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Haunted Home Movies — Dialectical Image and the Archive Fever in Contemporary Found Footage Films

Filmes Caseiros Mal-ditos — A Imagem Dialética e o Mal de Arquivo no Cinema de Found Footage Contemporâneo

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— Abstract

In this article, we analyse two *found footage* films composed entirely of home movies: *Happy End* (1996) by Austrian filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky and the feature-length *Private Footage* (2022) by Brazilian filmmaker Janaína Nagata. These films are part of a contemporary movement dedicated to reimagining and revisiting private archives in order to problematize official History. We begin with a theoretical review that references key bibliographical sources relevant to our analysis, followed by a brief historical overview of the state-of-the-art debate surrounding *found footage*. Subsequently, we perform an *ad hoc* analysis of each film, employing a qualitative comparative approach that integrates scene analysis, film theory and film philosophy. This methodology uncovers ghosts and suppressed histories that continue to haunt these films, inhabiting hidden layers of meaning that surface from this ostensibly “innocent” archive through the operations of montage. Could these films, situated at the intersection of memory and imagination, reclaim overlooked and denied narratives and constitute a form of “pro-memory”? We explore how these works engage with Walter Benjamin’s concepts of the optical unconscious and the dialectical image, while also situating them within the framework of Jacques Derrida’s “*archive fever*.” Finally, we argue that each filmmaker confronts the hauntological virtuality — or the “silent” side — of the archive, leveraging its dialectical power to interrogate colonial histories and the spectres of fascism. Tscherkassky and Nagata confront the “origins” of these images, demonstrating that the past persists as an unspoken, denied, and repressed force that can finally be brought to light through the artistic gesture of *détournement*.

— Keywords

experimental cinema | found footage | archive | film studies | home movies

Abstract

Neste artigo, analisamos duas obras de *found footage* feitas inteiramente com filmes caseiros: *Happy End* (1996) do cineasta austríaco Peter Tscherkassky e o longa-metragem *Private Footage* (2022) da cineasta brasileira Janaina Nagata. Estes filmes fazem parte de um “sintoma” ou movimento contemporâneo que se concentra em revisitar arquivos privados a fim de problematizar a História oficial. Fornecemos, primeiramente, uma breve revisão do estado da arte; num segundo momento, referenciamos o enquadramento teórico e as fontes bibliográficas chave pertinentes à análise. Subsequentemente, realizamos uma análise *ad hoc* de cada filme, empregando uma metodologia qualitativa comparativa entre crítica genética e teoria do cinema. Esta abordagem demonstrará como esses filmes são assombrados por fantasmas, histórias suprimidas e camadas subterrâneas de significado que emergem deste arquivo supostamente “ingênuo” através das operações de montagem. Poderiam esses filmes, situados na interseção entre memória e imaginação, resgatar narrativas negligenciadas e constituir uma forma de “pró-memória”? Mostraremos como esses filmes se aproximam do conceito de inconsciente ótico e imagem dialética de Walter Benjamin e como podem ser vistos como parte do “*mal de arquivo*” conceitualizada por Jacques Derrida. Concluímos argumentando que cada cineasta explora a virtualidade hauntológica ou a parte “silenciosa” do arquivo, utilizando suas potencialidades dialéticas para investigar as “invisibilidades” produzidas pela história colonial e os espectros do fascismo que ecoam no presente. Tscherkassky e Nagata confrontam as “origens” dessas imagens, demonstrando que o passado ainda sobrevive como um não dito, negado e recalçado que pode finalmente vir à tona com o gesto artístico do *détournement*.
cinema experimental | found footage | arquivo | estudos fílmicos | cinema caseiro

Keywords

1.1 Introduction — Found Footage between anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts

In this paper, we examine two contemporary *found footage* films: *Happy End* (1996) by the Austrian experimental filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky and *Private Footage* (2022) by the Brazilian visual artist Janaina Nagata. These works are connected by thematic concerns, including the repurposing of home movies, the use of “found object” fabulations, and critical interrogations of the teleological conception of history inherited from modernity. Both films shift the focus from ontology to a cinematic hauntology, reclaiming home movies — often dismissed as a marginal or naïve genre — as powerful sites for the re-elaboration of memory and historical critique.

Peter Tscherkassky was born in Mistelbach, Austria, in 1958, and began creating his films in 1979, for which he has collectively received over 50 awards. Tscherkassky’s films are characterized by a reappropriation and creative destruction of pre-existing films, including Hollywood classics, westerns, amateur films, horror movies, advertising

campaigns, pornographic films, trailer excerpts or low-budget B-movies. *Happy End* (1996) is one of the first Tscherkassky's films entirely composed of *found footage*. It is a compilation of various short amateur home movies made by an Austrian couple, Elfriede and Rudolf. Tscherkassky uses this material to appropriate and produce a new film.

Private Footage (2022) marks the feature-length debut of Janaína Nagata, a young visual Brazilian artist born in São Paulo, in 1991. According to the opening title cards, the filmmaker recounts how she stumbled upon an original 16mm reel at an online marketplace auction. The only description accompanying the lot was "REEL + PRIVATE FOOTAGE" with no additional information. Nagata, merely looking for a random reel to test an old projector, purchased it out of curiosity. What initially appears to be a simple home movie documenting a family's tourist trip to Africa gradually reveals an eerie, hidden history of South African Apartheid. Using only digital editing tools, Nagata uncovers underlying layers of meaning that emerge from this seemingly innocent private archive.

What brings together both films is the fact that their original footage was "discovered" by chance. Through this analysis, we will explore how these two films engage with the hauntology of images in relation to colonial legacies, fascist projects, intertwined with subjective experiences. We argue that these films contribute to a "pro-memory" dimension of history by exploring how cinema and moving images facilitate an expansion of memory — both collective and subjective — serving as a lens that enables the act of "projecting memory." This projection, undertaken by either the viewer or the filmmaker, extends onto others, spatial contexts, and the present moment.

Hal Foster, in his texts *An Archival Impulse* (2004) and *Archives of Modern Art* (2002), points out that since the late 1960s, there has been a return of artists towards the artwork as an archive. This new field gives rise to the figure of the artist-archivist, a development from the idea of the artist-curator, now driven by an archival impulse. This is a contemporary phenomenon, which Anna Maria Guasch (2013) identifies as another "turn." Just as the *linguistic turn* and the *pictorial turn* emerged, a new *archival turn* would be taking place. Archives, inventories, catalogues, or albums thus emerge as speculative tools, a way to explore an author's poetic language.

Without necessarily appealing to the real or relying on its informative character, many artists use the archive to rewrite or revisit the past, exploring its potential and fictional powers, producing new viewpoints on an event, or even creating "new-false" archives. These artists share an interest in rewriting collective and individual memory, through fissures, noises, and discontinuities of History. Found footage can be considered a manifestation of this broader artistic "phenomena", specifically in experimental cinema.

The theme of trauma, which, according to Gagnebin (2006), has become sadly recurrent in 20th-century literature — particularly, though not exclusively, in the context of the Shoah — is also reflected in many of these cinematic expressions. Reflections on contemporary memory and colonial independence wars, has also fuelled the rise of archival re-elaborations in the fields of visual arts and cinema, including *found footage* cinema, amateur cinema, home movies, and autobiographical films. According to

Roger Odin (2012, 67), the 1980s marked the formation of the International Association Inédits, bringing together those interested in family films as documents. Similarly, the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) introduced the topic of amateur film as a document in two of its conferences (in 1984 and 1988) and dedicated an issue of its journal to this subject. Home movies are thus becoming an area of growing interest among researchers and filmmakers worldwide.

This trauma relation is also elaborated in Hal Foster (2014, 46) in which the author develops a temporal analytical framework that will serve as a useful model for understanding contemporary artistic landscape. Foster employs a temporal model from psychoanalytic thought to support his thesis on the neo-avant-gardes. For the art historian, art can be analysed through Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), a psychic event fundamental to the constitution of subjectivity, which occurs through the alternation and repetition of traumatic experiences. According to Freud — especially when interpreted through Lacan — at least two traumas are necessary for an event to be truly registered: one event is only recognized through another that deciphers it. In this sense, the historical avant-garde of the 1920s and the neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s function in a similar way, as a continuous process of protension and retention, oscillating between anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts. In short, they constitute an effect of *Nachträglichkeit* that rejects any simple, linear, and causal scheme.

An avant-garde work is never fully meaningful at the time of its emergence, as it represents “a rupture in the order of the symbolic”—a *troumatisme* (a term that plays on the French *trou* [hole] and the German *Trauer* [mourning]). The history of art, then, should be punctuated by wounds, mourning, or “failures yet to be re-signified.” In this way, the propositions of the historical avant-gardes only fully materialize in the present, through the retroactive reappropriations and reinterpretations of new artists, in this case, the *found footage* films of Tscherkassky and Nagata analysed in this work.

Found footage can also be encompassed within Mark Fisher's “diagnosis” of the capitalist realism era. In his essays, Mark Fisher (2022) empirically observes the rise of a new sensibility that he names “hauntological.” He appropriates the concept developed by Jacques Derrida in the book *Specters of Marx*, which is a neologism combining the French words *hanter* (to haunt) and *ontologie* (ontology). This homonymy or homophony is used to refer to the persistence of elements from the past that return in the form of a ghost. These artists focus on how the form of technology materializes memory, creating a fascination with obsolete media, such as television, vinyl records, audio cassettes, photochemical film, old projectors, and the sounds of technology on the brink of breaking and disappearing. This leads to a fixation on materialized memory. For Fisher, hauntology is an endemic feeling of our time of “techno-tele-discursivity” and “techno-tele-iconicity” within the empire of simulacra and synthetic-virtual images. The phenomenon relates to a crisis of space as well as time, when time is “out of joint”.

Another essential reference for archival studies is Derrida's seminal book *Archive Fever* (2001, 12), in which the author traces the etymology of “archive” to the Greek

arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. Historically, archives were housed in the residence of magistrates (*archons*) who not only guarded documents but also interpreted them, wielding authority through their hermeneutic power. For Derrida, *arkhé* embodies a duality: it shelters memory while simultaneously forgetting or concealing it, making the archive both public and private, revolutionary and conservative, depending on its *archontes*.

The classical archive functions as a monument to tradition, affirming the material “positivity” of historical facts. Yet it also contains a “virtual” dimension — discontinuities, erasures, and gaps that enable forgetting and concealment. This paradox positions the archive as a site traversed by power, with gray areas such as classified or confidential materials. There would therefore be an intrinsic force to every archive that would erase the marks and archived traces, a drive that Derrida (2001, 23) names “*anarchivic*” or “*anarchontic*,” the death drive is “*archiviolitic*” where resides a silent and destructive vocation of the archive. The archive would thus encompass a death and self-destructive drive, a silent vocation to burn itself and lead to amnesia. Derrida’s concept of *mal d’archive* highlights the archive’s capacity to simultaneously preserve and erase its meaning. By allowing new interpretations to overwrite crystallized official discourses, the archive can generate new inscriptions or counter-archives.

Archival images do not necessarily have to originate from institutionalized, official archives. There is always a social and economic *dispositive* embedded in any archival imagery. The ability to produce one’s own image was also highly determined by social and economic factors. In the early 20th century, only the highly privileged classes could afford and own a personal camera to document their private daily lives. Thus, home movies can also have an “*archontic*” dimension to them, even though they belong to personal or family archives rather than official repositories. *Found footage* made with home movies, in our view, can embody the dual nature of the archive, as theorized by Derrida: both anarchic and conservative. In our filmic analysis, we will demonstrate how the filmmakers regarded by this study engage with the “virtual” or silent aspects of the private archive, revealing its hidden and counter-narrative dimensions.

This debate will also relate with Walter Benjamin’s essay *On the Concept of History* (2014, 245) in which the author states in the seventh thesis: “*There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.*” Archives, whether institutional or personal, have the tendency to privilege the perspective of the winners while burying the stories of the defeated. These hidden narratives, embedded within the archive’s depths, await revelation — a task both filmmakers undertake in their film work.

Before expanding on the filmic analysis, the subsequent chapter will present a brief historical overview of the state-of-the-art debate on *found footage*, along with a literature review. This will demonstrate how various theorists establish a direct lineage between the genre and European avant-garde cinema. We will explore how both filmmakers rely on three essential aspects and gestures that closely resemble, as an ‘echo,’ the

practices of Surrealism and Dadaism: i) the act of “chance” or luck in discovering the materials to work with; ii) the gesture of *détournement* (to use the original French term), that is, the act of displacing a material from its original *locus*, and finally iii) the *praxis* of collage/assemblage, which facilitates the emergence of new meanings and dialectical shocks within the images. We will demonstrate how this avant-garde “return” constitutes the fundamental backbone of these films.

1.2 — The “arrival” of the Found Footage

The history of *found footage* is, in fact, quite long. It is difficult to categorize, as the act of reusing archival images and recontextualizing them into new narratives dates back to Early Cinema¹. In that way, *found footage* is sometimes grouped within various other terminologies, such as: archival film, appropriation film, montage film, compilation film, recycled film, remixing, and so on. It is important to differentiate them, especially when considering the “documentary” aspects of the archive. As we will see, *found footage* filmmakers engage with the virtual, fictitious, and discursive dimensions of the archive, rather than its strictly factual dimension.

One of the first researchers to conceptualize and systematize what archival cinema entails was Jay Leyda (1964) that maps out some films that use historical archives as their raw material, which he calls “compilation films.” Although primarily focusing on classical documentary films, Leyda also recalls that some *avant-garde* experimental films used archival compilation². Leyda identifies a critical principle in the films of this group of “abstract” filmmakers that is close to the “essay film”. Only through the articulations of montage do these filmmakers manage to convey a political and critical stance — such as the issue of hunger, poverty, and social inequality. Thus, Leyda identifies an argumentative rhetorical aspect to these archival images. This, according to Leyda, could make the viewer more attentive to the networks of meanings *within* the images, taking the archive away from its illustrative and documental *facade*.

William C. Wees (1993) will seek to create more differentiations among the Leyda’s approaches to archival cinema. Wees states that one aspect that distinguishes *found footage* filmmakers is the fact that they make the presence of the reused archive evident, inviting us to see these images as recycled, reappropriated, and diverted from their

1 The concept of Early Cinema (films dated from approximately 1895 to 1907) was coined by Tom Gunning in his influential 1986 article, “*The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*.” This concept refers to a mode of cinematic exhibition dominant in early cinema, in which films were less narrative-driven and more focused on visual spectacle and direct engagement with the spectator, akin to Variety Theater and vaudeville.

2 Particularly in Germany, such as Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (1927) and Hans Richter’s *Inflation* (1927)

original function. This would be what distinguishes *found footage* from compilation documentary cinema and remix videos. Wees then differentiates three methodologies or “types” of montage with recycled material, categorized as: i) compilation, ii) collage, and iii) *appropriation*. For Wees *found footage* would be located in the second category, associated with the technique privileged by avant-garde art³

Wees (1993, 42-43) characterizes Collage as “the quintessential art form of the twentieth century,” that will be used as a discursive tool to question the traditional premises of representative nature in the field of fine arts, having been the main modernist weapon to “assault” or challenge verisimilitude. Wees also appropriates the differentiation between Discourse and History, where History implies the absence of a specific narrator — the narrator is an impartial subject, such as a “voice of God,” where events “narrate themselves” — whereas in Discourse, it is possible to identify a narrator with intention and subjectivity, where there is a specific, delineated point of view from an impartial subject who speaks from a specific perspective (Wees 1993, 46). However, often the discourse of *found footage* is subliminal and “camouflaged” in the montage, open to interpretation.

The polysemic nature present in *found footage* films is another crucial point. Jaimie Baron highlights (2013) that archival films often operate through tropes of metalanguage. For Baron (2013, 36-37) by provoking their viewers, these films encourage critical engagement on the veracity of archives and images, which is both challenging and stimulating. This indeterminate openness increases the *artistic coefficient* (Duchamp, 1957) of the film (i.e., it expands the range of possible interpretations), and it is precisely this openness of new potential, imaginary and virtual narratives, that enables the qualitative strength of these works to emerge. It is through the polysemic openness of irony that “phantom” films can emerge in the spectator, thus invoking a “projective memory” or “pro-memory.”

Tom Gunning (2012) also associates *found footage* with the modernist *avant-garde* and connects this genre to Surrealism and Dadaism, specifically Duchamp’s playful *ready mades* and Breton’s practice of the *objet trouvé*. Gunning distinguishes between these two practices, noting that while Surrealists advocated for “magical” coincidences, Dadaists were more cynical. Duchamp’s *ready made*, unlike Breton’s *objet trouvé*, positions itself beyond notions of good or bad taste, directly challenging the very category of “taste”. Gunning positions the films of Peter Tscherkassky within the second tradition of Breton’s “enchanted” surrealism, since his films involve various manual manipulations and embrace montage/collage composition.

Yann Beauvais (2015) states that from the 1970s, *found footage* gained significant traction, becoming one of the most fertile fields in the production of moving images. By 1995, the cinema of appropriation had become the dominant form of experimental

3 More recently, Nicole Brenez and Pip Chodorov (2000) also attempt to “map” the different modalities of image reuse in the history of cinema, culminating in the *found footage* as we know it today. Like William C. Wees, they associate *found footage* with the modernist *avant-garde*.

and art-house cinema, a development driven largely by the advent of cassette tape and video technology, which fueled the hacktivist and remix movements. Despite the existence of film manipulation in analog cinema prior to the digital age, today, the genre of *found footage* encompasses both analog and digital films crafted from archives found on the internet as well as video games, augmented realities, and AI-generated content.

While there are significant material differences between the two filmmakers' practices — Tscherkassky's work is rooted in analog, manual interventions and photochemical methods, whereas Nagata's films employ digital tools and new technologies — we argue that they represent “two sides of the same coin,” offering distinct responses to the same phenomenon of the *Nachtraglichkeit* effect, or the return of the trauma and the “hauntological” phenomena in arts. We argue they are symptomatic of the contemporary: a means of engaging with past ghosts or suppressed collective memories that must be brought to light in the present in order to be inscribed in reality and, ultimately, elaborated. Our goal is to assess the extent to which the two films align with the historical debates surrounding the *found footage* and the critique of “fixed” memories and rigid official historiography.

In the subsequent film analyses, we will explore how the two selected films engage in a dialogue with this ontology of cinema, now framed within the “new” ontology of post-production — or, in other words, a Cinema Hauntology, as opposed to the canonical Cinema Ontology. This hauntological sensibility increasingly converges with cinema's foundational “DNA”: its inherent virtuality and phantasmal powers. This specular film-diptych invites the viewer to approach its images without ever being able to grasp or carry away a definitive “truth” or the “History” about them, except through imaginative engagement, as fantasy or *phasma*. Thus, *Happy End* and *Private Footage* address not only the structural conditions of cinema — specifically montage, which Eisenstein described as the “nervous system” of cinema — but also its ontological conditions, rooted in the presence of an “absent” being.

2.1 — Absent Presence, Between Pain and Pleasure in Peter Tscherkassky's *Happy End*

The filmmaker Lisl Ponger discovered the raw archival material for *Happy End* by chance in a *bric-a-brac* and antiques store and gave it to Tscherkassky as a gift. The original footage of *Happy End* is a compilation of various short amateur home movies made by an Austrian couple, Elfriede and Rudolf. Long before the advent of selfies or VHS home video cameras, the couple filmed themselves in a series of mundane situations: summer vacations, winter holidays, celebrating parties and frequently eating and drinking at their dining room table. Their conjugal life is staged for the camera over approximately 15 years, from 1965 to 1980. These are everyday scenes filled with simple joy, intimacy and a naïve relationship with the camera.



Figure 1 and 2

Still Frame from *Happy End*, © Peter Tscherkassky, SixPackFilms, Austria, 1996.

The “founding” by chance of this original material reveals Tscherkassky is less romantic and mystical than the French surrealists — as Tom Gunning (op.cit) have assumed, aligning more with the disinterested Duchampian encounter with the *ready made*. *Happy End* was born as a random *souvenir* that Tscherkassky received, without any prior intention, almost “accidentally”. To provide a more “dignified” resurrection of the couple, he starts the film with the most recent reel and ends with the oldest, making the couple rejuvenate in the eyes of the viewer. This approach reinforces a melancholic hauntological feeling of a lost innocence, both existential and technical.

The filmmaker chooses to work solely with the footage where the couple is alone around the dining room table, always displaying in the background symbolic objects of small bourgeois pride that are found in traditional family homes worldwide. We see a christmas tree, solid wood furniture with large, embedded mirrors, a cabinet full of glasses, a crystal chandelier, and, of course, the abundance on the table — elements of social class differentiation that confer a certain status to those in front of the camera. Each passing year, the couple enjoys sparkling wines, spritzers, and digestives, with the

table displaying typical Austrian culinary and confectionery delicacies: eggnog paired with the traditional *Sachertorte* (Image 1 and 2).

The camera is positioned in the same configuration: a medium shot on a tripod at the other end of the room. The acts of eating and drinking seem imbued with a sacred aura, a ritualistic practice that is “religiously” repeated over the years. Around the table, the couple waves to the camera on the tripod, laughs, and fills their glasses while looking in its direction — as if toasting in its honor. At one point, the two dance to the camera as if trying to entertain it. Despite apparently having no children, the camera acts as a surrogate third figure, also a family member that, like an offspring, consolidates its dual function of witnessing the family’s existence and ensuring its heritage and memory will endure in the future.

The scenes of joyful toasts are accompanied by a French song that seems to be played on an old, broken record player set at the wrong rotations per minute and in a state of evident deterioration. The song is “*Bonbons Caramel*” (1953) performed by the French singer Annie Cordy. Cordy’s high-pitched, accelerated female voice repeatedly sings the refrain, ‘*bonbons, caramels, esquimaux, chocolats,*’ serving as a meta-commentary on the sweets being aggressively consumed in the scene. The fast rhythms and BPM create a ghostly effect, making it seem as though the voice is emerging from the depths of time. The music subtly hints at something sinister or macabre lurking beneath the surface of those seemingly joyful family images. Additionally, the song contains curious verses that resemble metalinguistic encrypted messages about the nature of cinema itself⁴.

The choice of the soundtrack appears to function as an ironic and sarcastic commentary by the filmmaker. The lyrics of the composition evoke a form of provocation aimed at the audience of classical cinema, who, indifferent to home movies, are compelled to watch the “little films” Tscherkassky has unearthed. These amateur and private family films, initially devoid of historical, narrative, or significant action-based value, would traditionally be deemed “unworthy” of being screened in a grand and opulent cinema hall.

This implicit irony in the montage aligns with the key theories of Wees, Baron, and Gunning, previously cited, regarding the metacritical and ironic self-reflection and the gesture of *détournement* inherited from Surrealism and Dadaism. Such works subtly critique the historiography of art itself in the same way as Duchamp’s *ready mades*. Tscherkassky’s film seems to comment on how classical cinema has “submerged” non-narrative films from the canonized flow of film history, repressing any work that

4 “*Si bien qu’à la fin de l’entracte / Le public manifestait / indifférente au spectacle/ toute la salle réclamait (...) / la voilà propriétaire/ d’un magnifique cinéma / pour faire marcher les affaires/ tous les jours elle remet ça*.” “So much so that by the end of the interval / The audience showed / Indifference to the show / The whole room complained(...) / There she is, the owner / Of a magnificent cinema / To keep the business on / Every day she gets them running again.” My translation. (Lyrics by Noël Roux, music by Edward Chekler, Marcel Dubel. Source: *Sony Music*, 1953).

deviated from the hegemonic forms of fictional narrative/storytelling and Hollywood's spectacular representational regime.

The materiality of the music also evokes the hauntological sensibility conceptualized by Mark Fisher (2012). The primary hauntological signature in the use of sound would be the crackle of the vinyl needle. For Fisher, the crackle gives us the idea or perception that we are hearing, in Hamlet's words, a time that is "out of joint." The physical record of the sound reverses the repression of the "re" contained in the word "record" — it unveils the fact of being a reproduction and no longer allows us to fall into the illusion of presence. It is, in effect, the record of an absence, indeed an absent presence (or in Latin, *ab-sens*), away from or outside the subject. The worn materiality of the medium reaffirms its technical nature, emphasizing that what we hear is merely a recording produced by a specific and dated reproduction system, reinforcing the ontology associated with a ghost of someone no longer there.

Along the film, we see a subtle flicker of the images caused by the 35mm projector giving the image a slight tremor, reinforcing the lack of solidity of the forms and highlighting the diaphanous nature of these two ectoplasmic beings. *Happy End* highlights the spectral foundation of cinema — its phantasmagoric essence or fundamental mirror-like structure. The film becomes a harbinger of three impending disappearances: (i) the materiality of film itself, as celluloid faces extinction under the hegemony of digital imagery; (ii) the end of home movies and amateur films, destined to be forgotten and overshadowed by the Grand Narratives of official history; and (iii) the physical, material, and corporeal disappearance of Elfriede and Rudolf.

Around halfway through the film, the atmospheric tone undergoes a noticeable shift, marking a transition in mood and narrative rhythm. When the husband moves behind the device and starts manipulating the optical zoom, we see the woman through the man's eyes or, more precisely, through the male gaze. Tscherkassky revisits the images from another point of view, now a closer one. By superimposing two layers of film, one bluish and one more reddish, creating a double exposure, by doing a collage of both images together, the filmmaker reinforces his own visual writing or personal discourse of view of the footage. From this point on, a metamorphosis occurs, and the comedic suddenly takes on tragic contours, subverting bourgeois good taste for grotesque *dis-gusto*/disgust aesthetics⁵. The musical melody in the background deteriorates into an unsettling noise, a symphony of sounds that replaces the picturesque French song with another track of a rather suggestive title: *Requiem Aeternam* by Michel Chion (1973).

The woman begins to lose her luster, and we notice her eyes becoming serious. The staged joy starts to unravel, and the smile appears strange, artificial, mechanical. In a

⁵ The grotesque can be characterized as the inverted sublime, a kind of catastrophe of taste, that produces disgust (*dis-gusto* in Italian, disgust in English), a distortion of good taste or an "anti-taste", in other words, the scandal of form that produces laughter, even if a nervous and critical laughter (Sodré and Paiva 2002, 26-27).



Figure 3 and 4

Still Frame from *Happy End*, © Peter Tscherkassky,
SixPackFilms, Austria, 1996.

moment, we realize something that was evident but not yet fully processed in the conscious mind: they are dead. It is precisely at this moment in the film that the realization of the temporal paradox between past and present evokes the Barthesian shock, affecting us emotionally as a filmic *punctum* (Barthes, 1984). This delivers the unsettling, intuitive perception that we are witnessing a necromantic ritual. The thought that assails us is: the eyes of a dead woman are staring at us. A slight shiver runs down our spine.

Through double projections — made by means of optical printing — the bourgeois house slowly transforms into a haunted house or a “ghost house” (Horwath and Loebenstein, 2005, op. cit.). These doubles, the shadow of what they once were, return as evanescent “intruders” appearing uninvited to the party, creating a multitude of spectres. The viewer also finds themselves as an intruding gaze, scrutinizing the intimacy of personal archives never intended for public view. The blow-up from 8mm to 35mm can also be interpreted as a violence committed against the original film, as the extreme close-up brings out the “erogenous zones” of the filmstrip, evoking tactile senses of the image,

where we see the silver grains become “dancing bodies.” In the words of Matthew Levine (2018), the silver grains dance with the couple in a kind of macabre ball of the undead.

In the repetition of certain scenes, we notice new layers of significance. The super-imposed images emphasize the “hidden” erotic gestures within the footage. Hands manipulate phallic forms of bottles, cut slices of cream-filled cake, which are voluptuously thrust into mouths in large pieces. As the narrative progresses, Tscherkassky creates an indistinguishable mix of forms, producing a copulation between images including, as the director mentions in interviews, a subtle insertion of a sex tape of the couple in this section⁶. The more the images become indistinguishable and closer to blurs, the more the film gains erotic connotations.

Walter Benjamin (2014) examines the unique technical features of cinema, such as the wide shot, the close-up, and slow motion. The nature that speaks to the camera is fundamentally different from that which speaks to the eye. Benjamin establishes a parallel between the camera, the psychic apparatus and the instinctual unconscious as uncovered by Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud proposed a key analogy to explain the drive-based unconscious in *A Note Upon the “Mystic Writing-Pad”* (1924). In this essay he uses a simple toy or device as a metaphor. In this model, memory (*mneme* or *anamnesis*, constituting spontaneous or living memory) inscribes itself onto a sensitive surface, generating an impression or imprint (*hypomnema*, the act of remembering), which may or may not be “revealed.” In clinical practice, the psychoanalyst’s task is to bring these repressed images to light, much like a film laboratory technician developing a negative into a positive image on photosensitive emulsion. This analogy anticipates the dual movement of the psychic apparatus — simultaneously erasing and preserving memory.

The camera, Benjamin suggests, possesses also the ability to reveal an optical unconscious — one that is no longer individual and singular, but instead reflects the repressed symptoms of desires and traumas of the collective sphere. In this turning point of Tscherkassky’s film, as it gradually becomes more abstract, it is as though we witness the return of the repressed unconscious, emerging ‘to light’ and inscribing itself literally on the surface of these images. Something that was previously suppressed by morality and decorum finally surfaces through the optical unconscious of the film.

Following the imagistic “mating” dance, Tscherkassky ultimately invokes an act of “reproduction,” generating the child the couple never had, birthing a posthumous and profane film-child. Images of small porcelain dolls float above their heads like hauntings — prefiguration of the absent child they never conceived. As Matthew Levine (2018, p.11) recalls, the couple might also be a surrogate double for the filmmaker’s parents’ generation. In *Happy End*, it is as if Tscherkassky, the “*enfant terrible*”, compels the couple to enact another optical “unconscious” desire: Freud’s *Urphantasie* — the primal trauma or

6 Tscherkassky official website: <http://www.tscherkassky.at/> and Happy-EndEN.html. Accessed: 1st July, 2024.

forbidden scene, the taboo fantasized by every child in their quest to uncover the mystery of their origins: the parents' sexual intercourse. Thus, he celebrates and reenacts the *cliché* of the fairy tale, the ending desired by the narrative of the classical cinema audience: they married, had children, and lived happily ever after — *voilà*, happy end!

Tscherkassky's film images also resonate with the imaginary of other cultural manifestation, rather than that of Hollywood happy endings. We could also relate it to the Viennese Actionists the second generation of the Austrian avant-garde — whom Tscherkassky honoured in his career and influenced his early work. In a way, we could say *Happy End* represents the other side of the same coin as the Viennese Actionists in a filmic form. The generation of Elfriede and Rudolf was precisely the type and social stratum that the Actionists sought to shock and horrify: a wealthy and "well-behaved" middle class living within the normative *status quo* yet hiding their perversities. As the actionist Gunter Brus would state: "Hitler's Nazism, despite being a taboo and 'repressed' subject in everyday life, was still deeply rooted in the spirit of the Austrian people, embedded in every element of Viennese life, and tenaciously maintained by its inhabitants" (Brus *apud* Barber 2020, 25)

While watching the film, as historically informed viewers, we are confronted with another unsettling and suppressed question: What were Elfriede and Rudolf doing during the Second World War? This omission prompts us viewers to construct a 'pro-memory,' or projective memory, inviting us to imagine a virtual 'ghost' playing on the backscreen or in the 'background' of Tscherkassky's film. Could the young Elfriede and Rudolf have been celebrating with their family, clapping cheerfully (as they do in *Happy End*) within sight of the *Führer*? On the other hand, could they have been opposed to National Socialist ideology? The image of a steady, happy family, maintained for all those years, appears, to viewers, upon closer inspection, to be phony or merely a facade. In this case, the image serves not to show, but to conceal, functioning as a surface that obscures something else. As if, by 'erasing' this dark episode in Austrian history or family memory in these private images, the horrors of the Shoah could be erased, and the Austrian people's complicity in supporting Hitler could remain unspoken and unaccounted for. The image, as History, seems to return as a farce.

At the end of the film, Elfriede dances, twirling several times while laughing at the camera, with a smile that, for us as a spectator, no longer seems innocent. Here, a self-reflexive fold of the image reappears. The woman-image becomes aware of her spectral condition and, in despair, realizes she will be eternally trapped in these nauseating images — as an indication that the past and history persistently repeat themselves, and as trauma operates through reification and redundancy, repetition and difference. The film ends with her frozen effigy, her cold eyes staring at us from the other side of the screen. In Tscherkassky's (2005, 148) words, Elfriede's ambivalent smile lies "between pain and pleasure".

2.2 — To hear the silent voices of the archives — Nagata's Private Footage

In the opening credits, Nagata emphasizes that the only alteration made to the private footage was the addition of a new soundtrack — an atmospheric piece devoid of a melodic line — while maintaining the original montage of the footage she found in its entirety. Following the opening credits, the audience is presented with a 19-minute amateur home movie. The footage captures records of a family on vacation: a mother, father, and their roughly seven-year-old daughter enjoying a safari. Wild animals, including giraffes, elephants, and lions, unexpectedly emerge from the dry bush in front of their vehicle. Like any typical family, they pose for photos at scenic overlooks with views of the sea, as well as at tourist landmarks and alongside “exotic” local attractions.

The family is also shown attending an elegant party, where young people lounge by a pool on a sunny day. Certain details — what Roland Barthes (1984) might describe as *studium* — can be intuitively inferred from the footage. The family appears to be in Africa and seems to be affluent, consistently dressed in fine clothing, chauffeured in a Mercedes-Benz by a formally dressed driver. Yet, beyond these superficial observations, the film offers no clues that might reveal the identities of these individuals.



Figure 5 and 6
Still Frames from Private Footage,
© Janaina Nagata, Brazil, 2022.

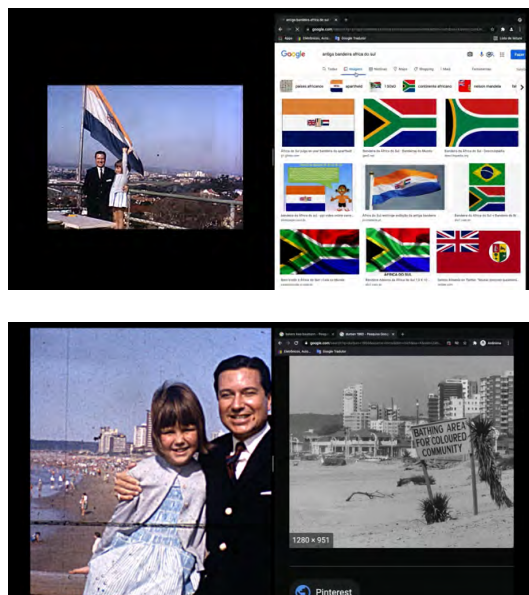


Figure 7 and 8
Still Frame from *Private Footage*, © Janaina Nagata,
Brazil, 2022.

Curiously, the opening argument of Nagata's encounter by chance with the material resembled Ken Jacobs's fortuitous encounter with his famous *Perfect Film* (1986), one of the most iconic films of the North American experimental found footage film. Ken Jacobs allegedly discovered a 16mm film cartridge in a trash can on Canal Street. To his surprise, the reel contained already-developed footage. Upon closer inspection, he realized it was raw, unedited material from a journalistic scoop covering the assassination of Malcolm X. The footage consisted of interview fragments discarded by the television network, which had somehow ended up in Jacobs's possession.

Jacobs believed the testimonies captured in this historical moment were so invaluable that the footage should remain untouched, treated as a relic, as a counter-monument. He concluded that merely re-screening the images through the lens of the present would suffice to convey their significance. They would reveal the structural racism contained in the original material and how the official narrative of Malcolm X murder was fabricated by corporate media, obliterating testimonies that were not of interest to the TV broadcast Channel narrative at that time. *Perfect Film* implicitly critiques the fact that every official version of history is the product of editing, or a selective montage, and that the public will never have access to all the testimonies or perspectives surrounding a historical event.

The similarity with Jacobs' film makes us question whether Nagata's 'encounter' was truly real, or if it serves as a meta or self-referential allusion to *found footage* experimental cinema history — a playful jab at cinephile culture. The randomness of the encounter with the material could also be a storytelling tool for inducing curiosity and grasping the interest of the public, creating an atmosphere of a thriller. Why has this mysterious batch/reel been secretly "hidden" from the public eye? What secrets does it contain?

The same invocation of Jacobs's concept of destiny and the ethical imperative to uncover what is perversely hidden is also present in *Private Footage*. Nagata never directly or manually alters the original footage, as if working with a piece of history itself — one that demands respect. Ultimately, she treats it as a monument or an *arkheion* dimension. After presenting the footage in its entirety, Nagata then repeats it with a second glance, now with a detailed detective gaze. Through a diptych, as in the Kuleshov method, she exhibits the original film alongside a second screen, where she adds new meanings to the original images searching for traces of forgotten stories. With the help of facial recognition tools, such as Pim Eyes, Google Glass, Youtube and Wikipedia, by slowing down, pausing and observing the images frame by frame, she excavates, like an archaeologist, subterranean layers of meaning that emerge from this supposedly innocent amateur archive, that are inadvertent at a first glance.

Purely through digital montage tools, we then follow for the rest of the narrative Nagata's forensic investigation "live" on the editing table (although prepared with previous pre-established script in which she enacts once again her spontaneous investigation) Nagata acts like the hunters on safari in the Kruger National Park opening scenes. Faced with exotic animals/imagery that suddenly jump in front of her (in parallel to the act/gesture of the hunter that tries to capture its prey), the editor-director beholds herself with a counter-story that slowly emerges in-between the lines of the *image-écriture*, where she tries to capture.

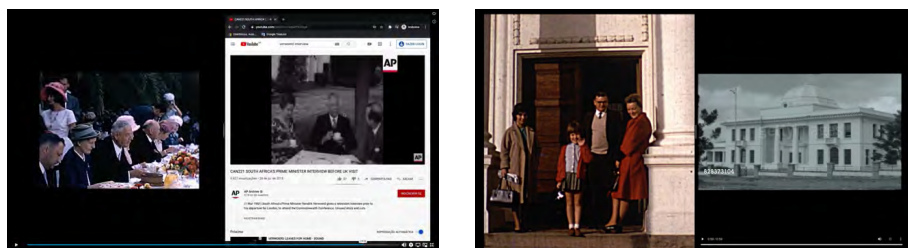


Figure 9 and 10

Still Frame from *Private Footage*, © Janaina Nagata, Brazil, 2022.

Nagata then uncovers new meanings that emerge from this seemingly private archive. A bucolic scene at the beach reveals, to our astonishment, a segregated space. An important detail, only noticeable upon a second viewing of the archive: we perceive the strangeness of a beach in Africa, filled exclusively with white people. When pausing a frame where the girl and her father are on a building's terrace, Nagata identifies — using Google Lens — the flag the child is holding, which the father proudly shows to the camera: it is the flag of South Africa during the Apartheid era. In another scene, we see a happy family on the balcony of a building with “Southern” American-style architecture, characterized by imposing Neoclassical Greco-Roman columns. Nagata discovers — using Google Street View tools — that the building was a meeting place for pro-apartheid colonists, and it would later become the Nelson Mandela Museum in Durban, now a symbol of the fight against racial segregation.

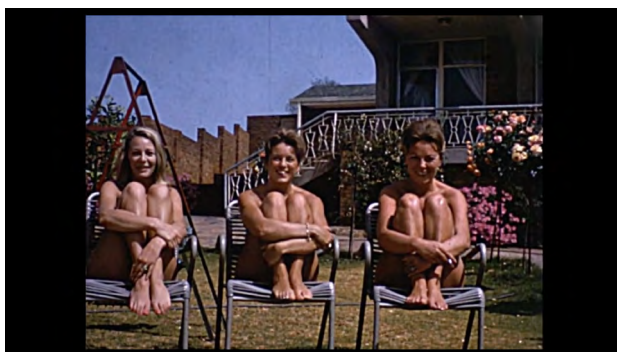


Figure 11 and 12

Still Frame from *Private Footage*, © Janaina Nagata, Brazil, 2022.

In interviews, Nagata claims that by pausing and carefully analyzing the material, she was able to perceive the perversity embedded in the original footage's editing. Racism is literally found in the interstices or in the *raccords* of the images⁷:

In the original, there are visible cuts in the physical film itself, made with tape, and I observe how the editing was already intentional, always conveying something. This becomes obvious when, as a group of Black people is filmed walking towards the camera, there is a sudden cut to a shot of sheep. I find this part very strong and feel deeply disturbed when I see it (Nagata, 2022)⁸.

Nagata also explores the institutional and *arkherontic* barriers that, as Derrida observes, block access to archives. In various situations, in order to obtain more information about an image, she finds herself confronted with obstacles such as credit card payment, different languages, and the failure to recognize the face of a key figure in the history of the film. We are gradually led to realize that this happy family is part of a supremacist elite, probably a family of settlers who proudly support and benefited from the apartheid racial policies in South Africa, with network connections including the Prime Minister Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd. The infamous architect of South African Apartheid, who believed vividly in eugenics and the white supremacy, is spotted in the footage in the fancy party in which the family was invited and engaged with. The nostalgic footage of small blonde cute children and beautiful smiling women by the pool we see during the movie, and elegant women in their English style summer hats, at a second glimpse, start to give us goosebumps and appear as diabolical figures.

In Nagata's film, we can effectively see how the filmmaker operates with this anarchic force hidden inside the archive. She symbolically erases Verwoerd's memory through the excess, repeatedly reproducing the news coverage of his attempted murder and death on YouTube. She chooses to conclude the film with a burnt frame that obliterates and deforms the face of the architect of Apartheid, set to the song *Beware, Verwoerd* (1965) performed by Miriam Makeba, one of the leading voices of South Africa's resistance to Apartheid. Through a discursive gesture conveyed exclusively through editing, the director crafts a silent voice that speaks through the dialectical tension between shots, creating a counter-archive that issues a political plea for racism to be definitively eradicated and buried.

7 Other images she encounters by chance also provoke discomfort in the audience, such as the scenes in which a white Italian family 'adopts' a black South African child and gives her a new haircut, in a clear example of epistemicide and colonial tourism. Another unsettling moment is the discovery of a black shaman who collaborated with the white settlers and was reportedly Verwoerd's 'favorite' personal witchcraft practitioner.

8 For more, see the interview with Gabriel Bravo de Lima on the Cineset website. Available at: <https://www.cineset.com.br/entrevista-janaina-nagata-filme-particular/> (published on June 8, 2022). Accessed: 1st July, 2024.



Figure 13

Still Frame from *Private Footage*, © Janaina Nagata, Brazil, 2022.

Returning to the theme of trauma, in the essay *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) Freud elaborates a topological metaphor, likening the unconscious to the city of Rome. Rome is not merely a human dwelling but a psychic entity, constructed upon successive layers of buried temporal strata. The past is never entirely erased but persists as a residual presence. Trauma, in this sense, functions as a repressed “remainder” that may resurface, particularly in dreams, where the unconscious seeks to rework it. The traumatized individual recalls and processes the traumatic experience in fragmented, molecularized pieces, attempting to mitigate its pain. The psychoanalyst, in turn, assumes the role of an archaeologist, aiding the analysand in excavating and uncovering these ruins and traces through the interpretation and elaboration of dreams in conscious life — bringing them to light and inscribing them into reality.

By “bringing to light” the collective trauma through the optical unconscious of these familial archives and by visually exploring the anarchival blind spots — in Derrida’s terms — Nagata navigates the erasures and gaps embedded in the “digital *Arkhé*,” illuminating the invisible narratives that inhabit this familial archive. This process allows for the emergence, finally, of a dialectical image.

3. Conclusion

Both films operate exclusively through montage, reworking archival images from the perspective of Discourse rather than History, as elaborated by William C. Wees (op. cit). While Tscherkassky's film suggests a counter-history embedded in the irony of its images — one that may (or may not) be activated by the viewer, depending on their projective imagination and interpretative dispositions — its meaning remains open to a broad spectrum of interpretations. In contrast, Nagata's work guides interpretation in a more explicitly subjective manner, more clearly shaped and delineated by Discourse. Her authorial position and intended political meaning are more readily identifiable, leaving less ambiguity in how the film is to be understood.

Although both filmmakers engage with the avant-garde gesture of *détournement*, Tscherkassky and Nagata differ in their approaches: the former adopts an iconoclastic stance, while the latter embraces an iconophile one. By making minimal, almost imperceptible interventions in the original material, Nagata treats the *found footage* as a relic, a monument or a perfect *objet trouvé*. In this sense, her rhetoric as an artist seems more aligned with the notion of a supposedly “mystical” Surrealist capacity — rooted in Bretonian thought — where the object is believed to speak for itself, revealing its hidden meanings through a magical coincidence of destiny. It is as if the material did not arrive in her hands by chance but instead “chose” her to uncover its mysteries for imperative reasons.

This distinct approach to the finding of the material sets Nagata's work apart from Tscherkassky's. The Austrian filmmaker did not intend to elevate the copy to the status of an untouchable relic; instead, he treated it as it truly is, a disposable object, a by-product of the excess and waste inherent in capitalist society. Tscherkassky finding of the material does not seem imbued with an enchanting, magical aura or a surreptitious desire rendered visible in the moment of the encounter. He adopts a more cynical Duchampian *ready made* approach.

We can therefore conclude that both Tscherkassky and Nagata acted under this untimely anarchic gesture that could dangerously erase or destroy the original archive, but at the same time, paradoxically, give it a new rebirth. Nagata's and Tscherkassky's *détournement* gestures, though employing different techniques — one analog, the other digital — produce a desacralization of private archives, where the conquered can speak, even in silence or through imagination. In doing so, they bring forth historical debts and debates that still demand collective reckoning and integration into the social fabric.

The images of Tscherkassky and Nagata emerge and submerge in the present as a way of witnessing the shock of a memory or collective trauma refusing to submit or return to the original past and remain stagnant in time. They are images that will always be transhistorical objects, images from the past that return to the present in a critical, self-reflexive, and historicized manner. It is not by chance that Nagata is doing her film right after the epitome of Black Lives Matter protests flooded U.S streets and global

news, during the last two years of a global pandemic of COVID-19. In the face of danger Nagata explores the virtuality, the dark part of the archive, using its dialectical powers to investigate history as a Benjaminian Historian.

The dialectical image, according to Benjamin, necessarily embodies two simultaneous characteristics: ambiguity and critique. It is ambiguous because it asserts certain aesthetic choices but dissociates itself from any clear and distinct synthesis, from all reconciling teleology. Benjamin critiques modernity for promoting the forgetting of the aura (as it magnetizes towards progress) while invoking memory, yet he also critiques archaism. In other words, the nostalgia for the aura, through acts of modern invention, substitution, and essential designification (Didi-Huberman 2015, 275). The dialectical images of Tscherkassky and Nagata appeal to a ‘Once upon a time’ of time. Confronted with the origins of these images, we understand that the past represented in this film has receded but still survives in contemporary forms of racism and xenophobia, as unspoken, denied, and repressed as something that “was left behind in the past”.

By uncovering the optical unconscious embedded within these two familiars found footage archives and visually probing their archival blind spots, these filmmakers navigate the erasures, gaps, and lacunae within the “digital *Arkhé*.” In doing so, they illuminate the invisible narratives that both inhabit and are concealed within the family archive, ultimately allowing a dialectical image to emerge. They reveal, in conclusion, another ‘stream’ of history to surface, emerging from the underground spectral margin — the aquifer that flows invisibly in the subterranean depths of cinema’s canonical history.

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