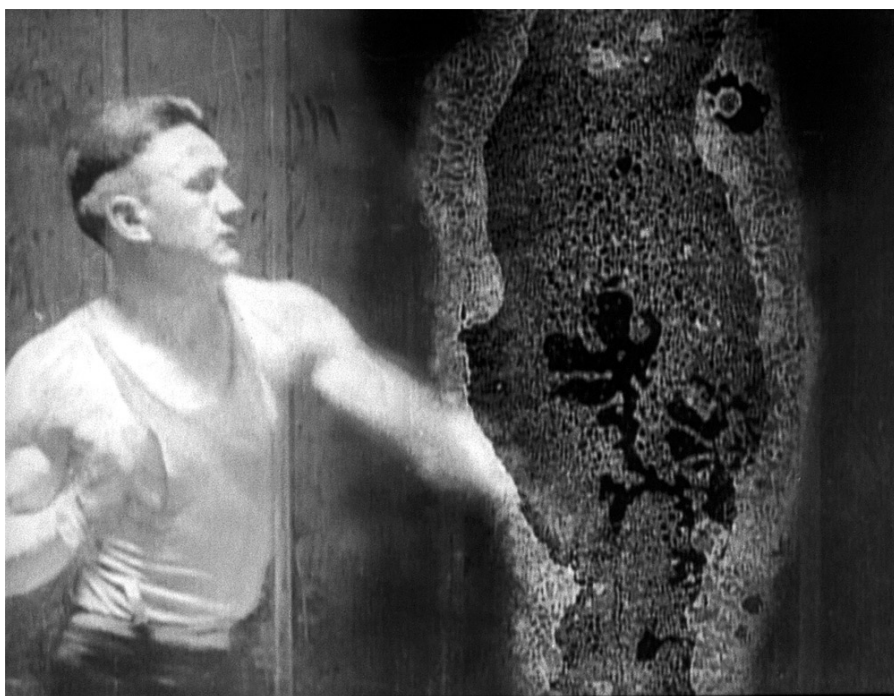




## Found Footage Film in Decay

Reflecting on the position of analog film through  
its encounter with the spectator



Daya de Jongh

s1789139

MA Thesis Film and Photographic Studies (Media Studies)

University of Leiden

Supervisor: Dr. J.J.M. Houwen

Second reader: Dr. P.W.J. Verstraten

September 2017

Words: 17.413

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## Introduction

Citizens are strolling on a bridge, glancing at the boats moving underneath them. They are viewed from the perspective of a boat floating on the canals, looking up. Right after a bridge is passed, this peaceful and slowly moving image within the city waters turns into something liquid itself. The color instantly changes from green to brown and through the moving stains and damages on the screen the canal is barely recognizable. After a few alternations between the green integrant images and brown damaged ones, solely decaying brown scenes are shown. The familiarity of human beings, buildings and streets is decreasing due to the changing of their shapes. Figures are fading out and leaking into other figures, stains are occurring on the images, reframing parts of the whole picture. External factors are changing the images internally and together with the slowed down pace of the citizens walking down the streets, a feeling of alienation is enhanced.

At the beginning of the 21st century the EYE Film Institute rediscovered a print of *HAARLEM*, directed in 1922 by Willy Mullens in a series of films on different Dutch cities.<sup>1</sup> The institute started a restoration and conservation process to decrease the deterioration of the filmstrip, repairing ruptures and highly damaged pieces.<sup>2</sup> The state they found the celluloid in inspired filmmaker Karel Doing, who chose to digitize the filmstrips and recreate a new work out of it, in which he accelerated the deterioration process that originally was attempted to be delayed by the archive. This resulted in the film *LIQUIDATOR* (2010), existing of images of the Dutch city Haarlem, depicting the streets and canals and the city life of its inhabitants. Doing used the deterioration damages done to the filmstrip in his advance and intensified the effects through editing. In his filmmaking process, Doing asked himself the following question: “Where lies the ultimate border of film preservation, and how does it look?”<sup>3</sup> By reusing filmstrips in decay and manipulating them with his own digital tools, a new work was created on the border of analog and digital, film restoration and deterioration.

In this thesis these borders will be explored through researching the usage of found footage film in decay. Found footage films are known to be created without the use of a camera and are characterized by the montage process in which other filmmakers’ images are

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<sup>1</sup> Nederlands Film Festival, “Haarlem,” accessed July 28, 2017, [www.filmfestival.nl/publiek/films/haarlem](http://www.filmfestival.nl/publiek/films/haarlem).

<sup>2</sup> To see how the damages pieces were repaired, view this video: “The Conservation of Haarlem,” YouTube video, 3:00, from the restoration process by the EYE Film Institute in 2011 of *Haarlem* (1922) by Willy Mullens, posted by “EENSTUDIO,” May 25, 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jynqeWaLxJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jynqeWaLxJw).

<sup>3</sup> “Liquidator,” accessed July 28, 2017, [www.doingfilm.nl/films/liquidator.html](http://www.doingfilm.nl/films/liquidator.html).

used, transformed and reinterpreted extensively.<sup>4</sup> As explained by curator Jaap Guldemon in the book *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed*,<sup>5</sup> the phenomenon captures found materials ranging “from home movies to famous Hollywood classics, from well-known television fragments to unknown early-cinema films, from anthropological study material to images pulled from the Internet.”<sup>6</sup> The ‘found’ aspect of the works refers to sources acquired either by chance in the garbage or for instance at a flea market, or searched for with or without any direct purpose.<sup>7</sup> In this research I will, however, focus on films consisting of footage acquired by the filmmaker specifically from an archive, either by chance or on purpose. Material that originally was protected by the archive, but from which the preservation process is nullified by the filmmaker by exploiting the deterioration leaving its traces on the used material.

Found footage filmmakers are, as shown by Doing, gradually replacing photochemical processes by digital montage in their reproduction of the found footage. The used sources as discussed above however originally were found as celluloid filmstrips. Analog films decay on physical and chemical levels, which results in shrinking celluloid, or color fading, stains and scratches showing on the strips, making the deterioration process directly visible.<sup>8</sup> How these filmic materials are preserved and prevented from decaying any further is one of the subjects film theorist Giovanna Fossati discusses in her book *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*; same as the effects of the digitization process on the preserving and usage of found footage. The unidentifiable ontological status of film in transformation from analog to digital that these works call upon, motivate her to describe this process as being a transition, rather than a direct change.<sup>9</sup> In her argumentation on film in transition, Fossati is concerned not solely with the material artifact of film itself, but with the whole filmmaking workflow that is becoming more digital step by step. The transition from analog to digital filmmaking is affecting and reshaping both the practice of filmmaking and the practice of film archiving, as researched in her book.<sup>10</sup>

By describing the process as a transition rather than a change, Fossati emphasizes the

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<sup>4</sup> Cecilia Hausheer and Christoph Settele, *Found Footage Film* (Luzern, Switzerland: VIPER/zyklog verlog, 1992), 5.

<sup>5</sup> The book has been published in the context of the *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed* exhibition of the EYE Film Institute in 2012. The exhibition contained found footage films by artists such as Aernout Mik, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, Bill Morrison and Douglas Gordon.

<sup>6</sup> Marente Bloemheugel, Giovanna Fossati, and Jaap Guldemon, eds., *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34.

hybridity of films today, combining rather than dividing analog and digital technologies.<sup>11</sup> In his book *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media*, film theorist Jihoon Kim recognizes this hybrid nature within a specific phenomenon, which he calls ‘transitional’ found footage practices. Whereas Fossati focuses mostly on both the practice of filmmaking and of archiving hybrid films, Kim is concerned with the effects of its transitional character on the definition of found footage film, positioning himself within the topical debates on medium specificity. He acknowledges the multiplicity of relationships between analog and digital media within the found footage film, since the phenomenon implies a new work being created not simply duplicating the former images, but transforming and reformulating them through a distance between past and present.<sup>12</sup> The transitional character of the phenomenon is motivated by the technical apparatus used by the filmmaker, existing of a combination of different media. Besides this, it is expressed through the aesthetics of the found footage practices, in which an intermedial configuration of film and non-filmic media is to be recognized.<sup>13</sup>

Although I do acknowledge the multiple relationships present in the found footage film and the prominent role of digital technologies in the changing nature of cinema in general, I do not fully agree with the term ‘transitional’. Since in his definition of the term, Kim seems to approach the digital as a predominating point of reference from which he reflects on the changing nature of (found footage) film; while I believe the found footage phenomenon to actually bring forth a renewed vision on the many possibilities analog film has to offer. Through researching a specific way in which found footage has been used - that is, films containing materials in decay - I wish to emphasize that the literal disappearance of analog film offers more, rather than less, possibilities in creating and reflecting on film.

Two examples of decaying found footage films I wish to research in this light, are the feature REY (2017) by Niles Atallah and the experimental DECASIA: THE STATE OF DECAY (2002) by Bill Morrison. Although these two films are not necessarily representing the whole spectrum of decaying found footage films, they do contain certain characteristics that make them interesting case studies in this research. Both films are created in the last two decades in which the digitization process has been developing extensively, both are created with decaying archival footage and they are representing two different genres, expanding the

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<sup>11</sup> Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 151.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

results of my analyses. In the films, the transience of the filmstrips is showed directly through a depiction of the deterioration process of the materials, raising questions on the death or obsolescence of cinema and at the same time showing ways in which the footage could still be used, despite of its disappearance. According to Kim, digital technologies are presenting “potentials for a renewed perception of the past in the present - as it counters the teleological voices declaring the ‘death’ of cinema.”<sup>14</sup> In this research the ‘death’ of cinema will not be acknowledged. Instead, the relevance of analog film will be emphasized by analyzing the changing nature of decaying found footage film in general, and the ways in which it is put into practice by the two cases, by focusing on the encounter of the spectator with the films. While former researches do not touch upon the spectator extensively enough or at all, I wish to demonstrate why the phenomenon should be indeed related to the spectator, in order to comprehend the potential of the decaying found footage phenomenon and the position of analog film today, in the best way. In the analyses the following research question will be answered: In what ways can the decaying found footage in REY (Niles Atallah, 2017) and DECASIA: THE STATE OF DECAY (Bill Morrison, 2002) affect the spectator and how do these effects question the presumed transitional nature of found footage films on the level of aesthetics, narrative and indexicality?

In the pre-production phase of REY, Atallah has searched in the Bits & Pieces collection of the EYE Film Institute for early silent film fragments.<sup>15</sup> This found footage has been combined with his own shot material, created in digital format at first. Specific scenes from his film however have been converted to celluloid filmstrips, to be buried under the ground for several years, and reused again during the post-production of the film. For this project the decaying process of cinema has been accelerated and the images have been combined with actual old footage in natural deterioration, found in an archive. Both parts are used, as described by the director, to depict the irrational inner world of the protagonist: “a journey through a realm of forgotten dreams, the decaying memories and fantasies of a ghost.”<sup>16</sup>

A work that consists solely out of early analog film footage is DECASIA: THE STATE OF DECAY (2002) by Bill Morrison. The footage used within the film is derived from archives

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<sup>14</sup> Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age*, 171.

<sup>15</sup> The Bits & Pieces collection is a project of the EYE Film Institute, in which unidentifiable found film fragments are combined and conserved. EYE, “Bits and Pieces,” accessed August 13, 2017, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/collectie/selectie/bits-and-pieces>.

<sup>16</sup> Diluvio, “REY,” accessed July 28, 2017, <http://diluvio.cl/projects/reyl/>.

such as the George Eastman House and the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>17</sup> Through the visual effects of the decaying process, the images flow into each other in burning stains, holes, ruptures and fluids. Together with the editing Morrison did after reprinting the celluloid, the visible deterioration process makes the images into a flowing whole of decaying aesthetics.

In the first chapter of this thesis, REY and DECASIA will be analyzed on the level of aesthetics. Both films consist of footage printed on celluloid material that is in the middle of the process of deterioration, which results in damaged images showing holes, black spots, ruptures and fluids, amongst others. In the analyses of the cases, attention will be paid to the aesthetic effect of the deterioration on the images. Besides describing the forms it takes in and the roles taken in by the decay in the films, the analyses will be related to Laura Marks' theory on haptic visuality, to show how the decay functions as a way for the spectator to identify with the films. This will be one step in emphasizing the relevance and the importance of such decaying found footage films and of analog film in general.

A next step in this direction will be taken in the second chapter, where the presumed traditional nature of the decaying found footage phenomenon will be questioned on a narrative level. With reference to the theory of narration by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, and the theory of narratology by Peter Verstraten, both films will be analyzed in order to show if and how decay is represented on a thematical level within both stories. The historicity of the films will be researched, by paying attention to the dialogic of past and present, based on the dialectic introduced by Kim. By showing how these aspects evoke feelings of nostalgia in the spectator, the relevance of analog film in times of digitization will again be emphasized and the presumed transition will be invalidated.

In chapter three, the presumed transitional nature of the found footage film will be discussed by analyzing both cases on the level of indexicality. Before the digitization of cinema, the medium has been identified as containing indexical characteristics. By researching indexicality in the cinematic in general and by analyzing both REY and DECASIA as consisting of deictic indexical signs, I wish to show that film as an index is still relevant today. With reference to Mary Ann Doane and Pepita Hesselberth, I will research the encounter of the spectator with the cinematic, to see how the spectator makes sense of a film through indexicality.

Throughout this thesis, the cases of my research will be approached solely for their analog characteristics, to position them and the general usage of and reflection on analog

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Jones, "Ghost World," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2003, [www.theguardian.com/film/2003/sep/26/art](http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/sep/26/art).



found footage film in the overall digitization process. One of my motivations to focus on analog instead of digital decaying found footage works, is the fact that the deterioration process of analog film affects the material in such a way that is not possible for digital film. Although digital technologies could deteriorate and eventually become obsolete in their own way, discussing these technologies in the context of decaying found footage films would be less interesting than the analog cases, on which an actual effect is to be seen and possibly experienced by the spectator.

## 1. Aesthetic effects

With the recent digitization process cinema is going through, the developments that stand out first and foremost are those affecting the technologies used to create a film, and the materials that eventually form it. Instead of discussing the differences between analog and digital technologies, I will, however, pay attention to key characteristics of analog film in particular, and possible complications that its usage could bring about. This could be of importance in researching the aesthetics of both cases, and answering the following subquestion: How is the presumed transitional nature of found footage film questioned by the aesthetics of REY and DECASIA and how is the spectator affected by their formal decay?

### *Stages of deterioration*

According to the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), three types of film materials can be recognized throughout history: cellulose nitrate, cellulose acetates and polyester. The first cellulose nitrate negatives were sold in 1889 by Eastman Kodak. They remained in production until the early 1950s and were then replaced by cellulose acetate filmstrips.<sup>18</sup> Although the types were two of the main analog materials used in film and photography, they still have many instabilities. The filmstrips are highly flammable and will eventually disappear at the end of a deterioration process, in which dangerous gases are released.<sup>19</sup> As explained by the National Film Preservation Foundation, this deterioration “is a slow chemical process that occurs because of two factors: the nature of cellulose nitrate plastic itself and the way that the film is stored.”<sup>20</sup> When not stored under the right conditions, external factors will damage the material and make it eventually fade away.

Before that moment is reached, the material however goes through different levels of deterioration. The abovementioned NEDCC explains how this affects the usefulness of the filmstrip:

Most negatives will retain legible photographic detail into the third stage of decomposition. These negatives may become brittle, but – with careful handling – they can be duplicated. Negatives in the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages of decomposition

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<sup>18</sup> Northeast Document Conservation Center, “5.1 A Short Guide to Film Base Photographic Materials: Identification, Care, and Duplication,” by Monique Fischer, accessed July 28, 2017, <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/5.-photographs/5.1-a-short-guide-to-film-base-photographic-materials-identification,-care,-and-duplication>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> National Film Preservation Foundation, “Nitrate Degradation,” accessed July 28, 2017, <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preservation-basics/nitrate-degradation>.

generally have decreasing areas of legible image and should be either placed in cold storage or digitized before the image completely fades away.<sup>21</sup>

Despite of the several disadvantages of using celluloid filmstrips, analog material is still widely used by filmmakers, as shown for instance by the two cases that are researched in this thesis. According to Giovanna Fossati, one of the main reasons for the present-day preferability of analog over digital film, is the fact that digital technology is in rapid development and will therefore become obsolete sooner than the original analog material.<sup>22</sup> The constant developments of new digital soft- or hardware opposed to the ongoing 150 years of usage of the nitrate film support this claim. Besides this Fossati states, with reference to film theorist Paul Read, that the deterioration of analog images can be postponed easier than with digital technologies if preserved in the right conditions.<sup>23</sup> Together, these elements all support the claim already mentioned in the introduction: that analog film is still of relevance today. These thoughts are put into practice by the phenomenon that is being researched within this thesis – images in different states of decomposition that are reused by the found footage filmmaker, showing that the literal obsolescence of analog film is not yet within reach.

What motivates decaying found footage filmmakers undoubtedly differs per maker and work. I believe, however, that one of the main reasons for reusing such images is their stylistic characteristics, since the decay first and foremost has an effect on the aesthetics of a film, before anything else. As stated by the NEDCC, the three beforementioned types of celluloid film material can hardly be distinguished from each other when they are in a good condition. Which kind of filmstrip is used in a specific film can, however, be identified more easily when it is in deterioration, since signs of decay differ per type of material.<sup>24</sup> The aesthetics of a film are one of the elements a spectator gets confronted with right away when viewing a film, and they are an important – if not the main – source of information for the spectator to recognize a film is in deterioration. It can therefore be stated that it is of great importance to start this thesis with a research of both cases on an aesthetic level.

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<sup>21</sup> Northeast Document Conservation Center, “5.1 A Short Guide to Film Base Photographic Materials: Identification, Care, and Duplication,” by Monique Fischer, accessed July 28, 2017, <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/5.-photographs/5.1-a-short-guide-to-film-base-photographic-materials-identification,-care,-and-duplication>.

<sup>22</sup> Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66. Fossati is making a reference to Paul Read, “Digital Image Restoration – Black Art or White Magic?” in *Preserve Then Show*, ed. Dan Nissen et al. (Copenhagen: Danish Film Institute, 2002), 161.

<sup>24</sup> Northeast Document Conservation Center, “5.1 A Short Guide to Film Base Photographic Materials: Identification, Care, and Duplication,” by Monique Fischer, accessed July 28, 2017, <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/5.-photographs/5.1-a-short-guide-to-film-base-photographic-materials-identification,-care,-and-duplication>.

### *Stylistic framework*

In the book *Film Art: An Introduction*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson state that every film has a specific form, which is a system of relations between different narrative and stylistic elements. The narrative elements contribute to the story of the film, whereas the style refers to what is situated in front of the camera and how the story is visualized through, for instance, camera movement, color patterns and music, amongst others.<sup>25</sup> Although seemingly divided in theory, in practice the content and form are inseparately connected to each other. In this chapter I wish to focus mainly on stylistic characteristics of my cases and on how these affect the spectator. Certain aesthetic features will be related to the narratives of the films, mainly as support of my signification and interpretation of the elements. In addition to this, in the second chapter the narrative aspects of both films will be elaborated on more extensively, within the context of their decaying footage.

With the help of terms formulated and defined by Bordwell and Thompson, the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound of REY and DECASIA will be analyzed in this current chapter. Keeping in mind that their definition of film form is based on structures of classical cinema, I do not expect to be able to relate every term directly to both found footage cases. Since, according to film theorist André Habib, found footage films could be seen as either avant-garde or experimental cinema and in general are “based on fragmentation, elliptic narration, temporal collisions and visual disorientation;”<sup>26</sup> elements that differ from the classical cinematic form as described by Bordwell and Thompson.<sup>27</sup> The terms as formulated in *Film Art* will, however, be used as tools in order to grasp the aesthetic characteristics both (non-classical) films contain. Before going into the possible effects the films are expected to have on the spectator, their aesthetics will be analyzed in order to understand what role the decay is ascribed to within the works, how the decaying images relate to possible integrate images and how this questions the presumed transition of the found footage phenomenon.

### *Cinema of ruin*

One element that, as Bordwell and Thompson state, lays at the basis of both the content and form of a film, is time. The theorists distinguish temporal order, duration and frequency as the

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<sup>25</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (University of Wisconsin: McGraw Hill, 2012), 57.

<sup>26</sup> André Habib, “Ruin, Archive and the Time of Cinema: Peter Delpet’s ‘Lyrical Nitrate’,” *Substance* 35, no. 2 (2006): 127.

<sup>27</sup> Opposed to the temporal collisions and elliptic narration as described by Habib, Bordwell and Thompson for instance state that in Classical Hollywood Cinema “time is subordinate to the cause-effect chain,” and “a strong degree of *closure* [is displayed] at the end.” Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 103.

three main elements that form the temporality of a film. When discussing temporal structures in this light, the focus would be on the order in which the images are presented to the viewer, the duration of the scenes and the frequency of the images shown.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, in the case of a found footage film another temporal layer is of importance: the historical time of the used material. As stated by Habib in “Ruin, Archive and the Time of Cinema: Peter Delpet’s ‘Lyrical Nitrate’,” films using found footage in decay – such as *LYRICAL TIME* by Peter Delpet as implied by the title – are not only originated in a specific time: “they also embody ‘time’ – a layering of the times those films have traveled, of which they are documents. They are, in a way, monuments of time.”<sup>29</sup> The amount of temporal layers as represented in a film does not have to be recognizable straight away. With my analyses I will emphasize that the focus should be on the traces left on the material – therefore the surface of the screen – by the overall passing of time; and the effects this has on the form of such a film.

Habib not only discusses the visibility of time’s passing within the material itself; he also stresses how this visibility affects the position of film:

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 to actualize or accomplish a certain number of actions or tasks, we say that this thing is in ruins.<sup>30</sup>

I assume that the function and original destination Habib is referring to are in the case of a film the possibility to be regularly screened to an (world-wide) audience - which becomes almost completely impossible when its material falls apart. This loss however gives the work new possibilities as stated by Habib: “the loss of vocation makes it worthy of an aesthetic appreciation (to our modern sense of art).”<sup>31</sup> It is no longer the usage of the work that is of importance, since that has been lost; therefore it could function solely as an aesthetic object, showing a pure image through its ruins.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of Habib that in becoming a ruin, a film would lose its vocation, will be refuted in my analyses. Indeed, when a film would be granted no restoration or protection and would be left to disappear, it could not be screened again. However, as explained in the introduction of this chapter, within the right preserving conditions or within the hands of a

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<sup>28</sup> Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 84-85.

<sup>29</sup> Habib, “Ruin, Archive and the Time of Cinema: Peter Delpet’s ‘Lyrical Nitrate’,” 123.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

found footage filmmaker, it could still maintain important functions outside of the aesthetics, even when it is identified as a ruin. Despite this, I do agree that in its deterioration process, the aesthetics of a ruined film become a focal point that could lead to either a rejection or appreciation of the work; with the latter being a more logical response for found footage filmmakers than the former option. In addition to Habib's idea on the aesthetic appreciation of a ruin, I will emphasize that films or parts of a film that are heading to complete disappearance are given new possibilities by de- and recontextualising them within a new work, undeniably reused most of all for their aesthetics. Film theorist Jaimie Baron even states that "were these images not decayed, they would lose much of their affective power."<sup>33</sup>

This focus on the aesthetics as affected mostly by the deterioration, is emphasized by professor of Film Studies Catherine Russell, who ascribes cinema the name of an aesthetic of ruin. She motivates this idea by stating that, although the found material always refers to an original production context, the filmmaker can distance his or herself from the body filmed, since the images were already shot by someone else.<sup>34</sup> With this in mind, it would seem that more attention could be paid to the way in which the body is reused and represented on a formal level within a new work, instead of the original recording; though I do believe that the filmmaker could never entirely break away from the latter.

Keeping the importance of the found footage film's aesthetics in mind as emphasized here I want to ask the following questions: In what way is this filmic ruination to be recognized in REY and DECASIA? And to what extent could the spectator, on the one hand, distance him- or herself from the original body filmed in the same way as (according to Russell) the filmmaker does; whilst on the other hand identify with the decaying body of the found footage film?

### REY

In his feature REY, Niles Atallah depicts the story of Orélie-Antoine de Tounens, which is a French adventurer in the 1860s. De Tounens travels through forests and rivers to Araucanía, in the south of Chili and Argentina, where he intends to establish a kingdom. Guided by a Chilean man named Rosales he rides through the country on the back of his horse, carrying the flag of his kingdom, his own written constitution and national anthem. Before he reaches his goal, he however is arrested and sent to jail, after which he goes to trial and eventually

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<sup>33</sup> Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 129.

<sup>34</sup> Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 238.

gets thrown out of the country with the suspicion of him being a French spy, working against Chili. In the film, you see how a man truly believes in his own story and goals, but unfortunately seems the only one who does not doubt them. His intentions and actions are questioned by everyone around him and in the end no answer of true or false is given by the maker, which leaves the spectator in doubt as well.<sup>35</sup> The only evidence present, is De Tounens' own word based solely on his beliefs and memories.

The film alternates between two temporal layers. In the first layer, that seems to be located in the present of the story, De Tounens is locked up in jail and is being questioned in the courtroom. All the characters in these scenes are wearing masks, covering their facial expressions which hides a part of their humanity, even though each mask has its own individual characteristics. When they speak, the spectator only knows who is talking by connecting the voice to a character and reading the body language – of a body that appears to be more human than the face attached to it. The masks are one element with which the scenes of the 'present' can be distinguished from scenes located in the second temporal layer, which is the 'past'. During De Tounens' statement, flashbacks are shown in which memories are visualized of his travels through Araucanía. In these images, you see real human beings with their own human faces, depicting the stories De Tounens tells in his court statements.

It is the depiction of these memories in which the found footage and its decay are present, creating yet another division between two temporal layers. Images of films found by Atallah are alternating with footage shot by himself; thereby showing an example of how the historical time of the footage is added to the temporality of the film, as explained earlier in this chapter. Atallah created an overlap between the differing temporal natures of the two layers. Although the decay is expected to be showing solely on the found material, comparable historical traces are also left on the footage Atallah shot himself,<sup>36</sup> thereby connecting his own footage with the found images on an aesthetic level.

The first signs of decay are already made visible at the start of the film. In the first shots no recognizable objects are shown; only figures of decay filling the screen. The film starts off with cracking and rattling sounds that are relatable to an old film projector. Stains in different forms are flashing in a fast motion with a layer of smaller damages on top of it. Only after a couple of minutes these images of ruin dissolve into something more recognizable;

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<sup>35</sup> In the film the judge does give him a verdict in court and punishes him, but as a spectator you do not get an answer on the question if the protagonist really is telling the truth.

<sup>36</sup> As described by International Film Festival Rotterdam, Atallah buried his own shot footage under the ground, to dig it up years later and use it in the film. International Film Festival Rotterdam, "REY," accessed 28 July, 2017, <https://iffir.com/en/2017/films/rex>.

images located in the past layer of the film that depict De Tounens with his own face and body. At this moment, the decay cannot yet be directly related to what is happening on screen. The fact that these deteriorating images are already introduced at the start of the film does however emphasize the important position the decay takes in within REY.

After thirteen minutes into the film, the first found footage image is shown, entering with a classical *fade-in*. The black circle, which is expected to disappear at the end of a *fade-in*, frames this first image with a black surrounding. A *nondiegetic* narrator is heard through a *voice-over* and on the background projector sounds are added, similar to the ones in the first shot. A floating boat on sea, a desert, a harbor and mountains covered in snow. These are images originating from different sources, proven by the differing color filters and figures of decay. Through this decay Atallah even reveals the nature of the material, when borders of the nitrate filmstrip are displayed in the jumps between frames.

This first found footage scene demonstrates that the decaying footage not only functions on an aesthetic level; therefore emphasizing that a film in ruin requires more than Habib's aesthetic appreciation. Through the *voice-over* a narrator is heard, recognizable by his voice as the protagonist, describing certain experiences from his own point of view. In his book *Handboek Filmnarratologie*, Peter Verstraten describes this as external focalisation.<sup>37</sup> What is depicted on the images are scenes not directly showing the narrator himself. The bodies on screen are framed with a distance of a *long shot*, resulting in small figures covered in shadow not showing details; therefore impossible to recognize. The images could either depict memories of the protagonist himself, thus changing the focalisation to an internal one; or maintain an external focalisation by depicting someone else's story. Aside from this issue, however, the found footage clearly functions as a visualization of the narrator's *voice-over* (thus also from the protagonist); thereby supporting the narrative either way.

Halfway through the film again several found footage images are edited into Atallah's own material. At this point in the story, De Tounens is still locked into jail and catches a fever that causes him to hallucinate. As explained before, it is during the visualizations of his inner world – which until now only consisted of his memories – that the decaying footage is shown. At the moment that these memories turn into feverish hallucinations, the decay becomes worse. A horse stuck in the mud with a sepia color filter *cuts* to fairy-like women dancing in the woods. This *dissolves* into a fully blue image, starting with unrecognizable decaying forms and eventually *dissolving* into a shot of De Tounens himself, acting delirious in his cell;

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Verstraten, *Handboek Filmnarratologie* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2008), 105.



which *dissolves* back into the blue. During the hallucinations, a *voice-over* is heard that says the following:

I've been poisoned. My skin stinks. What king has not suffered? Beloved subjects...  
You know how I was exiled from our land. You know how I tried countless times to return. How I searched for you and how I was forced to flee time and again. But I beg you to never believe that I gave up on our noble dream! Don't forget me. My beloveds...

While the *voice-over* continues, the decay develops from small damages into quickly moving stains, burnings, scratches, blots, smudges with faded colors, together with white figures caused by overexposure of light. The fact that the decay is becoming worse when the protagonist gets ill, again emphasizes the role of the found footage in supporting the overall narrative, due to their aesthetics.

According to Verstraten, the spectator can take in different positions while viewing a film, deciding for him- or herself which convention to choose, from which the film is analyzed.<sup>38</sup> In the case of REY, the spectator has been given access to the main character with both external and internal focalisation. On the one hand, the decay in REY and its experimental nature could create a distance between the spectator and the film, since certain images are barely recognizable and it could be difficult to understand the position of every scene within the overall story. Besides this, in the 'present' temporal layer, De Tounens' facial expressions are covered, providing the spectator with information only through dialog and bodily movements. On the other hand, the spectator does get access to the thoughts and emotions of De Tounens through the depiction of his memories, in which the deterioration functions as support of this internal focalisation. I believe that despite of and thanks to these decaying images, and the relations between their aesthetic features and narrative elements, the spectator could actually identify with the protagonist. By comparing REY with a DECASIA, a film that consists solely out of images of decay, I wish to show that even without a clear narrative a comparable effect could be achieved.

#### *DECASIA*

In 2001, Bill Morrison was asked to create a filmic element for a live performance located in Switzerland, commissioned by the Europäische Musiksommer. After the performance a version of this film was re-edited for cinematic release, which premiered at the Sundance

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<sup>38</sup> Verstraten, *Handboek Filmnarratologie*, 32.

Festival in 2002.<sup>39</sup> Morrison's experimental feature film called *DECASIA: THE STATE OF DECAY* contains 70 minutes of decaying pre-1950s archival footage retrieved from the South Carolina University Archive of Twentieth Century Fox, the nitrate film collection of the Library of Congress in the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and the Museum of Moving Image in New York.<sup>40</sup> The music piece "Symphony of Decay," originally composed by Michael Gordon for the live performance in Switzerland, has been used as the soundtrack of the film.<sup>41</sup>

Other than the music, the film does not contain any diegetic or non-diegetic sounds. The soundtrack exists solely out of high sliding and low staccato tones, alternating between unisons and polyphonies. Throughout the whole film the images are shown in *slow-motion* and black-and-white, intensifying the old appearance of the found footage and the deterioration of its material. The traces of decay differ in intensity with every image. The film starts off with small signs of damage; a graininess that barely affects the images. After a few minutes, however, the screen is filled with unrecognizable forms and shapes that almost seem to be liquids, moving in a slow pace. From this moment on images of decay slowly dissolve into recognizable shapes of human beings and nature, such as waves hitting rocks in the sea. The images are damaged to such an extent that the question rises if the water is actually moving, or if the decay causes it to move.

Every shot is not shown longer than one minute, making of *DECASIA* a continuous fragmentation of different images. Since the film lacks dialog and narration, initially the focus is expected to be on aesthetics rather than content. Atallah seems to have used the decaying images of REY as support of the narrative - partly due to their aesthetics and partly for the content of the images, whereas Morrison does not present a specific narrative. There, however, are several themes to be recognized in his film, that can be related both to what happens in the screen and on the surface of it.

In her article "Inscriptions of Light and the 'Calligraphy of Decay'," Professor Ursula Böser states that "[t]he portrayal of linear progress provides a recurring theme in *Decasia*."<sup>42</sup> Although several shots of the film do contain linear movement,<sup>43</sup> circular movements are of

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<sup>39</sup> Ursula Böser, "Inscriptions of Light and the 'Calligraphy of Decay': Volatile Representation in Bill Morrison's *Decasia*," in *Avant-Garde Film*, ed. Alexander Graf and Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam, New York: Editions Rodopi BV, 2007), 305.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>43</sup> For instance in the shots at the beginning and end of the film, in which first a caravan walks from right to left through the desert, and at the end from left to right, on the line of the horizon.

bigger importance in the film. This element is in fact mentioned by Böser, but in my opinion not dwelled upon extensively enough. At the beginning, middle and end of the film the same shot is shown, which depicts a male dancer spinning around in *slow-motion*. This circular movement is recurring in shots of wheels spinning in machinery, on carnivals and in a weaving room. As stated by professor Bernd Herzogenrath, it is also “taken up in the circular structure of *Decasia* itself, opening and concluding with the Sufi dancer.”<sup>44</sup>

One of the ways in which this element of circularity has been interpreted, is dwelled upon by Cynthia Rowell in her review of DECASIA. She interprets the symbol of the circle as representing the cycle of life:

*Decasia* also expresses this never-ending cycle in its dual motifs of death (the decomposition itself, fire consuming a house, a man in a tomb surrounded by sarcophagi) and birth (a baby born, microscopy of spermatazoa, the Darwinian allegory of two miners crawling from the water onto land, the development of film in a lab, an abstract shot of fog or smoke that connotes primordial beginnings).<sup>45</sup>

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Jihoon Kim introduces the term ‘transitional’ found footage phenomenon; referring to the transition from analog to digital that cinema is going through. Kim seems to approach digital film as an overpowering medium that replaces analog film in a way; therefore, in line of his view on the analog, the theme of death could be of more relevance. I however believe in the many opportunities analog film has to offer and the role of the decaying found footage film in supporting this. Despite the signs of disappearance and possible death the images of DECASIA show to its viewer, the film visualizes a never-ending cycle of life rather than death; adding to the idea of Rowell as well as questioning the presumed transitional nature as introduced by Kim. As a support of this claim and as a way to put this power of the analog into practice, attention will be paid to the affective encounter of the spectator with DECASIA, as stimulated by the abovementioned thematical elements.

### *Haptic visuality*

As explained earlier in this chapter, the spectator is expected to be able to identify with the protagonist of REY, due to the representations of his inner world through the decaying images. In DECASIA, the fragmentation of the images and the degree of damages done to the

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<sup>44</sup> Bernd Herzogenrath, *Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media|Matter as Medium* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 123.

<sup>45</sup> Cynthia Rowell, “Decasia: The State of Decay (review),” *The Moving Image* 5, no. 1 (2005): 146.

material make it difficult for the spectator to identify with the bodies shown on screen. Even though certain elements of *mise-en-scène* could stimulate a connection between the spectator and the cinematic – for instance when the figures on screen look straight into the camera that serves as the eye of the spectator – it would not be enough for a profound relationship.

As stated by Rowell, the lack of dialog and other forms of narration puts the music in the position of emotional guide for the spectator, transferring feelings “appropriate when faced with the concept of death.”<sup>46</sup> My analyses however show that the music is not the only element that could affect the spectator, and that the spectator could be affected on more levels than his or her emotions. A cinema theorist that specialized in existential phenomenology, covering the experiential and perceptual field of how human beings make sense of the world,<sup>47</sup> is Vivian Sobchack. According to her, in a film experience both the spectator and the film are immersed in a visual and bodily being in the world: “the film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression. It entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically.”<sup>48</sup>

Instead of making sense of a film by thinking about it, interpreting and understanding what you see on the screen, all of your senses are addressed to create a full visual and bodily experience. In her theory, Sobchack emphasizes that the viewer is aware of its position and “the double and reversible nature of cinematic perception.”<sup>49</sup> This interaction in which both the film and its viewer play an active role is also acknowledged by media theorist Laura Marks, who describes a film experience as “a dialogical and dialectical engagement of *two* viewing subjects.”<sup>50</sup>

Whereas Sobchack discusses the bodily experience of a spectator’s encounter with a film in a more general way, Marks focuses on a genre more directly related to my cases: found footage films depicting dying bodies on dying material. She states that illegibility as a result of the deterioration of a work “invites a haptic look, or a look that uses the eye like an organ of touch.”<sup>51</sup> Through what she calls haptic visuality, the spectator gets involved in a process of seeing, hearing and feeling the film through multiple senses, which results in

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<sup>46</sup> Rowell, “Decasia: The State of Decay (review),” 145.

<sup>47</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 87.

<sup>48</sup> Vivian Sobchack, “Phenomenology and the Film Experience,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>51</sup> Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 105.

identification. Thanks to the double decay of both the bodies on screen and the films she analyses, the figures, however, have become unrecognizable. Therefore the spectator is compelled to identify not with the characters, but with the inanimate body of the screen itself, through the decay of the images.<sup>52</sup> In his book *Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media|Matter as Medium*, Bernd Herzogenrath describes what this body could entail:

The images can be thought of as desires or memories: actions that take place in the mind. The filmstock can be thought of as their body, that which enables these events to be seen. Like our own bodies this celluloid is a fragile and ephemeral medium that can deteriorate in countless ways.<sup>53</sup>

The way he describes it, the spectator could relate to my cases by identifying it as a body comparable to his or her own; becoming aware of his or her bodily fragility through the deterioration of the filmstock. Marks seems to share this thought, since she further describes identification with a decaying image as building up a bodily relationship with the screen, through a mutual experience of disappearance.<sup>54</sup>

In the encounter between the spectator and decaying films, the body of the original recordings that are reused in a found footage film (as mentioned by Russell earlier in this chapter), does not seem to be of importance. In accordance with this idea, DECASIA emphasizes that information on the original recorded events would not necessarily add up to the bodily experience of the viewer, even though they are inevitably connected. The scratches, fading colors, bobbing images, discolorizations, blisters and other signs of decay on the body of the filmstock – therefore the screen, could make the spectator feel the structures on his or her own skin and result in an identification not directly with the content of the images, but with the inanimate materials of the film.

Throughout the analyses, the intensity of the decay, the amount of decaying images used within the films and the relations between the damaged and integrant images in the case of REY, and entirely decaying ones in DECASIA, have been proven to differ. By showing the different aesthetic characteristics that reused found footage could possess, with this research I posed to question the presumed transitional nature of cinema and prove that found footage films and their analog materials are unique and could be loved and identified with not despite of, but thanks to their visual disappearance.

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<sup>52</sup> Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 92.

<sup>53</sup> Herzogenrath, *Media|Matter: The Materiality of Media|Matter as Medium*, 131.

<sup>54</sup> Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 92.

## 2. Narrative effects

The term ‘transition’ has been defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a process or period of changing from one state or condition to another.<sup>55</sup> The presumed transitional nature of cinema, as formulated by Kim and Fossati, arises mostly from the change of the medium from analog to digital. By describing this process as one of transition, it puts the state of analog film in a dialectical relationship with the state of the digital. As already explained in the introduction of this thesis, both Kim and Fossati seem to view the digital as either replacing analog film, or absorbing its characteristics for them to function together with newer technologies in one medium. In this chapter, I will however criticize their ideas and focus on the position of analog film in this digitization process, while at the same time acknowledging that the relationship of analog and digital is a dialogical one rather than dialectic. Instead of two contradictory opposites, they are viewed as differing on many levels, but at the same time being inevitably related to each other. In this chapter, the focus will however mainly be on the possibilities analog film offers in the context of the decaying found footage film, to show why the medium is still of relevance today.

In the former chapter, attention has been paid to aesthetic features in relation to narrative ones and their effects on the spectator. This resulted in an identification with either the protagonist in *REY*, and the inanimate decaying material of *DECASIA*. The focus in these analyses was mainly on the present encounter of the spectator with the films. In addition to this, in the current chapter I wish to research the decaying images of both cases as having narrative functions. Besides this, attention will be paid to what seems to be another important dialogic in relation to the digitization process: past and present. Although, as stated, the cases will not necessarily be viewed from the perspective of this overall digitization, it still is relevant to research the films in relation to this dialogic. I believe the films hold a certain historicity, since the past is represented in the present through the usage of decaying found footage. In order to further research the effect of the footage on the spectator and the ways in which this questions the presumed transitional nature of found footage films, the historicity of *REY* and *DECASIA* will be analyzed through their narratives.

### *Narrative framework*

In *Film Art: An Introduction*, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define narrative as “a

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<sup>55</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “transition,” accessed May 31, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/transition>.

chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space.”<sup>56</sup> The way the spectator engages with the story depends on his or her understanding of the patterns of change and stability that are created, together with cause and effect relations and the time and space in which the story takes place. Through narration the overall story is being distributed to the spectator, from which a part is shown on the screen, forming the plot. Within the plot, information from the story is either presented or withheld, trying to achieve a specific effect on the viewer.<sup>57</sup> In the analyses of REY and DECASIA, not every basic aspect of narrative will be touched upon. The films will be approached as representing historicity, therefore focus will mainly be on the temporal level of their narratives. The parts of the films in which decaying found footage is used will be researched, to show how they function on a narrative level and to position the films in the dialogic of past and present.

Although the starting point of this part of my research is narrative, I do acknowledge that the experimental films may not thoroughly follow the rules of narrativity as introduced by Bordwell and Thompson. In his book *Handboek Filmnarratologie*, Peter Verstraten mentions a term that, according to Bordwell, should not be related to narratology;<sup>58</sup> but in his own view is adjacent to it. When the style of a film puts all the attention to itself, the story could disappear into the background. Where stylistic features mostly function as support of the narrative, in this case they stand on their own and could even interrupt the story, instead of pushing it.<sup>59</sup> The term Verstraten relates to this imbalance between content and form, is filmic excess; as acquired from film theorist Kristin Thompson. I expect the decaying images of REY and/or DECASIA to be representing certain parts of filmic excess and therefore adding to the theory of Bordwell and Thompson, and I wish to keep this in mind whilst analyzing them on a narrative level.

### *Past and present*

Even though the spectator is not always aware of it, films are constantly referring to the past. In a film three layers of temporal durations can be recognized that touch upon different parts of the work, as described by Bordwell and Thompson. The first layer is story duration, meaning the linear time the overall story takes in. As explained earlier in this chapter, the plot is the part of the story that is actually shown on screen. Bordwell and Thompson state that

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<sup>56</sup> Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 70.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>58</sup> Verstraten refers to Bordwell's critical view on excess, by explaining that Bordwell sees it as non-functioning for the story, since it is too abstract for the spectator to be able to interpret it as a story. Verstraten, *Handboek Filmnarratologie*, 30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

“[t]he sum of all these slices of *story* duration yields an overall *plot* duration,”<sup>60</sup> forming the second temporal layer. Lastly, the total length of the film itself should be taken into account, which is called screen duration.<sup>61</sup> In a filmic encounter, these three layers are working together and influence each other and the experience of the spectator. Before these layers are determined, I wish to highlight an additional important time frame that the spectator is not to be made aware of: the time in which a film is made. When focusing on analog film in general, due to the fact that the shooting of the film takes place long before its (first) screening, every film you view contains images of the past and already takes its place in history.<sup>62</sup>

Within the found footage film this is taken to a higher level. The filmmaker uses images that already have a history on their own and creates a new historical event with it, referring both to the original film and to the events depicted in the original, that have been recorded in an even earlier past. A film theorist that does not seem to acknowledge the historicity of contemporary films that (partially) consist of analog material, is Giovanna Fossati:

Although new films may perhaps become all digital soon, film-born and hybrid-born films (i.e. films from the analog past and films made during the transition) are destined to a perpetually liminal status. As material artifacts they are both analog and digital (e.g. the nitrate stored in the archive’s vault and its digitization stored on a server and available on-line); as conceptual artifacts they are both the historical artifact and the historized one.<sup>63</sup>

In line with the thoughts of Kim on the nature of found footage film as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Fossati locates contemporary analog films in an inevitable transition to digital. She does not seem to acknowledge the possibility of creating new analog films as ‘simply’ being analog. Besides this, she refers to such works as being historical artifacts and states that, when being digitized or used within a new (found footage) film, they should be approached as historized artifacts.<sup>64</sup> This is not something I agree upon. With her statement Fossati ignores the fact that a new (found footage) work that uses such analog materials, creates a historicity on its own; not simply duplicating or referring to the one that

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<sup>60</sup> Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> This is not the case for every film. Digital film could for instance be recorded and screened to its spectators live, thereby dismissing this pastness. In the context of this thesis this will, however, not be taken into account; since the focus mainly is on analog cinema.

<sup>63</sup> Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*, 107.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



already existed. When looking at my cases this view is criticized, in line with the idea of philosopher Walter Benjamin. He stated that past and present are inevitably connected to each other, and fragments of the past are constantly marked by the present. Even though, for instance, a found footage film finds its basis in a reference to history; by reproducing an original event within a new context, such an image of the past could only attain its legibility at a particular time within the present, as a dialectical image.<sup>65</sup>

Catherine Russell refers to Benjamin by connecting found footage films to his idea of dialectical images. She acknowledges the inevitable relationship between past and present in a confrontation with such an image, and approaches the ‘now’ of this confrontation from its momentariness:

The reference to the past in the form of an image produces the present as a moment in a historical continuum that is in perpetual change. The imagination of the future is thus grounded in the imagery of a past that cannot be salvaged but only allegorically recalled.<sup>66</sup>

Found footage films are described by Russell as being allegories of history, consisting of memory traces. By referring to the history represented by the films as an allegory, Russell seems to state that she does not take on their history as something truthful. Since according to her, through these traces a historical reference is made, that “originates in the present, as memory, and not in the past as origin.”<sup>67</sup> In her line of thought, the past of a found footage film could only be recalled through the memories the spectator has of the used footage itself, or of events, people and places related to it. I do believe that the present, from which we view these found footage films, is in perpetual change. Besides this, in the following analysis of REY, the decaying images of the film will be ascribed a role as memory traces, in relation with Russell’s view as described above. Before doing this, I however wish to emphasize with DECASIA that the found footage film could represent history in ways other than as Russell’s allegory, through an analysis of the narrative functions of DECASIA’s decaying images.

### *DECASIA*

As explained in the former chapter, DECASIA exists of footage originating from several films, retrieved from different archives. When viewing the film, it becomes immediately clear that

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<sup>65</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London, New York, Toronto, etc., 2008), 7.

<sup>66</sup> Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, 253.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

multiple sources are used, since characters and events on screen change constantly throughout the film. For instance a few seconds of two males dancing in uniforms, covered in extreme deterioration, alternates with an image of a Geisha that is barely recognizable through the stains. This constant change of imagery, and the signs of decay, make it difficult to directly recognize cause and effect relations. Besides this, there does not seem to be a clear temporal development constructed. The basic elements of narrative as defined by Bordwell and Thompson, therefore, are not adequate in analyzing this case. This coincides with the view of Russell, who, with reference to film theorist Craig Owens, describes found footage films as interrupting narrative and therefore representing counter-narratives. Russell states that these films, as being allegories of history, imply “a certain randomness, a seriality without necessity, rendering the logic of narrative necessity null and void.”<sup>68</sup>

Although, as mentioned, I do see how DECASIA counters narrative as formulated by Bordwell and Thompson, I expect Morrison to have made specific choices in his creation of the film instead of randomly combining the images.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the film distances itself from Russell’s theory on counter-narrativity and rather should be viewed in line with Verstraten’s filmic excess. Since no clear story is represented, and even in scenes that seem to show part of a story, attention is drawn to the style of the images by the constantly moving and changing signs of decay filling the screen; therefore almost all the images of the film could be ascribed the role of excess.

This excess has been defined as not directly relatable to narrativity, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. But in the context of the dialogic of past and present of this chapter, DECASIA shows to be inevitably connected to narration due to its historical nature. The film consistst solely out of images from the past edited together, with no footage being shot by Morrison himself. He formed his own historical telling of the past, since he represents pieces with different histories that most probably are not known to the present spectator; therefore the past as it was could not be retrieved in its total existence. Although, as emphasized above, no clear story is represented in the film, thinking about, formulating or referring to history always happens in a narrative way. Therefore, by referring to the past through the found images, a “new” history is narrated by Morrison. Not with the purpose of representing a truth,

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<sup>68</sup> Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, 240. Russell makes a reference to Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 208.

<sup>69</sup> This could also be supported by the results of the analysis in chapter one, showing how the aesthetics of decay functioned in the film.

but by acknowledging the pastness of the film and its present existence; by creating a “new” history in the mind of the present viewer.

### *REY*

For DECASIA, Bordwell and Thompson’s narrativity has been shown not to be a necessarily relevant theory for analyzing such experimental found footage films. REY, on the other hand, is a feature film that does consist of elements supporting a more definable story. By analyzing this case, I wish to show how its decaying footage could function on a narrative level in line with the theory of narratology by Verstraten, through relating it to the dialogic of past and present in a way differing from DECASIA.

As explained in the former chapter, REY alternates between one temporal layer located in the present, showing the protagonist De Tounens in court, and one temporal layer in the past, depicting flashbacks of his actions that led him there. Several times, these flashbacks are introduced by one of the characters. For instance, at the beginning of De Tounens’ trial, his prosecutor says: “You said you crossed the Bio Bio. Tell us about it.” He asks De Tounens at that moment in court to tell a story, through words. Instead, the film cuts to what seems to be an embedded visualization of a flashback of De Tounens, showing the river Bio Bio the prosecutor referred to. Throughout this flashback, which seems to be depicting a memory of the protagonist, the sound narrator gives information only through dialog of the characters that are part of the recreation of his past; possibly making the spectator almost forget it is a flashback in the first place, until it cuts back to the court room.

At other parts in the film, a double focalisation is created through the flashbacks, emphasizing the nature of the scenes even more as memories of the protagonist. An internal focalisation is created with sound, hearing De Tounens explain to the judge how his guide betrayed him, while on a visual level external focalisation is created by showing images of De Tounens being arrested. Throughout the film the protagonist’s memories are recalled and his own past is retraced from an external point of view.

This retracing of a past on a narrative level, through the memories of a character, can be connected to how the memories of both the filmmaker and the spectator are called upon in the pastness of the found footage film in general. In *Death of Cinema*, film theorist Paolo Cherchi states that the ambition of the filmmaker in general is to fabricate memories and visions that are believed to exist forever, with the hope of avoiding memory loss and anxiety

for the future.<sup>70</sup> Although he immediately writes this external existence off as an impossible goal, it still is an interesting thought on the role of memory in representing the past through film. Since, in general, the spectator is believed to aim to live in the ‘now’, while always having a desire for the past. The spectator therefore falls back on objects that can bring him or her back to the past or even proof that the past in his or her memories truly exists. In her book *The Archive Effect*, Jaimie Baron describes this desire for presence as being a desire for what she calls the archive affect, meaning “an awareness of the passage of time and the partiality of its remains, for an embodied experience of confronting what has been lost, and the mortal human condition.”<sup>71</sup> According to Baron, this experience is an embodied one, since the past is not only recalled through knowledge, but is also felt by the spectator.<sup>72</sup> In the context of REY, the mortality of the protagonist is depicted together with the decaying of his memories; through the transience of the archival materials out of which the film is created. Together, these elements give the spectator the possibility of recalling the past and experiencing this archive effect, in its present viewing.

### *Authenticity*

In general, before the spectator experiences this so-called archive affect through found images, several mediations take place that are important in the level of effect the footage could have. First of all, the archive preserves films from the past and restores them where necessary. Throughout this process, changes are made to the material in order for it to exist longer. According to Baron, the restoration of a film implies that a copy of the authentic film artifact is being made. This artifact may be called authentic, since it is the original work; the authenticity of the copy however is not self-evident but can be attributed, depending on the human mediation within the restoration process. Baron states that the filmmaker determines how exactly the old footage is used, and in turn, it is this process that determines the authenticity of the copy; or in this research, the new found footage film.<sup>73</sup> Corresponding with the inevitable connection between past and present, is the inseparability of the original artifact and its recreation. This means that even though a found footage film can be authentic whilst using already existing material, it will always lack its presence in (the original) time and space and therefore, it lacks a unique existence connected to this time and place.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001), 35.

<sup>71</sup> Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, 128.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 5.

Benjamin defines the authenticity of an artwork as “the quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears.”<sup>75</sup> He however mainly discusses the authenticity or uniqueness of the original work of art, and only describes what happens to this uniqueness whenever a work is reproduced; rather than explaining how the reproduction itself could be ascribed an authentic role. Other than that, he relates these ideas to art works in general, while I wish to explore if a film of the transitional found footage genre could be seen as authentic. Since in case of this phenomenon, already existing works or parts of it are not solely reproduced or digitized with the intention of recreating a new version of the old, but certain elements are used to create a whole new uniqueness, marked by the authenticity of decaying footage.

In his description of the authenticity of the art work in its reproduction, Benjamin mentions aura as an element that could be seen as diminishing with every reproduction, therefore losing its uniqueness.<sup>76</sup> In contrast to this, in the context of the decaying found footage phenomenon, Laura Marks states the following: “Mechanically reproduced images supposedly lack aura, but as images decay they become unique again.”<sup>77</sup> According to Marks, every film deteriorates in its own individual way, dependent on external elements such as temperature.<sup>78</sup> The loss of an image in line with its decay does not result in a loss of aura, but rather contributes to its uniqueness. But how is this loss represented on a narrative level of the decaying found footage films as analyzed in this thesis, and what kind of spectator response does this evoke?

### *Mourning and melancholia*

In 1917, Sigmund Freud laid the basis for the debate on dealing with loss. He described mourning as separating yourself from the lost loved one, as a way to survive. The melancholic act differs from mourning, in the way that the connection with the loved one is preserved, thereby remaining the feeling of loss instead of distancing yourself from it.<sup>79</sup> The way the subject is loved and lost in the descriptions of Freud corresponds with the love for a disappearing image, as described by Marks and referred to in the former chapter. Through loving an image that is in decay, the images are in both a temporal and spatial way allowed to pass while the present remains are embraced. By creating a found footage work, the maker

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<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>77</sup> Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 96.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Collected Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 14:255.

acknowledges the transition the material is going through and instead of ignoring or rejecting it, he or she respects its remains by using it in a new space, in a new work and giving it the possibility of a new life in the present and possible future time. As a result, the spectator is presented the possibility of building up an emotional connection with the work and in line with this, with the medium itself.<sup>80</sup>

In order to relate the experience of the spectator in its viewing of deteriorating images to the dialogic of past and present represented by the narratives of REY and DECASIA, I, however, wish to go further than Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia. The spectator is expected to experience more than a feeling of loss of the images in front of him; partly because memories could still be evoked, even though the images are not complete anymore – that may be comparable to how, in REY, the memories and ideas of De Tounens are still as strong, even though they are deteriorating into vague hallucinations due to his fever. Instead of focusing on the loss, the films prove that attention should be paid to experiences evoked by their pastness. In the present encounter with the archival footage from the past, the spectator is confronted with the historicity of the footage, and possibly with his or her own. The historicity themes as described above, represented in the narratives of the films, evoke feelings of nostalgia.

### *Nostalgia*

Literature philosopher Susan Stewart defines nostalgia as “sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience.”<sup>81</sup> The person who is feeling and behaving nostalgic, is longing for something – not specifically an object, but it could be an event or certain emotions - that does not exist within our real lived experiences. According to Stewart, nostalgia expresses itself as some sort of ideology, for the person being nostalgic has a goal that could not be reached. His or her expectations could never be lived up to, since the subject of the longing will never return in the way it exists within your mind.<sup>82</sup>

In an encounter with a decaying found footage film, the spectator could on the one hand experience nostalgia in line with Stewart's definition. The archival images could evoke a longing for something that could never be attained today, that is in the way that it is remembered by the spectator. On the other hand, the decaying found footage film could

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<sup>80</sup> Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 110.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1984), 23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

actually help to fulfill this longing whilst evoking it in the spectator. He or she relives the past through the images, re-experiencing what is longed for in the first place; since, according to literary theorist Svetlana Boym, this nostalgic longing does not have to be related to something that actually existed. It is “a romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>83</sup>

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym defines nostalgia in its relation with space and time:

At the first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires [...] to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.<sup>84</sup>

This relationship between time and space is recognizable in the way nostalgia is expressed through the narratives of the two cases. In REY, the flashbacks depict the space that De Tounens in person experienced as his kingdom, before being arrested. After being deported from the country, most likely a feeling of nostalgia was evoked in him, since he would never be able to visit it again without being sentenced to death. As an emphasis of Boym’s view, the films show that this longing would, however, be directed more strongly to time instead of space. Directed to the time of his search for support of his position as king, when he could feel everything would still be possible – before his dream was shattered and he could only return to this temporal zone through his fantasies.

In DECASIA, the nostalgic is not directly recognizable as something that exists in the characters of the film, possibly due to the fact that it solely contains filmic excess, without the presence of a clear external and internal focalisation. Certain shots do, however, emit a feeling of nostalgia through their nature as excess. In the film the temporalities of several different archival images are mixed, edited together in a *slow-motion* that could be connected to “respectively and most likely nostalgically, [...] the slow rhythm of reflective time [that] made possible the dream of freedom.”<sup>85</sup> One specific scene in which this is emphasized, is located at the beginning of the film. This scene shows nitrate filmstrips that are picked up by a human hand from a container with fluids, to be put back again after being checked for a few seconds. This could be interpreted as nostalgia for the times of early cinema, shown in the

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<sup>83</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 13.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

slow pace of reflective time as described by Boym.

These examples are ways in which nostalgia is translated into the time and space of REY and DECASIA's narratives. In addition to this, should be discussed how the films and their decaying footage could evoke a nostalgic response in the spectator, in its encounter with the cases. One of the ways in which a nostalgic response could be expressed, is connected to the act of restoration. As explained by Boym, restorative nostalgia implies that the past should not show any signs of decay; instead it should be restored back to the original image it once was.<sup>86</sup> Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, is concerned more with the longing and remembrance of what has been lost. The remainders of the past, referred to as ruins, are accepted and used as a point of reference to be able to experience this kind of nostalgic feelings.<sup>87</sup>

In the encounter with both REY and DECASIA, the spectator is put into the position of reflective nostalgic. Morrison's work exists solely out of decaying found images that, as mentioned before, are slowed down in an extreme way. Besides this, several shots are shown in which the forms and shapes of decay fill the whole screen, making it impossible to recognize something. Through these elements, Morrison could be expected to seek in the spectator an acceptance of the decay and a focus on remembering and repositioning the past, rather than fixing it. For REY, the same effect is achieved, but with a different technique. Parts of Atallah's own shot filmstrips have been buried under the ground for five years before being reused in the film. By taking the matter in his own hands, Atallah accelerated the decaying process and thereby shows to the spectator that anxieties about "historical incongruities between past and present,"<sup>88</sup> that Boym connects to restorative nostalgia, are not necessary.

In her definition of nostalgia, Boym refers to the development of modern technologies and their position in society today. She describes nostalgia as offering the possibility to deal with these developments, in a way that can be relatable to the goal in my thesis: "The history of nostalgia might allow us to look back at modern history not solely searching for newness and technological progress but for unrealized possibilities, unpredictable turns and crossroads."<sup>89</sup> With the creation of decaying found footage films, filmmakers make it possible for their audience to look back to the past and acknowledge its transience and momentariness,

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<sup>86</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



instead of fixing the damages done to older works or creating perfectly new integrant works with the help of modern technologies. I believe this lays at the basis of cinema. The decaying found footage films that are analyzed in this thesis emphasize the idea of Kim (citing Cherchi Usai): “it is film’s material mortality – that film cannot prevent both destruction from external causes and its internal degradation – that makes the ontology and historicity of cinema possible,”<sup>90</sup> since a film could not have a history if it eventually is not able to decay.

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<sup>90</sup> Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age*, 176. Kim refers to Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age*, 41.

### 3. Indexical effects

In the previous two chapters the aesthetics and narratives of REY and DECASIA have been researched, to show how the decaying images could affect the spectator and how the presumed transitional nature of the found footage phenomenon could be questioned due to these effects. This last chapter will be centered on the same questions, in a research in the realm of indexicality. Throughout its earlier stages, analog film has been identified as having indexical characteristics. The development of digital technologies, and the changing nature of the medium in this context, motivated certain academics to state that these indexical traits have disappeared.<sup>91</sup> I however believe that the cases REY and DECASIA do consist of indexical signs, for reasons that will be elaborated later on in this chapter. The analyses of REY and DECASIA will be positioned in this research field and the statements on cinema's disappearing indexical nature will be opposed, by showing why, for cinema, the index is still of relevance today. With reference to Mary Ann Doane and Pepita Hesselberth, I will research the encounter of the spectator with the cinematic, to see how the spectator makes sense of a film through indexicality.

#### *Cinema as index*

At the end of the nineteenth century, philosopher Charles S. Peirce introduced a taxonomy of signs. With his distinction of the icon, the index and the symbol, he represented three ways in which meaning can be attached to a sign. According to Peirce, the first type of sign, the icon, is related to its object through a physical resemblance. The physical characteristics of this type of sign are (almost) the same as the ones of the object to which the sign is related, accordingly the sign could be recognizable even though the object itself is not present.<sup>92</sup> As explained by Peirce, the second type of sign, called the index, is physically connected to its object, but does not resemble it in a way the icon does. In this case, the sign needs the presence of the object to maintain its character, since the meaning-making process is dependent on the object pointing to the sign.<sup>93</sup> The third sign, the symbol, is defined by Peirce as "connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind [...]."<sup>94</sup> According to him, the connection between object and sign would not cease to exist without someone present interpreting the

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<sup>91</sup> Later on in this chapter references will be made to these academics and their arguments, as well as my view on the case.

<sup>92</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 304.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 299.

sign.<sup>95</sup>

In discussions concerning the presumed transition from analog to digital cinema, theoreticians have fallen back on Peirce's idea of the indexical sign to describe the changes the medium is going through. A citation that is widely used in reflections on this changing nature of cinema, originates from media theorist Lev Manovich: "Cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint."<sup>96</sup> As stated by Manovich, early cinema, as manifested in different forms and genres, used to represent lens-based recordings of reality. He explains that today the connection of the film with its pre-filmic reality is manipulated by digital technologies interfering in the process of recording, through creating and modifying the images.<sup>97</sup> What exactly makes early analog cinema more indexical than digital can be emphasized with reference to film theorist Mary Ann Doane, who describes the relation between the object and the index as one of contiguity. Whilst recording, the filmstrip is touched by the light reflecting from the object in front of the camera, which results in images appearing on the material.<sup>98</sup> This can be related to the abovementioned idea of Manovich, on the digital interfering with the reality of analog film. The traces of light on the filmstrip point directly to the pre-filmic reality that is recorded, while for films created digitally, these steps are replaced by other technologies. For the latter, the digital materials are less tangible, making it almost impossible to leave indexical traces – resulting from a touch of a surface by an object - in the same way as with analog film.

Even though Doane's description of the indexical traces of cinema seems to coincide with Manovich's ideas, she does distance herself from his point of view. Manovich associates the indexical sign with reality, whereas Doane explicitly discusses the index detached from its relationship with the real. Doane refers to Rosalind Krauss, whilst stating the following: "While realism claims to build a mimetic copy, an illusion of an inhabitable world, the index only purports to point, to connect, to touch, to make language and representation adhere to the world as tangent – to reference a real without realism."<sup>99</sup>

The function of the index is brought back to a 'simple' literal or figurative pointing to an object by a sign, without making claims about the realness of both elements. As shown by

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<sup>95</sup> Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 304.

<sup>96</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 286.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 286-287.

<sup>98</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Culture* 18, no. 1 (2007): 133. doi: 10.1215/10407391-2006-025.

<sup>99</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Culture* 18, no. 1 (2007): 4. doi: 10.1215/10407391-2006-020. Doane refers to Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (1977): 68-81.

the different purposes of the index touched upon in this statement, there is a diversity of signs to which the index could be applied. In this diversity as originally represented by Peirce, Doane specifies two types of index: trace and deixis. According to her, in the case of the cinematic, the index as trace has been associated more with filmic images than the deictic has. The description of cinema as the art of the footprint made by Manovich, as cited above, aligns with this idea. Doane describes the indexical trace as a residue left on a surface touched by an object. Her definition, however, goes further than the material level on which it is manifested:

The index as trace implies a material connection between sign and object as well as an insistent temporality – the reproducibility of a past moment. [...] Hence, this understanding of the index necessarily aligns it with historicity, the ‘that has been’ of Barthes’ photographic image.<sup>100</sup>

I believe that in the opposition between trace and deixis, it is this temporal level on which the differences between both indices are most striking; especially in the context of the found footage film.

Since as stated by Doane, as opposed to the trace, the deictic index unfolds substantially at the moment it is enacted. Also, the foot necessarily needs to touch the ground for the footprint to appear, whereas with the deixis “[t]here is always a gap between sign and object, and touch here is only figurative;”<sup>101</sup> instead of necessarily performed. In the introduction of the *differences* journal, Doane stresses that the importance of presentness for a deixis’ implementation can be emphasized even more by the form in which it appears. These indices are associated with language signs such as ‘now,’ ‘this,’ ‘I’ and ‘here,’ that on their own imply a certain emptiness and hollowness and need a spatiotemporal context to obtain a specific meaning through interpretation.<sup>102</sup>

It is this emptiness, amongst other elements, that motivates Doane to associate the trace more with the cinematic nature than the deixis. I believe, however, that in the context of the found footage film, the deixis and its temporal characteristics as mentioned above are more relevant than the trace. Before I explain why, the dialogic of past and present that emanates from the opposition between trace and deixis will be further elaborated upon.

### *Found footage as index*

In the second chapter of this thesis, attention has been paid to the dialogic of past and present

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<sup>100</sup> Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 136.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction,” 2.

as represented by the found footage phenomenon. Initially, cinema in general is interpreted for its historicity, on the one hand representing history through its recorded images and on the other hand creating a new historical event with its existence. In this light, the found footage phenomenon is particularly of interest, since its makers reuse images from the past in the present, therefore underlying a historicity at its basis. The films are in a way using traces of the past while leaving new traces with the creation of their present works. It would, therefore, make sense to interpret the signs represented in the films as traces rather than deixis, keeping in mind that filmstrips in a way always relate to objects by which they have been touched in the past. At the moment of recording of the original films, the light left imprints on the filmstrips, resulting in images that later on have been reused; touched upon by either new material or other reused footage, during the editing process of the filmmaker.

When focusing specifically on decaying found footage, another position can be taken in. Instead of trying to re-experience the past, for example due to a feeling of longing or nostalgia, the films could be seen as securing the past; a process that film theorist André Bazin has described as a mummy complex:

The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continue existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life. It was natural, therefore, to keep up appearances in the face of the reality of death by preserving flesh and bone.<sup>103</sup>

The original footage was deteriorating and slowly disappearing, but by reusing it in a new film – either by digitizing it or printing it on a new analog filmstrip – the material in a way is preserved, comparable to the “continue existence of the corporeal body” as described by Bazin. By reusing deteriorating footage, the transience of the material is paused “in the hold of life” (rather than stopped, since eventually the found footage film will deteriorate too), while at the same time transparently showing the vulnerability of the “flesh and bone” of the material.

Although reusing and thereby preserving decaying footage in a way could be associating with embalming the dead, in agreement with media theorist Vivian Sobchack, I

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<sup>103</sup> Andre Bazin and Hugh Gray, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1960): 4-5.

do, however, not view cinema as a mummifying medium. As emphasized in the first chapter, Sobchack is specialized in existential phenomenology, interested in the experiential and perceptual experience of the spectator. From this position, Sobchack focuses on the present encounter instead of dwelling on the past, stating that “[t]he *moving picture* is a visible representation not of activity finished or past but of activity coming into being and being.”<sup>104</sup> In line with this thought, I will emphasize that the decaying found footage films consist of indexical signs. These signs step away from both the pastness of the trace and the mummification of time and instead are analyzed to show what happens in the “coming into being and being” of the cinematic. In this context the historicity of the found footage film is acknowledged, whilst researching what this brings about in the present encounter with the spectator. The decaying found footage film, therefore, rather coincides with the nature of the *deixis* as index.

### *Deixis of decay*

One of the motivations for researching the present encounter with decaying found footage films, is the sense of temporariness and fleetingness the films entail. Cinema has been viewed as a medium of fast motion already from its earlier years on, for instance by Roland Barthes.<sup>105</sup> The usage of decaying found footage in a film, however, expands this volatile nature even more by exposing the transience of the material. The images are disappearing and even though, in general, the spectator could be aware of the fact the film has ‘locked in’ the decaying material; at the moment of viewing it would seem as if the deterioration process would actually be developing further, resulting in a complete disappearance of the footage in the immediate future, under the eye of the spectator.

In discussions on new media technologies, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin defined immediacy as creating a transparent experience for the viewer, erasing the traces of mediation to make it seem as if the spectator directly interferes with the mediated environment.<sup>106</sup> As stated by film theorist Pepita Hesselberth, this illusion of non-mediation gives the spectator a sense of ‘being there,’ provided by modern technologies. She, however, declines this widely used definition of presence-effect and instead describes it as “being

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<sup>104</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 146.

<sup>105</sup> In his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes compares the cinematic with photographs and emphasizes the speeding movements of cinema, stating one could not get ahold of the images in a way that is possible with photographs. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 89-90.

<sup>106</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, “Remediation,” *Configurations* 4, no. 3 (1996): 313.

within reach, tangible for our bodies.”<sup>107</sup> The decaying found footage films will emphasize that, in addition to the ideas of these theorists, immediacy refers to their fleeting nature; since the term is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “occurring or done at once; instant.”<sup>108</sup> Instead of concealing the interference of the medium, its mediation is acknowledged through the visibility of the deteriorating materials. Through these signs of decay that function as deixis, an embodied interaction is stimulated between the film and the spectator – wherein he or she is directed to look here, now.<sup>109</sup> With both the transience of the footage and the uncertainty of its existence in the future being emphasized in the films, the importance of researching the then “in the changing light of the ‘after,’ the ‘now’”<sup>110</sup> of the cinematic encounter is motivated.

### *Here, Now, Me*

In his definition of the index, Peirce discusses that the sign is dependent on the presence of the object it refers to, but could still maintain its character when the subject interpreting the sign would not be there.<sup>111</sup> He could, however, not exclude the interpretant completely from the meaning-making process, “as because [the index] is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the sense or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand.”<sup>112</sup> According to Peirce, in the case of the deixis the presence of the interpretant actually is inevitable, since originally it is a linguistic sign that should be both used by one person and acknowledged and interpreted by another.<sup>113</sup> In addition to this, Doane states that the sign appears best in “the here and now of speech,” since “[w]hen it appears in writing, it can only refer back, recursively, to previous words in the syntactical chain.”<sup>114</sup> These arguments again emphasize the inevitable importance of immediacy in the usage of the deictic index and the spatio-temporal context in which it attains its meaning.

As referred to by Hesselberth, for film theorist Christian Metz, this need for the presence of the sender and interpretant in the usage of deictic markers, makes it impossible

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<sup>107</sup> Pepita Hesselberth, “From subject-effect to presence-effect: A deictic approach to the cinematic,” *European Journal of Media Studies Necsus* 1, no. 2 (2012): 243. doi: 10.5117/NECSUS2012.2.HESS.

<sup>108</sup> *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “immediate,” accessed July 23, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/immediate>.

<sup>109</sup> Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 140. Doane puts the deictic sign that directs the spectator to look here, now in opposition of the trace, that reconfirms that something exists to be looked at.

<sup>110</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 21.

<sup>111</sup> Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 304.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 136.

for cinema to represent these signs; Metz therefore approaches the viewing of a film as a voyeuristic act.<sup>115</sup> Hesselberth herself, however, states otherwise: by showing how an encounter with the cinematic calls for a “bodily-spatial or affective [...] engagement with the technologies of sound and vision that valorize our being in the world.”<sup>116</sup> Whereas Peirce, as described above, ascribed the sense and memory of the interpretant a role in this process, Hesselberth is focusing solely on the sensory part of the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of the cinematic encounter. She connects this to the theories of Laura Marks on tactile and haptic visuality as discussed to in the first chapter of this thesis. With reference to Marks, I showed how the decaying footage of the cases REY and DECASIA functioned as haptic images, calling forth an identification with the films as inanimate objects. In addition to this, I wish to demonstrate in this chapter in what forms the deixis is represented in both films and how they arouse an embodied experience in the spectator, with reference to the framework of the deictic ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘me’ as formulated by Hesselberth.

### REY

The feature REY is divided into five chapters, in this order named El Captivo, El Tribunal, La Traición, La Fiebre and El Exilio. As stated in the former chapters, the film alternates between two different timelines: the present in which the main protagonist De Tounens is locked into prison and is being prosecuted in court, and the past timeline of him travelling through Araucanía where he eventually gets arrested. The five chapters are depicted in the order of the events happening in the present of De Tounens, in which he gets captured, is questioned in court, describes - during this questioning - how he was betrayed by his guide Rosales, gets a fever while being locked in prison, and eventually gets exiled out of the country. By dividing the film in these chapters the story is structured, which could provide a way for the spectator to understand where and when in the story De Tounens is located. Initially, in the alternations between De Tounens in jail and during his travels, the protagonist does not seem to be confused about his own presence in the ‘here’ and ‘now’; meaning his spatio-temporal position. His memories of the country he was arrested in (being his kingdom Araucanía) do differ from the interpretations of the other characters (thinking the country is

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<sup>115</sup> Hesselberth, “From subject-effect to presence-effect: A deictic approach to the cinematic,” 246. Reference to Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), 89-98.

<sup>116</sup> Hesselberth, “From subject-effect to presence-effect: A deictic approach to the cinematic,” 242.



part of Chile, that is being threatened by De Tounens),<sup>117</sup> making it difficult for the spectator to know which truth is the right one. This, however, does not directly influence the depiction of the spaces and times in which De Tounens is located; since they are still recognizable for the spectator. Even though the question of reality versus imagination is not answered, the spectator could still locate him- or herself in a ‘here’ and ‘now,’ by reflecting on the protagonist’s spatial and temporal positioning.

The film does contain specific moments in which the spectator is challenged in his or her bodily-spatial (and temporal) deixis. Whenever decaying footage is shown, the images are less recognizable on a visual level, making it difficult to locate the protagonist – and therefore the spectator – in a specific time and space. What makes the case even more interesting in the context of deictics is, however, connected more to the narrative functions of the decaying images. As concluded in both the former chapters, in REY the decaying footage functions as visualizations of De Tounens’ memories and hallucinations. Near the end, the film shows even more archival footage than before, and the signs of decay are at their worst; conforming to the mental and physical state De Tounens himself is in. The film alternates between images from different archival sources in a fast pace, during which the spectator gets access to the film through both external and internal focalisation by a *voice-over* of De Tounens, in which he talks about his kingdom and refers to himself as king several times. Although he does not use the words ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘me’ literally, in an indirect way he is reflecting on his position in time and space, and his own identity.

De Tounens’ reflection on his own ‘me’ is stimulated in a comparable way within the spectator, in the scenes shot by Atallah himself. As explained in the first chapter, the protagonist (as well as other characters) is wearing a mask covering his whole head. The illness of De Tounens at the end of the film is leaving traces on his mask, making the cover of his face even less recognizable, and therefore stimulating a reflection on his identity within the spectator. Together with the shiftings between the different archival images as mentioned before,<sup>118</sup> which clearly are not a direct depiction of the story, this process challenges the spectator in positioning him- or herself in the encounter with the film. All these elements are

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<sup>117</sup> This conflict in interpretations is depicted for instance in a scene in which Rosales and De Tounens are having a conversation about De Tounens’ motivations for travelling. De Tounens: “I’ve wanted to come here my whole life.” Rosales: “Here in Chile?” De Tounens: “No, this is not Chile. We are in Araucanía since we crossed the river Bio Bio.” (time code 40:20)

<sup>118</sup> Doane makes a reference to Roman Jakobson, who defines deictic indexes as shifters, and states that “their reference is entirely dependent upon the situation of speaking itself and shift[ing] from one implementation to the next.” Roman Jakobson, “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb,” *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2. *Word and Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 131-133.

making it even more difficult to answer the ongoing question of reality or imagination: Does De Tounens truly obtain his kingdom in the end, or is it just a hallucination? Although the different environments as perceived by the spectator in general are, as stated by Hesselberth, actual from his or her own point of view during the observations,<sup>119</sup> these shiftings in spaces, times and positions of the protagonist could make it difficult for the spectator to experience an identification with the protagonist.

### *DECASIA*

In her analysis of *SOURCE CODE*, Hesselberth refers to moments in which the protagonist literally uses the words ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘me’ to make sense of his surroundings and his own shifting identities, which she translates into the encounter of the spectator. In the case of *DECASIA*, no dialog is inserted and no words are shown on screen, therefore no literal use of these indices is presented. I believe, however, that the index could still be acknowledged in the film, in particular through the decaying footage. Doane connects the signs of deterioration in *DECASIA* to the trace type of index: “What is indexed here is the historicity of a medium, a history inextricable from the materiality of its base. [...] *Decasia* exhibits a nostalgia for a medium subject to dissolution and corruption, as the mark of its own historicity.”<sup>120</sup> Although I do acknowledge the historical nature of the film (as proven in the former chapters of this thesis), to critically add to Doane’s idea on indexicality I prefer to approach the signs as deixis, so as to put the focus on the present encounter with the indices in *DECASIA* instead of their historicity.

A literal representation of a ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘me’ as introduced by Hesselberth is not present in this specific film, but I believe that her description of the thickening of time in *SOURCE CODE* could be applied to *DECASIA*. The different temporalities that exist in Morrison’s work, as described in the first chapter, are coming together at the moment of the encounter between spectator and film. Several images from different sources are combined and slowed down, on the one hand possibly giving the spectator the impression that the image will never fade, since it is shown in such a slow pace. On the other hand, it expresses a sense of fleetingness that results in a complete disappearance. The decay on the screen refers back to the body of the film itself and on the body of the spectator: the deterioration of the images makes the spectator reflect on the ‘me’, on his or her own transience, empowering its encounter in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of the viewing.

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<sup>119</sup> Hesselberth, “From subject-effect to presence-effect: A deictic approach to the cinematic,” 251.

<sup>120</sup> Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 144-145.

A scene in which this is strongest, depicts a boy sitting in a school bus, looking straight into the camera, into the eyes of the spectator. The same effect is produced in another scene, when a group of children is walking in an extreme slowed down pace towards a building under the guidance of a couple of nuns. Due to the slow pace, the spectator could end up staring at the screen without being very much aware of what he is looking at; until one of the girls suddenly looks directly into the camera, confronting the spectator and making him or her aware of his or her own presence; therefore motivating a presence or tangibility-effect, in line with Hesselberth's arguments. The effect of these scenes in DECASIA reflect on the theory of Doane, who analyzes the film *SO IS THIS* (1982) by Michael Snow: "the film directly addresses its audience as the 'you' of a present tense, that of the film's screening, in an ever new, ever unique moment that repudiates the idea of film as recording or representation, the trace of an object placed before the lens."<sup>121</sup> At the moment of a visual connection between the spectator and the boy and the girl in DECASIA, the spectator's awareness of the screen's presence could be gone, if only for a few seconds.

#### *Future decay*

As stated before, the interpretation of a deictic sign is related to the specific present context in which the sign is taken in by the spectator, depending both on the filmic situation in which the signs are presented, and on the spatial, temporal and personal situation of the viewer. In addition to the positioning in past and present in her analysis, Hesselberth also reflects on the future with reference to film theorist Sean Cubitt: "Thus, the future is the unmarked space that lies beyond the frame of that which is indicated, but with which the event-ness of our encounter with the cinematic is nonetheless affectively charged."<sup>122</sup> This can be reflected on with the indirect way in which the deictic signs in found footage films – that are presented in the images of decay - refer to the future. No direct references to the future are made in the film, but the transience of the material is shining through the decay, emphasizing that the possibility of a future for the filmstrips could not be assured. Described in line with the deixis, the films not only show a disappearance in the 'now' of the viewing and the past 'then' of the creation process of the works, but also a to be expected 'then' of a dissolving in the future.

Either directly or indirectly this could affect the spectator in its encounter. This result emphasizes the idea of Svetlana Boym, who describes the relations between past, present and future in a nostalgic experience: "Fantasies of the past determined by the needs of the

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<sup>121</sup> Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity," 137.

<sup>122</sup> Hesselberth, "From subject-effect to presence-effect: A deictic approach to the cinematic," 254.

present have a direct impact on realities in the future.”<sup>123</sup> In the spectator’s encounter with deixis the present moment is determining, but this experience could either evoke or be influenced by for instance feeling of nostalgia, mourning or melancholia as described in the former chapter. Additionally, both these elements have an impact on the realities in the future as stated by Boym, either as fantasies or actually carried out. According to Doane, in this situation the deixis could actually have an important function:

If the cinema as we know it [...] is on the verge of obsolescence, the utopian dimension such a fate releases is the desire for the certitude of the imprint, the trace, the etching in a medium whose materiality is thinkable. The source of this longing does not lie in the belief that the cinema gives us realistic representations of objects or people but that, in the manner of the ‘this’, the deictic index, it points to and verifies an existence. It reveals more readily than the digital, with its dream of immateriality, the inescapable necessity of matter, despite its inevitable corrosion, decay, and degeneration.<sup>124</sup>

Although I do not believe cinema to actually be moving into the direction of obsolescence, Doane’s view on the importance of analog film, in fulfilling a longing by verifying an existence rather than representing reality, is something I agree upon. Still, decaying found footage film does not solely function as revealing the importance of materiality, and emphasizing how the digital lacks this. It is in this encounter of the spectator and the cinematic that the importance of the analog film’s existence - due to preserving and collecting - is motivated, together with the opening up of its dissection to the public and the creation of new works with the decaying found footage.

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<sup>123</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 16.

<sup>124</sup> Doane, “The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” 146.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis the following research question was introduced: In what ways can the decaying found footage in REY (Niles Atallah, 2017) and DECASIA: THE STATE OF DECAY (Bill Morrison, 2002) affect the spectator and how do these effects question the presumed transitional nature of found footage films on the level of aesthetics, narrative and indexicality? The first step in answering this, was analyzing the aesthetics of REY and DECASIA and researching how the spectator is affected by the formal decay of the films. Analog film goes through different stages in its deterioration process. In which stage the material is, can be recognized by formal elements. This demonstrates that decay instantly influences the aesthetics of a film. In addition to this - as mentioned earlier in this thesis - Baron states that “were these images not decayed, they would lose much of their affective power;”<sup>125</sup> thereby motivating a research of the aesthetics and effect of decaying found footage films on the spectator.

The most important result of the analysis of REY was related to the two temporal layers the film represents. Through flashbacks of the protagonist, the spectator obtains access to his inner world through internal and external focalisation. In the scenes in which decaying images are shown, memories and hallucinations of the character are depicted. The observation that the decay becomes worse in scenes in which De Tounens’ hallucinations are at their worst, supports my claim that the decaying images function in the narrative of the film due to their aesthetics. Thanks to and despite of the decay and the internal and external focalisation these images offer, the spectator is believed to be able to identify with the protagonist. The decaying images of the film affect the spectator on this level, emphasizing the relevance of its analog material and therefore questioning the transitional nature Kim and Fossati presumed the phenomenon to have.

In DECASIA, no clear narrative is present, putting the focus mainly on the aesthetics. The lack of a narrative is one of the reasons it could be difficult for the spectator to identify with the characters in the way that is shown to be possible with REY. Due to the decaying images an identification however should be possible, but instead with the inanimate body of the screen. Through haptic visuality, as introduced by Marks, multiple senses of the spectator are addressed. Identification is stimulated since the spectator could compare the body of the screen to its own, while becoming aware of his or her own fragility through the deterioration of the film, in a mutual experience of disappearance. By representing the different aesthetic

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<sup>125</sup> Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, 129.

elements two decaying found footage films could possess, I demonstrated that the analog materials of both films are unique and could be loved and identified with thanks to, rather than despite of, their visual appearance.

In addition to this, an analysis of REY and DECASIA on a narrative level resulted in a second way in which the spectator could be affected by the decaying images of the films and also resulted in another motivation of my rejection of the presumed transitional nature. The found footage film could be seen as representing the past in a way that is marked by the present. A historicity is created in the film that is inevitably related to the histories of the used materials, but at the same time stands on its own. In the present encounter of the spectator with the decaying footage, he or she is confronted with the historicity of the images and with his or her own, possibly evoking nostalgic feelings.

DECASIA has been shown to exist solely out of filmic excess, in which style is superior to narrative. Although the film is inevitably narrative, due to its historical nature, in the analysis a critical view has been taken in against the theory of Bordwell and Thompson. Multiple historical events of the found footage and the 'new' history of his film are narrated by Morrison. This does not function as representation of a truth, but acknowledges the pastness of the film and its present existence. Differing from DECASIA, REY does represent a narrative and through the double focalisation of the flashbacks, the memories of the protagonist are recalled and thereby his own past is retraced. Throughout the film, the protagonist's mortality is depicted in the decay of his memories, shown in images of decay originating from archival material with which the film partly is made. The spectator is able to recall the past through these scenes and experience in its present viewing an archive effect as introduced by Baron.

With both films, a reflective nostalgic response is expected to be evoked in the spectator, rather than a restorative one. Morrison could be seeking in the spectator an acceptance of the decay and a focus on remembering the past. In REY (as well as in DECASIA, but in a different way) the decaying process is accelerated, possibly evoking the same response in the spectator. Through these found footage films in decay, spectators are given the possibility to look back to the past, acknowledge its transience and accept the deterioration instead of fixing it. These effects support my claim that analog is not solely a precursor destined to move in a liminal way into the digital, as wrongly stated by Fossati, but should be valued in its own development and historicity.

In a further research on the present encounter of the spectator with the cinematic, the

focus was put on how he or she makes sense of a found footage film through indexicality. In the analyses, REY and DECASIA were shown to represent deictic indices, with which an embodied interaction is stimulated between the spectator and the films, directing him or her to look here, now. In the decaying scenes of REY, the spectator is challenged in its bodily-spatial and temporal experience, due to the shiftings in spaces, times and positions of the protagonist in the two temporal layers. In DECASIA, no literal deictics – meaning in this context the words ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘me’ – are presented. But the continual changing of the spaces, times and events in the images expresses a fleetingness that could distort the spectator’s reflective process. The decay on the screen is connected to the body of the film, as well as to the body of the spectator. This deterioration stimulates him or her to reflect on the ‘me’, on his or her own transience, that empowers the encounter in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of the viewing; and in addition to this, a reflection on the disappearance of the material in the ‘then’ of the future.

Throughout the three chapters I proved that analog film still takes in an important position in the digitization process of cinema, therefore questioning the transitional nature as presented by Kim and Fossati, implying that the digital in a way is superior to this medium. REY and DECASIA have been positioned in relation to their past, present and future; showing how they affected the spectator and evoked emotions, bodily and mental reactions in the spectator - translated into identification, nostalgia, a reflection on the spectator’s own position of a ‘me’ in a ‘here’ and ‘now’. This directly puts into practice a few of the many possibilities analog film still has to offer today, emphasizing and celebrating its liveness instead of directing analog film into an obsolescence.

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