceries to Wagenbach's door from his shop, which was around the corner on Dundas Street. The man's father would often tell him about the cranky, reclusive immigrant who refused to allow anyone into his house. Häussler pointed out that there are many immigrants, and many modest houses like this one, in the neighborhood; perhaps it was another house, another man? 'No, no,' the man insisted, growing more distressed. It was *this house*. But Häussler had rented the empty house only a few months before, and there had been many renters before her. She offered to show him the lease, but he refused. 'What you are doing here is really wrong,' he said, still convinced that he knew what had *really* happened inside that little house.

Häussler's interpretation of this incident is telling. After the man left, she says, 'I was biking home and thinking, "OK. There is a Joseph Wagenbach. Just in this area, in a side street. The guy does not lie. I do not lie. It is just a confusion."'”¹³⁹ Even though we can incontrovertibly prove that Joseph Wagenbach does not exist, that fact is ultimately irrelevant in this incident.

¹³⁹ Iris Häussler, personal interview. 3 September 2010.

In presenting Joseph Wagenbach as a real person who may or may not be a bona fide artist, Häussler and curator Rhonda Corvese constructed a space that momentarily escaped the architectural and discursive confines of institutionalized art-practices and enabled viewers to consider another set of legislative frameworks, specifically the historiographical apparatus exemplified in the Municipal Archives' appropriation of Wagenbach's home. Once the project was revealed as a fiction, these institutional frameworks re-emerged with their legislating contours more visible than ever. Confounding the conventionally discrete spaces of (private) studio/home and (public) gallery/museum, the presentation of Wagenbach's life as fact-then-fiction enabled viewers to reconsider the ways in which our historical determinations—about what happened, and about whether or not those events are worthy of remembrance—are produced through these institutional frameworks.

If we reconsider the performance at the heart of *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* in terms of efficacy rather than facticity, we see how the fictional, like the factual, shapes what we know about the past and, by extension, our present lives. Four years after its initial exhibition, *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* continues to exist in archival form, as a sea of documentary traces—photographs, sculptures, newspaper articles, sketchbooks, tags with the Wagenbach stamp, lab coats and latex gloves. It persists in the memories of visitors, volunteers, and the artist herself, and in video footage recording many tours. In encountering these traces of the project, in researching an event that is, in many ways, lost to me, I have been driven to take hitherto unanticipated actions; I hope that I have constructed a kind of historical fantasy, a version of events that may seem too

good to be true. For *The Legacy of Joseph Wagenbach* marshals our desire for seemingly nondescript remains to become monumental by virtue of the simple fact of their survival; it kindles our wish to make a great discovery and our need to believe in it. In putting on the white lab coat, we are able to imagine the thrill of thinking about pasts that are not, yet somehow are, our own.

Chapter 3... The Custody of Disappearance: Photographic Decay as Opportunity

When Brian Dillon was a teenager, both of his parents died within a handful of years of one another, leaving him and his two younger brothers to raise themselves until the house was sold and the three boys left to forge their own adult lives. In his memoir *In the Dark Room*, Dillon describes how he found himself charged with the task of presiding over the emptying and sale of his familial home in the aftermath of these deaths. Amidst the challenge of dispersing this ‘glum inheritance’¹⁴⁰—arguing with his brothers over the few objects valuable enough to keep, seeing items ‘spirited away’¹⁴¹ by relatives, and unceremoniously dumping everything else—he finds himself contemplating the small archive of items he has kept for himself. It’s a paltry little collection including a few photographs, scraps of paper, an ashtray, a teddy bear.

According to Dillon, convention dictates that the stuff of familial inheritance is supposed to kick memory into high gear, catalyze historiography, and provide ‘an uninterrupted corridor to the past.’¹⁴² But Dillon ‘fails completely to identify’¹⁴³ with the ‘archival fever’¹⁴⁴ of genealogists for whom material remains provide an occasion for the ‘calm acceptance of time’s implacable advance.’¹⁴⁵ Instead, Dillon feels unmoored by his inheritance; that these objects taunt him. Faced with the task of writing about his

¹⁴⁰ Dillon, 4.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid, 47.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 48.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

family's history, he finds that there are no facts to be gleaned from his parents' bequest, no tidy narratives to construct. The stuff is 'hopelessly inarticulate,'¹⁴⁶ plunging him into a confrontation with his own fragmented memory, which defies logic and stubbornly fails to comfort him.

In the wake of his parents' death, Dillon experiences an attendant loss of memory, and finds himself afflicted by an insurmountable forgetting. His task—to call forth memory in the face of death—is one that he regards as simultaneously inevitable and impossible, and which he greets with a sarcastic sort of bleak resignation:

I wonder if there is not actually a certain pride at work in my abject failure to make of these things a coherent image of the world I would like to remember. It is, after all, the dreadful privilege of the orphan to be able to forget precise chronology (there is nobody there to remind the newly bereaved almost-adult of dates and occasions), and so one invents a universe out of unverifiable impressions and self-serving revisions. Once it has been lost into the prehistory of bereavement, there is a kind of seduction to the memorial fragment: every detail becomes telling, each rescued object a reminder of a vanished era. But I cannot say that these things summon up a story, only that they mark out a space which is immovably still that of their original homes. The double bulwark of my parents' deaths seals a watertight chamber in which to dream everything on the other side of the divide as a storehouse of memories all the more

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

alluring for being glimpsed through the thick portal of mourning. The objects I now attempt to describe are submerged, as if they could not survive in the corrosive air of a clear recollection, and so must be left to drift and settle in their strange submarine resting place, becoming ever more inaccessible as they calcify into myth.¹⁴⁷

In Dillon's mind, to be orphaned is an exceptional experience, qualitatively different from other kinds of mourning. He has been left doubly alone, abandoned to a world populated by things that have no proper historical context. There is no one in Dillon's world to help him put these things to their expected mnemonic use, to help each 'memorial fragment' recall his dead parents. What makes his 'object failure' so distressing is that it marks a point of no return, a kind of memorial impasse caused by the 'double bulwark of my parents' deaths.' Everywhere Dillon goes in his memory, he is stymied, partitioned off from 'clear recollection.' On the one hand, he is forever condemned to remember, and forever preoccupied with the objects that survive his parents; on the other, such remembrances are woefully inadequate.

However, less obvious than Dillon's anger at his own abandonment—and more significant to me—is an attendant fear that *he might abandon his own parents* by forgetting them. He negotiates this sense of genealogical responsibility through his encounters with the few objects he has retained, objects at risk of being orphaned themselves. As exceptional as Dillon's account of the orphan's particularly tragic sort of mortuary unmooring might seem, the impasse that he encounters as his memory fails him

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 48-9.

can be tied to deeply-rooted cultural anxieties around the relationship between genealogical responsibility and remembrance. In the wake of death, seemingly inconsequential objects take on a monumental significance, suggesting that our custodianship of these objects—the extent to which we assume responsibility for their care—is bound up with our processes of remembering and forgetting of the dead. To encounter such objects is to encounter twin quandaries that exhibit a rather pathological sort of codependency. The first quandary—‘What do I do with this object?’—is haptic and material, while the second—‘How do I remember the dead?’—is ethical, philosophical, and immaterial. Both are performative, in the sense that they precipitate posthumous behaviors—preservation, disposal, re-purposing—that are commonplace and unavoidable. Such practices link the intimacies of the family home to the most institutionalized of archives, offering us an opportunity to consider the degree to which our treatment of family remains—bodies and objects alike—can reveal broader cultural anxieties about what and how we choose to remember.

In considering the ethical quandaries of archival custodianship, it is worth conjuring Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous essay ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life.’ In the essay, Nietzsche identifies a stultifying affliction, particularly acute in German modernity, of ‘historical cultivation,’ a wholly passive relation to the past that attempts to remember everything and forget nothing. He identifies three ‘modes’ of viewing the past—monumental, antiquarian, and critical—which, while distinct, all betray the same sort of slavish attitude towards history and inhibit all present action. However, it is the antiquarian mode which interests me most, for it is the historical

attitude that depends upon a fetishistic and preservative attitude towards documentary remains, and aligns itself with the ‘archival fever’ of the genealogists that, for Dillon, enforce the moral injunction to remember one’s elders through the objects they leave behind.

Antiquarians, according to Nietzsche, are pitiable creatures who are consumed by ‘an all-encompassing desire for what is old.’¹⁴⁸ Driven by a desire for rootedness—‘the happiness of knowing that one’s existence is not formed arbitrarily and by chance’¹⁴⁹—the antiquarian performs a ‘repugnant spectacle of a blind mania to collect, of a restless gathering together of everything that once existed.’¹⁵⁰ Any artifact, by dint of its mere survival, is worth saving; as a consequence, ‘the human being envelops himself in the smell of mustiness,’ and the antiquarian devotes himself to the mummification of all that came before, and the refusal of all that is new: ‘antiquarian history understands only how to *preserve* life, not how to create it.’¹⁵¹

It is this instinct towards preservation—its moral force, ideological scaffolding, and practical consequences—that I will investigate in this chapter. While Nietzsche does not use this word, I believe that the fear of forgetting has resulted in a *conservative* archival practice, in both the practical and ideological senses of the word. It is worth noting here that the OED defines conservatism as ‘the tendency to resist great or sudden change, especially in a political sense;’ the piety of archival custodianship is indebted to

¹⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘On the Utility and Liability of History for Life.’ *Unfashionable Observations*, Vol. 2. Richard Gray, trans. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) 105.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 104.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 105.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 106.

resisting change, manifested in a desire to hold the past in permanent reserve (distinct from the present), and to mitigate decay at all costs. This kind of conservatism, I argue, privileges preservation at the expense of all other forms of engagement with documentary remains, and results in a deeply impoverished set of archival practices.

In what follows, I intend to show how decay—the material degradation of the object—is inextricably linked to forgetting—the immaterial degradation of the memory. In particular, I will examine a uniquely acute form of custodial alarm that accompanies the encounter with decaying photographs. I argue that the emphasis on preservation reduces the film image to a merely evidentiary significance, where a given film's worth can be gauged according to its relative ability to testify accurately to whatever occurrence it might depict. Within this framework, a decaying photograph is crippled, unable to fulfill its documentary promise. Drawing on key texts in film preservation and restoration, I demonstrate how contemporary film archiving is predicated on the refusal of decay, and results in alarmist attempts to save film from its inevitable destruction.

Following Nietzsche, I argue that the desire to preserve at all costs signals a slavish attitude to the past. Bringing the work of film preservationist Paolo Cherchi Usai into conversation with seminal research in performance studies on the archive, I argue that Cherchi Usai's claim that film is 'more a performing art than an art of reproduction' begs a reconfiguration of the archive, from a space of eternity and stasis to one of constant and ever-evolving change. I conclude by advocating for artistic orientations to the archive that accommodate change and decay far more readily than conventional archival practice; such activities are 'an-archic' in their refusal to subordinate present to

past, or to submit documentary remains to a preservationist logic. Ultimately, I argue that Cherchi Usai's intervention opens up a space for reconsidering archival practice *not* as the fulfillment of the preservative promise, but rather as the ongoing, never-completed work of tending disappearance.

The shoebox

A few years ago, I found myself in an archival quandary. In the fall of 2008, my parents undertook the rather Herculean task of relocating a twenty-two-year accumulation of personal belongings in order to facilitate the remodeling of their house. Given my mother's propensity for material accumulation and general untidiness, the project required sorting through a sea of objects in no certain order or relative importance, many of which had not been examined since my parents' arrival at the house in 1986. Buried amidst this biographical detritus, my mother discovered a cache of several hundred slides and sixteen 8mm films. The images had once belonged to her father, who'd stashed them in his own house for decades; upon his death in 2007, they migrated over to hers. Because she hadn't purged as ruthlessly as other mourners might (her material inheritance filling several of the many boxes cluttering our house), the films and photographs had been easily forgotten, left to languish in the damp heat of a Florida garage.

Once found, the archive sat undisturbed in my mother's possession for several months. Then, one day in the spring of 2009, she mentioned her discovery to me. I responded to her nonchalance with something approaching naked covetousness. I

immediately set upon her, enumerating why I was the appropriate family member to take the archive off her hands. Several weeks later, she relinquished the shoebox full of slides and films under one condition: that I arrange their digital transfer and provide her with a DVD of the archive's contents. Other than that, the stuff was mine. In the end, she seemed relieved to give this particular burden up for adoption.

I began by assessing the archive. Suddenly I was an amateur archivist, charged with the task of managing this corpus of historical material. Almost immediately, it became clear that this archive was in poor health. The slides were jumbled together in no particular order. There were few dates, locations, or names of subjects to facilitate their cataloguing. I dropped the slides into a projector, and slide by slide, witnessed the damage wrought by decades of neglect. Some images were barely legible, while others were vivid and clear; some had molded, while others were the victims of color fading; some depicted recognizable people, locations, and activities; others were anonymous and vague. I took the 8mm films to a local film service to be inspected, and the diagnosis was dire—vinegar syndrome. Shrinkage. Brittle film and breakage in the projector. This archive was sick.

My encounter with a shoebox full of ordinary, inconsequential photos and films in an unfortunate state of corrosion warrants attention, despite—indeed, because of—its personal nature. Whereas the previous chapter emulated the cataloguing strategies of the institutional archive in order to expose its vulnerabilities, this one begins with a rather more quotidian (and ubiquitous) kind of archive. In one sense, this chapter logically extends the previous one's troubling of the private/public divide that institutional

archives such as museums and libraries regularly police. In keeping with the notion that dispersal and volatility govern the documentary encounter, the chapter shuttles between three kinds of archives, all dedicated to the housing of a particular kind of documentary remains: analog film. Beginning with my grandfather's shoebox, I then relocate to one of the world's most august institutions of film preservation—the Academy Film Archives in Los Angeles—only to wind up in a decidedly less official space, the moldering basement of underground filmmaker Craig Baldwin. In moving between these very different spaces, I wish to underscore the way in which the filmic archive—both the images it houses, and the people and places housed in its images—always brings the public and the personal into proximity.

I also begin with my family's archive because its damaged condition signals a very real problem currently faced by all archives of analog photographic material: decay. In this chapter I intend to identify the especially acute archival anxiety that suffuses the encounter with a decaying photographic image. As I discuss in Chapter One, Pierre Nora has argued that the twentieth century is defined by the need to archive.¹⁵² If Nora is even partly right (insofar as he points to the 20th century's archive fever) then the anxieties of archival custodianship writ large are perhaps best understood by examining decay's effects on the quintessentially modern medium—photography.

While it may seem that any attempt to re-visit the material, haptic encounter with analog photography risks an ineffectual nostalgia for 'old media,' the present ubiquity of digital technology prompts an occasion for us to reconsider our relationship to the analog

¹⁵² Nora, 8.

photograph at a moment in which its materiality presents itself, quite literally, as burdensome. It is no accident that just as the arrival of the digital has sounded the alarm of the ‘death of cinema’ (to borrow Paolo Cherchi Usai’s phrase), the archive has become the primary site in the production of cinematic obsolescence.¹⁵³ In the 1980s and 1990s the fields of film restoration and preservation rapidly professionalized,¹⁵⁴ just as institutions around the world—libraries, universities, high schools, and businesses—began to de-accession their collections of analog photographic materials, relinquishing thousands of films and photographs to archives and individuals who pledged to assume responsibility for them.¹⁵⁵ Nor should we ignore the more recent increase in concern over so-called ‘orphan films’—industrial, scientific, small-gauge, amateur, educational, pornographic, and other films that lack the historical, social, or aesthetic value to enjoy the perks of archival attention—a trend evidenced by the founding of the biennial Orphans Film Symposium and the international recognition of the work of Rick Prelinger, whose archive.org website has digitized and made available for open-source download thousands of orphan films. Indeed, the very term ‘orphan’ signals the degree

¹⁵³ I say ‘the production of cinematic obsolescence’ deliberately; I am interested in the way that the notion of obsolescence is produced discursively through the appearance of new media. In other words, the paradox is that in order for a new media to become new, it must do so by simultaneously creating the old. Of course, cinema is not extinct; in fact, its persistence is what both enables and troubles the digital to exist as ‘new’ in the contemporary imaginary.

¹⁵⁴ This professionalization is evidenced by the establishment of several MA programs in moving image archiving and preservation around the world (New York University, University of California Los Angeles, George Eastman House, and the University of East Anglia, et al), as well as the creation of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the world’s first professional organization of film archivists, in 1991.

¹⁵⁵ A local example is available at the University of Minnesota’s library system, which in 2004 quietly de-accessioned its entire 16mm film collection, over 6,000 films in all, and handed it over to its new (and reluctant) custodian, Minnesota Film Arts. While the majority of the collection now resides in a (non climate-controlled) storage locker in Plymouth, MN, many films deemed to have historical, monetary, or aesthetic value have been pilfered by various individuals along the way.

to which our relationship to the analog photographic archive is increasingly defined in terms of an ethics of custodianship, on the question of care—a quandary of what to *do* with these images.

When we assess the damage that decay has already wrought on the film archive, the losses are truly staggering: in 2000 film preservationist Anthony Slide claimed that ‘75 percent of all American silent films are gone and 50 percent of all films made prior to 1950 are lost [... and] there still remains more than 100 million feet of nitrate film of American origin awaiting preservation.’¹⁵⁶ Film preservationists (and by ‘preservationists’ I include anyone engaged in the work of moving image preservation, whether they be archivists, conservationists, restorers, or technicians) frequently describe themselves as champions of a dying film heritage, standing on the front lines of what is ultimately an unwinnable war against decay. In the 1980s, the alarm call was sounded in the form of the slogan ‘Nitrate won’t wait!’ a rallying cry used by professionals fundraising for the preservation of the highly unstable nitrate films of the silent era. When it became clear that, in the right environmental conditions, nitrate actually *will* wait (i.e. decomposition could be slowed, if not stopped),¹⁵⁷ the word ‘orphan’ became the galvanizing term of choice, evolving ‘from a colloquialism among archivists to [its usage

¹⁵⁶ Slide, 5.

¹⁵⁷ See Emily Cohen, ‘The Orphanista Manifesto: Orphan Films and the Politics of Reproduction,’ *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 106, Issue 4, 2004, 719–731; Dino Everett, ‘Introduction to Bio-Fiction Classification Theory: Remix Methodologies and the Archivist,’ *The Moving Image*, Spring 2008, 15-37.

in everything from] federal legislation to actual preservation practices to copyright reform.¹⁵⁸

Underlying both the ‘nitrate won’t wait’ and ‘orphans’ descriptors is a rhetoric of care; there is the implication of a risk of loss and abandonment, and an appeal for public, institutional, and professional intercession. The driving notion is that film is dying—and it is up to us to stop it. In his *Silent Cinema* Paolo Cherchi Usai likens the painstaking work of the moving image archivist to that of a doctor in a hospital, unable to attend to the sheer magnitude of needs that surround him:

Consider the following scenario, imaginary but totally plausible. One hundred prints in a film archive are in the process of severe decomposition, and we know all too well that they will soon disappear altogether if appropriate action is not taken promptly. We have enough money to save only ten of them, and the choice of which will survive and which will not is entirely in our hands. It is a cruel, thankless duty, similar to the situation of a doctor with a hospital full of dying patients and enough medicine to cure only a handful. Think of it. You are that doctor. How are you going to determine who will be cured and who won’t? What will you tell them? How will you justify your actions to their descendants?¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Dan Streible, ‘The Role of Orphan Films in the 21st Century Archive,’ *Cinema Journal* 46, No. 3, Spring 2007, 124.

¹⁵⁹ Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), 8.

For Cherchi Usai, the archive is like an under-funded, woefully ill-equipped intensive care ward. He anthropomorphizes our filmic heritage, inviting us to see film not as a thing, but as a life; these films might well be our ancestors and elders, all afflicted by the same pernicious disease:

Once the film's cancer (be it nitrate decomposition, or the vinegar syndrome) has begun to spread, the preservationist is well aware of the moral challenge involved in deciding whether to salvage at least a part of a film, or to let it die because others have to live. Such circumstances demand a remarkable sense of commitment towards posterity. Films will die anyway, but at least we must be fully conscious of why this daily tragedy occurs before our eyes.¹⁶⁰

Always limited by the lack of resources and funds, the moving image archivist has to make an ongoing series of Sophie's choices, sacrificing one film for the good of another while ultimately presiding over an epidemic as catastrophic as any plague. Thus, this individual is not a preservationist at all but rather a custodian of disappearance, ameliorating but ultimately facilitating the certain disintegration of the photographic archive.¹⁶¹

I want to chart the contours of my relationship to my family's ailing archive as an exemplar of archival custodianship in contemporary culture. In particular, I want to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 69.

¹⁶¹ In facilitating disappearance in this fashion, the film archivist is not unlike the bureaucrats in *A Certain Kind of Death* who preside over the disposition of abandoned corpses (see Chapter One). In both offices, professionals oversee rituals that are akin to a kind of 'state-sanctioned mourning.'

understand the nature and effects of decay on these images, and the alarm I feel about their condition. If culture is, in a sense, genealogical—if there is a collective inheritance of practices and expectations, habits and customs—then there is a correspondence between my anxiety over the degradation afflicting my family’s archive and broader cultural anxieties about the endangerment of the analog photographic archive as such, and in particular to a fixation on the necessity to mitigate its further ruin. As Jacques Derrida argues (and as the previous chapter discussed), despite the fact that it is so frequently imagined as the exclusively private locus of family life, the house is a primary institution of political power.¹⁶² Similarly, the seemingly private question of inter-generational memory is central to all archives, and fundamental to archival law as such. The archive, Derrida argues, is inextricably bound up with lineage, a concept that is inherently patri-archal (in the word itself, we have the union of familial, masculine, and historical power). Here, it is worth recalling the moment in *Archive Fever* when Derrida describes the Bible that Jakob Freud bequeathed to his son Sigmund, and in particular, the memorial injunction that accompanied that bequest.¹⁶³ My mother’s rather unceremonious handing over of the shoebox is not unlike Freud’s Bible; bound up with this act is a powerful moral imperative that simultaneously guides and constrains my archival activities.

¹⁶² Derrida, 7.

¹⁶³ This incident is explored in further detail in Chapter One.

Decay, responsibility, and remembrance

Decay is an affliction that is indiscriminate in its object. We can speak of decay in multiple arenas—biological, architectural, moral, cognitive. We can think on the fecund degradation of the Southern gothic, the tropical decrepitude of an overripe fruit, the macabre undoing of the buried corpse, the corruption of synapses in the minds of Alzheimer’s patients. In all quarters, decay has a temporal connotation; by eating away at an object, decay signals the simultaneous persistence and loss of the past, and the uncertainties of the future. I want to single out photographic decay for special attention here, for there is something about a photograph’s undoing that sets it apart from other forms of decay.¹⁶⁴

The question of photographic specificity has preoccupied filmmakers and theorists alike since the medium’s inception. The Lumiere brothers, Dziga Vertov, Andre Bazin, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, and many others have all tried to sketch out the essence of photographic images. In addition, the contentious and, I would argue, porous bounds of documentary film theory have often hinged on this question of photographic specificity, all advancing the notion that photography has a unique sort of purchase on the world it depicts.¹⁶⁵ It is worth recalling Andre Bazin’s now-famous investment in ‘the

¹⁶⁴ When I refer to photographic images, I am talking about both still and moving images, in a cooperative vein that nonetheless remains attuned to their constitutive differences. If I had more space I would consider the way that duration, the distinguishing feature of the moving image, sets it apart from still photography, but that is not my objective here. Rather, I am invested in exploring how the slides and 8mm films that populate my family’s archive are connected via their shared photographic trait.

¹⁶⁵ The question of documentary’s relative (dis)ability to capture, resemble, or represent reality has become a perennial and central concern; even as theorists frequently mention how exhausted they are by the issue, it continues to feed contentious debates in the field. Some texts worth exploring include Bill Nichols’ now-seminal *Representing Reality* (1991), which features an extended discussion on indexicality (149-55) and

essentially objective character of photography,’ the notion that the photograph is uniquely capable of testifying to an ineluctable occurrence before the camera.¹⁶⁶ Bazin’s definition dovetails with the frequent invocation of indexicality in film theory. Defined by Charles Saunders Peirce as ‘a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object,’ the index as applied to the photographic image signals the privileged capacity of the camera to register an imprint of the physical contours of the profilmic object onto the emulsion.¹⁶⁷ Here, I am less interested in discussing what photography actually is than what we *want* it to be—a technology uniquely capable of proffering incontrovertible visible evidence of a past event. Despite the vast sea of discussion that has already been had in film studies, and in particular, in documentary studies, on the question of reality in film, and in particular on the role of indexicality in the search for that reality, I still think we are haunted by our desire for

John Corner’s *The Art of Record* (1996), which surveys the reality question via an extended analysis of John Grierson’s famous pronouncement that documentary is ‘the creative treatment of actuality.’

¹⁶⁶Bazin, ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image,’ 7.

¹⁶⁷ Charles Saunders Peirce. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2 (1893-1913). Bloomington, Peirce Edition Project, 1998, 291. A 2007 issue of the journal *differences*, edited by Mary Ann Doane, revisits some of the major debates in film theory regarding indexicality. Particularly useful is Tom Gunning’s contribution, ‘Moving Away From the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality’ (29-52), which points out the frequent and unfortunate over-identification of Bazin and Peirce’s thought since the 1970s, beginning with Peter Wollen’s influential essay ‘Semiology of the Cinema.’ While Gunning feels that Wollen’s comparison of Bazin and Peirce has some utility, in Gunning’s estimation it has also contributed to a simplistic misunderstanding of Bazin’s theory in strictly semiotic terms, excluding Bazin’s investment in both aesthetics and spectator involvement. My intention is to chart the ongoing cultural heft of indexicality, not to analyze the reception and legacy of Bazin’s work; however, in the interest of nuance, I think Gunning’s intervention is worth mentioning. See also Philip Rosen’s *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (2001). Like Gunning, Rosen seems bent on rescuing Bazin from accusations of crudeness to which he was subjected in the 1970s, reintroducing a level of nuance in Bazin’s thought which shows Bazin capable of recognizing the incommensurabilities between photographic image and profilmic world. The nuance seems, for Rosen, to have to do with the ambiguity of the subject who sees this world represented in the photograph. That is, in Rosen’s reading of Bazin, it is less that the camera records the world exactly as it is, but that we as spectators want it to: ‘It is precisely the activity and desire of the subject—“an obsession with realism”—that makes indexicality the crucial aspect of the cinematic image for Bazin’ (18).

photographic media to do a very certain something—and that something, I would argue, is at the heart of my anxieties over the decayed state of my family's archive.

One day my mother and I sit down together to examine the archive. As we scroll through the images—which I have digitally scanned and arranged into a Powerpoint presentation in order to facilitate their examination—I become acutely aware that my mother's desire for visible evidence is far stronger than my own, and that there are stark differences in our respective feelings of genealogical obligation. As a result, our encounters with these photographs, while simultaneous, exist in totally discrete registers. For my mother, the archive's worth is directly correlated to its relative indexical promise; the photographs are 'doing their jobs' if they (a) trigger a specific memory of hers, or (b) proffer some new factual information about her predecessors. In short, my mother is on an evidentiary mission. All she does is point fingers: There is your uncle! There: your cousin! That place is where we went on vacation that time! See? That's where I did that thing, and there is where so-and-so did that other thing, and there—oh yes, stop right there! There is that other thing I told you about earlier! At the same time, whenever she comes across an image that has faded or decomposed beyond recognition, she bemoans the damage, shaking her head in disappointment; what a shame! For her, the relative importance of these photographs depends on the extent to which she can identify and recognize the profilmic places and people they depict.

We come to
this photo.



Figure 3.1.

One of my favorites. Its candor pleases me. I like the informality with which everyone is sitting, the four pairs of eyes averted from the camera. I am also drawn to the heavy, saturated yellow blotch in the bottom left-hand corner. It strikes me as confident, an assertion of color against the soft compromise of faded degrees of brown.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ My description of this slide derives not from an analog projection, but rather from a digital scan. Indeed, throughout this project my primary method of referencing the slides and 8mm films in my family's archive has been through digital means—as anyone who works with analog photographic materials will attest, it is infinitely more efficient to work with these materials on a computer. Since I digitized the slides and films, the originals have remained in their shoebox, largely untouched. However, one day, months after writing my initial draft of this chapter, I dig out the slide described above and put it in a projector. Suffused with the projector's light, I am surprised to find the projected version's colors disappointing, compromised. The blotchy yellow is not nearly as saturated, the powdery texture of the browns not so seductive. There's less detail, less drama. Projected on the wall, the image suddenly appears unremarkable, and I am inclined to pass it by. I include this addendum as a reminder to myself and others that while the material object deserves more attention than contemporary culture often gives it, this is not to

When we arrive at this image, Mami's index finger flies out so quickly it almost knocks back the computer screen. It singles out the woman in the white blouse, second from the right (Fig. 3.2):

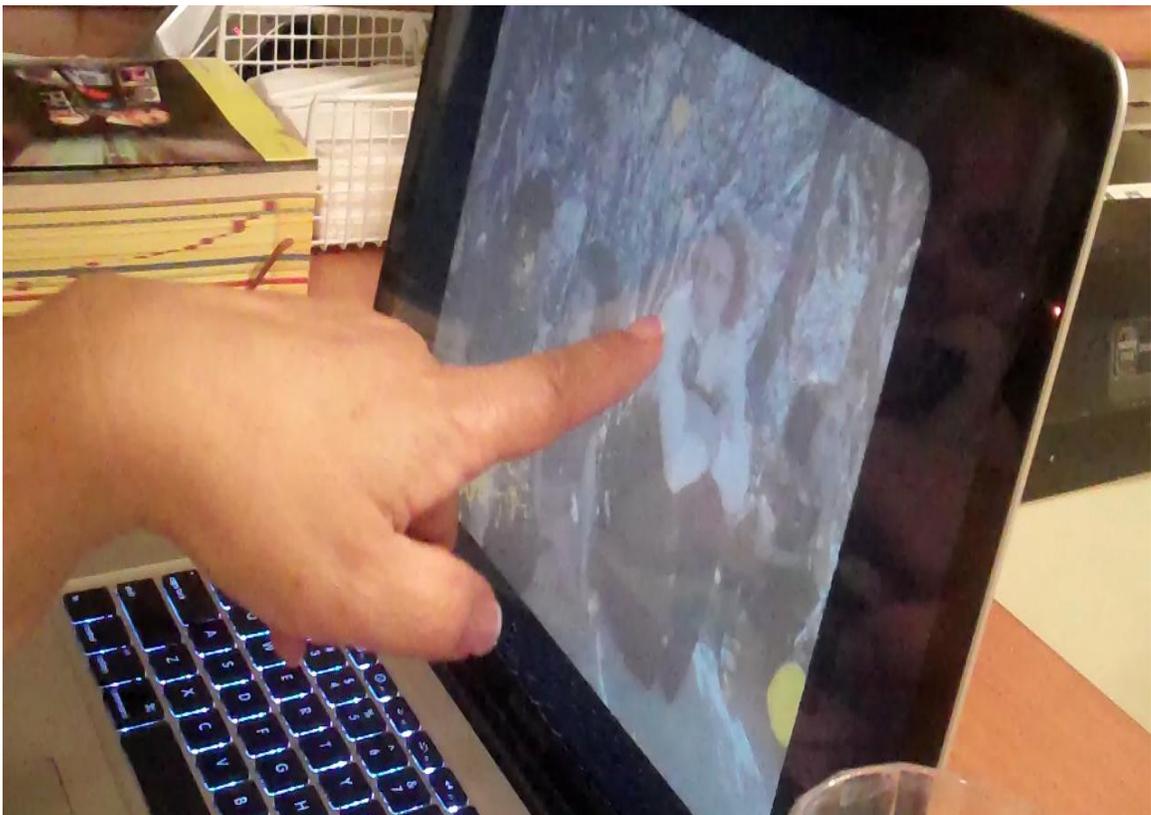


Figure 3.2.

discount the possibilities afforded by the dematerialized, digital version of that object. While I remain wary of the naïve exultation of digital enthusiasts, I recognize the concomitant dangers of being too pious or precious about the analog.

‘Titi Vi.’

(Me: how do you recognize Vi?)

‘Por la nariz larga y la cara flaquita. Es que me acuerdo de ella. Es increíble. Yo me recuerdo de tanto.’¹⁶⁹

For this kind of evidentiary treasure-hunt in which my mother is engaged, the photos’ decay is nothing but a nuisance, a barrier to the images’ testimonial abilities. At the same time, when confronted with the archive’s decrepit state she gives way to guilt, and takes herself to task for neglecting it.

Meanwhile, my reaction to decay is more ambivalent, and reflective of another, parallel decay—the decay of intergenerational memory. What my mother sees in these photos interacts with the archive of her own memory, a compendium of experiences, impressions, speculations, and narratives she has inherited from her elders. In contrast, my connection to these images is tenuous at best, as I am now two generations removed from the incidents that generated them. Therefore, I have a limited ability to treat them as any kind of historical evidence, since I would not even begin to know what I am looking for in them. This deterioration of familial memory makes me feel that the archive and I are failing each other. The photos fail me in their inability to comply fully with their photographic promise; I fail them by letting my memory go flabby, and not listening better when my mother and grandparents tried to tell me about their lives. When I look at these images my first instinct is to redress the wrongs of decay, and

¹⁶⁹ ‘By her long nose and skinny face. You see, I remember her. It’s incredible. I remember so much.’

assuage the guilt of my forgetfulness; if I can simply heal these images, perhaps I can reconstruct my shattered familial identity. (At the same time, I know that in aspiring to the achievement of this familial integrity, I am more likely to produce a horrific Franken-family, a misfiring, destructive assemblage of incongruous and conflicting parts.)

Decaying photographs remind us of the inevitable and unavoidable losses that characterize existence, and the ways in which the losses of death are accompanied by the losses of forgetting. My lack of memory of this and other familial events might mean that I care less about these images than my mother. Perhaps I have less use for them. Perhaps, in their evidentiary mediocrity, they are undeserving of my care. Perhaps an image is only as worthy of saving as its ability to testify. Or—perhaps not. While Mami is bound by the responsibilities of her memory, I exist in between—on the one hand responsible, on the other not. For I find that my ignorance, coupled with the photos' crippled indexicality, cleaves an opening for a different kind of relationship to emerge between us. Having absolved myself of the responsibility to honor my mother and father, I take the liberty of regarding these images differently—I embrace the blasphemy of forgetting.

In considering the possibilities afforded by my compromised memory, I want to return for a moment to Brian Dillon's account of the forgetting that afflicts him in the wake of his parents' death. Of course, the sort of destruction of inter-generational memory that Dillon is charting—one that is particular to the orphan—is tragic. However, he also says that to lose one's parents is perversely liberating, the 'dreadful privilege' of being released from the apron-strings of genealogical responsibility. Once his parents

have gone forever, his memory—always already subject to caprice and contingency—is no longer governed by the tyranny of historical accuracy. Rather, as he worries over these surviving artifacts, Dillon's memory gives itself over to mythmaking, a compendium of impressions shrouded in forgetting.

The cooperation of forgetting and decay yield a form of photographic encounter that we might call supra-indexical. As I have already shown, our obsession with the camera's capture of the profilmic instant drives our engagement with photography, and confines photography to an evidentiary economy. However, I would also add that this obsession blinds us to the aspects of photographic images that exceed that indexical function. Our desire for the photograph to testify to historical occurrence is so strong that when we are faced with decay's frustration of that testimonial function, we immediately see the image as crippled, and by consequence any use we might make of that image is similarly compromised. Our expectation for photography's evidentiary pretensions is so great that we neglect to ask *what else* a photograph might do for us, beyond accounting for the presence of an object in front of a camera at some previous point in time.



Figure 3.3.

Exhibit A: Two Caucasian women stand to the right of a column extending above their heads. They appear to be positioned at the top of a staircase; we can deduce this because (a) the woman in the foreground stands lower than the woman behind her and (b) there appears to be a step to the right of the column. Their dress is typical of the 1950s; they appear to be aged between 30 and 50. The woman in the foreground holds some kind of notebook or folder in her hands.

(I know this woman to be my grandmother. I know this and you do not. I know this because I recognize the contours of her full cheeks, and the placid smile on her face.

I know this because I feel that she is not simply looking at me, but for me. I know this because every time I look at this image, I confront the fact that I haven't seen her in fifteen years.)

Only one more recognizable element: to the right of the column, what appears to be the right heel of a man's shoe. The heel is lifted as if to indicate motion.

I have looked at this image many times, for what may be many hours, since 2008.

It took me many months to notice the shoe.

I am troubled by this shoe. It cheats me. I have no way of contextualizing it, no ability to attach the shoe to a foot, the foot to a leg, the leg to a torso, the torso to a face, and the face to a life. I have no way of deciphering whether or not my grandmother and this shoe's owner are acquainted. I can say nothing about this moment that matters; I can only say that my grandmother was there ('there' being nothing but an amorphous 'somewhere,' a place distinguished only by a staircase, floating in a blank geographical sea). What is productive about knowing that my grandmother once had a moment, at the top of a staircase, with a woman and a shoe?

What is productive, indeed. The vignette I've just told compartmentalizes my encounter with this image, reducing my experience of it into an evidentiary economy. However, I continue to revisit this image not because of its paltry indexical information—not because of the profilmic facts that I can glean from it—but rather, because of what is missing. More specifically, what draws me to this image is its most obvious element (what I have yet failed to describe, because it is inassimilable to the photograph's profilmic content)—the golden threads coursing across the photograph's

surface. Here we have an index too, but of another kind—an index not of what once stood before the camera, but rather an index of the deterioration of the slide itself. This is the index of the *fingerprint*, not the *fingerpoint*.

These synapses and sunspots mar the image, true—they are in cahoots with the color fading that also afflicts the photo—but they also enhance it. They challenge one index (the profilmic index of the pointing finger) with another (the material index of the fingerprint). Due to the compromised state of the evidentiary in this image, color and line assert themselves, and replace photographic representation with abstraction. While photographic conventions dictate that abstraction comes on the heels of representation—it exists in subordination, like a red-headed stepchild—in this photograph, representation and abstraction are in constant tension.

Here, I am reminded of a book that happened to be sitting at my bedside at the time that I began writing this chapter, Lawrence Weschler's book on the abstract artist Bill Irwin, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*. Discussing the period in which he first began to turn away from representation and toward abstraction in his work, Irwin makes a distinction between what he calls 'imagery' and 'physicality.' Imagery, Irwin believes, involves any kind of visual representation that is recognizable enough to call forth previous experiences in the viewer. With their capacity to conjure familiarity—"I have seen this before!"—images function 'like a psychologist's ink blot in a Rorschach test, summoning all manner of projected associations.' For Irwin, these associations compromise the viewer's experience of a primordial, metaphysical perception: 'Imagery for me constituted representation, "re-presentation," a second order

of reality, whereas I was after a first order of presence.¹⁷⁰ Against the experientially loaded distractions of representation, Irwin believes that abstraction offers the viewer an opportunity to catch herself in the act of presence.

Irwin's argument intrigues me in part because he seems to be suggesting that perception can somehow be separated from previous experience, a notion with which I disagree; in contrast to Irwin, and recalling Bergson's theory that perception always occurs in cooperation with memory, I believe that there is no such thing as pure presence. However, I do find that Irwin's notion—that abstraction facilitates the viewer's encounter with 'the thing one sees'—affords a provocative occasion to consider another function of the yellow threads coursing across the photo of my grandmother and her anonymous companion. In addition to subordinating representation to abstraction, these yellow threads also remind me of another aspect of this image, one that often gets lost in our obsession with projected images—materiality. As decay eats into the image, I am reminded that this photo is not only an image I can see, but a *thing* that I can encounter; as Mary Anne Doane puts it, 'In the viewer's recognition of an old photograph or film as old, the fact of the medium's materiality is foregrounded, not escaped.'¹⁷¹ In the moment of encounter, we see the wounds wrought by time, and are reminded of the film's corporeality, and our own.

This recalibration of the photograph from image to thing has several consequences. First, it changes the nature of the object's value. Whereas photographs

¹⁷⁰ Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 61.

¹⁷¹ Mary Ann Doane, 'The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,' *differences* 2007 Volume 18, Number 1, 128-152: 144.

are typically valued according to their relative ability to testify to a past occurrence (their evidentiary value), decayed images betray a more generalized pastness, a brute historicity rooted in their participation in the passage of time (their artifactual value). For example, Andre Habib argues that an archival film undergoes a necessary categorical shift and is ‘taken out of its regular function so that it *could appear as a cultural artifact*.’¹⁷² Therefore, while an undecayed photograph or film reminds us of a *moment* (a past we can never recover), a decayed photograph or film reminds us of a *process* (the ongoing nature of loss and the persistence of the past in the present). Photographic decay is arresting precisely because it forces us to reckon with the distressing recalcitrance of a material object that is simultaneously disappearing before our very eyes.

I wish to stress that despite the fact that, as Doane and Habib suggest, any given object can acquire a general artifactual value by simple dint of survival, this is no guarantee that such an object will be deemed worthy of the archive and protected from any further neglect. As the exclusion of ‘orphan’ films from the archive (or their neglect within it) can attest, the guarantee of historicity only gets an object so far. It’s rather like marveling at the liver spots, wrinkles, strange odors, and cracked nail beds of one’s grandmother, then promptly seating her in a corner and forgetting about her. Oldness is as much a signal of a material burden as it is of historicity. In other words, sheer oldness is no guarantor of value; in order for an object to qualify for archival custodianship, that

¹⁷² Andre Habib, ‘Ruin, Archive, and the Time of Cinema,’ *SubStance* #110, Vol. 35, no. 2, 2006, 120-139: 123 (emphasis in original). I return to Habib’s article—and in particular to his theorization of the ruin—in Chapter 4.

object needs to have participated in an event that is deemed to have cultural, personal, or ideological legitimacy.¹⁷³

I believe that the losses precipitated by forgetting have enabled me to make use of these images in ways that my mother cannot. However, this does not mean that I have managed to rid myself of custodial alarm. Every time I encounter these images—even after hundreds of viewings—I am floored by decay. I feel complicit in their neglect. I want nothing more than to restore them. However, there is another part of me that wonders if such conservative impulses do me no good, if this custodial intervention isn't a sort of folly. It is the part of me that resists the urge to put on my white cotton gloves and protect my family's archive, that leaves the shoebox under my bed, that opposes cataloguing the slides in any particular order, that worries about learning too much about the places, people, and things they depict. Part of me wants to engage in a deliberate act of neglect, to put the archive in a hot, damp corner of my house and help the mold along. I think sometimes about burning or burying it, or breaking it up into its constituent parts and giving it away. I wonder why it is illegitimate for me to issue a 'do not resuscitate' order on these images and leave them to their own devices (or destroy them outright). What is so blasphemous about these behaviors?

The tomb: the archivist as custodian

In my own private archival encounter, I have felt the weight of an injunction—to preserve at all costs—that I believe does not originate with me, or with my mother. In

¹⁷³ See Chapter 2's analysis of 'The Wedding Dress Problem.'

order to understand the source and nature of this preservative impulse, I decided I needed to compare my amateur endeavors with those of a major archival institution. On March 15, 2010 I had the privilege of touring the vaults of the Academy Film Archive in Los Angeles, California. As the preservation arm of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the AFA is one of the largest and best-funded film archives in the United States. Like all film archives, it has an established protocol that any visitor should expect to follow; access is granted on a case-by-case basis and by appointment only. Not wishing to be denied entry, I made my appointment early, via email, with the archive's Public Access Coordinator.

The Coordinator sent me a few instructions in advance of my visit—I was advised ‘to avoid wearing strong scents’ and ‘to bring additional attire to accommodate for our cold air conditioning.’¹⁷⁴ Arriving promptly at the appointed time, scentless and additionally attired, I was greeted by the Coordinator, as polite, officious, and dutiful a servant of the institution as one might expect. She led me into the vault, and the chill that greeted us made me grateful for my extra layer of clothing. I'd been in film vaults before, but never one on this scale; it was as if this place was what every other film archive aspired to be. Shelves extended in every direction (Fig. 3.4). I looked up, and up, and up... looming several floors above my head were thousands of film canisters. The deeper we went, the stronger my feeling of finality. This was the sort of place where time stopped. I sensed that if I didn't track my steps, even I could go missing.

¹⁷⁴ May Haduong. ‘Attn: Mark Toscano.’ Email to Cecilia Aldarondo. 8 March 2010.



Figure 3.4. I was not allowed to take photographs inside the Academy Film Archive vault. It seems appropriate to substitute an image of the unclaimed ashes stored in the vaults of the LA County Coroner's Office. Source: *A Certain Kind of Death*.

The orphanage metaphor was more than a little apt here. Clad in the drab, functional uniform of grey plastic, all bearing a standard-issue barcode and a neatly typed label, the canisters all exhibited a rather pathetic sort of enforced monotony. As I looked them over I was filled with a strange amalgam of pity, anger, and curiosity. I had several competing urges: to give my escort the slip, disappear behind a shelf, sidle up to a stack of films and whisper, 'I'm getting you out of here;' to pry open several canisters and unspool their contents into a tangled heap; to throw a wild party and screen as many films

at once as possible; to turn on the heat; to touch, taste, and smell them all. I felt positively blasphemous. Every anti-institutional impulse was clamoring for my attention, and I wanted nothing more than to halt the unnecessary and premature entombment of films that were, in my mind, still very much alive.

As we snaked down the aisles, I found myself confronted by the piety and conservatism of preservation. Currently, the vast majority of the world's archived films lie on their backs in suspended animation, hovering between usage and disposal. According to Paolo Cherchi Usai, 'less than 5 per cent of all the titles preserved in the average film archive is seen by scholars, and even less is requested by film festivals. Much of the remaining 95 per cent never leaves the shelves of the film vaults after preservation has been completed.'¹⁷⁵ The result is a kind of institutionalized hoarding, and the likelihood that an ordinary person will ever come into contact with a film diminishes every day.

A close examination of the 'Codes of Ethics' of the two most prominent professional organizations in the field of moving image archiving—FIAF (Fédération internationale des archives du film, or International Federation of Film Archives) and AMIA (the Association of Moving Image Archivists)—reveals the ways in which custodial responsibility demands that the moving image archivist prioritize the fight against decay at the expense of all other forms of engagement with these images. To compare the introductory language of both (emphasis added):

[FIAF]: Film archives and film archivists are the *guardians* of the world's

¹⁷⁵ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*, 69.

moving image heritage. It is their *responsibility to protect* that heritage and to pass it on to posterity in the best possible condition and as the truest possible representation of the work of its creators. Film archives *owe a duty of respect* to the original materials in their care for as long as those materials remain viable. When circumstances require that new materials be substituted for the originals, archives will retain *a duty of respect* to the format of those originals. Film archives recognise that their *primary commitment is to preserve* the materials in their care, and—provided always that such activity will not compromise this commitment—to make them permanently available for research, study and public screening.¹⁷⁶

[AMIA]: AMIA, a collective of individuals, recognizes the diversity of its membership and encourages each individual who acts as a *custodian* of our moving image heritage to strive towards the following common goals:
[...]¹⁷⁷

In FIAF's language, moving image archivists are 'guardians,' in AMIA's, 'custodians;' for both organizations, they are agents operating on behalf of 'our'/'the world's' 'moving image heritage.' In this language, archiving is not merely a profession; it is a *vocation*,¹⁷⁸ couched in the solemn terms of 'responsibility,' 'commitment,' 'balance,' and 'a duty of

¹⁷⁶ Fédération internationale des archives du film, 'Code of Ethics.' Web. <http://www.fiafnet.org/uk/members/ethics.cfm>. Accessed 16 June 2011.

¹⁷⁷ Association of Moving Image Archivists, 'Code of Ethics.' Web. <http://www.amianet.org/about/mission.php>. Accessed 16 June 2011.

¹⁷⁸ As a former Catholic, I happily encourage the religious connotations borne by this term. Vocation, as I am using it, carries with it the dignity and subordination of divinely mandated calling.

respect.’ The implication is that the archivist assumes the burden of remembrance on behalf of the rest of the present generation. Much like the child is tasked with the protection of the familial legacy when her parents die, the weight of keeping the past in reserve—and the potential guilt if that past is forgotten—falls on the archivist’s shoulders.

Such a vocational conception of the work of the moving image archivist has yielded a kind of archival orthodoxy that has dramatically curtailed our present ways of engaging archival photographic material. The success or failure of an archivist’s custodial work depends on the degree to which s/he prevents further degradation of the film heritage; therefore, any attempts to screen, re-use, or otherwise disseminate archival material are subordinate to the priorities of preservation. To quote the ‘Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images’ adopted by UNESCO in 1980: ‘The safeguarding and preservation of all moving images of national production should be regarded as the highest objective.’¹⁷⁹ Similarly, the FIAF Code of Ethics commands that archives ‘deny access rather than expose unique or master material to the risks of projection or viewing if the material is thereby endangered’—hence the premature entombment that greeted me at the Academy Film Archive.

According to this preservationist ethos, an archivist’s neglect of a surviving film print may be lamentable, but the willful destruction or distortion of such material is tantamount to sacrilege. For example, the FIAF Code of Ethics states categorically that

¹⁷⁹ UNESCO. ‘Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images.’ *Records of the General Conference, Twenty-First Session* (Belgrade, 1980), 159.

‘archives will not unnecessarily destroy material even when it has been preserved or protected by copying;’ ‘archives will not edit or distort the nature of the work [...nor will they] seek to change or distort the nature of the original material.’ Furthermore, moving image archivists frequently agree that any intervention on an original film artifact must be reversible.¹⁸⁰

However, the criteria by which archivists determine what constitutes ‘original material’ are muddy at best, and depend on a number of factors, including the circumstances of a print’s circulation, survival, and preservation history, as well as the varying priorities of the institutions and archivists attending to it. While any surviving print could technically be considered ‘original material,’ the limited resources available to moving image archives invariably leads to the privileging of some film materials over others, further encouraging the establishment of a singular, definitive version of a given film that will be more deserving of further care than its less valuable counterparts. This issue is complicated by the fact that unlike unique works of art such as paintings or sculptures, the preservation of any film depends on duplication—that is, a film is preserved through the production of a copy. Therefore, the very process of film preservation necessarily challenges our investment in the uniqueness and integrity of an original artifact. The convoluted channels of print generation entangle the matter even further; a restorer searching for a film may be forced to navigate multiple prints in differing versions and degrees of quality, such that a restored film may, in its final form,

¹⁸⁰ See Bowser (1990), Slide (1992), Cherchi Usai (2000), Busche (2006).

be cobbled together from any number of ‘lesser versions.’¹⁸¹

In their quest to establish the definitive version of a given film, moving image archivists are expected to remove any material traces of events that have subsequently accrued on the print. For example, preservationist Andreas Busche argues that

[...] in the assessment of a film artifact, the restorer must distinguish between characteristics that are integral to the moving image artifact (such as the grain structure) and characteristics that are introduced at a later stage. For example, there is a decisive difference between a picture that is unstable due to the low quality of motion picture technology at the time of production and a picture that appears unstable because of errors in a later duplication process. The first must be respected as inherent to the motion picture, the latter should be corrected.¹⁸²

This commandment is also explicitly stated in the FIAF Code of Ethics: ‘When restoring material, archives will endeavour only to complete what is incomplete and to *remove the accretions of time*, wear, and misinformation.’¹⁸³ According to this expectation, the restoration process involves a sort of historical purging whereby anything intervening between ‘then’ and ‘now’ should be identified and systematically erased. The result is a paradox—while the goal of film restoration is to enable audiences in the present to re-experience the past ‘as it was,’ that goal is only realized through the deliberate destruction of the connective tissue between past and present, ultimately reifying an

¹⁸¹ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*, 44-51.

¹⁸² Andreas Busche, ‘Just Another Form of Ideology?: Ethical and Methodological Principles in Film Restoration.’ *The Moving Image* 6, 2 (2006), 1-29: 18.

¹⁸³ Emphasis added.

unbridgeable divide between the two.

Similarly, Eileen Bowser argues that restorers should try to approximate as closely as possible the film ‘as it was seen by its first audiences.’ The ‘first audience’ rule continues to be an industry standard, driven by the notion that ‘to understand an old film, we try to get into the skin of those who saw it for the first time.’¹⁸⁴ The application of this principle informs all aspects of film restoration, helping the restorer to determine everything from color and contrast, to aspect ratio, to narrative structure. More generally, Bowser’s suggestion that present viewers should not simply try to sympathize with past viewers, but empathize with them—become them, as it were—is suggestive of a curious understanding of the relationship between past and present. In advocating that contemporary viewers ‘get into the skin’ of past viewers, Bowser is implying that film restoration enables contemporary viewers to re-experience the past in all of its multivalent complexity; in other words, a properly restored film facilitates the complete identity of past and present.

I believe that there is an intimacy between these twin imperatives—for restorers to ‘remove the accretions of time’ and for present viewers to ‘get in the skin’ of past ones—and the imperative to mitigate decay at all costs. Both priorities indicate the degree to which contemporary archival practice is driven by a desire to establish a discretely bound, definitive past that can be held in reserve, separate from—but somehow miraculously accessible to—the present. As Philip Rosen puts it, this approach to film is driven by an aspiration towards permanence, a desire to cheat death:

¹⁸⁴ Eileen Bowser, ‘Some Principles of Film Restoration,’ *Griffithiana*, Nos. 38–39, 170–173: 173.

The first vehicle of this subjective project is maintenance of the body against decay in the context of a belief in an afterlife, amounting to an obsession with the problem of ‘embalming time.’ Thus, we can call the founding obsession preservative. The history of the representational arts can then be seen as sublimations of their impossible impulse to defeat death.¹⁸⁵

In aligning film’s ‘founding obsession’ with embalming, Rosen deliberately recalls Bazin’s famous pronouncement that the cinema is ‘change mummified,’ and the conventional theorization of film as an art of record, distinguished by its ability to capture time in a kind of filmic tomb. Cherchi Usai echoes the ‘impulse to defeat death’ himself, stating that ‘moving images arise out of an intent to transform into an object whatever is forgettable and therefore doomed to decay and oblivion.’ In other words, film is memory materialized; ‘the impermanence of these events finds its empirical counterpart in the moving image and determine its status as an artifact.’¹⁸⁶

Crucially, however, Cherchi Usai goes a step further. While he agrees that this attempt to stave off forgetting drives the cinema, for Cherchi Usai this aspiration is ultimately unrealizable:

Experience teaches us that loss of memory is as inevitable as anxiety for the future. In the hopes of avoiding both, the maker of moving images fabricates memories or visions of what is to come in the cherished belief

¹⁸⁵ Rosen, 22.

¹⁸⁶ *The Death of Cinema*, 65.

that they will exist forever in an eternal present of the spectator's will.

Exposing the spectator to a single viewing of that moving image is enough to reveal the futility of such ambition.¹⁸⁷

For Cherchi Usai, the association of film with permanence is predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of the medium. Rather than liken the filmic object to a static container such as a tomb or a mummy, he treats film 'like a biological entity,' a living organism subject to aging, illness, and death.¹⁸⁸ The impossibility of filmic permanence lies in the continual subjection of film to an apparatus (the projector) that strains, stresses, tears, and ultimately destroys the image, not to mention whatever environmental or experiential damage the film might sustain. Even without the corruption of decomposition, film is necessarily subject to degradation and loss through its predisposition to re-use. Therefore, film is a medium bent on its own destruction—'the art of destroying moving images.'¹⁸⁹

If we take to heart Cherchi Usai's proposition that film is predisposed to destruction, we begin to see how the practice of 'removing the accretions of time' refuses something very important about filmic materiality (and by extension, materiality in general). By effectively erasing the traces of decay, moving image restoration denies us the opportunity to experience, through film, the relationship between time and materiality. The decayed film is a living (and dying) example of the irrevocable effects of time's continual passage. Decay—the material degradation of an object due to the passage of time—manifests not only the inevitability of loss, but also the way in which

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 35.

¹⁸⁸ Paolo Cherchi Usai. 'Passio.' Interview by Grant McDonald. *Rouge 10* (2007). Web. 23 June 2011.

¹⁸⁹ Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 7.

such loss occurs with and through material remains. To return to Rebecca Schneider: ‘absent flesh ghosts bones.’¹⁹⁰ In other words, decay produces a recalcitrant materiality that is constituted precisely by what is missing from it; loss and recalcitrance are two facets of materiality that are not oppositional but *cooperative*.

Here, we have the opportunity to revisit Bazin’s notion that cinema is ‘change mummified,’ and to see how his metaphor may not be yoking the cinema to permanence after all. By likening cinema to the mummy (an entity that exhibits an almost supernatural capacity for persistence), it may appear on the surface that Bazin is suggesting that cinema is a process that is constitutionally opposed to change. However, the mummy is hardly an exemplar of stasis—embalmed, shriveled and desiccated, the mummy’s horror lies in its refusal of sameness. Mummification does not eliminate, or even mitigate change; like pickling, it fundamentally alters the constitution of its object. In other words, preservation does not simply depend on change—*preservation is change*.¹⁹¹

Given the preceding attention I have paid to Cherchi Usai’s opposition to cinematic permanence, it seems unsurprising that he would state categorically in an interview that ‘Film was never meant to be permanent. Film was born as something ephemeral.’¹⁹² If cinema is an art of destroying moving images, then it follows that its logical bedfellow is ephemerality rather than permanence. However, his subsequent

¹⁹⁰ Schneider, ‘Performance Remains,’ 104.

¹⁹¹ See Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified*, for a detailed analysis of the oxymoronic facets of the mummy complex. As Rosen puts it, the desire for permanence paradoxically opens the subject to the possibility of change (39).

¹⁹² Patrick Walsh, ‘Passio’ Filmmaker Destroys His Film’s Negative.’ *The Moviefone Blog*. 30 April 2007. Web. 16 June 2011.

statement in the same interview is less expected, perhaps downright startling. He continues, ‘I consider film more as a performing art than an art of reproduction.’¹⁹³ This statement implies a radical reconfiguration of the way the cinema is conventionally thought. Cherchi Usai is diminishing the aspect of the cinema that has given it such cultural clout since its inception—its reproductive ability. In a separate interview, Cherchi Usai clarifies his opposition to the indexical investment in images, saying, ‘I have often argued that images do not demonstrate or prove anything at all; at best, they may achieve the status of symbols, something of much more enduring value than evidence or, worse, ‘content’. Images have nothing to explain; it is us who should explain ourselves to them, and justify the fact that we have made them exist.’¹⁹⁴ He suggests that despite everything that has been written about the centrality of the photographic index, and despite the way in which photographic images have been valorized for their evidentiary potential, the real significance of film lies not in the content of the projected image, but in film’s participation in live events.

If we topple evidence from its pedestal and replace it with decay, we consequently place performance at the center of photographic engagement. In arguing that film is a ‘performing art’ on the one hand, and ‘the art of destroying images’ on the other, Cherchi Usai echoes the many performance theorists who have all remarked on the intimacy between performance and ephemerality. In Chapter 1 I addressed the conventional opposition of performance and the archive, with performance aligning itself with

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Paolo Cherchi Usai, ‘Passio.’ Interview by Grant McDonald.

ephemerality and the archive with permanence. I suggested that, despite the work of writers such as Rebecca Schneider to demonstrate the interplay of ephemerality and remains in performing bodies, there was as yet a lack of attention being paid to such an interplay in archival material itself. I believe that Cherchi Usai's suggestion constitutes such an opportunity. While performance theorists have all tended to affiliate performance with living human bodies, Cherchi Usai binds performance to non-living, non-human objects. He is suggesting that the objects that populate the cinematic archive are as ephemeral as we are, and that like us, they are performing their own disappearance. In other words, cinema as performance necessarily depends on an *interaction* between decaying people and decaying films.

One of the most significant consequences of imagining cinema as performance concerns the question of repetition, i.e. whether or not past events can be resurrected in their re-performance. Such a question necessarily conjures the collective experience of cinematic projection, and invites us to return to Eileen Bowser's notion that film restoration enables contemporary audiences to 'get into the skin' of previous ones. Despite acknowledging its wide acceptance throughout restoration practice, Cherchi Usai is one film preservationist who believes that the 'first audiences' rule of thumb is 'an empirical impossibility.'¹⁹⁵ In his estimation, the viewing of any film is subject to an infinite number of variables that render it unrepeatable:

No such thing as two identical viewings. Films sometimes as brief as the twinkling of an eye. Programs of shorts continuously shown. Spectators

¹⁹⁵ Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 25.

indifferent to where the cycle begins or ends. Audiences who happily cheer, stomp, eat and make love in front of the screen! Projectionists who arbitrarily slow down or accelerate the speed of reality! Images that appear and vanish even before barkers can describe them. Oxyetheric lamps that hiss in the dark.¹⁹⁶

Cherchi Usai's insistence on the unrepeatability of the past implies that viewers' experience of a restored film is predicated not on the resurrection and display of a properly authenticated, unitary past, but on something rather more complicated. Echoing Cherchi Usai, performance theorist Joseph Roach writes that 'no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance.'¹⁹⁷ In other words, the encounter with an archival film is a necessarily *creative* act that requires present actors to invent the past in order to experience it. In the encounter with an archival film, the relation between past and present is one of *inauthentic* repetition, one that recognizes and marshals the necessity and efficacy of loss. Cinematic experience recast as performance can be thought of as an 'improvisatorial behavioral space' in which 'memory reveals itself as imagination.'¹⁹⁸

Cherchi Usai's affiliation of cinema with performance offers a provocative opportunity for understanding the relation between the moving image archive and its custodians more dynamically. In his hands, archiving is a series of ritual performances that our society compulsively engages in because of the inevitability of time's passage.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 47.

¹⁹⁷ Roach, 29.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Unable to stave off our certain disintegration, in archiving we witness it instead. While we might think that archiving is about stasis, it is ultimately an act of ushering in disappearance.

It may appear that Paolo Cherchi Usai's embrace of disappearance as constitutive of the cinema results in a rather contradictory ambivalence about the work of moving image archiving as a whole. Despite a lifelong career working as a leader in the field of film preservation, at many points in his writing Cherchi Usai questions the efficacy of his chosen profession. Having seen his own argument through to its logical conclusion, at times Cherchi Usai seems to throw up his hands and acknowledge the absurdity of the archival enterprise, as evidenced by this passage:

Is this what a film archive is for? A shelter for a privileged minority of cultural icons? A sanatorium for all the rest? An observatory of decomposing nitrate prints, or worse, a cemetery where archivists are paid for the sad duty of witnessing the progressive self-destruction of film history? Saving mummies of what's left, amongst the indifference of our time? Why bother spending fortunes for such an absurd task?¹⁹⁹

In a similarly defeatist vein, he states even more explicitly that film preservation is ultimately an impossible undertaking:

Despite all the claims to justify it in the light of a given cultural programme, any attempt to restore the moving image derives from motivations which are at best alien, if not contrary, to the unstable nature

¹⁹⁹ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*, 69.

of the carrier [the film base]. The main aim of each project of preservation of the moving image is therefore, *strictu sensu* an impossible attempt to stabilise a thing that is inherently subject to endless mutation and irreversible destruction.²⁰⁰

Having theorized the death of (or better yet, *into*) cinema, it would seem that Cherchi Usai might be forced to turn his back on his chosen profession. However, without explanation, he stops short of doing so. While he acknowledges the futility—and the perversity—of any attempt to mitigate decay, at the same time he argues for its continuing necessity. Oriented as it is towards an impossibility, preservation is a ‘necessary mistake.’²⁰¹

This may seem to be an unsatisfactory and rather timid way of resolving what is, in fact, a provocative rhetorical quandary. For if Cherchi Usai is right and film preservation is a ‘mistake’ (his word), why is it also ‘necessary’ (also his word)? However, I believe that the seeming paradox is resolved, if we consider that Cherchi Usai’s continued attention to the disintegrating archive may not be the certain folly that it appears to be. Perhaps his work might be better understood as the kind of non-

²⁰⁰ Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 67.

²⁰¹ Ibid. We see impiety at work in Paolo Cherchi Usai’s own film *Passio*, for which he assembled silent film fragments to a soundtrack of the orchestral work *Passio* by the composer Arvo Pärt. Once the film was completed he struck seven prints, then promptly burned the source footage. It was a clear act of archival provocation; however, it bears noting that while Usai burned his own negative, he also entrusted his seven prints to museums and archives, with strict instructions on their storage and usage. The films are prohibited from being digitized, and can only be exhibited with live accompaniment performed by a full orchestra. While on the one hand, the restrictions he imposes exhibit a clear desire to bear out his theories of cinematic ephemerality and performance, they also signal Cherchi Usai’s inability to follow his own argument of the destruction of the moving image to its logical conclusion. Ultimately, Cherchi Usai is too much of a preservationist to willingly destroy archival material. A true illustration of his theory would have seen his seven prints burn along with the negative.

teleological, repetitive, perpetually unfinished labor that is frequently feminized as ‘immaterial,’ ‘affective,’ and ‘useless.’ Like the keening woman who sits up with the corpse, Cherchi Usai appears to be engaged in a ritual marking of progressive loss.

The basement: the artist as an-archist

On March 19, 2010—four days after my visit to the Academy Film Archive—I descended into a space that seemed to be governed by a flagrant impiety towards preservation and stasis. Craig Baldwin is one of the world’s best-known living found footage filmmakers, an artist whose body of work exhibits a brazenly tongue-in-cheek relation to the visual past, and who is in no way squeamish about appropriating and re-deploying archival material for his own uses. However, my interest in Baldwin is not in the films he makes but in the personal archive of several thousand 16mm films from which he draws most of his source material. For more than 25 years this collection has sat in a basement in the Mission District in San Francisco. It is rather unofficially open to the public, in particular to artists who are interested in acquiring archival film material for their own use. To describe the conditions under which this archive is housed as precarious would be generous. Everything in the space seems to exist on a diagonal plane: the shelves are tilting, the films are toppling, and the ceiling seems like it’s about to cave in upon it all (Fig. 3.5). There is a leaky roof and no climate control.



Figure 3.5.

The collection's system of categorization seems to be driven more by serendipity than sobriety, resulting in some very surprising juxtapositions of titles.



Figure 3.6.

An interested visitor is welcome to make an appointment (or try her luck and just show up), at which time she will be handed a box, and given license to search the collection for the images she might need (this could be anything from a particular title to shots of a given subject). The visitor pulls the films herself (no gloves, but carefully, so as not to disturb the house of cards), examines her materials on a film viewer, identifies the bit she needs, cuts it from the reel, splices the film back together, pays for her respective bits (3 dollars a shot, no matter the length), and then goes on her way. What's in her hand is hers to do with what she wishes, no questions asked.

It's important to note that many of the films moldering in this basement are quite possibly one of a kind—in many cases, provenance is murky at best. Clearly, preservation has taken a backseat. As we've already seen, any archive that turns a blind eye to the loss or destruction of its holdings is violating a cardinal rule of archival protocol (though it is probably worth noting that this archive isn't exactly a card-carrying member of FIAF). The fact that this archive is run by an artist, and makes his films available largely for artistic appropriation, begs the question of to what extent archival protocol stands in direct opposition to a more creative approach to archival material. For example, Eileen Bowser (a 'founding mother' of modern film restoration who wields considerable posthumous significance in the industry) argues that any artistic usage of archival material must always come second to the project of preservation: 'Contemporary artists sometimes appropriate the work of an earlier artist, reworking it in their own image. Is it piracy or the legitimate territory of the artist? The conscience of the artist should decide whether or not this appropriation is an ethical one. We may grant the artist the right to borrow, but never to destroy the original while making it over into something else.'²⁰² Again, we have the injunction against destruction of original material, which in Baldwin's archive is violated the moment a visitor snips her chosen bit from the print. We also have the attempt to impose the custodial responsibility borne by the archivist onto the artist—in the greatest sort of genealogical guilt trip, Bowser leaves the question to the artist's 'conscience.'

²⁰² Bowser, 173.

I would go so far as to argue that Baldwin's basement is not so much an archive with a rather lax set of practices, but instead exhibits a flagrant disrespect of archival protocol. This space and its guardians are positively *an-archic*.²⁰³ By this, I am referring to Derrida's reflections in *Archive Fever* on the etymological affiliations of the word 'archive' with the law. As I explained in the previous chapter, the archons—the archive's guardians who stand at its gates, guarding its entry and contents—also ultimately preside over the instantiation and enforcement of the law. The archive is the place where power and knowledge cohabit. In this sense, to flout the conventions of the archive is to overthrow the law itself.²⁰⁴

I believe that anyone who subordinates the priorities of preservation to those of re-use or outright destruction displays an *an-archic* disposition to the decaying film object—one that opposes the archive's restriction of the films it houses and that is also attuned to the many possible extra-archival sites of cinematic encounter (dumpster diving, jumble sales, illicit hoards, etc). Such a disposition is decidedly more interventionist and, I would argue, *creative* in nature than the custodial position that the archivist currently occupies. In this sense, we might say that anyone who disregards the priorities of preservation is an artist. I'd like to think about this artist as an interested party who is potentially willing to subordinate preservation to other uses, and who might be willing to see the opportunity in acts of archival blasphemy.

²⁰³ See also Chapter 2.

²⁰⁴ Derrida, 2.

I do not use the word ‘artistic’ to refer to a particular artwork, practice, or movement—or even the production of art objects per se—but rather to designate anyone who exhibits a creative orientation toward materiality. In other words, like the custodian, the artist is a subjective position that anyone who encounters archival material can inhabit. Unlike the moving image archivists that I have been studying, the artist that I am referring to does not belong to a specialized class of trained professionals; in fact, this particular figure exhibits the capriciousness of an amateur.²⁰⁵

Agnes Varda’s 2002 film *The Gleaners and I*²⁰⁶ offers an exemplar of the creativity engendered by the artist’s an-archic disposition. Beginning with the French agricultural tradition of the ‘gleaners’ who, after each harvest, would collect whatever remained, Varda modernizes the concept and expands it to include anyone who trawls the world for curiosities that exist in unlikely places—in a trash heap, on a beach, at a jumble sale. This material exists in a precarious, extra-archival state; it is the kind of stuff that we might deem unworthy of preservation. Varda’s film reminds us that all objects exist in a state of flux, capable of trafficking in and out of the archive at multiple points. Given its attenuation to a materiality that escapes the preservative logic of the archive, gleaning is governed not by custodianship, but rather by serendipity; a gleaned object has the capacity to surprise. One artist who trawls the streets of Paris after dark, picking through piles of unwanted stuff, says that the objects he finds are ‘like presents on the street, like it’s Christmas.’ Gleaners are enchanted by oddities that emerge

²⁰⁵ Echoes here of the Outsider Artist, discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

²⁰⁶ *Gleaners and I, The (Glaneurs et la glaneuse, Les)*. Dir. Agnès Varda. Video. Zeitgeist Video, 2000.

unexpectedly—heart-shaped potatoes, a clock without hands. Thus, the gleaner's method for assigning value to things is not institutional, but rather, *creative* in nature. What possibilities might emerge from an embrace of this an-archic disposition? I imagine a community art project in which citizens bring their personal archives of film and photographs, and turn them into artworks. Perhaps they can swap images, or caption each other's material. Perhaps one mercenary soul would pilfer the best stuff from other people's collections.

Overdetermined as it is by the preservative impulse, the moving image archive refuses such opportunities. But we must remember that every archive is more remarkable for its aspirations than its actualities. No archive ever achieves what it sets out to be. Like the house, the archive aspires to be a container, a prison of consignment where documents are preserved and pickled and meaning is decided, a final resting place of epistemological immobility. However, the archive is more sieve than sepulcher, a place marked by entrances and exits, front and back doors. The archive's documents are never fixed in location or meaning, always at risk of being taken up, taken out, made to do things.

Conclusion: the bonfire.

‘Restraint is the greatest virtue of a restorer.’²⁰⁷

‘All action requires forgetting, just as the existence of all organic things requires not only light, but darkness as well. A human being who wanted to experience things in a thoroughly historical manner would be like someone forced to go without sleep, or like an animal supposed to exist solely by rumination and ever repeated rumination. In other words, it is possible to live almost without memory, indeed, to live happily, as the animals show us; but without forgetting, it is utterly impossible to live at all.’²⁰⁸

In ‘The Utility and Liability of History for Life,’ Nietzsche rails against the subordination of present needs to past occurrences. Such an attitude betrays a form of historical knowledge predicated on accumulation and analysis, but never creation. Thus history subsumes life; that is, the overabundance of history makes it impossible to deploy it for present or future use. Instead, the German people suffer from a historical indigestion; they are ‘walking encyclopedias,’ their bellies burdened with the weight of these ‘stones of knowledge.’ The sickness of an excess of history is a form of insomnia; if only the Germans could sleep, that is, forget, they would be able to create.

²⁰⁷ Busche, 23.

²⁰⁸ Nietzsche, 89.

Alternatively, Nietzsche argues in favor of ‘shaping power,’ the generative act precipitated by a judicious balance between knowledge and forgetting. While, for Nietzsche, historical cultivation is on the side of science, ‘shaping power’ aligns itself with art and illusion. To use history in the service of life, then, is to act like the artist, who works against history, and with forgetting, in an imaginative act in order to create the new. As Nietzsche writes, ‘the genuine historian must have the power to recast what is age-old into something never heard of before.’²⁰⁹

I believe that Nietzsche’s assault on his German contemporaries has an analogous application to the contemporary filmic archive, at a moment of ever-increasing crisis. In its current form, the ideology governing moving image archiving is unable to accommodate the loss that is the archive’s necessary condition of possibility. Total recall, although it continues to be one of the greatest dreams of our modern era, is not only a futile endeavor, but also a dangerous one. Forgetting is a necessary preventative against the plenitude of historical knowledge that could only crush us beneath its weight. We see the perils of archival plenitude at work in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story ‘The Library of Babel,’ a story about a library that contains all thoughts in a limitless multitude of versions and translations. This library is the world; its inhabitants circulate through vast networks of shelves filled with books, with no possibility of escape. Knowledge in its totality becomes cacophonous, indecipherable, and useless. Wars break out, people come undone: ‘The certainty that everything has been written annuls us, or renders us

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 129.

phantasmal.²¹⁰ Borges' story is a fantastical projection of the madness that would ensue if a perfect memory were possible; it is also a warning against preservation.

I want to conclude by asking if there is not something redemptive—or perhaps even pleasurable—in the occasional destruction of archival materials. In *Silent Cinema*, Paolo Cherchi Usai narrates the discovery of a batch of silent nitrate feature films in a Midwestern barn:

Most of the reels were in good condition, but for no apparent reason each individual film was lacking the first or the last reel. It was later determined that the missing reels had been used by some local kids for a rather daring form of fireworks display, in which the film was removed from the cans, unspooled, and then ignited at one end of the leader. The game was dangerous—gas es produced by burning nitrate are extremely toxic; inhalation can cause death within a few hours. Still, the witnesses to this playful destruction of film heritage were not aware of that, and the sight of flaming celluloid must have been quite spectacular.²¹¹

I am interested not only in the peculiar mutilation of these films, but also in the abandon with which they became fodder for a dangerous children's game. In *The Death of Cinema* Cherchi Usai tells a similar story about a silent film entitled *This Film is Dangerous*, which graphically depicts the conflagration of burning nitrate and the inherent difficulty of putting out such a fire once it has begun. He reflects that 'In hindsight, this is the snuff

²¹⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*. Andrew Hurley, trans. (Jaffrey: David R. Godine, 2000), 35.

²¹¹ Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema*, 44-5.

movie of cinema itself—people gathering in order to destroy moving images and see how fast they can burn.²¹² And film also catches fire in the 2010 film *Inglourious Basterds*, where Shoshana, the ‘vengeful Jew,’ traps several hundred Nazis in a cinema, piles her entire collection of nitrate films behind the screen, then sets it all alight.

In these three anecdotes, I see a tension between, on the one hand, the irretrievable loss inflicted on the films in question, and on the other, the wondrous cinematic experience engendered by such carelessness. Some might argue that ‘the sight of flaming celluloid’ does not constitute a true cinematic experience, that we need to see photographic images—still and moving alike—in all their indexical glory in order to engage properly with them. But if we are to take Cherchi Usai at his word and consider film as a medium oriented towards its own destruction, it behooves us to amplify our definitions of what we choose to do with the thousands of films that continue to burden us.

Paolo Cherchi Usai concludes *The Death of Cinema* by reprinting two letters he received when the book’s manuscript was under consideration by the publisher. The first is a lengthy reader’s report which effectively advises against publishing the book, accusing moving image archivists of a costly and absurd hand-wringing over the demise of a medium that was never meant to last in the first place. In many ways, the letter echoes the very same problems that Cherchi Usai has been outlining in his text, with the difference that the reader seems to find the entire topic of cinematic obsolescence a waste

²¹² Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, 68.

of time. Taken as a whole, the letter reads rather like a great rhetorical shrug, with the take-home message being ‘So what if film is disappearing? Get over it!’

Cherchi Usai follows this document by also including the editor’s response to this reader’s report, a comparatively short letter stating that despite the reviewer’s lengthy and committed screed against *The Death of Cinema*, the editor intends to publish it anyway. What the reader fails to see in the book, the editor writes, is how the cinematic archive’s disappearance challenges us to recognize our own lack of mastery over the world we think we have depicted in film:

The fact that the unseen is beyond our control is an excellent antidote to our claim to authority over the visible world, and administers a good shaking up to our deluded obsession with permanence. Sooner or later you and I will both disappear, along with our visions and memories of what we have seen and the way we have seen it. Don’t deceive yourself.²¹³

The real lesson of decay is that it simultaneously testifies to the desire for permanence as the proof of modern man’s dominance over the world, and the ultimate unrealizability of that desire. This is what the photographic archive’s certain disappearance has to teach us. The choice of which ritual performances to include in this process is entirely up to us. Perhaps we should throw ourselves a going away party.

²¹³ Ibid, 129.

**Chapter 4 The Sky is Falling:
Architectural Ruin and Daily Life
in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas***

The gentrification of decay

In March 2010 I interviewed Ross Lipman, a film preservationist at UCLA's Film and Television Archive. It was a free-ranging conversation in which we touched on many things—his favorite film restorations, his impressions of the increasing professionalization of film archiving in recent decades, and his own artistic practice as a filmmaker. Over the course of our conversation we discovered that we had a mutual interest in architectural ruin and decay (in Lipman's case, this interest has influenced much of his filmmaking, which draws in part on his experiences squatting in ruined spaces in East London in the 1980s). At one point, the conversation drifted from ruined buildings to Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002), a film that invariably makes its way into such discussions. Made up entirely of fragments of decomposing nitrate film and accompanied by a score by Michael Gordon, *Decasia* is a film about the ruination of film, in which quivering blotches of decay eat away at shadowy, early 20th-century people and places (Fig. 4.1).



Figure 4.1. Still from *Decasia*.

On its release, the film was greeted by reviews that frequently described it in rhapsodic terms such as ‘haunting,’ ‘unbearably beautiful,’ ‘hypnotic,’ and ‘spectacular.’ However, as Lipman and I talked, I confessed my irritation with the film, having found it guilty of a rather indulgent self-importance. Lipman perked up and laughed in agreement: ‘That film is nothing but the gentrification of decay.’²¹⁴

The gentrification of decay: it is a phrase which has snuck up on me repeatedly since, and which continues to pester me now. It seems rather inappropriate to attach the

²¹⁴ Ross Lipman, personal interview. 13 March 2010.

term ‘gentrification’ to the visual contemplation of a ruined image as Lipman does; after all, in its most conventional usage the word seems to have little to do with images, and everything to do with urban space. However, given that one of the underlying concerns of this project is the interrelation of materiality and representation (the image is not only *of* the world but *in* the world, and vice versa), I believe the term ‘gentrification’ can serve as a useful hinge between the last chapter and the present one. Previously, I was preoccupied with decay’s assault on the photograph’s material substrate (an assault not unlike that which afflicts *Decasia*’s nitrate fragments), whereas in this chapter I am focused on a feature-length documentary, *Havana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*,²¹⁵ which investigates the pervasive decay of architecture in contemporary Havana, Cuba. In other words, while previously I was concerned with ruined pictures, here I am interested the picturing of ruin.

In his essay ‘Ruin, Archive, and the Time of Cinema,’ Andre Habib theorizes that decaying images such as *Decasia*’s are pervaded by what he calls a ‘ruinist sensibility.’ In defining this sensibility, Habib argues that in order for an object to become a ruin, it must first undergo an ontological transformation from functioning object to aesthetic artifact:

One of the major characteristics of a ruined construction is its loss of function and original destination (what it was destined to do). When an object loses its physical integrity, its shape and coordinates that permit it

²¹⁵ *Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins*. Dir. Florian Borchmeyer. Video. Raros Media, 2006. DVD.

to actualize or accomplish a certain number of actions or tasks, we say that this thing is in ruins.²¹⁶

The object becomes a ruin when it no longer functions properly, thereby losing its use-value. However, at precisely the same time that this use-value is evacuated, the object gains an aesthetic value that stems from its transformation from *object* into *image*:

But it is by falling into ruin that it appears as *image*, since its usage has ceased to replace it. [...] This could bring us to say [...] that the ruin is a *pure image* of an object, and that the image in ruins is only the image of itself: the loss of vocation makes it worthy of aesthetic appreciation (to our modern sense of art).²¹⁷

The ruined object, devoid of function, is activated as art—an object to be seen but not used. I am interested in the way in which Habib’s definition of the ruin as aesthetic image depends upon a visual distancing between viewer and object; more specifically, I am interested in the way in which the rendering of the aesthetic object as ‘useless but beautiful’ invites a kind of bourgeois contemplation of the decaying past that is enraptured by the romance of the dissolution of the image but not responsible to it, a politically disinterested position that mirrors that of the well-to-do who frequently bankroll the gentrification of derelict neighborhoods.

This chapter’s focus is on a documentary encounter, not just with a particular documentary film, but with the ruined buildings that populate Havana, ruins that serve as

²¹⁶ Habib, 123.

²¹⁷ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

documents of a past that contaminates the present moment. I am interested in ruination, not so much as the antithesis of gentrification, but as its frequent precursor, and occasional bedfellow. While I spend the majority of my attention on the ruined landscape of Havana as it is represented in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*, gentrification (and the economic marginalization and displacement of the urban poor that frequently accompany it) is never far behind. Havana is a city that has been undergoing profound transformations over the past two decades, spurred on the one hand by decaying infrastructure, and on the other by a boom in urban renewal and restoration projects funded through state partnerships with foreign corporations. Although I will describe the nature and consequences of these building projects later in the chapter, for the present moment I wish to highlight the way that such projects have initiated a profound transformation in the social fabric of Havana, leading to what Joseph Scarpaci has termed ‘nothing less than gentrification [...] pure and simple.’²¹⁸ Like the bourgeois contemplation afforded by *Decasia*’s activation as ‘useless but beautiful,’ I am interested in the way in which Havana’s gentrification depends upon a touristic attitude towards decay that is sufficiently distanced from the ruined landscape, so as to revel in its beauty. I demonstrate how the very architectural projects that profess to renew Havana’s barren landscape trade in ruination, exploiting the mystique and romance of the city’s degradation even as they decry it.

²¹⁸ Joseph Scarpaci, ‘Re: some questions regarding urban renewal and restoration in Habana Vieja.’ Email to Cecilia Aldarondo. 10 December 2011.

In the ruined Necrópolis

When I travel to a new city I always make a point to visit its cemeteries. It's a strangely merciful way to acquaint myself with a place. I can look without being looked at, indulge in my tourist's gaze for as long as I wish. This gaze, while always voyeuristic, also carries with it a tinge of the catastrophic. I go to graveyards to witness a particular sort of tragedy; in the cheapest sort of rubbernecking fashion, I always seek out abandoned tombs. The more neglected, the better. I appreciate the perversity of an abandoned grave, the wholesale abdication of care for the dead.

In July 2007 I visited the Necrópolis de Cristóbal Colón, Havana's largest and best-known cemetery. I was alone, walking the city on one of my last days in Cuba. I spent several hours in the cemetery, which was almost entirely empty. Just me and the tombs, hundreds of them, bone-white marble beaming under the unforgiving glare of the midday sun.

I noticed with not a little pleasure that many of the graves were in a state of woeful neglect. I noted broken windows, cracked plaster, peeling paint, stolen effigies. Inside one mausoleum I found a *pietà* silhouetted by light pouring in behind it, via the gaping hole of half-shattered stained glass. (Fig. 4.2).



Figure 4.2.

The wrought iron gate outside another had been invaded by an advanced case of rust; inside, the ceiling had given way, covering the tomb and floor in broken bits of plaster, and the once-uniformly green walls had faded, cracked, and peeled, leaving a welter of imperfections behind (Fig. 4.3).



Figure 4.3.

This chapter is about ruins, but not necessarily the ones that silently populate the Necrópolis de Cristóbal Colón. Rather, my focus is on ruins of a particular kind—the inhabited ruins at the center of a feature-length documentary from 2006, *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*. I recount the spectatorial pleasures of my visit to the Necrópolis de Cristóbal Colón because I believe that there is a fateful complicity between touristic consumption and the aesthetics of ruination, a complicity which courses throughout *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*. In exploring Havana’s ruined built environment and its effects on the many Cubans who are forced to inhabit buildings on the verge of

collapse, the film asks, what does it mean that an entire city, rather than an isolated building, is afflicted by ruin? How does the fact that these ruins are inhabited contradict conventional ways of thinking about ruination and its purpose in society? What is the connection between the crisis of ruin in Havana and the Cuban revolution? These are ruins which, in many ways, frustrate and perplex our conventional thinking, not only about ruins and what they mean, but about the nature of time itself, and the impact of this temporal re-shaping on everyday life as a form of politics.

As the film narrates, and as I will demonstrate, the concept of the ruin is deeply rooted in what *Habana*'s director Florian Borchemeyer calls the 'classical' definition of the ruin, a definition in which ruins exist for the sake of satisfying the touristic gaze in search of contemplation. In this tradition, ruins are temporary sites of suspension from everyday life, meant for reflection, or for the contemplation of historical events. We may visit, but we seldom stay long—for the famous ruins, we pay admission, take a guided tour, get our snapshots, and go; for the abandoned ruins, our visits are truncated by the 'no trespassing' sign that threatens arrest, or the possibility of danger or accident. We are supposed to look *at* ruins, not from *within* them.

Here, we can see how the tourist's temporary encounter with the ruin occurs within a specifically visual register. Not only does this encounter frequently involve the prosthetic visualization of a camera—an object that functions as a material intermediary between the tourist and the place she is visiting—but it is equally important to note that photography, film, painting, and other visual forms pre-condition the tourist's experience. A tourist arrives at a given site already primed by images that circulate in her

consciousness and color her expectations and understandings of the place she visits. Such visual material forms what Victor Burgin calls a ‘heterogeneous psychical object’, a kind of unconscious mnemonic sediment that lies dormant until it is activated in the moment of encounter.²¹⁹

Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas structures its argument through portraits of five residents of crumbling Havana buildings: Totico, who spends more time on the roof of his building tending pigeons than with his wife, Magdalena; Misleidys, who avoids her troubled past by writing fantastical stories from the safety of her bed; Antonio José Ponte, the ‘ruinologist’ whose writing has been banned in Cuba; Nicanor, once jailed for counter-revolutionary activity; and Reinaldo, who lives in an abandoned theater. The film argues that there is a causal relationship between the decay of Havana’s buildings and the decay of its inhabitants: the ruins of Havana cause ruined souls. This argument—that there is a one-to-one relationship between the city’s architectural devastation and an attendant devastation of the Cuban people—has profound implications for a country in the midst of political and economic transformation.

As a mode of picturing ruin, I am interested in the way that *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* exposes the voyeurism inherent in ruin contemplation, and simultaneously redoubles the spectatorial pleasures of ruin tourism. Because of its investment in the Picturesque depiction of decay, *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* gives the impression that Cuba has been overtaken by historical paralysis, a view that is ultimately limited in its scope. In its wholesale attachment to decline, degradation, and

²¹⁹ Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 9.

ruin, the film excludes the attendant processes of architectural improvisation, displacement of people, and reconstruction, renovation and renewal of historically significant buildings that are currently transforming the Cuban built environment. Even as it rightly points to the ‘scandal’ of inhabited ruins, by making ruins out of its characters, the film incorporates them seamlessly into a Picturesque ruined landscape, conforms to the very classical notion of ruins that it appears to trouble, and ultimately facilitates the viewer’s experience of ruin tourism. In doing so, *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* disenfranchises its human subjects in precisely the ways it claims that the Cuban government has done and occludes the temporal paradoxes of contemporary Cuban life that are borne out in an ever-fluctuating built environment.

Havana’s splendid sinking

It is a well-worn cliché that Cuba has not changed since 1959. Cuba is frequently imagined in popular visual culture—in tourist guidebooks, documentaries like *The Buena Vista Social Club* and fictional narratives like Andy Garcia’s 2005 film *The Lost City*, blogs and news articles, among a whole host of other written and visual texts—as a singular sort of time capsule, a place suspended in amber, as though the revolution’s triumph in 1959 and the subsequent US trade embargo brought the country to a grinding halt. While some invoke markers of the 1950s (with the American cars, the ‘Yank Tanks’ that still populate the Cuban landscape as the readiest example), popular representations of Cuba outside the country as frequently cite the country’s crumbling

built environment, the colonial-era edifices that any visitor to the country cannot help but encounter.

Such texts frequently contrast the vibrant pleasures of the pre-revolutionary past with the torpor of the late-revolutionary present, and trade in the notion that Cuba's allure lies in a pathological anachronism. A Reuters article from 2007 entitled 'Havana's former grandeur decays and crumbles' markets a Cuba, spectacularly trapped between stasis and decline, to an international audience:

In teeming, pot-holed Central Havana, poverty coexists with some of the world's finest examples of neo-Baroque and Art Deco architecture built before Fidel Castro came to power in 1959. [...] Foreign visitors stroll through spectacularly dilapidated streets snapping photographs of the city's rotting grandeur and vintage American cars caught in a bizarre time warp.²²⁰

This quote reads as though it could come from the mouth of a tour guide, leading foreigners through Havana's dusty streets. On your left, one of the world's finest examples of pre-Castro neo-Baroque architecture! On your right, a collapsed building! [Yank Tank ambles by, sputtering smoke from its tailpipe] Check out the fins on that car! Here you have it, folks—time travel, Cuba-style! [sound of camera shutters, clicking away]

²²⁰ Anthony Boadle, 'Havana's former grandeur decays and crumbles,' Reuters online, 23 March 2007, Web. Accessed 25 January 2012.

In a similar vein, Florian Borchmeyer, says in an interview that Cuba is a place whose relationship to time is both seductive and contradictory:

Es una especie de contrauniverso raro que puede tener un gran encanto.

[...] pero este contrauniverso también es totalmente anacrónico.

- - -

It's an odd kind of counter-universe that can be incredibly enchanting [...]

but this counter-universe is, simultaneously, totally anachronistic.²²¹

This global fascination with Cuba is founded on a paradox. On the one hand, nothing has changed since 1959—Cuba is a kind of Caribbean purgatory, where Cubans wait to for the embargo to end, while exiles in Miami wait for Castro to die—and on the other, everything has—Cuba is overwhelmed by decline, a country mired in its own political failures.

I seek to flesh out the affinities between this rhetoric of stasis—this notion that Cuba is one big waiting room—and this rhetoric of decline, particularly as it manifests itself in the depiction of architectural ruin that has become a repeated theme in several films produced in Cuba in recent years. As these films demonstrate, the issue of architectural ruin in Havana constitutes nothing short of a crisis in Havana's current building stock—a crisis with profound implications for Havana's social and political future. For decades, Havana's architecture has been steadily degrading, due on the one hand to government neglect (in favor of other revolutionary priorities, such as health and

²²¹ Florian Borchmeyer, 'Cuba es un lugar donde nada avanza,' interview with Sandra Ellegiers, *Cuba Encuentro*, 6 September 2006. Web. Accessed 23 February 2008. English translation mine.

education), and on the other to a shortage of resources (brought on in part by the US trade embargo, and exacerbated by the economic crisis of the 1990s). At the present moment, the extent and gravity of this crisis is hard to overestimate. Havana, quite literally, is falling to pieces. It is worth quoting a journalist, Theodore Dalrymple, who describes the Havana landscape in this way:

The stucco has given way to mold; roofs have gone, replaced by corrugated iron; shutters have crumbled into sawdust; paint is a phenomenon of the past; staircases end in precipices; windows lack glass; doors are off their hinges; interior walls have collapsed; wooden props support, though not with any degree of assurance, all kinds of structures; ancient electrical wiring emerges from walls, like worms from cheese; wrought ironwork balconies crumble into rust; plaster peels as in a malignant skin disease; flagstones are mined for other purposes. Every grand and beautifully proportioned room—visible through the windows or in some places through the walls that have crumbled away—has been subdivided by plywood partitions into smaller spaces, in which entire families now live. Washing hangs from the windows of what were once palaces. Every entranceway is dark, and at night the electric lights glimmer rather than shine. No ruination is too great to render a building unfit for habitation: Havana is like a city that has been struck by an

earthquake and its population forced to survive among the wreckage until relief arrives.²²²

While this passage is undeniably tragic, it also paints a vivid picture of a city on a spectacular precipice, beautifully perched on the brink of utter disaster. The world painted here is almost magical in its unpredictability. It's another world, full of worms, rust, and lurking street bandits. Havana is a city so rich in devastation, it must be seen to be believed.

While architectural neglect and urban ruination are not uncommon in cities throughout the developing world, what distinguishes Havana's case is the ubiquity of ruins across the city. In its most conventional usage, the term 'ruin' designates a place that has been legitimated and demarcated as uniquely meaningful; as Lisette Smits and Alexis Vaillant put it, 'when something is falling apart, one doesn't necessarily address it as a ruin unless it represents a certain value. A fallen tree won't become a ruin unless it's a very special tree.'²²³ According to this logic, a ruin should be aberrant, a jarring abnormality in the landscape. However, in Havana the ruins are everywhere. As one writer puts it, 'Havana is like Beirut, without having gone through the civil war to achieve the destruction.'²²⁴

This ubiquity is remarkable both for its devastating effects on Cuban society—hundreds of buildings are on the verge of collapse, with thousands of Cubans living in

²²² Theodore Dalrymple, 'Why Havana Had to Die'. *City Journal*, Summer 2002. Web. Accessed 24 February 2008.

²²³ Lisette Smits and Alexis Vaillant, 'In the Ruin Tavern', *RAW: Among the Ruins* (Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2007), 27.

²²⁴ Dalrymple. Web.

precarious to outright life-threatening circumstances—and, at the same time, for the role that decay has played in the marketing of Cuba to tourists. Ruin is part of Cuba’s mystique. Like Venice, whose allure stems not solely from the grandeur of its palazzos, but from their splendid sinking into the city’s canals, Cuba’s *casas coloniales* hover on the brink of dissolution. For anyone with a penchant for decadence, contemporary Cuba is a prime destination. However, there is one major obstacle to these pleasures—people. The problem with Cuba’s ruins is that they are inhabited, a fact which proves ethically and aesthetically troublesome for the would-be tourist. A particularly acerbic blog post entitled ‘Decay, Gorgeous Decay!’ rails against what it perceives to be the perversity of this sort of tourist rubber-necking:

Oh, the crumbling, no-longer-beautiful houses! Ah, the lovely two-foot-deep potholes, and rickety Chinese bicycles. [...] How people can derive pleasure from evidence of the suffering of innocents is beyond me, and few sights are more unseemly to my eyes than seeing a Lonely Planet-waving travel snob whine about how some current or formerly misgoverned hellhole has been “ruined” by all that yucky reconstruction, material success, and (worst of all!) tourism. Oh how pretty!²²⁵

[As one writer puts it, ‘Havana is like Beirut, without having gone through the civil war to achieve the destruction.’²²⁶]

²²⁵ Matt Welch, ‘Decay, Gorgeous Decay!’ *Reason Magazine*, 8 June 2005. Web. Accessed 28 February 2008.

²²⁶ Dalrymple. Web.

The housing crisis is an issue affecting the vast majority of Cubans, and exists at the core of any attempt to examine the Cuban Revolution's aspirations and failures over the past five decades. At present, Havana's architectural devastation is ubiquitous; to be in Havana is to be immersed in decay. However, the Cuban question has never been a simple one, and the schizophrenic, precarious, and rapidly changing nature of the Cuban political situation means that to write about Cuba now means, perhaps more than ever, to court certain madness. The paradoxes of life in contemporary Cuba are so numerous, so interpenetrating, and so widespread that visitors and citizens alike report a sense of vertigo. Research in Cuba, never easy, is complicated by several factors: (1) a general lack of accurate information, due on the one hand to a lack of infrastructural resources common to developing nations, and due on the other to censorship by the state, and (2) the rapid and unpredictable nature of political reform, much of which is announced in cryptic language of the bureaucracy.

Picturing ruin in contemporary Cuban cinema

In recent years, Cuban cinema has, in many instances, been overtaken by a backward glance. Much recent film and video-making on the island—particularly by young directors working independently of ICAIC, the national film institute, whose tight grip on the country's film production has gradually loosened due to the economic crisis that began with the 'Special Period' of the 1990s, alongside the advent of relatively affordable digital technology—is deeply invested in Cuban cultural memory. These films seem to have an attitude towards the Cuban past that is evaluative, self-examining, and

concerned. It's not triumphant or revisionist, as many of the early films of the revolution were. I'm thinking here of films like *La primera carga al machete*,²²⁷ or *Lucía*,²²⁸ both from 1968, early revolutionary films that sought to reclaim Cuban history in wholly anti-imperialist terms, as told through the mythical *cien años de lucha*, the ongoing, hundred-year struggle for independence, beginning from the slave revolts against the Spanish and leading all the way through the overthrow of Batista.²²⁹ Instead, the memorial attitude that I see in contemporary Cuban film seems pensive, as if to ask of the Cuban past, 'How did we get here? What has happened to us? What could we have done differently?'

We see this attitude in Laimir Fano's short documentary *Model Town*, from 2006, which explores the heyday of the pre-revolutionary factory town of Hershey, and the

²²⁷ *La primera carga al machete/The First Charge of the Machete*. Dir. Manuel Octavio Gómez. Perf. Adolfo Llauradó, José Rodríguez, Idalia Anreus, Pablo Milanés. ICAIC, 1968. VHS. Film titles will appear in Spanish, with the English translation in footnotes.

²²⁸ *Lucía*. Dir. Humberto Solás. Perf. Raquel Revuelta, Eslinda Núñez, Adela Legrá. ICAIC, 1968. VHS.

²²⁹ In his seminal book *Cuban Cinema*, Michael Chanan describes films like *Primera Carga* and *Lucía* as *cine de rescate*, or 'cinema of rescue,' historically oriented films that sought to retrieve the Cuban past, and recast all of Cuba's national history as an ongoing project of anti-imperialist struggle. While Chanan's description of this revisionist tendency is a worthy one (especially in considering how this tendency is paralleled in other revolutionary forms such as Soviet cinema), it is also worth noting that Chanan's own recounting of the first decade of revolutionary cinema (like all history writing) is carefully curated, in the service of his own celebratory framing of Cuban revolutionary film. In his book, Chanan repeatedly prioritizes those films and directors (such as Manuel Octavio Gómez, director of *Primera Carga*) whose projects dovetailed with the fledgling revolution's priorities. At the same time, Chanan ignores or derides other films and directors whose relationship to the revolution was more ambivalent. For example, we could look to his description of *P.M.*, Saba Cabrera Infante's documentary about Cuban nightlife, which caused a fervor when it was banned in 1961. The controversy elicited by *P.M.* led to Castro's famous 'Words to the Intellectuals,' in which Castro made his now-legendary pronouncement about the decided, yet totally ambiguous limits of artistic freedom: 'Dentro de la Revolución todo, fuera de la Revolución, nada' ('inside the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing'). While Chanan describes the furor around *P.M.*'s censorship in detail, he ultimately shrugs off the film itself as 'modest' (134) and 'only mildly offensive' (133). We could also look to Chanan's exclusion of the oeuvre of Nicolás Guillén Landrián, a prolific experimental filmmaker and documentarian who was jailed and tortured in the 1970s, and eventually escaped to Miami in the 1980s. Landrián's films exhibit a masterful use of editing, on-screen text, and voice-over, and establish him as one of the most inventive figures of early revolutionary cinema—however, his films' irony and ambiguity made him an enemy of the state, and he does not receive so much as a footnote in Chanan's account. *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

dramatic decline its community has experienced since the expulsion of capitalist businesses from the island during the first years of the revolution. Or we could look at two films—Julia Mariano’s *Desvarío*, from 2005, and 2003’s *La época, el encanto, y fin del siglo*,²³⁰ by Juan Carlos Cremata²³¹—that while different in sensibility, subject matter, and aesthetic, still share an interest in the legacy of a particular historical event, the terrorist attack on the Havana department store El Encanto in 1961, and its potential relation to contemporary Cuban social issues, from mental illness to general malaise.

For several Cuban filmmakers, this evaluative tendency has manifested itself in a fascination with Cuba’s crumbling built environment. The short film *Sola: la extensa realidad*²³² is one such film, which enacts a visual investigation of an abandoned school in the city of Camagüey, Cuba. As the camera moves through the building’s floors, rooms, hallways, and courtyards, it simulates our potential encounter with this place. We, as viewers, can imagine ourselves happening upon this crumbled, monolithic structure rising out of the earth, and being lured inside. The camera takes us up stairs; it peers through blown-out windows and holes in the roof (Figs. 4.4, 4.5). Occasionally, it lands on a wall, on which text is stenciled in peeling paint: ‘El cuidado de la propiedad social es tarea de todo Revolucionario.’/‘The care of social property is the job of every Revolutionary.’ On another wall, an image of a computer connected to a network of wires, and the word: ‘Memoria.’

²³⁰ ‘La Época’ (‘The Epoch’), ‘El Encanto’ (‘The Enchantment’), and ‘Fin de Siglo’ (‘End of the Century’) were all famous department stores in Havana in the 1960s. Thus the title of the film plays on its reference to a historical period of Cuban prosperity, as well as the words’ reinforcement of that nostalgic connotation.

²³¹ *Desvarío*. Dir. Julia Mariano. 2005. Video. *La época, el encanto, y fin del siglo*. Dir. Juan Carlos Cremata. 2003. Video.

²³² *Sola: La extensa realidad/Solitary: The Vast Reality*. Dir. Gustavo Pérez. 2002. Video.



Figure 4.4. Still from *Sola: La extensa realidad*.



Figure 4.5. Still from *Sola: La extensa realidad*.

Accompanying these images is a soundtrack which both complements and complicates them. It is the ambient sound of voices echoing through open rooms. We hear a woman's voice counting loudly—'veintiséis, veintisiete'—we hear laughter. The camera moves outside and shows us a patch of paved asphalt, and it's the sound of male voices shouting at each other, along with the percussive bounce of rubber on tar, that confirms our suspicion that what we see are the remains of a basketball court. Here, the acousmatic voice-over enacts the desire that every ruin inspires—to bring back the dead, coupled with a forensic will to know what happened in this place. For ruins are at their

best when they are not fully identified. The unfinished, contingent state of ruins means that they invite visitors to revel in their mystery, in the enfolding of knowing and not knowing, at once, in a place.

Habana and the Picturesque

When I use the term ‘Picturesque,’ I do not imply its more colloquial usage—as in, a place could be said to be ‘picturesque’ when it displays a certain kind of charming, inoffensive beauty. Rather, I am referring to the Picturesque as an aesthetic mode that was predominant in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Britain, impacting everything from painting, to landscape and garden design, to literature. The Picturesque is a concept with a long and complex intellectual history, and is characterized by a heterogeneity that, as Stephen Copley and Peter Garside point out, has at times rendered the concept ‘so ill-defined as to be virtually meaningless’²³³ (similarly, Malcolm Andrews calls the Picturesque ‘both a ridiculous cliché and a concept of baffling complexity’).²³⁴ More significantly, the Picturesque is notable as a response to dramatic social and political changes in Britain, in particular the regularization and enclosure of common land during the agrarian revolution. Emerging just as the landscape was being disciplined for economic purposes, the Picturesque was an aesthetic mode characterized by a bucolic nostalgia for the unfinished, improvised Nature that was supposedly under threat. The

²³³ Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, ‘Introduction.’ *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape, and Aesthetics Since 1770*. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

²³⁴ Malcolm Andrews, ‘The Metropolitan Picturesque.’ *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape, and Aesthetics Since 1770*. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 282.

ideological and aesthetic impact of the Picturesque cannot be underestimated, and the reverberations of the Picturesque can be felt even in a film about contemporary Havana. While it is beyond the scope of this current project to provide a nuanced history of the Picturesque—indeed, there are already a number of texts that do this work²³⁵—I wish to touch on a number of aspects of the Picturesque that inform my understanding of *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*.

But first, a note on the applicability of the Picturesque to a film about contemporary Havana. While it may seem farfetched to attach a term that is deeply rooted in the 18th and 19th-century British rural landscape to a contemporary, urban context in the Caribbean, I wish to advocate for the ambulatory nature of this concept. Theorists and historians have frequently linked the Picturesque to a central goal of British colonialism, namely the conquest of foreign landscapes.²³⁶ Therefore, it does not seem quite so extraordinary to shift our gaze to Cuba, whose history has been so bound up with European conquest, and even now stands on the brink of a forceful re-entry into the global economy, its lands ripe for neo-colonialist exploitation.

²³⁵ Some of the most frequently cited primary texts on the Picturesque are William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; On Sketching Landscape* (1792); Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry Into the Principles of Taste* (1805); and Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque* (1810). John Ruskin was very influenced by the legacy of the picturesque, and advances his own re-consideration of the concept in Part V of *Modern Painters* (1906). For contemporary secondary literature on the concept, see Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, eds., *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770* (1994); Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (1986); Elizabeth Meyer, 'Situating Modern Landscape Architecture,' *Theory in Landscape Architecture: A Reader* (1992), et al.

²³⁶ See, for example, Stephen Copley and Peter Garside's *The Politics of the Picturesque*, in which they argue that the Picturesque repeatedly collides with colonial discourses: 'In the case of the Scottish Highlands, for instance, the combination of political repression, economic exploitation, and aesthetic sentimentalisation of the Scottish landscape in the early nineteenth century clearly renders the Picturesque "invention" of the region a hegemonic cultural manifestation of the English colonizing presence. In a broader field the shaping and constraining legacy of Picturesque assumptions can be discerned in European accounts of North America, India, Africa and Australia.' 'Introduction,' 6-7.

Secondly, as Malcolm Andrews points out in his essay ‘The Metropolitan Picturesque,’ the attachment of the Picturesque to the rural landscape, while habitual, is by no means total. For Andrews, not only is the Picturesque influential in urban design, but it also informs the customs of urban tourism, and in particular, the negotiation of tourism with the problems of urban poverty.²³⁷ While Andrews focuses his study on a site (Victorian London) that is both historically and geographically ‘closer to home,’ I believe that his assertions apply to the contemporary Cuban context. In other words, insofar as the Picturesque is a concept that has endured across time and space, I wish to argue for its not-so-latent influence on the aesthetic representation of ruin that suffuses *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*.

In understanding the way that the Picturesque aesthetic tinges a film like Borchemeyer’s, it is probably best to begin at the most obvious source of meaning: the word itself. ‘Picture-esque’ means, quite literally, ‘like a picture;’ in the British Picturesque tradition, the term indicated the degree to which there was a degree of similarity between a given landscape and its representation:

Applied to landscape, the term *picturesque* referred to its fitness to make a picture; applied to pictures, the term referred to the fidelity with which they copied the picturesque landscape. If the highest praise for nature was

²³⁷ Andrews, 282-3.

to say that it looked like a painting, the highest praise for a painting was to say that it resembled a painterly nature.²³⁸

Therefore, the Picturesque tradition is predicated on a wholly *visual* relation to nature. As Elizabeth Meyer puts it, the notion of ‘landscape as a scene’ supplants ‘site as a place,’ reducing a multi-sensory, three-dimensional environment to a two-dimensional plane of vision. For Meyer, this reduction of the landscape to image is complicit with the Enlightenment, and the early modern scientific investment in the primacy of vision in studying nature:

Humans became increasingly separated from the non-human world about them. What had previously been an insider’s relationship to a vitalist, organic world became an outsider’s relationship to a rational, mechanized world. The inhabitant became a connoisseur of visual scenery—the Picturesque landscape—or an observer/measurer of quantifiable landscape variables. This emphasis on the visual and recordable reduced the landscape to two-dimensional surfaces, either the vertical surface of the picture plane or the horizontal surface of the geographer’s map. Both facilitated the control of the landscape through abstraction, detachment, and distance. This distancing was complicit with the belief that scientific domination of nature was a prerequisite of progress.²³⁹

²³⁸ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 57.

²³⁹ Elizabeth Meyer, ‘Situating Modern Landscape Architecture,’ *Theory in Landscape Architecture: A Reader*. Simon Swaffield, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 28.

Here, Meyer articulates the way in which visual distancing becomes a prerequisite for man's engagement with nature, whether it be for the purposes of scientific study or aesthetic contemplation. The landscape becomes something to be *looked at*, but not inhabited.

In this configuration, the Picturesque landscape offers itself up for visual consumption by a temporary visitor—in other words, the tourist. It should come as no surprise that the Picturesque was extremely popular with wealthy English tourists, due in large part to the guidebooks of William Gilpin, one of the seminal theorists of the Picturesque. In his books, Gilpin offered scenic tours of many sites in the British countryside, thereby making the Picturesque available to a genteel general reader with the means to travel. The Picturesque's centrality for the development of British tourism signals the way in which contemplation of the landscape is defined as a class-bound pursuit, available to a privileged few.

In addition to inflecting tourism, the Picturesque also facilitated the landed gentry's transformation of common land into agriculture. As Bermingham puts it, 'the picturesque landscape was precisely the opposite of the landscape produced by the agricultural revolution, and therein lay a primary aspect of its value.'²⁴⁰ For Bermingham, theorists of the Picturesque such as Uvedale Price (who also happened to be a member of the landed gentry) valorized the unfinished improvisation of nature and the rough charm of peasants and gypsies as a compensatory counterpoint to the mechanization and appropriation of land for agricultural use:

²⁴⁰ Bermingham, 66.

Although the picturesque celebrated the old order—by depicting a pastoral, preenclosed landscape—some of its features—the class snobbery, the distancing of the spectator from the picturesque object, and the aestheticization of rural poverty—suggest that at a deeper level the picturesque endorsed the results of agricultural industrialization.²⁴¹

I believe that this sort of Picturesque consumption of the landscape courses through Borchemeyer's film, whether intentionally or not. It is important to note that ruined architecture occupied a prominent place in the Picturesque tradition—paintings were frequently populated by crumbling abbeys, mills, or estates, while artificial ruins became hugely popular in British garden design. These ruined buildings dovetailed with the Picturesque's affinity for irregularity, spontaneity, and roughness, characteristics which served to distinguish the Picturesque from the merely beautiful. In the words of Richard Payne Knight, 'many objects, that we call picturesque, certainly are not beautiful; since they may be void of symmetry, neatness, cleanness, &c.'²⁴²

Such irregularities abound in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*. While its ostensible focus is on its interview subjects, throughout the film the camera lingers on structural details: a rusted railing, missing screws, swings precariously as people grab it on their way downstairs; a crack snakes down the entire length of a supporting column; pay phones repeatedly eat the change that is deposited in them; sewage oozes out of leaking pipes as rain pours in from leaking roofs. The film takes great pains to

²⁴¹ Ibid, 75.

²⁴² Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry Into the Principles of Taste* (London, 1805), 148.

incorporate its five protagonists into this Picturesque ruined landscape, composing portraits of five stand-ins for a ruined Cuban population. The five characters each embody a particular character trait that is alternately a symptom or a byproduct of the pathological historical excess that afflicts them: refuge (Totico), languor (Misleidys), bitterness (Ponte), capitulation (Nicanor), and habit (Reinaldo). At varying points throughout the film, each character is framed in a shot that incorporates her/him into her/his respective ruined landscapes. These shots serve a crucial function, providing important visual support for the film's rhetoric of ruination.

Totico: refuge

The film opens with the plaintive entreaties of La Lupe's bolero 'Ruega por nosotros,' the sound of which overlays contrasting shots of two Havanas: digital video footage of contemporary Havana's crumbling architecture and black and white archival footage depicting smiling, elegantly dressed women on a boat. As the camera cuts to a sweeping wide shot of the Havana cityscape from atop a roof, the film's title appears onscreen; the camera then pulls back to reveal a pigeon coop, and a man emerging from a hatch in the roof. Next is a medium wide shot of the man sitting in front of the coop; the music ends abruptly, and we hear the diegetic cooing of pigeons. The camera cuts again to a wide shot of the man moving around the roof, and we hear in voiceover:

En la reencarnación, si existe, me gustaría ser paloma. Para tener la libertad de poder volar, y moverme para donde yo quiera y pueda, y hasta donde la fuerza me deje. Llegar a los lugares que uno quiera rápido. Eso es una de las facilidades que tiene volar. Puedes moverte p'aquí y p'allá, sin contar con nadie. Solamente con el aire.

If reincarnation exists, I would like to be a pigeon. Have the freedom to fly wherever I desire and imagine I can go so long as I have the strength. I could get places quickly. That's the advantage of flying. You have the freedom to move here or there, dependent on no one—just the air currents.

The camera cuts to a medium close up of the man leaning against the edge of the rooftop.

The late afternoon sun bathes him and the city beneath him in soft yellow light. He continues:

Bueno hoy estaré aquí. Mañana donde estaría no se... en Pinar del Río, otro día estaría llegando a Santiago de Cuba. Y si puedo llegar y cruzar e irme para otros países, a conocer, a mirar, a ver... a relacionarme con otras palomas. Estados Unidos, lo único que hay son 90 millas, 180 kilómetros. Caminaría ese kilometraje sin necesidad de... nada mas que un poco de agua y un poco de ¿?? En el buche, como se dice vulgarmente.

Today I might be here and tomorrow, who knows... maybe in Pinar del Río, another day in Santiago de Cuba. And if I could I would fly to other

countries, to get to know new places—and meet other pigeons. It's only 90 miles from here to the US, about 180 kilometers. I could fly that distance without anything... just some water and beans in the gut.

This is how we meet Totico, the first of the film's five protagonists. As the film unfolds we learn more about him: he works as the caretaker of the Arbos building, a decrepit tenement built in 1926 that houses 120 families, according to his son's estimate. Besides maintaining the building, Totico spends most of his free time on the roof, tending to his pigeons. Meanwhile, his wife Magdalena has divorced him and moved out. Magdalena initially says she left Totico because she was fed up with the building's poor state ('people live like animals,' she says). However, as the film unfolds a different story emerges: she left because Totico's preoccupation with his pigeons became downright obsessive. As she narrates it, every day after work Totico climbed straight to the pigeon coop, not to descend until nightfall. One day, she issued an ultimatum: the pigeons or her. 'I felt confident,' she says. 'I thought he would choose me. But no, he went for the pigeons.'

As Magdalena interprets it, over the years Totico became lost to himself, a tragedy that had ruinous effects on her as well: 'When he collapsed, I collapsed,' she says. The film argues that there is a connection between Totico's pigeon problem and his own personal ruination, a tragedy that is linked to his work as the building's custodian. In a key interview, Totico describes how his interventions on the building are little more than exercises in cosmetic futility, akin to 'putting rouge on an old lady's cheeks. You can repair a few things but in the end 78 years is quite a lot. Nobody can take that away.'

The building's accumulated afflictions are too great for Totico to do anything but engage in the most paltry acts of mitigation, and he speaks resignedly about its fate: 'The building might be condemned. That could happen. I don't worry about it because it's part of our daily lives.' As he speaks his face wears a rather lackadaisical expression, suggesting that he recognizes and accepts the perversity of his work (Fig. 4.6).



Figure 4.6. Totico: 'The building might be condemned. That could happen. I don't worry about it because it's part of our daily lives.'

In this scene, Totico's personal ruination is visually integrated into his ruined surroundings. He is framed in a medium wide shot which situates him along the inner corridor of one of the building's upper floors. The building envelops him in a dusty palette of blues and greys, with the railings and floor behind him reflecting the soft yellow light that pours in from above. Meanwhile, the shot's perspectival lines—created by the balcony railing on the left, and the floor and walls on the right—all converge behind Totico, directing the viewer's gaze into the blank darkness of twin doorways beyond him. Meanwhile Totico himself leans against the balcony railing in a familiar and relaxed pose, his head tilted philosophically to one side.

While Totico appears resigned, his rooftop pursuits become a symptom of his desire for a way out of a situation with no remedy. As he putters around his own Havana apartment, the 'ruinologist' Antonio José Ponte comments that one of the ways that Cubans cope with ruination is by taking refuge in some kind of personal preoccupation or hobby—some become religious, others take up art, and still others breed animals. These preoccupations, argues Ponte, are symptomatic of an attempt to 'find hope where there is none,' acts of self-sacrifice that also provide escape from the ruined present. If activity in the present moment is truncated by the overwhelming weight of the past, perhaps a panacea can be found in temporary modes of escape.

Misleidys: languor

Misleidys is a beautiful woman who appears to be in her early to mid-thirties. She is blessed with creamy skin, thick black hair, a long delicate nose, deep dark eyes,

and perhaps most strikingly, a gravelly, sorrowful voice which emerges from her downturned, sorrowful mouth. Like Totico, we first meet her suspended above the city's chaos, standing on her balcony. The camera looks at her in profile as she leans out, breeze rustling her long hair, Havana stretched out before her. The only sound is the cheerful chirp of birds. As the camera pans out onto the panorama below, Misleidys expresses in voiceover:

Si yo me fuera a morir, yo quisiera morirme dormida. Si me voy a morir aquí, mejor. No, no le tengo miedo.

- - - -

If I were to die, I would like to die in my sleep. If I were to die and it happened here, even better. No, I am not afraid.

This is one of the rare times in the film that we see Misleidys standing up. Apart from a few moments in which Misleidys attends to small domestic tasks—sweeping out the rainwater that invades her apartment thanks to a gaping hole where a wall should be, rinsing cups under a rusting spigot, cigarette in hand—Misleidys is almost entirely confined to her bed. Sometimes she sits up and addresses the camera. At others she lies under her covers, reading books or sleeping.

The introductory shot of Misleidys on her balcony cuts to a shot that becomes the most familiar representation of her in the film (Fig. 4.7). She sits on her bed, sheets ruffled, back to the wall. As in Totico's corridor, the wall behind her is peeling, its faded grey-blue alternately afflicted with scrawled graffiti and snaking cracks. To her right a couple of prints are pasted to the wall; above her are an empty bookshelf and a

ledge piled high with paperbacks. Dressed in a dark top and cropped pants, Misleidys fades into her surroundings, while the crumpled, salmon-colored blanket to her right contrasts with them. Consistent with the rest of the film, the shot is lit with a suffused, painterly natural light that lends a soft depth to the otherwise shallow composition.



Figure 4.7. Misleidys: 'It's like when you get old. You feel like it's the end. That's what's happening with this building. We're losing it. It's dying. There are so many beautiful things here... and they're dying.'

Much as the Picturesque tradition offered a nostalgic, lingering look on the wild nature that was swiftly disappearing, this scene provides the viewer-visitor with a similar

opportunity for contemplating the sensuous disaster of Cuba's decline. Sitting quietly, alternately picking at her bare feet or shrugging her shoulders for mild emphasis, Misleidys speaks about her love for the ravaged building in which she lives, the former Hotel Regina:

Esto es una cosa que tiene historia. Aquí han pasado cosas lindísimas. Aquí ha estado gente maravillosa. Aquí yo he vivido los mejores años de mi vida.

- - - -

This place is full of history. Beautiful things have happened here. Wonderful people have lived here. I've lived the best years of my life here.

Her voiceover then goes on to describe the building in its actual state:

Ahora es el derrumbe del Hotel Regina. Es un derrumbe. Tú viste en las condiciones que está. Esto en cualquier momento se cae y te aplasta. Y has visto todo lo que hay afuera? Se cayó—la pared esa se cayó completa. Se caen los pedazos. De una manera se cae un palo. Las escaleras ya viste como están. Porque esto es lo que se está cayendo. Y estamos perdiendo. Es como cuando te llega la vejez. Te sientes que te queda poco. Eso pasa con este edificio. Se está perdiendo. Se está muriendo. Hay cosas lindísimas aquí. Y se están muriendo.

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All that's left of the Regina today is a heap of rubble. It's in shambles. It could crumble at any time and bury all of us. Have you looked out there? That wall has completely collapsed. Pieces of wall fall down when you least expect it. You've seen the condition the stairs are in. Because everything is crumbling. And we are the losers. It's like when you get old. You feel like it's the end. That's what's happening with this building. We're losing it. It's dying. There are so many beautiful things here... and they're dying.

In Misleidys' description, the past was full of 'beautiful things,' 'wonderful people,' 'the best years' of her life. As she paints it, once there was bustle, beauty, pleasure, possibility, and above all, *vitality*—in the past, things *happened*. Now, there is nothing but 'rubble,' 'shambles,' 'collapse,' and loss: in short, everything that accompanies death. Against the vitality of the past, the present is characterized by decline, finality, and above all, *inactivity*.

This contrast between the vital past and the languorous present repeats itself throughout Misleidys' appearances in the film. Speaking in voiceover, at one point she says that she stays in the building despite its decrepit state 'because of the good memories' she has of it. She then goes on to describe the Johnny Club, a bar that used to exist on the ground floor of her building, which she never knew personally, but about which she has heard 'wonderful' things. Shots of the contemporary, dilapidated façade of the building cut to black-and-white archival footage depicting, not the Johnny Club, but anonymous groups of well-groomed, well-heeled patrons dancing and drinking in an

unidentified bar. A shot of swishing skirts on a dance floor cuts to a neon sign, flashing a pair of shapely female legs. Misleidys excitedly describes the parties that went on, every night, 'from 6 to 6,' while over the soundtrack, Nat 'King' Cole sings a bolero in Anglo-tinged Spanish.

Then, as quickly as it began the fun is over. The music stops; the film cuts to a shot of Misleidys lying face down in her bed like a corpse, sheets wrapped tightly around her, legs stretched out stiffly behind her, a pillow on her head. In voiceover she says: *La Habana, sí, se está quedando en ruinas. Havana, oh yes, little by little is in ruins.*

In her languor, Misleidys has the convalescent air of a nineteenth-century consumptive. Her chief activity in the present is to reflect upon her past; as she recounts it, Misleidys was once a very busy woman. As she talks, she reveals how she took up with a rich man and everyone called her a whore; how she had a child, then lost custody of him because of her drug habit; how she loved to act and dance when she was younger. These days, she hides out in her crumbling refuge, ignoring the gossip that followed her for years. Like Totico, Misleidys too has her hobbies: in her case, reading voraciously and writing fantastical stories about imaginary worlds. As she reflects, her raspy voice seemingly on the verge of breaking into a sob, Misleidys appears to take a romantic pleasure in the tragedy of her situation. Speaking wistfully about her beautiful city's premature collapse, she clearly also speaks about herself, a young woman who nonetheless believes her life to be, if not over, then a shadow of what it once was. Perhaps more than any of the other protagonists, Misleidys appears to give herself over willingly to the logic of the ruin as she sadly, yet peacefully, grinds to a halt.

Ponte: bitterness

Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas introduces Antonio José Ponte as he picks his way through the remains of a building that sits on a street corner in central Havana. The scene opens with a wide shot of the building from above. From this perspective, we immediately see that the building is little more than an empty shell; apart from the crumbling façade that gives a semblance of what once existed in the space, the roof, interior walls, and supporting structure are all missing. The sun pours in on the building's hollowed out interior, its floor covered in stone fragments. From this distance, the man inside is hardly visible. Then the film cuts to a closer shot that peeks inside the blown-out windows, and we can see a figure, hands on hips, wandering among the rubble. The voiceover begins:

Yo me considero ruinólogo, que es, de algún modo, la condición de quien siempre está pensando en las ruinas, y la está buscando razones a las ruinas. Razones para explicarse también esa perversidad de sacar sentido de placer en algo que se está decayendo.

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I consider myself a ruinologist. That's the condition of someone who is always thinking about ruins and trying to explain them. Who is looking for reasons to explain the perversity of getting pleasure from something that is falling apart.

From the moment of his first introduction, Ponte plays a role that is categorically distinct from the other characters in the film. Unlike the other interviewees, who all appear in the film as exemplars of ‘ordinary’ Cuban life, Ponte plays the expert: as he wanders through the rubble of collapsed buildings, Ponte scratches his chin and vocalizes his interpretations about what he sees. (Fig. 4.8) Whereas the other interviewees are all addressed informally by their first names, Ponte is always addressed by his surname—in the film’s end credits, he appears as ‘Antonio José Ponte,’ while the other interviewees are all listed by their first names only. Furthermore, unlike the other protagonists, who are rarely depicted leaving their homes, Ponte moves freely throughout the city. Rather than speak at length about his own life and experiences as the other characters do, Ponte spends the vast majority of his screen time taking the viewer on a visual tour of ruined Havana, stopping along the way to provide a philosophical and literary context for what he is showing us.



Figure 4.8. Ponte: ‘You carry the ruins inside, as mourning, as a deep sorrow. You can restore a building. You cannot restore a person. A person carries indelible damage.’

The film’s central argument emerges from Ponte’s mouth; in fact, he operates as its philosophical foundation. Ponte locates his conceptual understanding of the ruin in the European tradition that I have already outlined. Although Georg Simmel is his most substantive guide, he also references the writings of Thomas Mann—speculating that if Mann were in Havana he would write a novel about a man who goes to the city to fall in love, then to die, crushed by a falling cornice—as well as Henry James’ *Daisy Miller*, who contracts a ‘rare fever’ when she visits the Roman Coliseum, and the eighteenth-

century British trend of building ruins in the gardens of stately homes. As Ponte points out in the film, Simmel's fascination with the ruin stems from what he believes to be the inherently adversarial relationship between man and nature; for Simmel, architecture represents that moment 'in which the soul in its upward striving and nature in its gravity are held in balance.'²⁴³ The ruin signifies the triumph of nature over man's impulse to build, thereby revealing the 'world-pervading original enmity' between them. This apparent triumph of nature over man has a supremely aesthetic appeal, and offers up a new kind of 'characteristic unity' 'where human purposiveness and the working of non-conscious natural forces grow from their common root.'²⁴⁴

This new aesthetic unity is disrupted, however, whenever a ruin is inhabited. For a ruin to serve its aesthetic purpose, it must be regarded from a safe distance that guarantees the balance between man and nature. For Simmel, when a ruin is inhabited, 'man makes himself the accomplice of nature,'²⁴⁵ an act which signals indifference and neglect. As Ponte puts it, inhabited ruins are fundamentally perverse, and frustrate the visitor's desire to engage in the melancholic contemplation that is the conventional ruin's province: 'inhabited ruins don't allow space for melancholia, because the feeling is too poisonous, too fatal. It's acute, hurtful. It can only scandalize you.'

It is important to note that while Ponte himself does not appear to live in a ruined building—what we see of his apartment suggests relative luxury compared to the crumbling edifices in which the other protagonists live—what little we do learn about

²⁴³ Georg Simmel, 'The Ruin,' Reprinted in 'Two Essays: "The Handle" and "The Ruin,"' *The Hudson Review*, Autumn 1958, 379.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p 380.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 380.

Ponte's private life suggests a personal ruination that corresponds beautifully with the film's central argument. At one point in the film, Ponte mentions that his writings are banned in Cuba, without explaining why. He simply says that magazines in Cuba are prohibited from publishing his texts, while he, like most Cubans, is prohibited from traveling abroad. Wearing a sardonic half-smile, Ponte claims that when the government took away his right to publish, they ruined him entirely: if he cannot exist as a writer, then he does not exist at all.

Ponte's bitterness suggests a kind of subjective deformity brought on by ruination. He argues that there is a causal relationship between the decay of a ruined building and the decay of its inhabitants: the ruins of Havana cause ruined souls. As he sees it, the effects of personal ruination are crueler, deeper, and more irreversible than architectural ruination:

Las ruinas se llevan por dentro, como el luto. Como la tristeza. Tú puedes restaurar un edificio. Una persona no se restaura. Una persona tiene daños que son irrestaurables.

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You carry the ruins inside, as mourning, as a deep sorrow. You can restore a building. You cannot restore a person. A person carries indelible damage.

Ponte goes on to argue that the personal ruination of Cubans corresponds to the political surrender of the Cuban people. This is the crux of the argument on which the entire film is founded: the notion that there is a direct correlation between the collapse of private

domestic space and a broader political collapse. As Florian Borchmeyer, the film's director, puts it in an interview:

Las ruinas cubanas resultan de la irresistible de la población a la decadencia y de la falta de recursos para poder resistir.

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Cuban ruins result from the population's inability to fight decadence, and the lack of resources for resistance.²⁴⁶

In the film's climactic interview, Ponte claims in conspiratorial tones that it is in the revolutionary government's best interest to allow, even facilitate, architectural ruination, because the devastated environment the continued resignation of Cubans, and obliterates their capacity to imagine political change:

Yo creo que vivir en ruinas te menoscaba tu autoconfianza. Si tú no puedes, en lo íntimo, rehacer lo que va cayendo, entonces no podrás hacerlo en ningún sitio. En eso es lo que yo creo que hay un pensamiento del poder sobre las ruinas: demostrarle a cada súbdito que no puede cambiar nada. Si tú no puedes cambiar tu casa, tú no puedes cambiar el reino. Ese fracaso privado de la garantiza el fracaso público. Y eso es lo que yo creo que anima el desánimo político cubano, el desanimado civil cubano. La consciencia metida en la cabeza de cada uno, metida en las circunstancias de cada uno, de que nada se puede hacer. De que hay que dejar que los edificios se caigan. Pero no puedes cambiar nada. Entonces,

²⁴⁶ Borchmeyer, 'Cuba es un lugar donde nada avanza.' Web.

eso ha sido, yo creo, la mayor contribución de la revolución cubana al pensamiento urbanístico. La idea de que nada se puede restaurar. De que nada se puede arreglar. Entonces no se puede arreglar el país tampoco. Déjalo estar.

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I believe that living among ruins undermines your self-confidence. If in your private space you cannot rebuild what has fallen down, then you cannot do it anyplace else. This is why the rulers of this country have a purpose about these ruins: to show their subjects that they cannot change anything. If you cannot renovate your house, you cannot renovate the kingdom. This private failure precedes public failure. And that spurs Cuban political discouragement, Cuban civil discouragement: the mindset that you cannot do anything about it. Let the buildings collapse, but you cannot change anything. And that has been the most important contribution of the revolution to urban thinking. The idea that nothing can be restored. Nothing can be repaired. Then the country cannot be repaired. Let it be.

At the heart of the film is the notion that Havana's ruin is a product, not simply of the Revolution's passive neglect, but of its *active facilitation*. Ultimately, the film argues, the Cuban government finds it politically expedient to house its subjects in a disastrous environment, and has actively fabricated ruins to that end. This is the 'new art of making ruins' that titles the film: the Revolutionary government's deliberate construction of a

battered landscape that ensures the continued capitulation of the Cuban people. As Borchemeyer, the film's director, puts it:

Un ciudadano que ve que ni siquiera es capaz de reparar su propia casa, cae por ello en cierto estado de pasividad y se atreve mucho menos a suponer que es capaz de hacer arreglos en esa casa común que es la sociedad.

A citizen who sees that he is incapable of repairing even his own home falls into a certain state of passivity, and is much less likely to believe that he is capable in repairing the common home of society.²⁴⁷

Overtaken by failure, the film's Cubans have no ability to take action. In this configuration, not only is there no political resistance in Cuba—there is simply no life at all. Ruination obliterates existence as such; as Ponte says, quoting Rimbaud, 'Real life is always somewhere else.' In another country, in black-and-white archival footage... anywhere but here and now.

In arguing for the identity of architectural and personal ruin, Borchemeyer and Ponte both evoke the Picturesque investment in destitute figures—poor farmers, gypsies, and the like—who offered themselves up as emblems of noble sacrifice.²⁴⁸ In fact, I

²⁴⁷ Florian Borchemeyer, "Este fracaso privado garantiza el fracaso público." *Apuntes sobre la estética de palacios y de héroes en ruinas.* *Poéticas del fracaso.* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2009), 198, English translation mine.

²⁴⁸ See Raimonda Modiano, 'The Legacy of the Picturesque: Landscape, Property, and the Ruin,' who argues that 'rustics, beggars, or gypsies are salvational figures for the practitioners of the Picturesque.' *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 196.

would argue that it is worth recalling the Picturesque tradition's romantic apologia for the displacement and impoverishment of the poor during the agrarian revolution:

An appropriately elegiac background for the laborer dispossessed by the agrarian revolution was the picturesque landscape, whose preindustrialized character demodernized his plight and whose charms compensated him for it. The derelict habitations, mills, and so forth established the picturesque landscape as a largely abandoned one. The pathos of such a landscape cut two ways. On the one hand, the picturesque landscape celebrated a rural way of life as that which had been, or was being, lost. On the other hand, the manifest desolation of the landscape could work as a justification for transforming it into a more efficient, vital one.²⁴⁹

There is a disturbing parallel between the Picturesque's use of dereliction as a justification for enclosure and displacement, and the film's similarly elegiac depiction of ruined spaces and people, given that it could serve to justify invasive urban renewal policies that promise to disenfranchise the very Cubans the film professes to defend. I believe that the film's tragic take on Cuban political capitulation is not only misguided, but politically dangerous, insofar as it dovetails nicely with the kind of paternalistic development rhetoric that has paved the way for so much of the neo-colonial, neoliberal economic exploitation currently underway across the Global South. This rhetoric—that Cubans lack the will, resources, and wherewithal to renew their built environment—is foundational for precisely the kinds of state partnerships with foreign companies that

²⁴⁹ Bermingham, 69.

have formed the backbone of the post-Special Period Cuban economy, and more specifically, fund the vast majority of the urban renewal projects currently underway in Havana. As I argue later in this chapter, these urban renewal projects have resulted in the further marginalization and disenfranchisement of many Cubans, and promise to deepen the social stratification that, for many decades, the Revolution had relative success in preventing.

Nicanor: capitulation

Nicanor is the film's most explicitly politicized character, a self-professed 'political dinosaur' who was imprisoned in the early years of the revolution for reasons the film does not make clear. Now in his seventies, he lives on his family's farm, which was expropriated by the revolutionary government in 1963. While the family was allowed to remain on the farm and continue to work the land, Nicanor and his wife describe how in the intervening decades the government has made its own use of the property and divided it up, bit by bit. They dynamited the mango trees because the fruit was being stolen, which rattled the house and caused the ceilings to crack; they bisected the farm in half with a highway, prohibiting the cultivation of the best land. Nonetheless, Nicanor continues to work the farm, propping himself up with a crutch in one hand while wielding a hoe with the other.

While the farm has seen its fair share of neglect—the house now leaks profusely, the garden is unkempt—it is relatively intact, and even Nicanor himself says that it is not exactly a ruin. More significant is Nicanor's physical ruin. Toothless and hobbling,

Nicanor wanders around the property with his wife, as the two fairly hold each other up to keep from falling. At one point, the two of them pay a visit to the garden where they were first married, over 50 years before (Fig. 4.9). Nicanor's wife compares the garden's current neglected state with her memories of their wedding day: 'I had a better face, a better body,' she says, as the film cuts to a black-and-white portrait of a glamorous, long-lashed smiling girl, then a shot of a youthful, vigorous Nicanor, clad in an elegant white suit, accompanied by his beautiful bride.



Figure 4.9.

While the film states nothing explicitly, it makes a subtle critique of the revolution's attempt to eradicate class differences. Several clues point to the likelihood that Nicanor and his family were once wealthy, or at the very least bourgeois. Nicanor makes reference to the former vastness of the family's property before the expropriation; the wedding images depict an elegant, lavish party; and the house, while neglected, is clearly large, with lovely stained-glass windows and imposing furniture. However, apart from Nicanor's mild bitterness at the farm's confiscation, we get little indication of his actual political leanings. Instead, Nicanor appears in the film as a placeholder for an amorphous, undefined political resistance that gave way to capitulation many years ago. When Nicanor describes being thrown into a prison cell where everyone else had been given the death penalty ('Oh God, here you get executed and they don't even ask your name'), we never learn the circumstances of his imprisonment or his release. At one point, Nicanor describes in voiceover his initial enchantment with the revolution, as archival footage of a rifle-toting Fidel on the back of a truck, accompanied by ominous music, signals that trouble is coming. The film gives no further details about Nicanor's political activity.

This cursory, ambiguous attention to a complex and significant series of political events facilitates Nicanor's role as a generalized placeholder for a lost past. The film does little to contextualize the circumstances that gave rise to the revolution, and the only clear implication is that it has been a wholesale failure. It is significant that Nicanor is the only interviewee who was born before 1959; as the aging patriarch, Nicanor represents the physical embodiment of a ruined politics. In his broken body, we have the decline of an

entire generation, both of the first Cuban political exiles, and the aging and implied extinction of the revolution itself.

Reinaldo: habit

Reinaldo is an exceptional figure in the film, most notably because he is the only character who does not actually live in a space that was originally designed as a home. For fourteen years, Reinaldo has squatted in the Teatro Campoamor, a theater that, according to him, was shuttered 39 years ago, when a part of the ceiling caved in. After suddenly finding himself homeless upon the death of his godfather, Reinaldo secured a job working as custodian of the theater. Since he had nowhere to live, he installed himself in one of the theater's dressing rooms. More than the other building interiors depicted throughout the film, the theater is in a state of truly catastrophic abandonment. We see this most readily in a wide shot facing the stage, in which we can see the shirtless Reinaldo wandering below. The balconies are piled high with rubble and other detritus; the seating has been completely torn out; and whatever paint once adorned the cement walls is gone, replaced by rainwater stains that streak through blackish green curtains of fungus (Fig. 4.10).



Figure 4.10. Reinaldo: ‘When you say that you live in a theater, you have to feel very proud. [...] I wouldn’t ever want to leave this place.’

This is the shot in which the film most obviously attempts to integrate Reinaldo into the ruined landscape. However, throughout the film Reinaldo subtly resists the notion that he is a ruined man. While he is perhaps the most cynical of the film’s protagonists—he states, for example, that he does not believe in happiness—and lives in relative isolation, with no friends or family around him, Reinaldo is also cheerfully pragmatic when describing his everyday life in the theater. He puffs up with pride at living in the Campoamor: ‘Many people would like, just at this moment, to live inside a theater,’ he says. As the camera depicts him engaging in his daily activities—washing a

shirt in a basin and hanging it on a line inside the theater, practicing tai chi with an expression of steely resolve on his face, scrubbing a pair of sneakers in the rain—Reinaldo says that no matter how unconventional his living situation may appear to be, he has nonetheless made it into a home by observing a series of daily rituals:

Tú te haces la misma idea que tuvieras en una casa. Aunque no sea la tuya, te haces la misma idea: fregar, lavar, limpiar, cocinar, botar la basura, sacar el perro para que orine, haga su caca. No pienses que estás fuera de tu casa.

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You think you're at home, even though it isn't yours: [...] you do the same things: wash the dishes, wash clothes, clean, cook, take out the garbage, take the dog out to piss. Don't ever think you're not at home.

In describing something as banal as this litany of daily habits, Reinaldo is actually suggesting something very significant—he has domesticated a ruined theater.

This is a crucial moment in the film. In this moment, I believe that Reinaldo is describing a process of inhabitation that the film itself fails to recognize or explore. As I have already stated, the film argues that the Cuban people are afflicted by an overwhelming sense of stasis and failure, the notion that, as Ponte says, 'you cannot change anything.' However, Reinaldo's transformation of an abandoned theater into a home belies this argument, and hints at an aspect of Cuban daily life that the film otherwise ignores completely. In general, the film fails to account for the ways in which Cubans have been, for many decades now, engaged in active processes of inhabitation,

repair, and renewal of space that actually thwart the wholesale capitulation to the past that the film promotes.

Part of the problem is that, while the film takes great pains to point out that inhabitation is what makes Havana's ruins so distinct, and so tragic, it consistently does so from the position of the visitor. In other words, the film rarely asks what inhabitation of these spaces might mean for the inhabitants themselves. This may seem like a rather absurd conclusion, given the vast amount of screen time dedicated precisely to the people who inhabit these spaces; however, let us re-consider, for a moment, Ponte's statement that the inhabited ruin can only 'scandalize.' Reinaldo appears to be decidedly *un-*scandalized by his home; the ruin in which he lives does not transform him; rather, he transforms it. Reinaldo betrays the ruin's conventional function as a space of contemplation for the visitor; to take this one step further, he disrupts the division between man and nature on which the ruin depends. Suddenly, rather than gazing *at* the landscape, man is implicated *within* it, thereby frustrating the visitor's masterful gaze. In Reinaldo's performance of his daily habits, we see that inhabitation makes contemplation impossible—or at the very least, the inhabited ruin betrays the voyeurism that was always inherent in contemplation. Therefore, the inhabited ruin is only scandalous for the visitor; for those who live *in*, rather than simply *look at*, these spaces, there is more than scandal, perversity, or tragedy at work.

I believe that the film fails to recognize inhabitation as a transformative process with distinctly political implications. In order to tease this notion out, I wish to take a moment to examine the concept of inhabitation and to consider, in particular, the

relationship between inhabitation and time. Inhabitation suggests a special relationship to a special kind of space—to inhabit is to develop a series of intimate, personal attachments to a space that are deep and distinct. This is a process that does not happen immediately, but rather requires the occupation of space over time. In other words, inhabitation is not a given, but rather must be *made* through a series of repeated creative acts.

The fact that inhabitation requires the passage of time necessarily suggests the intimacy of domestic space with memory, a notion which has held fascination for many architectural theorists and philosophers. In their book *Home Rules*, Denis Wood and Robert J. Beck describe how every room in every home has a memory of its own: in the arrangement of the furniture, for example, a room stores a record of how one should and does act in that room, so that every time one enters it, one does not have to begin again.²⁵⁰ This mnemonic engagement with domestic space requires and facilitates the ritual repetition of activities, such as those that Reinaldo describes—cook, clean, take the dog out to piss. This is one of the distinctive ways in which inhabitation transforms the conventional ruin. Like conventional ruins, inhabited ruins are places of heightened meaning, where past events have accumulated and intermingled with one another, like so many layers of peeling paint on the walls. But they are also different in that they bear the personalized imprint of their inhabitants; they are *inhabited*, which means that they are encrusted with habit.

²⁵⁰ Denis Wood and Robert J. Beck, *Home Rules*. With Ingrid Wood, Randall Wood, and Chandler Wood. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

To become habituated to a space is to develop an intimacy with it that results in automatic bodily action; once we fully inhabit a space, we do not think, we just *do*. In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson makes a distinction between two forms of memory: habit, or motor-memory on the one hand, and recollection on the other. Habit memory results in the kind of automatic engagement with lived space that I have just mentioned. The by-product of a lesson learned, habit memory is something about which we do not need to think, and which does not require us to imagine a specific past event in order to put it to work. Predicated on repetition, habit memory is pure doing: ‘the lesson once learnt bears upon it no mark which betrays its origin and classes it in the past; it is part of my present, exactly like my habit of walking or of writing; it is lived and acted, rather than represented.’²⁵¹ Habit memory is not representational, since we cannot picture a habit. Rather, habit memory *happens*—it is a form of performance.

As with any home, inhabited ruins bear the weight of the repeated events that occur in each apartment, each building. There is a subjective specificity to the memories in these places—of meals eaten, of unresolved arguments, of the smells, sounds, and force exerted by an inhabitant’s body. As integral as habit is, for Wood and Beck habit is not the only way that domestic space is entangled with memory. A room-as-memory also inherits the memory all the memories of all the past rooms we have inhabited—a multitude of specific, unrepeatable experiences.²⁵² Gaston Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that the first house of our childhood sets the standard for the way we

²⁵¹ Bergson, 91.

²⁵² Wood and Beck, 125.

live in all subsequent houses. This house lives in us still: ‘the word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house’.²⁵³ Similarly, there is a bit at the beginning of Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, in which the narrator describes lying in bed after being abruptly woken in the middle of the night. He struggles to orient himself, but in this suspension between sleeping and waking, the furniture seems to float about him, his perception unable to fix it in place. He feels he is sliding between registers, tumbling through rooms of his past. He says,

For it always happened that when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything would be moving round me through the darkness: things, places, years. [...My body’s] memory, the composite memory of its ribs, knees, and shoulder-blades offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept; while the unseen walls kept changing, adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirling madly through the darkness.²⁵⁴

This ‘composite memory’ of a whole host of earlier-occupied spaces requires the performance of a second type of memory, that of recollection. For Bergson, recollection or ‘image memory’ is categorically distinct from habit memory because it involves the imagined representation of a singular, unrepeatable event: ‘it is like an event in my life;

²⁵³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Maria Jolas, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 15.

²⁵⁴ Proust, 12.

its essence is to bear a date, and consequently to be unable to occur again.²⁵⁵ Unlike habit memory, whose sole purpose is to facilitate present action, recollection necessarily involves our temporary withdrawal from action; in fact, recollection inhibits action.

Also, whereas habit memory is distinctly non-representational, recollection requires the production of an image. This is why recollection is more readily affiliated with dream-states and with reverie (and perhaps accounts for the kind of temporal disorientation that Proust, caught between sleep and wakefulness, describes). Bergson puts it this way: ‘To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the will to dream.’²⁵⁶ For Bachelard, daydream and memory fold in on one another through a kind of symbiosis, the one calling forth the other. Such daydreams are integrally linked to inhabitation, and Bachelard is most interested in the house as an assemblage of various spaces of solitude, of corners and nooks, of garrets and cellars in which we are able to dream. The essential function of the house is to protect daydreaming: it is maternal, a ‘large cradle.’²⁵⁷

Therefore, inhabitation occurs through habit and recollection, two cooperating yet categorically distinct forms of memory. (Indeed, for Bergson habit memory and recollection ‘work side by side and lend to each other a mutual support.’²⁵⁸) When we are at home, we develop ways of moving and existing in the space that are automatic and unconscious; at the same time, the particular events that transpire in a given home form

²⁵⁵ Bergson, 90.

²⁵⁶ Bergson, 94.

²⁵⁷ Bachelard, 7.

²⁵⁸ Bergson, 98.

the stuff of recollection. What makes this so acute in a place like Havana is that its buildings simultaneously upset, and reinforce, the conventional role of the home as stable, supportive, and enduring.

Beyond *Habana*'s ruin tourism: Renewal, restoration, and vernacular architecture

One of the main blind spots of *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* is its inability to consider the interpenetration of past, present, and future that occurs in lived space. One of the chief ways that this problem is manifest in the film is through its frequent use of archival footage. Throughout the film, black-and-white archival footage frequently interrupts the contemporary digital color images, signifying an amorphous past that contrasts viscerally with the present, in look, content, and tone. Most often these archival images depict pre-revolutionary pleasures—as when images of dancing Cubans accompany Misleidys' recollections of the Johnny Club—in direct contrast with the contemporary afflictions of the protagonists. For the moment, however, I wish to linger on one key use of archival footage that signals a rather different past—a depiction of the revolution's first attempts at mitigating the long-standing housing problem.

In the scene in question, the film follows Magdalena to Alamar, the half-finished housing project on the outskirts of Havana, where she has established herself upon divorcing Totico. Intercut with contemporary shots of Alamar's barren landscape is 1970s archival footage of Fidel Castro touring a bright, clean apartment in the complex, accompanied by a triumphant voiceover pronouncing Alamar's arrival as the revolutionary solution to the housing crisis:

Un gobierno revolucionario resolvería el problema de la vivienda, rebajando resueltamente el 50% de los alquileres; eximiendo de toda contribución a las casas habitadas por sus propios dueños; triplicando los impuestos sobre las casas alquiladas; demoliendo las infernales cuarterías; para levantar en su lugar edificios modernos de muchas plantas, y financiando la construcción de viviendas en toda la isla, en escala nunca visto.

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A revolutionary government could solve the housing problems, reducing rents by 50%; exempting from payment all owners who live on their own property; tripling taxes on rental units; demolishing the infernal slums; building in their place many-storied modern buildings; and financing the construction of houses all over the island on a scale never seen.

In visual rebuttal of this unfulfilled promise, the archival footage suddenly cuts to a panorama of Alamar's barren contemporary landscape. In voiceover, Magdalena comments that 'A person who has lived his whole life in Alamar might enjoy it;' for her, Alamar is too isolated from the city, and while she appreciates the measure of independence she has gained since leaving the Arbos building, she is not at home in her new surroundings.

In this moment, Alamar stands as a placeholder for the revolution's hubris and incompetence. More significantly, it is also symptomatic of the way that the film largely ignores several issues of key importance to Havana's ruin crisis—the intervening years

between 1959 and the present, the factors that have led to ruination, and most importantly for the current moment, the many restoration and urban renewal projects underway in Havana, alongside vernacular architectural revisions that Cubans have been undertaking in their homes for decades.

The Revolution inherited a profoundly stratified economic situation in which adequate, safe housing proved to be one of its most central—and troublesome—challenges.²⁵⁹ From its inception, the revolutionary government argued that social equality would not be achievable without direct and robust intervention into the arena of housing and urban reform. Change began in earnest as early as 1960, when the ‘Ley de reforma urbana/Urban Reform Law’ was enacted. This law initiated a series of interventions into the built environment such as the expropriation and redistribution of property and the prohibition of sale or rental of property (recently legalized in April 2011).

One of the architectural paradoxes of contemporary Havana is that the Revolution may be responsible for both its preservation and devastation. On the one hand, architectural historians and urban planners frequently argue that the Revolution spared Havana the destructive policies that afflicted so many other developing cities in the world, such that ‘the Cubans have what many American cities want again.’²⁶⁰ For

²⁵⁹ I will not be addressing the complex history of urban development in Havana, but rather will restrict my focus to post-1959 efforts to address the issue. For this history, see Trefftz, ‘50 años de la ley de reforma urbana en Cuba, en el aniversario del cambio de paradigma’ (2011); Joseph Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Miguel Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (2002).

²⁶⁰ Roberta Brandes Gratz, ‘Urbanism in Havana.’ Conference proceedings from ‘Havana. Patrimony, Patience, and Progress.’ The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School University, December 7, 2001. Web. Accessed 6 February 2012.

example, the relative economic stability of the working poor deterred the emergence of the *favelas* that ring Latin American cities like Sao Paulo or neighboring Santo Domingo, the exclusion of tourism until the 1990s prevented the construction of the kind of beachfront condominiums and resorts that blight so many Caribbean coastlines, and a general lack of government attention to infrastructure meant that no multi-lane highways bisected the city, a phenomenon that has irreversibly marginalized huge swathes of cities in the United States. The result is that until the 1990s, Havana experienced remarkably little growth or new construction, to the extent that the city now stands as a unique example of a wide array of architectural styles, leading to its designation by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1982.²⁶¹ Paradoxically, while economic scarcity and neglect have bred ruination, they have also passively bred preservation—an unintended but welcome side-effect.

However, such sparing of the built environment may have occurred due to neglect as much as foresight. In their article ‘Inventar: Recent Struggles and Interventions in Housing in Two Cuban Cities,’ Patricio del Real and Anna Cristina Pertierra argue that the economic crisis of the 1990s laid bare the simple fact that ‘urban housing had never received the level of attention or success that revolutionary initiatives, namely health and education, enjoyed.’²⁶² Thus, when economic crisis came, the increasing precarity of the built environment became viscerally evident; the vulnerability of Cuban architecture went

²⁶¹ See Roberta Brandes Gratz, ‘Urbanism in Havana,’ who argues that ‘the truly good news for urbanism in Havana is that the Revolution occurred before Cuba could copy the urban renewal policies that decimated so many American cities and from which few of our [American] cities have really recovered.’ *Havana: Patrimony, Patience, and Progress*, 25.

²⁶² Patricio del Real and Anna Cristina Pertierra, ‘Inventar: Recent Struggles and Interventions in Housing in Two Cuban Cities,’ *Buildings and Landscapes* Vol. 15 (2008), 78-92: 81.

from an ongoing but largely tolerable undercurrent of daily life to an outright threat to it. For del Real and Pertierra, the contemporary housing problem in Havana is informed by three crucial factors:

- Lack of maintenance and degradation of existing housing stock, made more complicated by unavailability/shortage of building materials
- Dearth of new construction/housing units
- Heavy migration from the provinces²⁶³

These factors collude to produce the pervasive architectural ruin that currently afflicts Havana. Buildings collapse with alarming frequency; the population density of Havana has increased, leading to overcrowding of living quarters; and building materials are obtained through a variety of ‘alternate’ means not sanctioned by the state, from grey market transactions, to recycling, to outright theft.

Hell-bent as it is on presenting Havana as subsumed by ruin, *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* makes no mention of the growing importance of urban renewal in the post-Soviet Cuban economy. Restoration is big business in Havana, and has already begun to transform the ruined urban landscape in the biggest architectural boom since the

²⁶³ As del Real and Pertierra point out, the migration problem is currently a major factor in the housing crisis, and is crucial to a holistic understanding of the issue. Until the 1990s, population growth in Havana was curbed by the revolution’s heavy investment in improvements to daily life in the provinces. Since the Special Period, however, thousands of ‘Orientales’ (Cubans from the eastern provinces) have illegally migrated to Havana, creating the sorts of makeshift shantytowns that historically Cuba has prided itself on avoiding, in contrast to its Latin American neighbors. As social stratification increases in the new economy, this is a problem which only threatens to increase in importance and severity. However, this undocumented population is also an embarrassment to the revolutionary government, which has frequently ignored, and at times denied, its very existence. A 2006 Cuban documentary, *Buscándote Habana*, highlights both the acuteness of the migration problem and the perversity of the revolutionary government’s neglect of the very sort of marginalized poor that initially represented the essence of its mission. See also Joseph L. Scarpaci and Mario Coyula-Cowley, ‘Urban Sustainability, Built Heritage, and Globalization in the Cuban Capital,’ *Human Settlement Development*, Vol. 1, 102.

1920s.²⁶⁴ Since the economic reforms of the 1990s resulted in the liberalization of the tourist trade, many restoration projects have been undertaken in Havana, primarily centered in the colonial heart of the city, Habana Vieja. These restoration projects are administered by one entity, the Office of the City Historian of Havana, headed by Dr. Eusebio Leal Spengler. Equal parts real estate agent, tourism promoter, and contractor, the Office is in charge of Habaguanex, a company that negotiates joint-venture deals with foreign companies who wish to invest in the tourist economy, and operates its own businesses in the tourist sector (hotels, cafeterias, gift shops, and the like). Habaguanex operates with unprecedented state authority, not least because of its exponential increase in revenue—from \$5 million in 1995 to an estimated \$200 million in 2002²⁶⁵—helping to make tourism one of the biggest sectors of the Cuban economy, second only to remittances from abroad.²⁶⁶

It is difficult to underestimate Habaguanex's influence in re-shaping contemporary Havana, and the centrality of tourism in that transformation. Although exact figures are hard to come by, in 2001 architect and urban theorist Miguel Coyula estimated that 'around 80% of the recent construction activity in Cuba is related in some way with tourism and real estate projects known as inmobiliarias—condos for

²⁶⁴ Joseph Scarpaci, 'Winners and Losers in Restoring Old Havana,' *Cuba in Transition*, Vol. 10, 289-299. Jorge Pérez López and José F. Alonso, eds. (Washington, D.C. Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 2000), 292.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 291.

²⁶⁶ Linda Robinson, 'The Politics of Development in Cuba.' Conference proceedings from 'Havana. Patrimony, Patience, and Progress.' The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School University, December 7, 2001. Web. Accessed 6 February 2012: 34.

foreigners.’²⁶⁷ Given the economic importance of the tourist industry, we can only guess this number has grown. Similarly, Leland Cott claims that ‘money for architects and architecture is difficult to come by in present-day Cuba unless it is for restoration in Old Havana and is related to tourism.’²⁶⁸ Habana Vieja, the colonial heart of the city, has historically been home to some of its poorest residents, and continues to be so today. While the near suburbs of Vedado and Miramar, became genteel enclaves for upper-middle and upper-class Cubans and foreigners in the early 20th century, the urban poor concentrated themselves in the *casas coloniales* of the old walled city, as well as in neighboring Centro Habana. The result is that currently, some of the most egregious examples of inhabited ruins stand in stark relief to some of Havana’s most revered historical sites and most popular tourist attractions.

***Barbacoas* and vernacular building practices**

Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas ignores the ways in which Cubans have been actively addressing the housing crisis for decades, undertaking renovations and new constructions independently, despite government neglect of the issue. *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* largely ignores this architectural improvisation; while the film profiles Totico’s work as a repairman, the film’s investment in ruination renders his activities quaint at best, pathological at worst. Beyond Totico’s repairs, however, the

²⁶⁷ Mario Coyula, ‘City, Tourism, and Preservation, the Old Havana Way.’ Proceedings from ‘Havana. Patrimony, Patience, and Progress.’ The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School University, December 7, 2001. Web. Accessed 6 February 2012: 31.

²⁶⁸ Leland Cott, ‘Havana and its Architecture: Living in the Past and Future.’ Proceedings from ‘Havana. Patrimony, Patience, and Progress.’ The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School University, December 7, 2001. Web. Accessed 6 February 2012: 13.

film ignores a whole host of architectural structures that are as ubiquitous as Havana's ruins. I am speaking of the *barbacoas*, improvised living spaces that divide, partition, and generally re-create homes in spite of (and sometimes in flagrant violation of) government housing policy.

Joseph Scarpaci and Armando Portela argue that the *barbacoas* 'constitute a new frontier in Cuba,' a 'new type of *cubanidad*' spawned by Cuban entrepreneurial ingenuity, in which '*barbacoas* represent a sort of Phoenix rising out of the rundown buildings in Cuba.'²⁶⁹ Similarly, architectural theorists Patricio del Real and Cristina Pertierra believe that the Cuban adaptation of lived space constitutes a kind of political resistance rather than political failure. Using the word *inventar*—'to invent'—to describe the building of *barbacoas* and other improvised structures, del Real and Pertierra argue that such activities 'can be seen simultaneously as a set of technical practices, an engagement of micropolitical actions, and an assertion of the social significance of particular personal qualities and community values.'²⁷⁰ In contrast to *Habana*'s fixation on ruin as a metaphor for wholesale decline, del Real and Pertierra argue that vernacular architecture stands as a symptom of a very active Cuban political life, characterized by creativity and social interrelation that has had profound effects on Havana's social and architectural fabric.

This argument seeks to recuperate Cubans as active architectural revisionists, whose adaptation of lived space constitutes a kind of political resistance. Like 'inventar,'

²⁶⁹ Joseph Scarpaci and Armando Portela, *Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 187.

²⁷⁰ del Real and Pertierra, 78.

this sort of re-shaping of space suggests another word, ‘resolver’ (literally, ‘to resolve’), a slang term that Cubans frequently invoke to describe their ability to see the possibility in an impossible situation, to make livable space where there is none, ‘donde haya hueco para hacer hueco.’²⁷¹ For Tim Edensor, the unregulated nature of ruined space dramatically expands its potential uses:

Bereft of these codings of the normative—the arrangement of things in place, the performance of regulated actions, the display of goods lined up as commodities or for show—ruined space is ripe with transgressive and transcendent possibilities. Ruins offer space in which the interpretation and practice of the city becomes liberated from the everyday constraints which determine what should be done and where, and which encode the city with meanings.²⁷²

So, according to this argument, we can see Cubans’ ability to improvise solutions to complex problems as a powerfully subversive appropriation of state-regimented space, whereby people are adapting, re-shaping, and re-building their homes, and by extension, their political existence.

It’s a tempting perspective—one that restores a sense of Cuban agency in the face of overwhelming difficulty. At the same time, however, I want to introduce a note of caution into this line of reasoning. We should beware this tendency to view Cubans as

²⁷¹ Idiomatic expression, roughly translating as ‘where there’s space to make a space.’ Patricio del Real, ‘Huecos: discursos y prácticas espaciales en La Habana.’ *Pasajes* num. 42, Madrid, Spain, 2002.

²⁷² Edensor, 4. Edensor’s book offers one of the few considerations of abandoned, derelict industrial spaces as potentially fruitful. By contrast, see Jakle and Wilson’s *Derelict Landscapes: The Wasting of America’s Built Environment* (1992), which operates on the promise that industrial ruins are inherently negative places, symptomatic of a wider decay of American culture.

full of some kind of ingenious pluck—that it's all good fun to divide one's house in two to make room for another family, that somehow Cubans are really sticking it to the authorities by renting rooms under the table to tourists, or by holding the ceiling up with a broomstick, or by using newsprint when there's no toilet paper. In other words, in the effort to see the ruined state of affairs in Cuba as a site of resistance and not acquiescence, we run the risk of re-romanticizing an existence that gets all the more precarious, every day.

The ubiquity of the *barbacoas* across Havana signals the degree to which the interests of the state have become increasingly and dramatically separated from the needs of the Cuban people over the past several decades. While the *barbacoas* serve to address the architectural crisis when the government does not, these structures do not conform to the priorities of urban renewal and restoration that are so central for the increasing development of the Cuban tourist industry. In an article on Cuba's modernist architecture, Eduardo Luis Rodriguez makes a connection between improvised architectural transformations and an attendant moral degeneracy, arguing that such transformations signal a 'loss of pride' that is also linked to an increase in crime in the country.²⁷³ The notion that 'undesirable' architectural transformation stems from 'undesirable' elements in the Cuban social fabric occludes a much more significant factor at work, namely that the priorities of ordinary Cubans clash with the aesthetic and historical priorities of preservation, and by extension, those of the Cuban economy. A

²⁷³ Eduardo Luis Rodriguez, 'Saving the Legacy of the Architecture of the Modern Movement in Cuba: Notes for the Recovery of the Future.' Proceedings from 'Havana. Patrimony, Patience, and Progress.' The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School University, December 7, 2001, Web. Accessed 6 February 2012: 40.

barbacoa does not make a good hostel; a subdivided building does not make a good museum.

In the new Cuban economy, the purposes of cultural patrimony align with the interests of capital. We can see such reasoning at work in a statement made by journalist Linda Robinson:

It would not be exaggerating to say that the preservation and continuation of Havana's rich cultural legacy, embodied in its buildings and the artistic and social activities that go in and around them, is the key to a healthy, dynamic, and prosperous society—in other words, to a successful transition. Why? Because these are the defining attributes of cubania, the essence of Cuba and Cubans, and their cultural identity is both a powerful fence-mender with the diaspora and a bridge-builder to other nations. Most immediately and most practically, Cuba's culture is the golden goose that is resurrecting its economy. Let us hope it is not killed.²⁷⁴

Robinson speaks euphemistically about 'transition,' mending fences with the diaspora, and building bridges with other nations—all phrases that demonstrate just how central Cuba's architectural heritage is for anyone with a stake in Cuba's shift from socialist stalwart to neoliberal player. As she puts it, Cuban culture is the 'golden goose' upon which the Cuban economy depends.

²⁷⁴ Robinson, 35.

Despite the government's lip-service to 'sustainable development' and the importance of retaining revolutionary values of economic equality,²⁷⁵ it appears that many restoration and urban renewal initiatives have occurred at the expense of residents of Habana Vieja. One of the major consequences of such restorations has been the displacement of Cuban families to the outskirts of Havana. In 2000 Joseph Scarpaci estimated that Habaguanex had displaced at least 200 residents;²⁷⁶ in 2012, he guessed that this number 'has probably trebled.'²⁷⁷ The effects of such displacements are dramatic on those who are forced to move:

The 'token' few left behind in renovated apartments (often used as Habaguanex business offices!) masks what is nothing less than gentrification and displacement, pure and simple. One can dress it up with all kinds of narratives and thinly veiled excuses, but social networks are disrupted, livelihoods are forced to change, commutes increase,

²⁷⁵ In a letter to the participants of a symposium on restoration and urban planning in Havana, Eusebio Leal Spengler, Havana's City Historian and the man in charge of Havana's urban renewal projects, wrote that while Havana's restoration projects involve economic partnership with foreign companies, they should nonetheless retain 'the social vision and the communal effort to integrate harmoniously the stones and the spirit. These projects are about sustainable development. We do not exclude outside cooperation and support, nor do we depend on it for success.' 'A Message from the Historian of the City of Havana.' Proceedings from 'Havana. Patrimony, Patience, and Progress.' The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New School University, December 7, 2001. Web. Accessed 6 February 2012: 3.

²⁷⁶ Scarpaci, 'Winners and Losers in Restoring Old Havana,' 295.

²⁷⁷ Joseph Scarpaci, 'Re: some questions regarding urban renewal and restoration in Habana Vieja.' Email to Cecilia Aldarondo. 10 December 2011. While building collapses are rumored to occur almost daily, and families are regularly displaced, reliable statistics on the housing issue in Cuba are hard to come by, due in large part to the fact that research in Cuba is frequently conducted at the pleasure of the state, a crucial factor which has often resulted in self-censorship by researchers who avoid addressing politically sensitive issues for fear of losing their research privileges.

unemployment results and addresses change.²⁷⁸

While a handful of restoration initiatives have resulted in mixed-use buildings (such as those in the Habana Vieja neighborhood of San Isidro, which include apartments for the elderly), Scarpaci claims that such initiatives are largely cosmetic: ‘neither tourism nor revitalization develops at the grassroots, despite Cuba’s intent on using mass organizations to further the goals of the revolution. [...] Cooperation with civil society is not part of joint-venture operations in Cuba.’²⁷⁹

Scarpaci profiles the dramatic transformation of one building in Habana Vieja as a paradigmatic example of the way that Habana Vieja is at risk of evolving from working-class neighborhood to foreign enclave:

One building in particular represents what has happened elsewhere in the old city. On the northeastern corner of the square rests a stately apartment complex built in 1904. Much of the ornate plasterwork and some of the balconies have fallen off the six-story apartment building over the years. By the late 1960s, the former single-family apartments had become homes to several families. Crowding compounded the interior deterioration. In 1996, a joint venture Italian-Cuban project began renovating the structure into condominiums. Future occupants will be foreign business people working in Cuba, not residents of Habana Vieja. Foreigners will rent the

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Joseph Scarpaci, ‘Winners and Losers in Restoring Old Havana,’ 297.

apartments from Habaguanex and will pay in dollars, not pesos.²⁸⁰

The result is a creeping gentrification which has already begun to accelerate social inequality in Cuba.

Conclusion: ‘And I applaud them’

I want to return for a moment to the Teatro Campoamor, where Reinaldo practices his tai chi among the rubble. Throughout the film, Reinaldo frequently speaks of the performances that used to happen in the theater. In one interview in particular, he describes the multitude of dancers, actors, and musicians that once graced the stage of the Campoamor. When he mentions that ‘the great Master Caruso,’ the early twentieth century tenor, once performed there, Caruso’s version of Donizetti’s aria ‘Una furtiva lagrima’ pours over the soundtrack, as if filling the empty theater. As he talks, the film cuts to slow-motion, black-and-white archival images in which an unidentified female singer shimmies her hips in front of a spirited orchestra. The film then cuts back to a contemporary shot of the theater’s moldering stage. This is another of the many moments when the film attempts to oppose the supposed vitality of the past and the inactivity of the present. The sudden insertion of archival footage precipitates a jarring juxtaposition of black-and-white film images coded as ‘old’ against the colored flatness of contemporary video. The implied paradox—the past shimmies with life, while the present sits in stony silence—only serves to reiterate the brutality of the theater’s abandonment. For what is a stage without performance? What is a place without life?

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 295-6.

The film's visual implication is that Reinaldo is suffering the loss of Cuba's once vibrant cultural life—that the now-abandoned Campoamor stands in for a greater cultural abandonment by all the musicians, dancers, and actors that have left the country over the past fifty years. However, when Reinaldo speaks about the theater's past history, he does not feel that he has missed out on those performances. Instead, Reinaldo insists that they happen still:

Yo me siento parte de ese teatro. Aunque no haiga [sic] escena, no existan bailarines, para mí, yo los veo. Porque represento, también, parte del teatro. [...] Me gusta subir los telones. Me gusta bajarlos. Me gusta sentarme en el primer balcón. Para verlos a ellos, actuar, cantar, bailar. Y los aplaudo.

I feel like I'm part of the theater. Even though there aren't any dancers, and there is no scenery, there are no ballerinas. But I can see them, because I also represent part of the theater. [...] I like to raise the curtains. I like to let them down. I enjoy taking a seat in the first balcony to watch them, see how they perform, sing, and dance. And I applaud them.

While it would be easy to shrug off such statements as mere hyperbole (or worse, as the mutterings of a lunatic), I believe that Reinaldo's spectatorial claim suggests a repudiation of the film's investment in Cuba's wholesale collapse. The fact that Reinaldo lives in a theater, of all places, is apt, considering the 'vexed affinities between

performance and memory.²⁸¹ Here it is worth returning to the work of performance theorists such as Joseph Roach and Rebecca Schneider, who (as I demonstrate more fully in Chapters 1 and 2) advocate for performance's strange historiographical capacities. For both Roach and Schneider, performance re-deploys events that refuse to remain past, yet simultaneously repudiates the authenticity of any past event. While on the one hand they are insistent and irrefutable, such returns of the past are 'multiple, ongoing, partial, and vexed.' As Roach puts it, the trickiness (and power) of performance is that it redeploys memory not as authenticity—not as a faithful representation of what happened—but through resolutely inauthentic process of repetition and substitution: 'Performance [...] stands for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace.'²⁸²

As he watches the plays before him, Reinaldo engages in a kind of one-man reenactment, with him in the role of stage manager ('I raise the curtains') and audience member ('I applaud them'). He re-performs Cuba's cultural past with no degree of literalness; the question of actuality is, frankly, irrelevant. Rather, Reinaldo signals how it is precisely through the *impossibility* of repeating the past that reenactment, in its inauthenticity, gains its power, for 'no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance. In this improvisatorial behavioral space, memory reveals itself as imagination'.²⁸³ Against

²⁸¹ Roach, 3.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Roach, 29.

the claim to linearity and the forward-march of time on the one hand, and the discrete boundary between past, present, and future on the other,

‘There is, instead, a certain superabundance to reenactment, like a run-on sentence, as if an event in time, refusing to be fully or finally “over” or “gone” or “complete” pulses with a kind of living afterlife in an ecstasy of variables, a million insistent if recalcitrant possibilities for return (doubling as possibilities for error). The zillion details of the act of interpretation in an act of live repetition make the pastness of the past both palpable and a very *present* matter.’²⁸⁴

The rather dizzying, yet powerful revelation of Reinaldo’s theatrical tendencies—that the ‘pastness of the past’ is a ‘palpable and very *present* matter’—calls to mind Henri Bergson’s claim memory is not ‘in the past,’ withheld from the present. Rather, memory is a process that occurs in the present, through a body engaged in continuous action: ‘when replaced in the flux of time, [my body is] always situated at the very point where my past expires in a deed.’²⁸⁵ Time cannot be separated out into discrete moments, and past/present/future can ever be entirely distinguished from one another.

This reconfiguration of time—from linear to enfolded, multiple, and subject to repetition and return—has profound implications for our understanding of Havana’s ruined landscape, beyond its depiction in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*. As Antonio José Ponte points out, the inhabited ruin ‘is a place where life goes on—and

²⁸⁴ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 29-30.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

where change happens. And that's something Simmel would not have liked.' Brian Dillon agrees with this assessment, stating that Georg Simmel's mistake lies in his belief that the ruin marks an ending rather than a process: 'the ruin is not the triumph of nature, but an intermediate moment, a fragile equilibrium between persistence and decay.'²⁸⁶ I would argue that this notion—that the inhabited ruin forces a reckoning with the interpenetration, rather than the separation, of life and death, past and present, and the ever-presence of change over stasis—is not only anathema to Simmel, but also to Ponte, and to the film itself. Even as it is fascinated by the 'scandal' of inhabitation, *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* fails to address its effects fully. Ultimately, the film cannot accommodate anything that troubles the notion that Cuba has completely capitulated to the past. In particular, the film does not consider the ongoing change that occurs when lives are being lived inside ruined spaces, and more importantly, ignores the political possibilities afforded by the repeat performances of daily life inside Havana's ruined buildings. While the film argues that architectural ruin precipitates the political ruination of Cuban citizens, inhabitation frustrates the desire of the visitor to engage in acts of disinterested contemplation, and forces a reckoning with the ways in which Cubans are consistently engaged in re-inhabiting and re-making their environments. Indeed, in the face of what may well become the rapid gentrification of Havana—where the most vulnerable of the urban population stand to be both spatially and economically excluded

²⁸⁶ Brian Dillon, 'Fragments From a History of Ruin.' *Cabinet* Issue 20, 'Ruins,' Winter 2005/2006, 55-59: 59.

from the city's restoration—we would do well to ask whether the visitor can sustain this spectatorial attachment to a ruined Cuban landscape.

I wish to conclude by returning to the alarmist blog post, 'Decay, Gorgeous Decay!', in which the author, Matt Welch, rails against the 'Lonely Planet-waving travel snob' whining 'about how some current or formerly misgoverned hellhole has been "ruined" by all that yucky reconstruction, material success, and (worst of all!) tourism.' It is not a little curious that the Welch, has chosen the term 'ruin' to describe the very processes that are currently gentrifying Cuba's decrepit buildings into playgrounds for the tourist trade. Perhaps, if we begin to adopt a more fluid definition of ruination—that the ruined building is not a symptom of a teleological process that has reached fruition (the inevitable triumph of nature over man, as Simmel would argue, or the death that finally threatens to engulf Fidel Castro, 'Cuba's greatest ruin'²⁸⁷), but rather signals something like a pit-stop in processes of ongoing, intersecting, and ever-unfolding change, we might be better-equipped to understand the complex and contradictory transformations underway in Cuba. These are transformations which do not sit easily in a category. Cuba is a place that is not entirely failed. It has not yet plunged into the sea. Cuba remains, ruins, repeats, and renews, all at once.

²⁸⁷ As described by Antonio José Ponte in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*.

Coda: Ashes to Ashes

I hope it is clear enough to you by this point that endings do not really interest me. Did that register? Have I been at least marginally successful in this regard? Like the human body itself, this dissertation's boundaries are ambiguous and ultimately unsustainable. This work is a temporary accumulation of mutually attracted ideas and incidents, a way station for philosophical and aesthetic affinities. I will not attempt to tie off all the threads here. Cohesion would be dishonest, a pathetic and paranoid attempt at expertise that would undermine the entire enterprise. For I am no expert. There are no ends. There is only passage.

There is, however, an incident I would like to recount. This incident has returned to me repeatedly over the past year, insisting itself with its own particular form of ruthless recalcitrance. It strikes me as the perfect incident with which to leave you, since it harkens back to the corpse with which this project began.

The incident occurs in Ross McElwee's documentary *Time Indefinite*.²⁸⁸ It has occurred and recurred for me dozens of times. It is always and never the same when I view it. In the film, McElwee turns his camera on his friend Charleen, an endearing blonde with imposing hips and a breezy, matter-of-fact Southern drawl. Charleen's ex-husband Jim, distraught over the impending sale of their dream house, breaks into the house on his birthday, scatters gasoline everywhere, and lights a match. The house goes up in the biggest conflagration the local fire department has ever seen, taking Jim with it.

²⁸⁸ *Time Indefinite*. Dir. Ross McElwee. Video. First Run Features, 1993. DVD.

A photo of the blazing house still hangs on a wall in the fire department: ‘It was the pinnacle of their life—his death,’ says Charleen.

In the scene that interests me, Charleen is in her new house with Ross. She is holding a photograph of herself with Jim, the only one she has. She explains that this photograph traffics back and forth between display and storage:

CHARLEEN: He gets on my mind, and I find if I have him out and I sleep with it out in the room, then I start dreaming about it, so I have to put it up. So sometimes I get it out, and sometimes I put it up.

Lately, she explains, it’s been up. Charleen turns to a white-papered box. She shows it to the camera as she talks:

CHARLEEN: It’s kind of like Jim himself. I’ve had this up, for over...months. A long time. And I kind of forgot what’s in here. As you can see, as soon as I got it—as soon as I got this box that said it was Jim—I opened it up. Because I always wondered about what it would look like, a person’s ashes. And I always wondered what he would look like.

Charleen opens the lid to the box, revealing a smaller cardboard box inside. As she opens it, she continues.

CHARLEEN: You know, it’s horrible to never see somebody you love the last time... I felt like it never got finished. I was surprised when I finally opened it up, at what it was.

She pulls open the lid and tugs out the box’s contents: a clear plastic bag full of a grey powdery material.

CHARLEEN: Look—it spills. It’s a baggie! A baggie of... [pause]... Jim. I think it’s got a hole in it. The bones are sharp. And everybody’s been mad at me that I won’t throw it away. ’Cause I carried it around a little bit. And I can’t decide what to do. I can’t decide to put it in a vase. Like most people decide to put it in a vase on the mantle.

She has an idea that Jim would have wanted her to scatter the ashes into the ocean:

CHARLEEN: But he liked water, and he liked rivers, and I think he would—if he could talk, he’d tell me to get him back into the water, and get him out of the closet! I know he wants to be out of the closet.

But she can’t bring herself to follow through on this wish. Jim’s ashes are trapped in the closet where she’s deposited them. ‘I haven’t been able to throw him away yet. Sometimes I just need to hold it,’ she explains.

Today she wants to try. She leads Ross to a boardwalk extending through a marsh, and out to the sea. Once on the boardwalk, however, Charleen is indecisive. She debates the virtues of potential locations of disposal: marsh or surf? Ross suggests that it’s time for her to go through with it. But Charleen balks, claiming concern for Jim’s welfare. ‘It’s dangerous in the ocean!’ she exclaims. No, she decides,

The safest place for this box is with me. [...] I’m going to keep ’em [the ashes] next to my shoes until I know what else to do with ’em! I mean, why can’t I! Everybody keeps telling me I can’t do this. But obviously I

can do it, and I don't see anybody who has a better idea! What's your better idea? You just say I can't!

Charleen clutches the box to her chest, her face truculent like a toddler's. She has decided. The box stays in the closet for now.

This incident fascinates and dismays me for several reasons. Each reason points to a central concern of this project; each concern adheres itself to the accumulation that I have called the documentary encounter, and adds an element of specificity to the concept.

Reason 1: the pause.

Let us rewind briefly, to the moment just before Charleen has vocally identified the box's contents. Although she has presumably opened this box scores of times before, Charleen's voice still carries with it a note of surprised glee at what she finds inside. 'It's a baggie!' she exclaims, clearly tickled at the inanity of a bit of clear plastic holding her ex-husband together.

And yet, in the next moment, Charleen is arrested, seized by recognition. 'It's a baggie! A baggie of...' Her voice breaks. Her hands are still (Fig. 5.1).



Figure 5.1.

A baggie of... A baggie of... A baggie of... Jim. In this space between

baggie

Jim

something happens to Charleen. She's caught, hanging on something invisible.

Throughout this dissertation, I have been trying to understand the human encounter with documentary remains—what it is, what it generates, why it matters—in three separate case studies. In Chapter 2, I described the performative histories generated by visitors' encounters with Joseph Wagenbach's art and personal effects. Meanwhile, Chapter 3 shuttled between a very personal encounter (between me and a shoebox full of decaying films and slides) and an institutional one (between the film archivist and the

films for which he is responsible). And Chapter 4 compared two different encounters with architectural ruin: the masterful, distantiated encounter experienced by the tourist, and the durational, habit-driven encounter experienced by the inhabitant. In each of these cases, it may have seemed as though the distinction between human and documentary remains is a clean one—with

human on one side of the pole,
and documentary remains
on the other. However, I believe Charleen's pause—the breakdown she experiences in that moment—comes upon her when she recognizes the ultimate untenability of such a distinction. The baggie is Jim, and it isn't Jim. Jim is gone. Jim is there.

We can hear it in Charleen's repeated semantic slips as she talks about 'the box that said it was Jim.' Sometimes the baggie is an 'it,' sometimes it is 'him.' Sometimes it seems to have agency, calling to her to 'get him out of the closet.' It seems that one of the key aspects of Charleen's mourning process is that she is reckoning with Jim's passage from person into object—from a seemingly masterful human into a bag of shards and bone. I find that this scene signals the ways in which the human, rather than being a non-object in life, and an object in death, is always already its own kind of documentary remains, matter that moves through time, participating in events, accumulating residues, acquiring and shedding bits of experience. The human, just like all materiality, is immanent with processes of entropy, dispersal, and ongoing and progressive decay. Jim's transformation is absurd, but only within a teleological understanding of life, and of

time. Even in death, Jim remains. He remains in Charleen's memory, and in these unruly particles of dust and bone.

And yet, he's also gone. Gone for good.

Reason 2: the unbearable keepsake.

There is something else in the pause between 'baggie' and 'Jim' that interests me. It relates to Charleen's peculiar ambivalence about the one photograph she has left, which causes her bad dreams unless she 'puts it up.' I am interested in the oscillation between Charleen's display and storage of this photo. Like the baggie of Jim, there is something truly absurd about Charleen's flirtation with the photograph. In taking it down, putting it up, taking it down, putting it up, according to the dictates of her memory and heart, Charleen seems to be engaged in a strange sort of ritualized indecision, a set of behaviors that mark the liminal space of mourning in which she finds herself. The photograph gives her nightmares, and yet she seems to need it. Why?

Here, I want to point to a particular role sometimes played by documentary remains—that of 'unbearable keepsake.' An unbearable keepsake is an object, powerfully charged with memory, which shuttles between usage and disposal, never truly settling in either zone. This object is sequestered, a kind of secret, meant for to be stowed away in dark corners, until those rare, furtive encounters. An encounter with such a keepsake, especially if unplanned, is risky. Once stowed, there is the danger of discovery, of opening a door which we mean to keep locked. While we may be compelled to remember a given event, we dread the encounter with the trigger which

compromises this remembering, which provides us with too much or contradictory information. Thus our relation to the keepsake (which conjures memory yet contradicts it) is ambivalent.

It reminds me of Swann, the main character in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. After his lover Odette has left him, Swann keeps her letters and withered chrysanthemum in a cabinet. But the cabinet taunts him; he cannot bear to open it. These documents, proof of Odette's now-diminished love, remain suspended between usage and disposal: 'Just as he had in his study a cupboard at which he contrived never to look [...] so there was a place in his heart to which he would never allow his thoughts to trespass too near [...] the place in which lingered his memories of happy days.'²⁸⁹ The distance serves as a prescription against encounter with those memories. It has enabled Swann to construct a more pleasing narrative about Odette's love for him.

Or another example, from closer to home:

K and I broke up and I had to get rid of everything. I deleted every email, every photo. But there were several items I could not get rid of. A necklace his daughter made me. A tiny specimen box into which I had pasted a typewritten 'K.' A love letter he wrote me but never completed. I couldn't keep them out, so I put the items in a cardboard box which I kicked into a corner of the room. I didn't seal the box because it felt too final. On a couple of occasions I nudged it open, caught a few words from the love letter, and shut it again. Finally I gave it to my roommate. I asked her to hide it from me. I also asked her not to throw it away.

²⁸⁹ Proust, 313.

A few months later we got back together. I told him about the box. He laughed at me gently. ‘Oh Cecilia. You’re so sensitive.’

Then, not too much later, another breakup. This time I left everything—even the rice cooker—on his stoop.

Swann and I both reckon with the flotsam and jetsam of lost love. Like Charleen, we are perplexed by these objects. We ‘put them up.’ And on the occasions when we bump into them, there is always some sort of trouble. Here, an echo from the beginning of this dissertation, reasserting itself at the end:

In the documentary encounter, we are faced with an undeniable, insistent pastness that causes a shock to the system. It may happen quietly, as a small shudder, or totally, as a cataclysm; in every case, in the documentary encounter we greet our own disintegration.

The encounter with the unbearable keepsake causes a cataclysm of memory, a breakdown and re-constitution of the self.

There is one, final example of an encounter with such a keepsake. It occurs in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. There is a passage in which Heathcliff, the vengeful, bitter hero, looks at his ward Hareton, an unwanted keepsake from the death of his greatest enemy, his childhood bully Hindley Earnshaw. Hareton, a filthy, ignorant foundling who hangs puppies from trees, so looks like his dead father that he is little more than an awful reminder of Heathcliff’s own childhood: ‘Hareton seemed a personification of my youth—not a human being—I felt to him in such a variety of ways,

that it would have been impossible to have accosted him rationally.²⁹⁰ Hareton is a reminder that, in Heathcliff's encounter with him, confounds Heathcliff's understanding and renders him inarticulate. Unwanted and unmanageable, Hareton is a keepsake that refuses to stay hidden. Human though he may be, he is 'not a human being': he is also a document.

Hareton stands as a reminder of the way in which human beings carry with them all manner of residues. Heathcliff's encounter with Hareton is distressing not simply because Hareton recalls the past, as if it were something 'over there' that can be regarded but maintained apart from the present; rather, he signals the messy entanglements of time. Rebecca Schneider, a theorist whose work, *time and time again*, returns to trouble and catalyze this dissertation, has forcefully described the uneasy, queasy feeling that occurs when times touch—what Schneider calls the 'crosshatch' of time.²⁹¹ Modernity tried to straighten time out, to put past, present, and future in place: 'That time can be *porous, malleable, tactile, given to recurrence, given to buckling, given to rupture, given to return* is denied by the tick-tock of the time clock.'²⁹² But ultimately, the documentary encounter reveals the fallacy of linear time.

Reason three: the embrace.

At the end of the scene in *Time Indefinite* that I have just elaborated, Charleen returns to her house and sits on the porch, clutching the box to her chest

²⁹⁰ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*. 1847. (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 240.

²⁹¹ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 27.

²⁹² *Ibid*, 174. Italics in original.

as if challenging Ross to just *try* and take it from her. The embrace is simultaneously authoritative and utterly childish. Her expression shuttles between sheepish stubbornness and resolute commitment. What is clear is that Charleen has taken a position: she alone decides the fate of this box.

Here, it is worth considering her wish—to keep the box ‘next to my shoes’—as it contrasts with ‘what Jim would have wanted’—to ‘get him back into the water.’ As she wraps her arms around the box, Charleen reminds me of the archivist, and the ethical struggle to reconcile the wishes of the dead and the needs of the living. On the one hand, Charleen’s decision to keep the box might call to mind the film archivist bent on the impossible, conservative work of preservation. On the other, her decision could also conjure Nietzsche’s injunction to act according to the needs of the present, and not in slavish adherence to the past. Jim wants to be in the water; Charleen wants to hold him in her arms.

I believe that Charleen keeps these ashes because they suit her. I also believe that someday they no longer will. By that time, she may have sufficiently forgotten Jim that she will also forget his wish to be in the water; the box may remain by her shoes, not because she needs it there, but because she does not need the box at all. For the moment, I choose to believe that Charleen’s back-and-forth—between putting it up and taking it down, between wandering out to the sea and coming back to the house—is representative of a very important kind of work, not unlike that of Paolo Cherchi Usai as he nurses the piles of terminal film, or of Reinaldo, as he sweeps the crumbling theater floor. These acts of tending

and maintenance are pointless—but therein lies their worth. Like women who might sit up with a corpse for hours, mulling over the life lived, these are ruminative acts that pay attention to the ongoing, unpredictable nature of disappearance. Of course, that is, until the day when they

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