

# **The monstrous archive. Aesthetics of decay and horror in found footage films<sup>1</sup>**

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## ***Introduction***

As an archivist, talking about “contested” and “diseased” footage takes a specific meaning. Apart from the pragmatic aspect of this topic (vinegar syndrome, mold, disappearance and other physical damages that archival records can suffer), the use of found or archival footage in experimental found footage films can be considered by some archivist as a contested way to use archives or even a mistreatment.

Usually archives serve scientific, patrimonial, or administrative purposes. But artists have been using them increasingly since the end of the 1980’s (Lemay, 2010), bringing the archival records into new frames of interpretation. Found footage filmmakers are a fascinating example of these archive-using artists, complicating what archivists call “archives” and blurring lines of the aesthetic (and sometimes the politics) of cinema. Using different techniques as re-integration, collage, compilation, cutting, transformation, and the destruction of reels and pixels of films, they create new pieces which are extending, changing, or annihilating the message of the original works. The filmmakers work with analogue or digital films and videos, using all kind of footage (found footage, home movies, blockbusters, orphan and ephemeral films, etc.). These footages are often considered an “archives” by them, in their link to the past.

From focusing on a specific aspect of one or multiple films (as in Douglas’s Gordon *24 Hours Psycho* where the filmmaker slowed down Hitchcock’s masterpiece to last 24 hours) to damaging them to incorporate the film with an aesthetic of decay and destruction, filmmakers use different techniques in their practices. This latter type of film will be the focus of this talk. We would like to show example of two found footage films using horror movie as a primary material: *Long Live the New Flesh* (Provost, 2009) and *Outer Space* (Tscherkassky, 1999). In

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analyzing their work and how the films are manipulated and redeployed, we can see that horror genre is refracted by filmmakers and video artists in order to shed light on how they not only redeploy archival practices but also, in some extension, “remediate” the genre.

### *Long Live the New Flesh*



Figure 1 Provost, N. (2009). *Long Live the New Flesh* [Film still]. Belgium. Retrieved from <http://www.nicolasprovost.com/films/468/>

Nicolas Provost is a Belgian visual artist, now based in the US (Provost, n. d.). His work examines the concept of collective filmic memory that he sees as a giant archive (Zvonkine, 2014).

In his video *Long live the New Flesh* (Provost, 2009), he puts together memorable scenes from 13 famous horror movies, including *The Exorcist*, *The Fly*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *American Psycho*, *The Shining* and *Videodrome*. These pieces are assembled together to form a new story, with Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* acting as guiding thread, and altered through different filmic processes. Images are 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. These alterations are creating different effects in an aesthetic and critical framework:

- the borders in between films and scenes are altered. The partial blending of images with the datamoshing technique creates a contamination of the different shots and their content. Therefore a contamination of the flesh and the mind is created (Zvonkine, 2014);
- they provoke a chaotic and decaying aesthetic: the spectator is always trying to overcome what he or she sees and attempts to “fix” it in a certain way. To do so he or she uses different mechanism, the main one being his cinematic memory (Zvonkine, 2014).

In challenging the viewing experience of classic horror movies, Nicolas Provost also drags our attention towards the archival excess (Russell, 2012) of our digital society: moving images are available in abundance and almost immediately. What does it involve for the viewer? For the movie itself? And for the archive? The viewers are more and more used to watch movies on their own digital devices. These multiple copies are not always in good quality: both official and unofficial copies of films can be compressed and therefore altered. For an archivist, keeping the integrity of the documents is essential. And it represents a peculiar challenge in the digital world and with a medium that is, as Usai suggests speaking about film stock, constantly dying (Usai, 2001). *Long Live the New Flesh* is forcing us to face the decay of the image in different ways: as a cinematic aesthetic, as a narrative element, as a memory effort but also as a testimony of the vulnerability of archival records.

### *Outer Space*



Figure 2. Tscherkassky, P. (1999). *Outer Space* [Film still]. Austria. Retrieved from <http://www.tscherkassky.at/content/films/theFilms/OuterSpaceEN.html>

Peter Tscherkassky is a filmmaker from Austria, known for his avant-garde work on celluloid and materiality (Tscherkassky, n. d.).

His film *Outer Space* is sampling a sequence of the film *The Entity* (Sidney J. Furie, 1982) where the protagonist Carla Moran (Barbara Hershey) is assaulted by an invisible entity inside of a house. From Furie's feature film, Tscherkassky created two short works of film-art: *Outer Space* (2000) and *Dream Work* (2002). In *Outer Space*, Tscherkassky worked on the film stock directly; his use of different techniques with the contact print to transform the stock is very innovative (Coderre, 2014). He cut and copied images from the original stock and combined them (through separations and superimpositions) on different layers (Judah, 2013). He subtracted the colors of the film, playing with the shadows of the black and white, and punctuated the images with flashes and noises. The film stock itself becomes a character of the sequence (Coderre, 2014).

A dialogue is therefore engaged in between the character of Barbara Hershey and the film stock, in its materiality, creating an intense experience for the viewer, who is in some ways, assaulted, as Barbara is struggling with the entity.

In an archival point of view, once again, the integrity of the film is altered. We are facing the physically decaying and damaged archive, bearing multiple meanings: critical (it challenges our usual viewing and narrative experience), aesthetic (reshaping violently the classic aesthetic of the film) and archival (film is a dying medium). For Tscherkassky, the digital transition and the archival excess are expressed in these experimental works: "Found footage was the response of a new generation of avant-garde filmmakers, from a technological standpoint, to the overwhelming presence of electronic imagery: a conscious return to the artistic specificity of the medium's historical expression. » (Tscherkassky, 2000).

### ***Conclusion***

Both Provost and Tscherkassky are working with a very diverse material (digital or analogue) and deploying multiple techniques. These manipulations of filmic documents, seen as archives by filmmakers, are generally not taken in consideration by archivists, as they are outside of the traditional archival uses and practices. Nonetheless, in an archival point of view, the two films touch a very similar and pragmatic subject: the film as an archive, in its fragility and excess.

Dragging us to an aesthetic of ruins, of decay and destruction these filmmakers change our conception of the qualities of the medium we are watching and therefore, in an archival point of view, the medium we want to preserve.

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