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Borders Cuts Images

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Borders Cuts Images

edited by

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The aesthetics of cut in found footage film

The case of Decasia by Bill Morrison

Sonia Colavita

Found footage film and its aesthetics

Found footage, in the cinematographic context, is a term used to describe films made partially or entirely with existing footage, subsequently reassembled in a new context. It's a recycling practice linked to the idea of ready-made art. There is a variety of ways and strategies that filmmakers have followed to recycling found footage, but montage/collage seems the most effective because it exposes the footage to a lot of social implications and the interpretation of these works is more critical than their original makers conceived. If we divide the aesthetics of montage into three levels as a compilation, collage, and appropriation, it is precisely collage that has the great potential to challenge and subvert the power of images produced and distributed through the corporate media. Incorporating different materials found in compliance with principles of coherence and organizational unity, the collage expresses referentiality that leads to the substitution of meaning, the objects to imitate, with a new set of signifiers that draw attention to themselves as real objects in the real world (Wees 1993). For this reason, this procedure is the filmic equivalent of a Duchamp ready-made, because it can be anything a filmmaker artist finds and decides to show in the form he or she found it.

Two forms of found footage film production can be outlined: a diachronic and a synchronic perspective (Brenez 2002). But starting from the 60s to the 80s, found footage became a central element of experimental cinema, eventually becoming an independent genre that broke the tradition with classic structural cinema. This type of 'new' cinema loses its distinctive ontological criteria, in a tendency towards hybridization between different media, prompting a new interpretation through an archaeological practice, capable of reconstructing an unconventional history of the medium,

privileging its forgotten aspects and discontinuities (Mariani, Fidotta 2018). These avant-garde works catalyze attention on the social function of art and the media not only concerning the search for the new but also and above all for how a form of hybridization of languages is proposed. Found footage has become a way that allowed the filmmaker artist to maintain a link with the avant-garde tradition, the love for classic cinema and for the film as perishable material and with the recognition of the preciousness of the archive as an infinite catalog to source from. This practice creates a moving meditation on the question of meaning without order. The content of the original footage is recognizable, but its visual impact depends on the filmmaker's reworking. Thus, there is a moving of intention: from a taking to an overturning. Found footage has a meaning close to the film-collage and editing itself because it rises when there is the need for a secondary elaboration, it is made by selection and collage, so we literally cut something. The artist tears pieces out of context or picks them out of the cultural heritage. Thus, found footage film differs from other experimental films properly for the fact that it doesn't work on staging or composition, but only on montage, therefore, in fact, on cutting. By being interrupted, these cultural fragments expose their ideological functions and encourage the viewer to see it differently and think about it more critically not only for how they can serve for the film and how they now appear, but also because they reveal their original function when they first appeared (Wees 1993).

Speaking in a modernist approach, this type of found footage film normally has a free and open story, due to a non-ordered space and this means that a lot of interpretations are possible; a rejection of causal rigidity, because there is an apparent absence of connection between scenes; finally, the presence of metalinguistic elements like iconology, symbology and archetypes creates associations that produce narrative continuity. The images come from a variety of sources and are juxtaposed in montage constructions that invest them with new or previously unrecognized implications. In this case, cut makes an interruption and this is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving. By cutting we can take the material of the reality and manipulate it to reveal its power to communicate and shape another reality; explore actions through which it's possible to create stories; make the familiar unfamiliar and instilling in the viewer the opportunity to comprehend and distinguish a new reality. There

are two ways in which interruption serves as a form-giving device, both emphasize the constructive end of the process, the act of putting pieces together. The first one is extrinsic to the films themselves and this involves finding the materials as fragments: what is interrupted is inside the sense and the context in which the materials normally exist and in which they seem perfectly 'natural'. The second one is intrinsic to filmic collage: the most obvious method of intrinsic interruption is the juxtaposition of shots with no apparent relationship between them.

The role of the archive in a post-digital approach

'Old' media such as painting and drawing had the claim to be autonomous, their specificity occurred precisely in their essence, they were engaged by everything that was outside their frames. From the end of the 1960s, however, deconstructivism began to attack the aesthetic autonomy ensured by the frame. Derrida built many of his demonstrations on the idea of an 'interior' of the work as opposed to its context, but deconstruction has instead dismantled the idea of the 'self', the abstraction from all other things that are not proper to the artwork. But the film apparatus is by its nature aggregative, a question of layered and simultaneous levels. Thus, the separate work of art loses what Benjamin called 'aura' as well as the specificity of its medium. In this way, postmodernity is configured as the total saturation of the cultural space of the image with a permeation of social life, so that even the aesthetic experience has expanded and made the notion of an individual work of art problematic and reductive (Youngblood 1970). This postmodernist attitude has prompted many artists to try their hand at intermediate work, where art is an accomplice to globalization (Krauss 1999). The advent of digital has radically changed cinema, its characteristics, and all the procedures for its creation.

The media of the 1800s and 1900s entered a crisis, pushing us into a post-media condition, because the balance between the social pervasiveness and the individuality of media devices has been broken, leading to a convergence of such media on digital platforms. This new condition, therefore, allows us to consider the forms of 'relocation' of cinema within new contexts, pushing cinema to re-read its past by entering the field of media archeology. Cinema has freed itself from the theoretical confines of the screen, becoming a rhizomatic and intertextual

structure (Eugeni 2015). Recycling archival footage becomes a methodology that can be placed in the synthesis of four paradigms: the historiographical process, the reconsideration of a primitive cinema, awareness of the content, the ideological and stylistic value of images and, finally, the interest in the aesthetic and anthropological possibilities of reuse of the archive. There is therefore a new experience with the document, because the archive is no longer conceived as a neutral deposit, but intends to broaden the spectrum of the visible, constituting itself as a treasure chest of common memories and stories (Baron 2012). By integrating the archival footage through films in the contemporary era, we place ourselves in a post-digital perspective. Indeed, in post-digital culture, an old medium may be used, according to procedures linked to new media, precisely with the purpose of remediation or re-enactment (Bolter, Grusin 1999; Pierson 2009). The result of this deep interaction is an experience in which the two heterogeneous systems (old and new media) can be no longer split: this fusion becomes the key to interpret our present (Manovich 2011, 39-45; Fickers, van den Oever 2013, 272-278). Thus, the innovation starts properly from an ideal cut which is outdated. Post-digital culture is the awareness that digitality does not simply transform everything into a virtual dimension, but it is matched with which is material, spatial, urban, and human (Balzola 2010, 7-19).

An analog and a digital system can be combined to create experimental products, to satisfy our eyes and feed our nostalgia and "this hybridity of practices becomes one perspective to the so-called digital turn" (Catanese, Parikka 2018). Also, these new creations do not have great opportunities for distribution, because they need spaces and modalities different from traditional ones (De Rosa, Hediger 2016). These works are innovative in terms of aesthetics and fruition, so it is necessary to analyze their hidden expressive potential because they do not belong to a market dominated only by audience ratings. This means that the analog system is not only a precursor destined to co-exist with the digital world, but it should be considered for its development and historicity. This directly demonstrates that analog technologies could offer many possibilities today, emphasizing and celebrating its vividness instead of falling into obsolescence (Knowles, Beugnet 2013, 54-65). Indeed, obsolescence is a theme very dear to these artistic products. Krauss stated that when a form falls into obsolescence, an evocation of the utopian ideals that the form held in promise at its

advent re-emerge, freed from the technological cell we're in (Krauss 1999). The blazing speed of technological advances has increased exponentially, similarly planned obsolescence is a daily experience in the 21st century that constantly overwhelms consciousness. Outdated technologies become very precise indicators of specific periods, down to the minute level of our memories. In this perspective, obsolescence, one of the main drivers of this contemporary anxiety, can be considered an act of reinventing the medium.

These nostalgic tendencies are more than a useless artistic melancholy, but the attention to obsolete technologies constitutes an effort to recreate a reference temporal place. Nostalgia manifests itself in the visual arts through forms created and framed by the aesthetics of a given technology that was available at a specific point in time. A work, therefore, that employs obsolete technology will evoke associations with the time within which it was relevant. The technology is freed from its function as a device to stimulate consumption and can be used to demonstrate a site of resistance. This means that old and analog technologies made by materiality can interact with digitality in the 21st century and these two worlds can create new experiences and reinvent the redemptive possibilities within the technological support itself. The materiality of the cinematographic medium can be traced to the role of the film strip, which is the film object par excellence and which was a vehicle for experimentation during the avant-garde, erasing cinematic conventions by exploring the medium with its properties and materials, detaching itself from the classical narrative and creating its history. Avant-garde filmmakers followed the idea of ephemeral and 'de-materialized' artworks, the reduction of the art object to the essential physical or material components of its medium into a reconsideration of the dictates of modernism in the arts. According to this analysis, the films of Andy Warhol, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Ken Jacobs, and many others are all fundamental examples of the material parameters of the medium (Hanhardt 1977).

Thus, we can consider that post-digital art seems to want to represent the transcendence of materiality, as an experience that goes beyond what is sensitive, because of the progressive dematerialization of the cinema screen and the film strip (due to its natural deterioration and the digital

switchover). The emerging trend, in a completely digitalized world, is a return and an attachment to what is still totally physical and material. This means that behind a modern and technological medium an ancient one exists. Thus, post-digital attempts are made to return to a human approach, to something that can be touched. This shows that there is a reaction to an era in which everything is labeled as digital. The word 'digital' derives from the same source of the word 'digit', from the Latin *digitus*, which means 'finger', so this concept refers to something physical like the use of the ten fingers of our hands (Alexenberg 2011, 31). We are in a multiform era, where different realities meet and easily create hybrid products. These products have something that is linked to the past, which often coincides with physical devices, but they also have a contemporary part that today relates to the virtual world. This demonstrates that it is possible to create something new, starting from the ruins of the past, through an analytical approach to film analysis. Specifically, analyzing the stylistic, semiotic, and iconological aspects, decomposing the elements of the pheno-text, and reading the subtext, to go beyond what is immediately visible. The configuration of moving images can be studied together with their operative aspects to provide an aesthetic experience or to produce knowledge. It is also possible to examine how the moving image relates to other elements of its configuration.



1 | Boxer frame from *Decasia* (2002) directed by Bill Morrison.

Framing practices in *Decasia* by Bill Morrison

Decasia is a case study that well represents the reflections described so far. It is among the most important and well-known works by experimental artist and filmmaker Bill Morrison. It was chosen by the Library of Congress in the National Film Registry as a film worthy of being preserved for its high cultural, historical, and aesthetic value. Bill Morrison began *Decasia* at the very end of the 20th century, in September 1999, and finished it in the first years of the 21st century, in May 2002. It took a year for the research of the material and two years for editing and it was made entirely on analog film. Bill Morrison spent many hours in the archive at the Museum of Modern Art, at the Library of Congress, and George Eastman House, always looking for particularly exemplary films from the point of view of decay. The decaying nitrate strips were first re-photographed into new master copies, in this way the decay was frozen as an image and the director concretely took a picture of decay, thus placing itself in line of continuity with experimental and self-referential modernist practices. In this regard, for the research of my master's degree thesis, I

had the pleasure of personally interviewing the artist who confirms as follows the procedure with which he worked for the creation of his film:

The film was made entirely on film. For every shot I acquired, I optically printed a new negative, and this was eventually cut into the master negative of the film. It was this moment, at which the decaying nitrate strips were first re-photographed into new master copies, that the decay was frozen as an image. If you were to digitally scan the same source material today, it would look very different. I took a picture of decay. Sometimes I took a picture of a picture of decay. The decay seen in those images continues, and in some cases, those films no longer exist (Colavita 2019).

Morrison is interested in manipulating the material component of the film to create new stories so that the images are reformulated as part of collective mythology. His approach demonstrates that we are not speaking only of the meaning of the contents of what is visible, but also of the material-support that allows its use. The strip of the film itself becomes the principal object of interest. Morrison's works, therefore, reveal a collaboration between time and matter that Herzogenrath defines 'matter-image', contrasting it with the more classic 'image-time' theorized by Deleuze and specifying that in this case time and matter exactly produce their filmic image (Deleuze [1985] 1989). It must be considered that experimental films that precisely highlight their physicality, showing the work as a material process, depend on the cinematographic device and become texts in the double meaning of a 'testament' (lat. *testes*) and 'fabric' (lat. *textum*); it is through this double nature that the triggering of an interlingual process is built (Herzogenrath 2018).

Decasia is a meditation on old, decaying silent films and represents mortality in several ways of its manifestation. It should also be considered that the film's production period roughly coincides with the 100 years of cinema, for this reason, many artists have reflected on the role of cinema in this sense. It is possible to contextualize this trend by citing *Historie(s) du Cinéma*, a 1988 work by Jean-Luc Godard. The director has tried to compose his point of view on the history of cinema using images from institutional films, changing their meaning and changing the context of the original film. Just as Morrison did, he did not try to tell a story that presents itself as objective, but he tried to build a new genealogy in the

relationship between sound and images to talk about his history of cinema and stimulate the viewer to create his own. In this case, the main theme of the film is exactly to intertwine the film with history.

Thus, the characteristics of Morrison's work find a genealogy in modernist experimental practices and the tradition of situationism and the idea of destruction, which can be traced, for example, in Guy Debord's cinema or *La Verifica Incerta* of Alberto Grifi and Gianfranco Baruchello, an emblematic case in the Italian panorama. In Debord's Situationist cinema it is a provocative declaration on the death of cinema in the classical sense and he makes interruption the very essence of the vision. The perception of montage is already an expression of discontinuity but Debord intends to make cinema a means of propaganda using *détournement*, a method of recovering elements already given because to oppose the dominant trends, it is necessary to use the artistic and literary heritage of humanity. By combining two fragments that derive from different works, their original meaning is certainly denied, but in fact, a readable reconnection is obtained, a devaluation-revaluation of the element in a new unifying meaning. *Détournement* is therefore a de-constructive method through which also a broad general critique of today's society can be advanced. The history, to which reference is made, is not a chronological but an eschatological history because it needs a new interpretation, freeing us from the chronological sense of events.

This is the meaning of Debord's *détournements*: re-proposing 'stolen' sequences imbued with a new meaning, within a reconstruction with a different meaning. Cinema then becomes a way of projecting power and possibility towards what is impossible, towards the past (Agamben 2001). On the other side, *La Verifica Incerta* is a 1965 modernist collage film outlined by a strong criticism: classic American cinema as a product of a specific language and as a collector of gestures and stereotyped images. Grifi and Baruchello use duplication and analogy, displacement and similarity, repetition and interruption, fragmentation and contraction as the use of found footage that shows a completely new intellectual montage that should not be confused with previous found footage films. In *La Verifica Incerta* each moving image has been transformed in its space-time connections, removed from its context, and inserted into another completely different significant series: a new meaning, which has

nothing to do with that of the old images, both as icons with symbolic content and as cells of a larger film organism. The pre-existing meaning is abolished, the new connections fill space/time with unsettling ideas. Even the viewer is called into question by the new work, indeed is a fundamental part of it in searching how to understand a new language, a new code, although nothing can be definitive to learn a new syntax that no longer exists, because the true meaning is the work itself, a ready-made film. The film as a material already existed before, the act of Grifi and Baruchello is of appropriation in itself that infuses new meanings to the old images through a process of destruction-resurrection of the meaning which, with the selection and editing, comes to articulate a new completely artificial rhythm, orchestrating a completely reconstructed space-time.

As *Decasia*, also *La Verifica Incerta* didn't have a working plan, not even a script at the beginning of the work. Once again the radical break between meaning and signifier emerges and prevents any profound comparison with other found footage films: the meaning of the film is no longer in its visual content (although there are many symbolic connections, many iconographic links, etc.) but in the very act of deconstruction and artificial reconstruction in which even chance plays a major role. Morrison's process of taking pre-existing footage from films that have been largely lost due to the natural process of nitrate deterioration and reconstituting them as artifacts for a new artistic product compromises the original shots and bring them to a new aesthetic existence by re-editing and integrating them into a new narrative. *Decasia* escaped the breakable world of celluloid through the eerily immaterial kingdom of digitality. Moreover, *Decasia* is not even just a collection of decayed films or a documentary on the film's need for conservation, but a carefully structured portrait of a decadent world, which is concretely disintegrating when we see it revealed on the screen. That means also that this film can be placed in the tradition of the American avant-garde and the experimental film because of the attention to the structure of the film and to the film strip, the material-support that allows its use, thanks to archive recycling.

Decasia was initially commissioned by the Europaischer Musikmonat as a symphony that had to be composed by Michael Gordon. Next, the Ridge Theater, where Bill Morrison works, was asked to create the visual part for Michael Gordon's symphony. So, the director's work was in close contact

with the composer who worked on sounds and music. Bill Morrison asked Michael Gordon to develop a symphony that evoked decay; the director showed the composer some segments of the film he was assembling, and this collaborative process allowed the music to integrate with the images. But *Decasia's* soundtrack is far from synchronism and has the aim to accompany the images which date back to the silent era, trying to express the same feeling of them. Thus, also in music, the selective operations are generated by the cut itself, that's especially because during the montage, the film came after the music and it was functional to it. In addition to thematic development, found footage montage can produce rigorous formal designs with graphic and rhythmic relationships between shots, and complex alignments of images and sounds. Together, music and images make a moving meditation on the relationship between the question of meaning without order. In the experimental film, music is used as another part of the collage technique to draw attention to the materiality of the new visual combines. Music and sounds, used in an unfamiliar way, not only creates a form of de-contextualization that mirrors the images, but also forms a new and audio-visual collage.

The de-familiarisation of sound, as well as image, questions the appearance of audio-visual synchronicity so neither image nor sound is dependent on the other, although they work closely together (Rogers, Barham 2017). Nicholas Cook has identified three primary ways in which music can interact with a film's visual track: music can complement the image by underline emotional or narrative aspects; it can match or replicate certain aspects of the image or its rhythmic construction, and it can provide contrast through audio-visual dissonance. The first two types are common in mainstream cinema, the third type, however, is relatively rare. That's because audio-visual dissonance is experienced as a rupture at the level of reception (Cook 1998). The experimental found-footage film can oscillate continually between all three types of audio-visual engagement and these forms can fundamentally influence our experience of a collaged composition. According to this perspective, it is possible to split found footage audiovisuality into three types. First, the replacement of existing sounds with original music. Second, the removal of the original sound in favor of new music produces a secondary form of found-footage compilation that runs in 'harmonic dissonance' to the de-contextualized visual collage. And third, the mixture of original and new sounds to create

a disjunctive and dissonant audio-visual flow that requires an audience to re-read images. What is significant about all types of a musical play in found-footage films is that there is a clear preference for the reuse, or production, of musical forms and timbres. However, there is a difference between avant-garde, or experimental music and avant-garde audiovisuality. Here, an experimental form is created from the clash of several re-situated forms of filmic discourse (Rogers, Barham 2017).

The 'sounds' of *Decasia* do not accurately translate what is seen on the scene and they are not even sounds that we could place side by side within those environments, yet they manage to merge with the images due to their common nature. So, if on the one hand this acousmatic situation, in which the source of the sounds cannot be traced in the scenes, still offers a sense of empathy with the images, on the other side, the soundtrack through this apparent indifference to what happens in the scenes further emphasizes the tone of the emotion, thus serving as an anempathetic music. This is possible because the experimental film can adopt different ways of interacting between sound and image. This continuous flow of music is automatically performed in harmonic dissonance in the context of a decontextualized visual collage. The soundtrack of *Decasia* does not need to denote anything in the space represented, rather, it represents the expression of the mood, of the rhythm, of the feeling concerning that space. The rhythmic, material, harmonic and expressive qualities of music emphasize the latent or manifest narrative content through a synergistic relationship with the other channels of filmic discourse. Thus, the music reinforces Morrison's interpretation of the diegesis.

Furthermore, according to the idea of de-framing and re-framing practices related also to the concept of expanded cinema because exposed to the audience, the recording of the event itself becomes an event; the transitory action, once fixed in the immateriality of the reproduced image, composed of a vibrant flow of luminous impulses, is configured and reads like another work, which tends to acquire its modalities; the relationships between the observer and what is observed, between space and time, are modified through the self-reflective potential of the mechanical gaze of the video. This process of transformation of the audiovisual media thus renders more and more explicit multiple specificities of the codes that transmute from one expression to another, from homo-media systems

in variable media or mixed media forms. Thus, in this inter-media path, the concept of expanded cinema proposed in 1970 by Gene Youngblood demonstrates how various intersections have emerged that have contributed to providing a new context for the formation of cinema between technologies, media, and art. Morrison stated that *Decasia* was not created to end up on DVD, but as a theatrical happening. Thus, *Decasia's* performative dimension systems – like live screening with live music – are examples of a deep change with the perception of the classic frame of the cinematographic screen because even in this case we are cutting something: the boundaries of the screen and the speakers too. In this way, inter-media art and environments are built to create a total experience for the audience and the show maintains its nature as a social phenomenon recognized by a community that includes traditions and meanings.

Decasia talks about mortality, memory, dreams, and resistance at the same time. There are several cropped and combined realities. Indeed, by ordering scenes in particular sequences, the film induces a certain kind of expectation and reaction in the audience, so found-footage collage gives the sense to cut as a powerful tool for a visual experience. About the effects of a cut in storytelling and viewers, it's important to consider the theory of the Kuleshov effect which has interesting results in storytelling and viewers' perception. When a sequence is shown to an audience, the spectators have the feeling of a coherent visual narrative through the editing of various pieces of the existing film. This shows that sometimes scenes are linked to each other through different connections, by a specific emotion for example, but they can be also put together because their development is in the same direction. In all the cases, the common feature for *Decasia* is the state of decay of the film. Morrison explains that the bodies represented in the film are rotting, but the spirit transcends and continues to live.

This experiment, therefore, tends to demonstrate the great importance of montage to understand what appears in a sequence (Mobbs, Weiskopf, Lau, Featherstone, Dolan, Frith 2007); viewers can only project their emotions onto an actor's face and relate them to the rest. Thus, by ordering the shots of a scene in a sequence, the film induces a certain type of expectation in the audience. In *Decasia*, therefore, there seems to be a

logic in the succession of images. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the work concretely recounts the evolution of human nature through a review of moments that describe what one person can experience in life, with a warning to the ever-present *memento mori*. We can list some main aspects of *Decasia* and its relationship with the idea of cut. Primarily, Morrison's film is based on the expressive power of decaying film as a metaphor for the human condition destined to death. But this also means that the aesthetics of this work is close to the oriental philosophy called wabi-sabi, widespread in the 14th century as a reaction to the Chinese formalism according to which all things are ephemeral and imperfect. We must therefore accept the reality made of a constant flow but of a mortal nature (Rowell 2005). The director has created a link between the state of the film and human life, so he has selected images for his purpose through exclusion procedures. The key is considering decay itself as a form of cut because the decay of the film physically created a kind of cuts within the scene: something is missing and it is up to us to reconstruct the meaning from a metaphorical point of view, based on our feelings or experience. We can interpret the signs of the time as producers of new figures, the material damaged becomes an image itself (Habib 2007). Secondly, we must consider de-framing and re-framing executions.

Decasia is a work that has been conceived as a theatrical happening with live musical accompaniment. The connection with silent cinema is evident and it is worth taking into consideration the performativity of early cinema, enjoyed in theatres with live sound accompaniment. Silent cinema was not entirely 'silent'; the practice of accompanying the silent films shown in the theatre, with a piano or small orchestra, dates to about the 1920s. From the very beginning, music has therefore been an integral element of cinema, whether it was comic or dramatic. At the dawn of cinema, the need was felt to give a sound dimension to images through music. Viewing animated but silent images was unacceptable as it produced a feeling of discomfort and even fear, being experienced as a completely unnatural perceptual experience. This relationship between music and silent cinema is important for two reasons: first, it can give more details on how music has been used, providing transitions, attention to detail, and creating specific atmospheres; secondly, it is useful for establishing an exact comparison with the approach to *Decasia*. This is because the work is composed of silent archive images and the projections

of the film with music played live in the perspective of a live performance can exactly recall the cinematographic experiences of the silent era. *Decasia* was originally conceived as a silent film for live orchestra and Bill Morrison also collaborates with many musicians active in the music scene, for example, Bill Frisell who in 2003 composed the music for *The Mesmerist* (2003), another work by Morrison, and still today there are musical performances that accompany live projections. Therefore, what happens in the current century with the live performances of *Decasia* seems to be an evolution of the past.

As the director stated during my interview:

SC: Another main aspect concerns the screenings of your movie accompanied by live music. This approach reminds me of the era of silent cinema when in the 1920s films were accompanied in theatres by a piano or small orchestra. Your screenings seem to be an evolution of silent cinema. Do you think this reference can be appropriate?

BM: Yes, it was originally conceived as a silent film for a live orchestra. The tradition of the City Symphonies from the 1920s was very much an inspiration, as was Godfrey Reggio's work with Philip Glass from the late 1970s and the 1920s tradition was very inspiring (Colavita 2019).

The film had to be shown on three screens around the audience and musicians would have to perform the soundtrack composed by Michael Gordon. Only later it has been transformed into a DVD, but still today the live performance is an execution modality used by the director. Some of Bill Morrison's works have been screened, always with live musical accompaniment, on architectural constructions, in a modern video-mapping perspective made by productive, executive, and distributive modalities which are conducted following a creative use of the medium.

Iconology and symbology: another type of cut by selection

Decasia requires a deep analysis of the imaginary and iconology. When I interviewed Bill Morrison, I've asked him how he selected the images, because, for example, iconology is a solid point of reference for cinema and I was wondering if he wanted to recall specific imaginaries. It is indisputable that also iconology can be connected to the concept of the

frame because it tends to understand the cultural meaning of images through their formal elements, and it is also connected to the idea of cut because there are several elements to be separated to consider their relevance in the iconological reading of a film. Thus, interpretation is exercised in the sense, to discover the possible relationships between what is evident and what is hidden. During my interview, Morrison stated: "I had two criteria in choosing images, decay and engagement in some transportative activity" (Colavita 2019). So, the director was not completely aware of choosing iconic images from cinema history, but he has practically cut by selection. As a matter of fact, in the film, some scenes recall iconologies shared by the common imagination and some figures can be considered as strong archetypes. Among the most indicative examples in the film, some recall the idea of death and rebirth.

For instance, there is the scene of birth, a heap of manure and a fire, destroyer, and purifier at the same time, which burns a house. The archetypal birth scene is indicative above all for the reference to the work *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) by Stan Brakhage, another well-known experimental director. Brakhage's work celebrates the natural processes of life through a set of poetic and direct images focused on birth. The choice of such a moment is highly symbolic typical of Brakhage's American avant-garde, who sought inspiration starting from his own family and the birth of his children. The one proposed by the artist is a revolutionary act, especially considering that before the 1950s, childbirth was a forbidden subject for film production, due to its links with the taboos of sex and blood. It seems that cinema has treated the theme of birth as a guilty secret of humanity, a mystery that had to be hidden from young people, an event reserved only for medicine (Vogel 2005). But a theme like that is charged with symbolism, because a moment is being shown to take hold of time, trying to defeat that aura of death that sticks to each of us as soon as we take our first breath. Furthermore, this approach allows the externalization of the memory process. Brakhage, like Morrison, also questions himself and nature through a body that becomes a work of art, a metaphor of a becoming that begins from that crack that secretes the unborn child (and the world).

The birth scene in *Decasia* is therefore also important because it acts just as an opening of the narrative about the evolution of human nature. It is

followed by close-ups of children on buses, which seem to describe the second phase of human growth passing from birth to education. Probably, this is the reason why their gazes seem empty: they are absorbed by an almost mechanized routine, made up of contents to be learned to build their identity. Many other images are indicative, as in the case of the boxer scene who trains by throwing punches at a rotting patch that erased the punching bag (as the actor is struggling with something symbolic: disease, death, time) or when a group of explorers discovers what seems to be an alien mass that pulsates in a cave. The film, in semiotic terms, is a basic 'open work' (as Umberto Eco theorized), it allows multiple interpretations, mediated by the viewers.

As he already stated, *Decasia* was not originally meant to end up on DVD. It is interesting to note, however, that precisely in this version the work has been divided into 4 chapters, each having a name to give a narrative on DVD, ordering by a meaning. This segmentation reinforces some important life concepts that this film deals with within an entropic universe. The chapters are so organized: 1. Creation; 2. Civilization; 3. Enigma; 4. Disintegration and Rebirth. The boundary between one and the other is implicit in the development of the film, it is not explicitly marked nor are there captions announcing the beginning of each section. While these chapters suggest a formal break into sections, the materials often repeat throughout the film, so no section is truly independent of the others. This subdivision, therefore, demonstrates and underlines that obviously, each scene follows the next for a reason precisely according to this cyclical perspective in the sign of creation, death, and rebirth. This order of scenes shows that found footage films frequently include vertical montage and associational montage, as Eisenstein called the juxtaposition of a film's sound and image tracks in which two adjacent shots produce through their juxtaposition an abstract meaning not inherent in either one of them (Eisenstein 1943). Thus, montage can be also found in natural phenomena such as human perception. So, watching the images, hypotheses about the narrative meaning of the events are immediately formulated, building a semantic union. This mechanism in *Decasia* does not apply only to the images, but also to the succession of the different sections. They presuppose a circular trend that, starting from birth, develops according to vital linear phases until the moment of destruction and rebirth itself. Moreover, to unify the various sections, there are

recurring images of a newsreel showing the birth of a film in a laboratory. There is the moment when the film emerges from developer liquid, as well as the repetition of images with a circular gait that recalls the movement of the film on the roller, as in the case of the image of a dervish who dances turning on himself, following the idea of the roller on which shoots the film. In this regard, the film features numerous rotation images not directly related to the decay but a kind of entropy and circularity of life.



2 | Child on the bus, frame from *Decasia* (2002) directed by Bill Morrison.

Among the many significant examples, we can also observe some 'fire tongues' that eat faces, wounding celluloid, picture, and actors. Thus, the 'skin' of the film and the 'skin' of the actors crack and swell like hot lava, and the faces are transformed and melted. The skin is a symbolically important organ, it possesses life when a person blushes or pales without control. On this aesthetic there are contemporary productions, in particular, the production of Cécile Fontaine who also works exclusively on found footage, developing gestures and plastic techniques that refer precisely to the material nature of cinema, most of the time through the detachment of the three constituent layers of the emulsion (obtained

through the use of certain chemical substances). The first function of Fontaine's chemical work is to analyze the nature of the images by multiplying them (the detachment produces three versions of the same images, which vary according to the specific color of each layer); the other main way is chemical alteration and degradation of the film. However, even in his case the choice of the initial motifs, the found footage, is as decisive as the editing which is itself essential.

The main formal characteristic of Fontaine's work, the detachment, and transfer of the layers of the emulsion, also concerns the montage, which is no longer the connection between patterns or series of figures, but the superimposition of planes, which is why a of Fontaine's great inventions is to circulate the meaning between, within and above the images. From this perspective, *Decasia's* 'skin' is also a field of experimentation: it is uninterrupted, but it can evoke scars and wounds, living and dying continuously. It also represents the most extensive apparatus of human beings, the envelope that conceals a deeper structure, the essential: flesh, organs, spirit. It is an expressive vehicle that puts us in communication with the outside like a bridge, and through the skin that we can live and feel our whole body. In this perspective, the skin treatment in *Decasia* overturns the oculo-centric paradigm of cinema (Marks 2002).



3 | Old woman decaying frame from *Decasia* (2002) directed by Bill Morrison.

Conclusions

Speaking of common imaginaries and the audience's perception, I have also created questionnaires that I submitted to some viewers. Many questions concerned some aspects of film reception, for example, which feelings caused the film. Regarding the birth scene, for instance, is interesting to note that many viewers have found a powerful and symbolic content in this scene and they have identified themselves in the child (someone directly, others remembering old family memories). This probably means that the absence of a coherent and unified meaning is experienced as a shock by the recipient and the shock represents a breakthrough aesthetic immanence that changes the recipient's life praxis. So, montage politicizes art confronting the viewer with the reality within a 'frame'. Analyzing and summarising all the aspects that have emerged so far, we can say that the signs represented in the film are like a trace rather than *deixis*.

Deixis refers to a meaning that cannot be fully understood without additional contextual information. The interpretation of a deictic sign is linked to a specific context in which the sign is received by the viewer, depending on the filmic situation, in which the signs are presented, and the spatial, temporal, and personal situation of the viewer. In *Decasia* we haven't any type of spatial or temporal positioning, except for a subtle sense of future due to images' impermanence. Also, the lack of words and dialogues means no literal use of signs. What is indexed is the historicity of the medium made by its decaying. Therefore, the semiotics of the deixis can be linked to the question of cutting because in *Decasia* even in the creation of a narration some classical reference coordinates – like space and time – have been excluded.

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English abstract

In the field of experimental cinematography, recycling images offered the chance to give life to innovative audio-visual products, creating a new type of cinema starting from the remains of its past. In the perspective of all recently produced found footage film, we are witnesses of a re-enactment and remediation able to revive and reinstate old objects in the contemporary age considering all the opportunities of this era. Specifically, these works are configured almost as archival curatorial practices, placing the artist as a filmmaker, archivist, and film preservationist. They are made by evaluating the possibilities and limits of their physical materials and are conceived by analyzing their relationship with the historical, artistic, and social context and with the most suitable forms of presentation for today's audience, moving from analog production 'framed' in electronic and digital distribution. This essay focuses on this topic analyzing Bill Morrison's *Decasia*, a case study which well represents the nature of this kind of films, inscribed in a precise modernist tradition that relates to some specific audiovisual experiments and artistic research to the materiality of the media. In this instance, according to the Kuleshov effect, cut, montage and selection have an important role which constitutes an efficient

example of film syntax because the vision of a scene is a stimulus-response phenomenon since the spectator actively participates in the process of creating meanings. The manipulation of the context can certainly modify the perception of the audience which projects its emotions into the face of an actor or in a scene and relates it to the rest. Therefore, the perceptive effect produced by the succession of images is rapid and unconscious. The aesthetics of cut in these works cannot be separated from linguistic specificity typical of found footage films that goes beyond the traditional film structure. For example, there is a free and open story, a rejection of the causal rigidity, the presence of metalinguistic elements, and a possible soundtrack free from synchronism. Moreover, these works often make use of the performative dimension, especially with live screening, which determines a deep change with the perception of the classic frame of the cinematographic screen, making possible the reconstitution of ancient cultural objects in structures with a new interpretation.

keywords | found footage film; experimental cinematography; archival cinema; Decasia; Bill Morrison; post-digital.

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