

## The Body, the Film, the Archive and the Monster

© 2016 by Annaëlle Winand. This text was presented during the roundtable “The Exquisite Corpus: Film Heritage and Found Footage Films. Passing Through/Across Medias and Film Bodies” at the XIV MAGIS – Gorizia International Film Studies Spring School in Gorizia, Italy, March 9-15 2016.

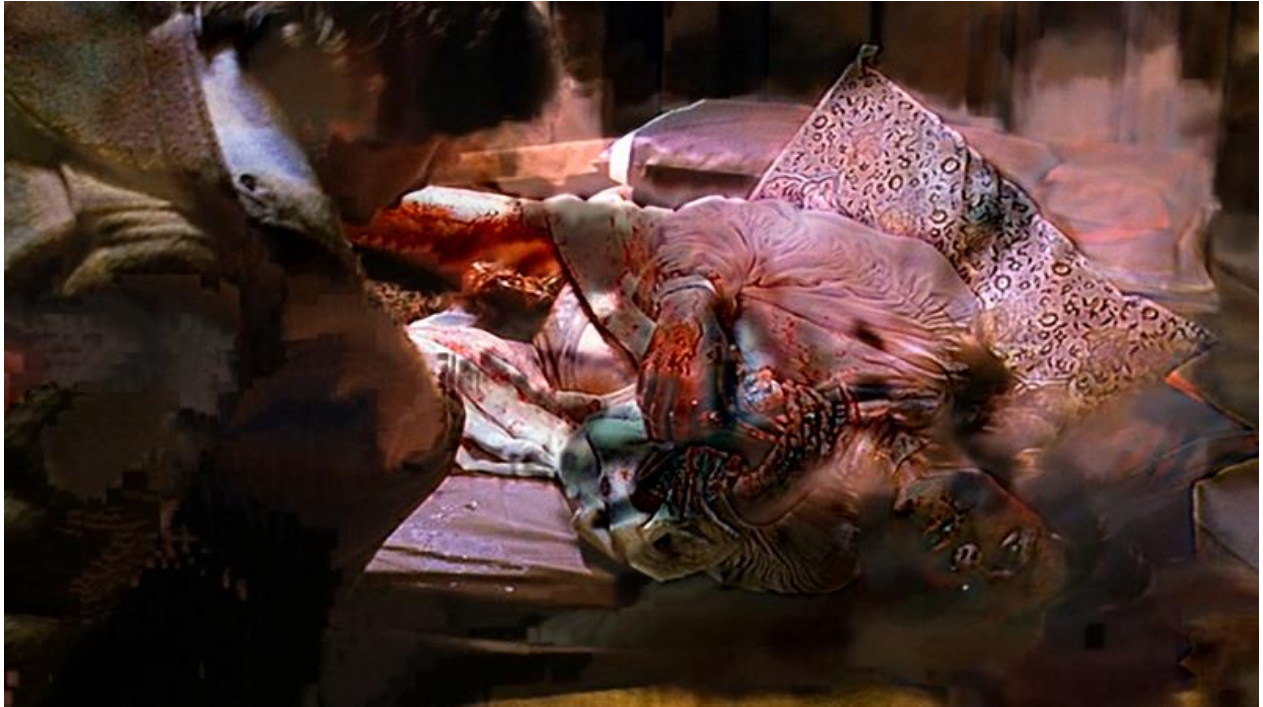


Figure 1 - Long Live the New Flesh (2009)

### *Introduction*

In the digital age, the body of the film resonates as a new cinematic experience. Digital angst is represented by “archival excess” and brings researchers back to the core object of their disciplines: the film and the archive. Far from weighing down this argument, some artists are playing with the materiality of analogue film as much as they work on the virtual materiality of digital films. These works are reminding us of the film as an archive, as a cinematic body, ruled by a physical, technical and institutional realm.

For an archivist, looking at found footage experimental films and videos, which are redeploing the materiality of film, can be an unsettling experience. To articulate this experience, we would talk about materiality, as matter, linked to decomposition and decay, all this related to authenticity, time, history and memory.

The materiality of the decomposing archives is something archivists have to prevent. It reminds us that time is moving and the history and memory inscribed in tangible records should be preserved in the best way possible: not disturbed, safe, uncorrupted as an authentic trace of the past, that will be read in different context, mostly in an administrative, scientific or patrimonial framework.

That being said, found footage experimental filmmakers redeploying archives and films are challenging this idea. They take the archives out of the archives, out of their context, they cut them, scratch them, burn them, declare “archives” what archivists usually do not consider as such and they play with the archival taboo of decay.

But, what I would like to do is to articulate what can be perceived as a “monstrosity” with a different idea: the perception of sublime beauty and dread evoked by that same work. I would argue that some filmmakers present the archive as a monstrous body (here the monster does not have a specific negative connotation, but more the function of something which reveals, from the latin *monstrare*: to show). And that monstrous body is a way to read the importance of the materiality of archives as a complement to temporality and history. It is also a way to understand the use of archives outside the traditional archival science framework.

To do so, I will look at *Spark of Being* from filmmaker Bill Morrison. His film depicts very vividly the clash of sublime and dread, creating meaning. Further, I would also like to open up the notion of materiality to the digital realm with the work *Long live the New Flesh* from Belgian artist Nicolas Provost.

## ***Materiality***

First, what do we talk about when we evoke “materiality” in archival science? Usually, the materiality of a record, of a document, refers to its quality as a trace of the past. What makes a document is its materiality, the physical existence of the medium on which the information is attached. It means that as long as the medium exists, we can have access to the past expression, what has been written, and then we can interpret it (Chabin, 2004). Materiality is linked to different notions:

### 1) Authenticity

That same trace of the past can be considered as an authentic archive. Authenticity is a fundamental archival concept. It is the trustworthiness of a record as a record: the quality of the record being what it claims to be and that is free from tampering or corruption. This quality is based on internal and external evidence, including its physical characteristics, structure, content, and context (“The InterPARES 2 Project Dictionary,” 2016).

## 2) Temporality and history

When we see an archive, when we read, touch and manipulate it, we do this at the present of its materiality. Time is inscribed in material: we hold a material piece of the past that lead us to experiment a past event in the now of the exploitation (Klein & Lemay, 2014). We are therefore the spectator of a certain type of sedimentation, a layering of time and experiences, which are physically and symbolically accumulated on the archive. It is where the authenticity of the archival record resides: “authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin, 2012, p. 21).

## 3) Emotion through evocation

A third way to apprehend materiality in archival science, and it is quite a new perspective, is to question the emotion harnessed by archival material. Archives have the capacity to move, through the power of evocation because they have the capacity to remind us forgotten things (Lemay & Klein, 2012). They place the reader/spectator in a timeline (with a past and a future), but also in a time frame, facing its own obsolescence, its own limits. Different attributes stimulate evocation (Lemay & Klein, 2012):

- authenticity: archives are authentic, guaranteed by an archival institution. They are the witness of the past, some of the truth of what happened;
- materiality: linked to the ideas of uniqueness, worthiness or frailty. It also bears physically the marks of the time.

## ***Monstrous bodies***

Following these ideas, how do we experience a found footage experimental screening, where filmmakers are redeploying the materiality of film?

For an archivist, the first glance at these works can be unsettling. They upset our ideas around authenticity and time. We directly are reminded of the duty of preserving archives. We may perceive first the list of problems that these films and videos are pointing out: mechanical damage, mold, mildew, and fungus; acetate decay (vinegar syndrome); shrinkage; color fading; nitrate decay; magnetic track deterioration; loss of data/unreadable supports.

In parallel, they also are sublime pieces, attached to decaying aesthetics, their cinematic body pushed forward to the audience to admire.

These images are accordingly the very fabric of a fascinating paradox, incarnated in their monstrous bodies. Far from rejecting this idea of the monster, I would like to embrace it in this discussion, because

the monster is a powerful creative figure: it helps us to understand the complexities of these kinds of images, moved by awe. The monster as cultural figure has different characteristics (Cohen, 1996):

- it is a cultural body, an embodiment of a certain cultural moment (time, feeling, place);
- it leaves behind material remains, traces; it always escapes and returns;
- it is an hybrid, made of incoherent bodies; it problematizes the clash of extremes;
- it incarnates difference, alterity (cultural, racial, political, economic, sexual);
- it demarcates the bonds that hold culture;
- it is linked to forbidden practices : it repulses and attracts in the same time;
- it stands at the threshold of becoming.

The work of found footage filmmakers is directly related to the monster. They show us what cannot be seen, the lacks in archives (what is missing), at different level of understanding.

Archives actually contains “tacit narratives” which need to be deconstructed to understand their meaning (Ketelaar, 2001). These tacit narratives are narratives of power and knowledge. Following Foucault and Derrida’s thoughts about the archive, post modernist archivists reshaped the traditional idea of archives from a trace of the past to a construction of the future: “archives not merely serve to preserve an archivable content of the past” (Ketelaar, 2001, p. 134), but the action of archiving produces as much as it records the event (Derrida, 1995). Archives are shaped by different factors:

- by a tension in between remembering and forgetting: we make, at different level (personal, institutional and societal) choices, because we cannot remember everything. Because we have to forget to be able to remember, the question to ask would be: what do we choose to remember or to forget? ;
- by a context: archiving is a “regime of practices” (Ketelaar, 2001, p. 136) which varies following a cultural, political and social context, situated in a certain place at a certain time : they are the mechanism, conscious or unconscious, behind what we preserve;
- by technology: it shapes what we produce, what is being kept and how it is kept.

From these ideas and back to materiality, we can ask ourselves what kind of archival narratives are revealed in these monstrous bodies? In order to answer this question, let’s have a look into the two works previously mentioned. On the many filmmakers and visual artists, on the multitude of beautiful and interesting works that could have chosen, I will focus on these two films because they also are, narratively and physically, an embodiment of both the monster and the body.

## *Bill Morrison's Spark of Being*

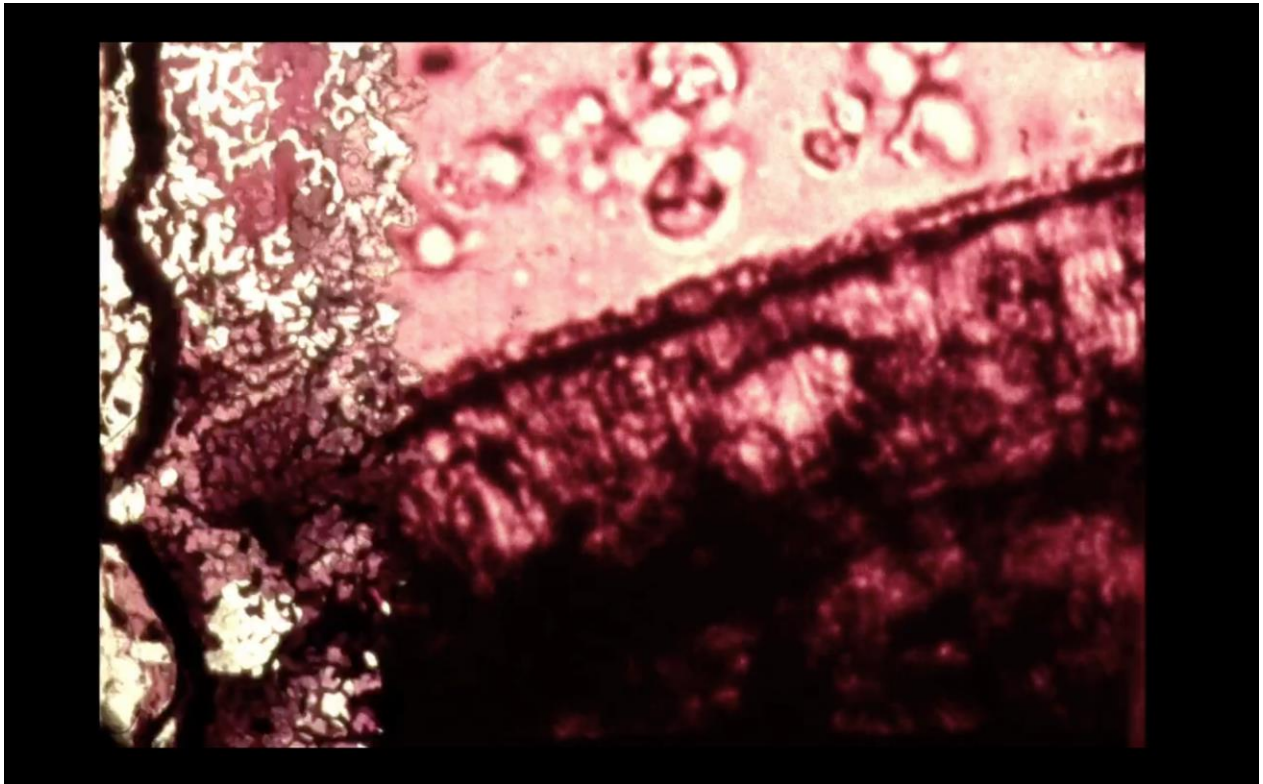


Figure 2 - *Spark of Being* (2010)

Bill Morrison is an artist and filmmaker from the United States with a background in painting and theater (Habib, 2004). His work, often on the edge of documentary, of narrative fiction and experimental, is highly regarded for the exposition of decomposed film stock, especially nitrate, and his use of institutional archives. Morrison has a large filmography: 5 features films, 14 shorts and different performances (Morrison, n.d.). The film I would like to focus on today, regarding our talk, is *Spark of Being* (2010) whose storyline is based on Mary Shelley's iconic novel *Frankenstein*.

*Spark of Being* is a 68min feature entirely made of institutional archives (including the British Film Institute and the Netherlands' Eye Film Institute). From this variety of sources, Morrison relates the story, through the eyes of three characters: the captain, the doctor and, of course, the monster (here called the "Creature"). The original soundtrack accompanying the images is composed by Dave Douglas and performed by Keystone (Morrison, n.d.).

The starting point of *Spark of Being* is the materiality of the film itself. It mixes different types of footage, different texture, different colours, different level of conservation and from different origins (the films were made to serve different purposes – educational or scientific films, for example. One of them being Frank Hurley's original footage of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition in 1914). All these pieces are

brought together to tell us the story of Frankenstein's monster, the story of a creature who is itself a mix of heterogeneous pieces.

What Morrison proposes is a staging of some sort, operating at different level:

- a staging of the physical connection between the archive user and the document: the audience can *feel* the materiality of the film, in a haptic look, using the “eyes like an organ of touch” (Marks, 1997, p. 104);
- a staging of an embodied temporality: we can see the time acting as a fading or decomposing agent while the narration of the story is evolving in a classic time frame;
- a staging of an aesthetics of ruins: the monster wanders in spaces surrounded by antiques or industrial ruins, all while the film itself is seen decomposing or suffering from fading or damages. In another scene the creation of the monster is paradoxically staged with decomposing and dying, nitrate footage.



Figure 3 - Spark of Being (2010)

The tacit narratives revealed by Morrison in his feature are multiple. They are motivated by both the visible materiality and the clash created by the mixing of diverse images. At least three different meanings can be here observed:

- Morrison transforms the imagery of a famous story. Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a classic of literature and film, access to both an individual and collective memory of the monster (a common image of the monster being Boris Karloff's performance in James Whale 1931's *Frankenstein*). *Spark of Being* allows a deconstruction of the original story through the lenses of unusual images;
- infamous images are redeployed: Morrison showcases archives that probably would not be seen otherwise, to be seen anew;
- a new meaning is given to archival material which was no meant to tell this specific story: taking these archives out of their context, breaking the authenticity that constitutes them as archives, Morrison give a new meaning to them, a new life, hitting once again collective and individual memory, through historical images that have the look of being authentic. The perceived authenticity in *Spark of Being* is based on the historical authority induced by institutional archives, but also on the link created in between the filmmaker and the film stock he manipulates: it insures a relation in between the artist and the image, relation which becomes a symbol of authenticity (Takahashi, 2008).



Figure 4 - *Spark of Being* (2010)

## *Nicolas Provost's Long Live the New Flesh*



Figure 5 - *Long Live the New Flesh* (2010)

The manipulation of film stock is an obvious manifestation of the materiality of film. It touches the audience in this very powerful way, related to the newly auratic characteristic acquired by this kind of support recently. But how do the audience relate to digital films and videos in this regard? The second clip I would like to discuss touches that subject: it is *Long Live the New Flesh* from Nicolas Provost.

Nicolas Provost is a Belgian visual artist, known for his work with film that “tightly bind visual art and cinematography” (Provost, n.d.). In his found footage related works, he does not use institutional archives, but popular movies. *Long Live the New Flesh* is indeed a mash up of different notorious horror films: *The Exorcist*, *The Fly*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *American Psycho*, *The Shining* and *Videodrome*, this last one acting as a guiding thread. Put together in a new story, these images are voluntarily pixelated, their definition is lowered, and the colors are shifted or blocked, while the sounds are delayed, stopped, moved forward, reduced to noises or chopped. The choice of films operated by Provost, revealing of a body-orientated theme, pave the way to our analysis: lots of horror films can easily be seen as the flesh of a bodily affective cinema. Cronenberg’s being one of his most iconic representative.

*Long Live the New Flesh*, revealing of a body-orientated theme, has an impact on memory through material aesthetics:



- it creates an affective response from the audience, seeing the different frames blending into each other, infecting one another and implying a contamination of the flesh and the mind (Zvonkine, 2014);
- the audience has to overcome the complexity of images (blended, altered, superposed) to apprehend the film. Our memory is working, trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle, to fix the images we are seeing, in a certain way. To do so, we use our cinematic memory (Zvonkine, 2014): the multitude of known cinematic images (individual, collective) are helping us to put together the film.

Compared to Morrison's work, Provost's film shows major differences: it is made of movies whose images are well known, it is entirely digital and the modifications are forced on the film. The only common ground is that they both are considered found footage experimental films. So the questions generated by that type of work in comparison to the previous example would be: can we still talk about materiality? Is this digitally induced modification producing the same kind of effect or affect? Can we talk about authenticity? Is it referring to the same temporalities? Different elements can be taken in consideration as a first step towards an answer to this questioning:

- Provost is redeploying what we could call the materiality of digital material. In manipulating the code of the digital files, he is showing us an extreme case of digital decay, that is reminding us of the natural, organic decomposition of film stock, but also drawing attention to the fact that digital is decomposing in its own way. These forced modifications are linked to found footage filmmakers who are scratching, cutting, burning, etc. film stock. They manipulate the materiality, inscribing some authenticity, through a physical alteration, in the film stock;
- the digital materiality prompts the audience to an affective reaction that is linked to the aesthetics of decay, but also to the same kind of embodied materiality that can be found in some paintings. In Provost's work, the digital film becomes an organic entity, linked in his aesthetics to the flesh of the film stock and the flesh of paintings. The experience of *Long Live the New Flesh* can be related to the sensation generated by watching Francis Bacon's Head series or the degradation of nitrate film stock. Digital is here presented as the new flesh, as Cronenberg's hybrid work, generating questions on the body of films, the bodies in the film and the body of the viewer;
- temporality appeared differently in a digital piece. In *Long Live the New Flesh* time seems to bend and blend, as the pixels are blurring the lines in between the frames.



Figure 6 - Head VI (1949)



Figure 7 - Long Live the New Flesh (2009)

## ***Conclusion***

Redeploying the materiality of the film, with the monstrous bodies, to reveal the tacit narratives of archives or pushing the boundaries of what we call archives is important to our understanding of these archives, institutional or not, and film heritage: found footage filmmakers and artists are making us face the monster, in its paradoxical awe. They create new bodies that trigger questions about our understanding of preservation, among other things (we could also evoke: memory, history and temporality; aesthetics; time and space; filmmaking; archival science, etc.).

Experimental and avant-garde artists are often a driving force towards new thinking. They are themselves monsters at the fringe of our culture. They draw attention towards what cannot/will not be seen, made or thought: the importance or beauty of documents that are not always considered for preservation; the intelligence and aesthetics of documents that are not considered useful to make history. On a larger scale, these filmmakers inscribe themselves in film heritage as a monstrous entity, made of disparate bodies, rejected or loved, hidden or shown, destroyed or preserved. It is an incoherent body, rich of an individual, a collective or a specific memory.

The work on materiality directly applied on these films is a way to see the archive as a body, to induce an affective response in the audience, identifying themselves to time on body-frames (a time that is naturally happening or has been forced on the film) as a decomposing, fading, disappearing entity. The decayed or manipulated films become excessive bodies that are toned and deformed in excessive ways. Filmmakers are creating new bodies, uncanny, unexpected, monstrous or ghostly creatures showing at the border of the film: they often show parts of the cinematic body that we usually not see (pieces of frames, emulsion, and perforations as skin, articulations, flesh or bones).

The current fast-moving and ever-changing digital context suggests changes in our way to understand and think about archives. Both fundamental and new questions arise from these mutations, asking updated or innovative ways to grasp the objects of our disciplines: the archive, the film. In that respect, if we consider that “the most interesting developments in the redefinition of our relationships to archives will arise from practices from the margins” (Martel & Prelinger, 2013, p. 140), the creations of found footage filmmakers are a valued and useful tool to generate reflections. Being monstrous entities, as in Cohen’s definition, they ask us how we perceive things: “(...) they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside” (Cohen, 1996, p. 20).

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### ***Filmography***

Morrison, B. (2010). *Spark of Being*. USA.

Provost, N. (2009). *Long Live the New Flesh*. Belgium.

### ***List of illustrations***

Figure 1, 5 and 7. *Long Live the New Flesh*. (2009). From: *Long Live the New Flesh*. Directed by: Nicolas provost. [Film still] Belgium. At: <http://www.nicolasprovost.com/films/468/> (Accessed on March 21st, 2016).

Figure 2, 3 and 4. *Spark of Being* (2010). From: *Spark of Being*. Directed by: Bill Morrison. [Film still] USA. At: <https://vimeo.com/29643041> (Accessed on March 21st, 2016).

Figure 6. *Head VI* (1949). Francis Bacon [painting]. At [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Head\\_VI\\_\(1949\).JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Head_VI_(1949).JPG) (accessed on March 21st, 2016)