



REVIEW ESSAYS

The Orphanista Manifesto: Orphan Films and the Politics of Reproduction

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ABSTRACT In this essay, I review the works of filmmakers Bill Morrison and Gregorio Rocha and contextualize their work within a growing apocalyptic cultural movement of film preservationists who identify as “orphanistas.” As orphanistas they struggle to reshape and reproduce cultural memory and heritage through reviving “orphans”—films abandoned by their makers. Moving images mimic cognitive memory, yet, depending on reproductive technologies, copies of moving images may organize mass publics and influence cultural imaginaries. Traditionally considered conservative, preservation in the midst of destruction is not only a creative but also an avant-garde act of breathing new life into storytelling and the reproduction of cultural memory. In this essay, I discuss how the surrealist works of Morrison and Rocha radically confront dominant cultural imaginings of race and nation, and I argue that film preservation has the potential of being socially transformative. An interview with Gregorio Rocha follows. [Keywords: film archives, cultural memory, reproduction, race, nation]

Prior to 1949, all motion pictures were made of nitrocellulose, a volatile material susceptible to blistering and powdery decomposition, and which could, at times, explode into a ball of fire. Upward Bound Math and Science, a group of high school students in Moscow, Idaho, who are interested in film preservation, state on their website “Reel Science” that a nitrate film in its last stages of decomposition is like “a time bomb waiting to explode” (Rider et al. 2000; see Figure 2). One of the most dramatic nitrate fires was in 1982, at the Cineteca Nacional in Mexico City, which destroyed 6,506 films (Slide 1992). For many, the mass destruction of films is simultaneously the destruction of a nation’s cultural heritage—hidden truths of a history untold, buried in piles of decaying nitrate reels. On the brink of



FIGURE 1. The aftermath of the fire at the Cinémathèque Française on August 3, 1980. Image from *Nitrate Won't Wait* (1992) by Anthony Slide.

imminent demise, an old decaying silent film provokes an emotional landscape of urgency.

Today, people who struggle to preserve and make available forgotten films that are decaying in archives, garages, and basements call these dying films “orphans.” As an orphanage, the film archive is transformed into a place of forgotten, abandoned images and texts. Decomposing nitrate reels are near death, buried underneath museums and occasionally resuscitated by the will of collectors and the gaze of spectators (see Figure 3). If archives are mass burial grounds of dying images, inhabited by invisible and potential truths, film festivals and movie screens are spaces of radical transformations in which images and texts reappear, arranged in ways that tell stories that reawaken historical consciousness.

In this essay, I introduce a brief history of film preservation and highlight the work of two film artists who creatively pursue the political, economic, and material labor of preserving films, not only for the sake of preservation but also as a radical reconsideration of how visual imagery

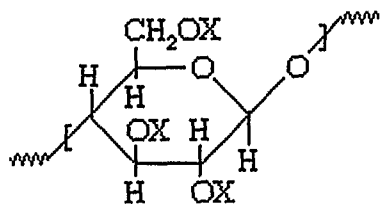


FIGURE 2. The molecular structure of nitro-cellulose from "Reel Science" website. Courtesy of Upward Bound Math and Science and Shawn Rider, student project coach.

perpetuates popular perceptions of race and national histories. Inspired by the works of filmmakers Bill Morrison and Gregorio Rocha, I hope to show that creativity is possible in the midst of destruction. Indeed preservation, although traditionally perceived as conservative and static, is not only creative but also a contemporary avant-garde act, breathing new life into storytelling and the reproduction of cultural memory. As in any recollection, memory is never fixed but, rather, effaced and resituated in the present, as it constructs a new existential moment. Every time the image meets viewers, the semantics of images are continually refashioned. As Morrison and Rocha force us to consider, radical change in social consciousness requires a recovery and revision of the visual past. Only stasis exists in the forgetting and destruction of it. Morrison and Rocha partake in a fascinating moment in film history: Contemporary film-preservation practices seem to be spawning a social movement in the United States. Its participants call themselves "orphanistas" and meet regularly at the Orphan Film Symposium in South Carolina.

In my discussion of film preservation as socially transformative, I draw attention to the materiality and technical properties of film itself. As David MacDougall (1998) has pointed out, more than any other visual medium, film and video most closely mimic cognitive memory, with various elements that constitute sensory thought. Like dreams, films pull from "a distinctive repertoire of signs"

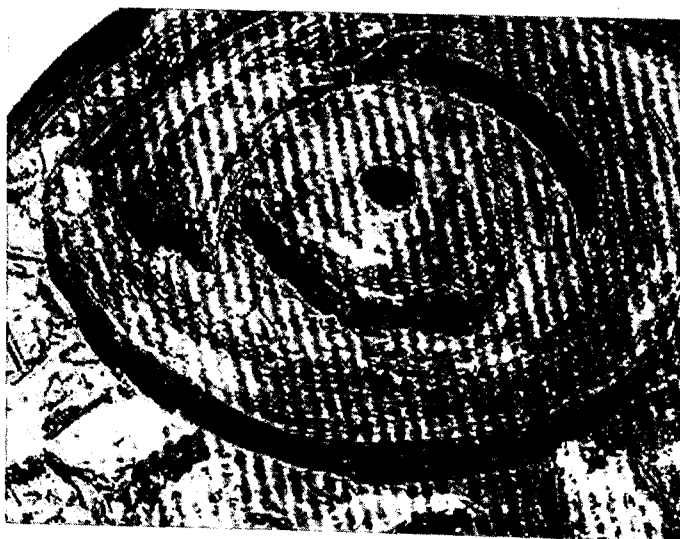


FIGURE 3. The decomposition of a nitrate film. Photograph by Blaine Bartell from *Nitrate Won't Wait* (1992) by Anthony Slide.

(MacDougall 1998:233). Aural and visual cues index heterogeneous associations among different viewers, which allow for multiple interpretations. Filmic images also maintain fixed qualities that survive through the ability to preserve and replay imagery. As a contemporary medium of perception, moving images can be imagined as an extension of the mind's eye. With the ability to manipulate film and video, we can imagine the potential of changing our world of perception. Film significantly differs from "natural" cognition in that it is not contained within the mind of an individual. Film and video constitute a memory that can be reproduced on a massive scale. In effect, it organizes publics (Benjamin 1955) that share ephemeral moments of imagery. However conflictive the meanings that are constructed between viewers may be, moving images nonetheless powerfully shape cultural imaginations (see Figure 4).

AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY: FILM PRESERVATION AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Film preservation has existed since the advent of the film industry but became a concerted effort by the 1930s, when Henri Langlois founded the Cinémathèque Française (Slide 1992). Similarly, James Card, who was a friend of Langlois (Slide 1992), built the first major movie archive in the United States at the George Eastman House museum and co-founded the Telluride Film Festival (Hannah 2000). Before the late 1940s, however, film-preservation efforts in the United States were rather capricious. Limited technological development and inadequate state policies that protected film images were major obstacles for film preservation. Although the first motion picture projection took place in the mid-1890s, copyrights were only available for still photographs, resulting in the creation of the Paper Print



FIGURE 4. The decomposition of a nitrate film reel. Courtesy of Upward Bound Math and Science and Shawn Rider.

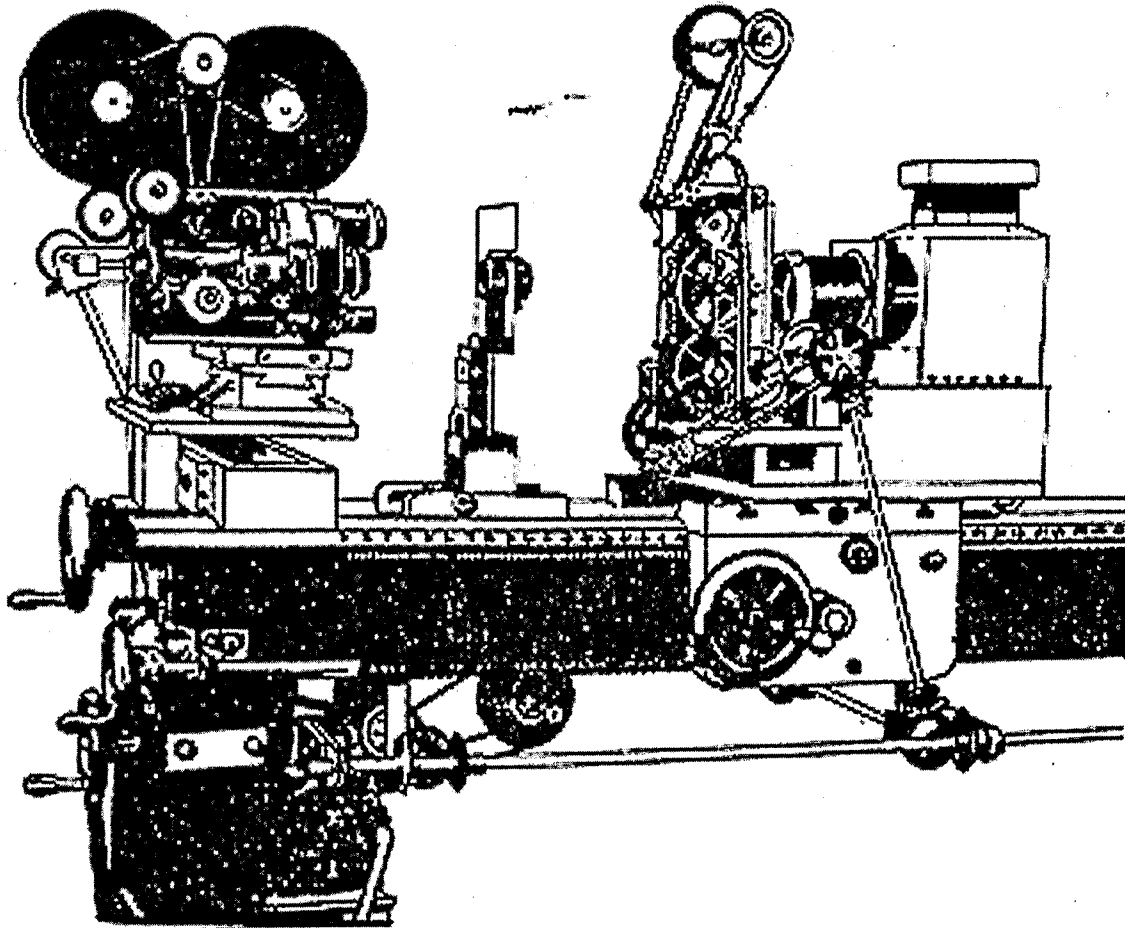


FIGURE 5. Drawing that appeared in the original conference paper presenting the optical printer. Courtesy of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers.

Collection of film stills at the Library of Congress. Processed on January 7, 1894, *Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze* was the first film on paper roll to have a copyright (Grimm 1997). Meanwhile, nitrate film reels were deposited at the Library of Congress, locked away in an old vault, largely ignored, and left to disintegrate. In 1912, the Townsend Act was passed, which provided copyrights of motion pictures. Yet because of lack of funds, these paper prints and motion pictures continued to pile into vaults, becoming more of a dumpster than an active archive. Because of historical neglect, technological limitations, and the chemical instability of nitrate film, only ten percent of the films from these vaults have survived (Grimm 1997).

In 1939, the laborious struggle for preservation in the United States would be instigated, in part, by a young college graduate, Howard Lomar Walls, who was hired at the Library of Congress as a copyright clerk. With his new job, Walls gained access to a paper print collection of film stills, which he saw as culturally valuable. He spent hours discussing the preservation of films with Archibald MacLeish, the Librarian of Congress at the time. MacLeish had a special affinity for film (Slide 1992), but, unfortunately, the Library had no funds to offer Walls and his cause. Sympathetic to Walls's project, MacLeish was able to provide him with space where he investigated how film prints could be preserved onto celluloid (Grimm 2001; Morrison

2001; Pierce 2001; Weissman 2001). Through the National Archives, Walls met Carl Louis Gregory, a well-known cinematographer who had constructed an optical printer to copy brittle shrunken film. In collaboration with Walls, Gregory then modified the printer to utilize refracted light to successfully copy fragile print materials back onto film (see Figure 5). Gaining publicity for this technological success at the Society of Motion Picture Engineers (SMPE) conference, Walls's initiative for preservation gained momentum. This ultimately resulted in the creation of the 1945 Library of Congress Motion Picture Project (Grimm 2001; Morrison 2001; Pierce 2001; Weissman 2001).¹ By 1947, the Motion Picture Project closed, forfeiting hopes for greater public access to films, and in 1979 a vault fire at the National Archives resulted in Librarian Daniel Boorstin halting all nitrate handling in Washington, including making them available for outside screenings. Consequently, the Library's in-house preservation moved to Wright Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB),² in Dayton, Ohio (Slide 1992).³ The Library of Congress chose WPAFB because, during WWII, the Air Force had built vaults to store reconnaissance films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Unfortunately, by July 2000, the Library of Congress announced that the Ohio air base vaults were deteriorating. The Library moved the films to their new Audio Visual Conservation Center in Virginia, previously

owned by the Federal Reserve (Hannah 2000). Today, accessibility to films from large archives such as the Library of Congress is limited. However, film-preservation activists have reimagined the film archive as an orphanage in an attempt to call attention to the politics of film archives. They have also formed strategies to obtain permission to preserve decaying nitrate films.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ORPHANAGE

Since the 1960s, inaccessibility and the increasing number of lost films have inspired some public outrage. A growing "archive fever" and widespread despair for film conservation is transforming the film-preservationist community into social activists.⁴ In the 1960s, film archivists began to protest with their motto, "Nitrate Won't Wait," as a way to raise public awareness and to appeal to the U.S. government funding agencies. As a result, a wider variety of films were preserved (Slide 1992). By the 1980s, the rallying cries of "Nitrate Won't Wait" lost its credibility when new research showed that nitrate can wait, and new film materials such as acetate safety film and digital copies seemed to carry risks of decomposition as well (Lukow 1999). Today, activists have adopted the more politically useful metaphor of the "orphanage," which has increased the types of films gaining public attention (Lukow 1999). Film-preservation activists first identified themselves as "orphanistas" at the Orphans of the Storm Conference held in 1999. They continue to meet at the Orphan Film Symposium, where an international representation of film historians, archivists, artists, and amateur film collectors come together every 18 months at the University of South Carolina.⁵

Prior to the term *orphan*, Rick Prelinger became a leading figure to cultivate popular interest in nonclassic films, otherwise known as ephemeral films.⁶ Prelinger was on the forefront of "dumpster diving" and organized the Prelinger Archives in 1982: a collection of ephemeral films, including advertising, industrial, educational, amateur, and documentary films that depict everyday U.S. life and culture throughout the 20th century. The term *orphan film* gained popular use among film preservationists with the National Film Preservation Act of 1992, an initiative to increase funding support for the preservation of archival films (Lukow 1999). An *orphan* is now considered any film abandoned by its owner or creator. Generally, orphans only look important retrospectively, as in the case of the films in the Prelinger collection. However, this genre also includes newsreels, forgotten silent films, and ignored copies of film classics that have been left to disintegrate.

Because *orphan* implies an association with the Save the Children organization, it is a contested term bound up in the politics of legal discourse and U.S. copyright law. As Lukow elucidates, "the politics of orphanage has been to reinforce in a new way the historic division of labor between the public and private sector archives" (Lukow 1999). In some instances, vital relationships between the private and

public sector have formed, but often private rights holders do not seek collaborative partnerships. This limits the material that cultural institutions may have formerly been more compelled to preserve (Lukow 1999). Nonetheless, since 1992, lively debates on what constitutes an "orphan film" have opened the possibilities for a wider definition, and increasingly heterogeneous groups of people have been drawn to salvaging abandoned films from their archival orphanages.

According to Paolo Cherchi Usai, the term *film archive* is ineffective in understanding the politics of the complex lives of films. He suggests that thinking of the archive as a "film orphanage" evokes the broader reality of a film and its progeny. A film print reproduces multiple offspring and potential orphans (Usai 1999). The fate of the offspring, and, subsequently, the clarity of visual memory, depends on the historical moment and financial context of its preservation. When Eastman Kodak introduced 16 millimeter and eight millimeter safety film in 1932, fire companies lobbied for industrial use of safety film. Archivists made the switch but not without consequence. These offspring were susceptible to shrinkage and the "Vinegar Syndrome," referring to the vinegar odor released when safety film decomposes (Slide 1992). Moreover, safety film did not have the same depth and color contrast as nitrate film images.

The introduction of videotapes in the late 1970s created only more complications for film offspring. Whereas analog video provided a cheaper alternative for reproducing film footage, digital technology has made conservation all the more accessible financially, and it has made possible the removal of filmic blemishes through digital remastering. Nonetheless, preservation of filmic images continues to be a costly process. Although digital video enables preservation of nitrate films, the images appear flat in comparison to a transfer onto safety or nitrate film. Moreover, archives of digital media require continual restoration, as digital shelf life is short, perhaps less than ten years. Once preserved in digital video, it is unlikely the next transfer would go back onto film, as it is too expensive for any archive. Although digital video can be stored on various media—videotape, disks, or computer hard drives—all of these forms have their respective shelf lives. Most preservationists use digital technology only partially, such as for removing blemishes considered errors inherent in the materiality of film, and the "digital switch" is under debate among archivists and archival organizations; nevertheless, the future is certainly becoming more digital (personal communication with Howard Besser, 2004). Unlike analog, digital technologies encode our visual memories into pixels, which are like capturing the atoms and molecules of an object in images that can easily be reordered and manipulated. The hope of some digital futurists is that they will produce copies, like remastered DNA strands, better than their originals (Chute in press). However, does striving for an ideal type improve our cultural heritage of disappearing nitrate orphans?

SCREENING ORPHANS AT THE MARGARET MEAD FILM FESTIVAL

As questions of appropriate use of reproductive technologies are being sorted out, the history of visual culture has become a provocative object of study across several academic fields, including anthropology. Filmmakers who work with archival, orphan, and decaying materials have entered the arena of ethnographic film festivals. Indeed, "orphan films" were a major theme at the Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival in 2003, in which participants of the orphan film movement were described as dissolving "the boundaries between archive, art, and academy" (Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival 2003).⁷ Hosted by the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), this annual event has introduced U.S. audiences to ethnographic film since 1977 and has been seminal in featuring key figures like David and Judith MacDougall, Tim Asch, and Jean Rouch (Ginsburg 1998). Filmmakers Bill Morrison and Gregorio Rocha, both of whom creatively use archival materials, presented their work at the Mead festival in 2003 in a session entitled "No Film Left Behind: Orphan Cinema." Although each filmmaker uses decaying archival material in distinctive ways, the two films featured at the Mead festival (*The Mesmerist* by Bill Morrison and *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa* by Gregorio Rocha) embarked on a revisionist reconstruction of the visual representation of history: revisiting the past to create stories that critically evaluate the present, and contextualizing historical accounts with modern-day critiques.⁸

With his prior work, *Decasia*, featured at the Mead and other venues in 1997, Bill Morrison proved to be a master of editing and metaphor—talents also evident in his more recent work. In collaboration with composer Michael Gordon,⁹ Morrison's *Decasia* reflects on life and the inescapable menace of mortality, which we know is true yet deny even in the face of our own decay over time. The name *Decasia* is a pun on *Fantasia*, Disney's classic visual symphony. Morrison's visual symphony, however, is one of decay. *Decasia* opens with an Egyptian Sufi dancer endlessly spinning. The film then cuts to a film lab with infinitely spinning reels of film. In an interview, Morrison explains that the wheels represent infinite continuity. The audiovisual imagery induces a hypnotic sensorium. Watching film decay moves the viewer to admire both the beauty and despair of life's end. A symphony montage of glissando, unstable pitch, and staccato, reminiscent of the ticking of a time bomb, simultaneously creates sensations of horror and hope, creating a kind of filmic trance. Throughout the filmic montage, continuity simultaneously opposes decay: the Sufi dancer, the film reels, and the Ferris wheel endlessly spin like the images and memories that remain after film, which, like the body, decays. The montage of continuity and decay is coupled with images of a boxer appearing to struggle against his own eventual death as he punches into a cloud of nitrate deterioration (see Figure 6).



FIGURE 6. Featured in Bill Morrison's film, *Decasia*. Imagery from Willie Ritchie-Ritchie Trains 1927, Fox Movietone Newsreel, Archived at University of South Carolina Newsfilm Archive. Courtesy of Bill Morrison.

In another section, the actions of a Japanese woman sitting on a seashore are obscured. She is an artifact reappropriated in this fantasy of decay. The viewer might ask, "Within a cloud of decay, is she perhaps signing to our faded collective memories of Hiroshima?" Repeated imagery of nuns and children marching into Catholic school perhaps signify a fearful apocalyptic relationship with the immanence of death. Life and death are in constant apposition: A ghostly shadow of a baby being born can be deciphered from the decaying film stock; school children stare into the camera, representing youth; a woman applies makeup to fend off any sign of deterioration; and old men wave goodbye. The film ends with the Sufi dancer introduced at the beginning. Initially, the film stock of the Sufi dancer is only slightly damaged, whereas the last images are smeared with nitrate destruction. In Morrison's work, the surface itself decomposes, reminding us of our own fragile materiality.¹⁰

The images can be thought of as desires or memories: actions that take place in the mind. The film stock can be thought of as their body, that which enables these events to be seen. Like our own bodies this celluloid is a fragile and ephemeral medium that can deteriorate in countless ways. The nitro-cellulose base gradually returns to the elements that comprise it: cotton, nitric acid, and camphor. The images deform and coalesce throughout the length of the film, appearing to melt, burn, drip or tear away from the base. This is a natural phenomenon. [Morrison 2004]

In the natural process of decomposition, what is left is a visual representation whose former embodiment has melted away to be rescued into a new narrative about life and death.

For *The Mesmerist*, shown at the Mead festival in 2003, Morrison restored an old decaying reel of the 1926 film called *The Bells*.¹¹ He combined the amoeba-like nitrate



FIGURE 7. Imagery was taken from *The Bells* (1926), directed by James Young and is archived at The U.S. Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Center. Featured in *The Mesmerist*. Courtesy of Bill Morrison.

burnouts inherent in the preservation of the film, in rhythmic time, with hypnotic guitar riffs of contemporary avant-garde composer Bill Frisell. The original film by James Young features Lionel Barrymore and Boris Karloff in an adaptation of the 19th-century French play, *Le Juif Polonoise*, by Alexandre Chatrain and Emile Eckmann. Barrymore plays Mathias, a man in financial debt aspiring to be a burgomaster. In despair to pay his debts, he murders and robs Baruch Koweski, a wealthy traveler and a Polish Jew. Koweski's brother seeks to find the murderer with the assistance of a mesmerist, played by Karloff, who puts men into trance to reveal their good and evil deed (see Figure 7). Pressured by the mesmerist and his own guilt, Mathias begins to go mad, haunted with apparitions of his victim. By the end of the film Mathias has successfully paid off his debts, throws a grand wedding for his daughter, and his guilt is finally absolved when his victim's ghost appears to forgive him.

For contemporary viewers, *The Bells* disturbingly prefigures the Holocaust, resignifying the original production. By reediting the film, Morrison reconceptualizes its storyline. Whereas the stereotyped image of the Polish Jew as the wealthy traveler may have been naturalized for pre-



FIGURE 8. Imagery was taken from *The Bells* (1926), directed by James Young and archived at The U.S. Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Center. Featured in *The Mesmerist*. Photo courtesy of Bill Morrison.

World War II viewers, Morrison's editing recontextualizes the murder by juxtaposing images of the film. He revisits and problematizes this stereotype and the justification for his murder. Different from the original production, the film opens with a carnival scene in which the mesmerist hypnotizes Mathias, taking him into a fortune teller's tent, where he experiences a hypnotic vision of his own guilt and unmet desire for absolution. Then the film cuts to a scene in which Mathias, a Christian man, has murdered a Polish Jew for his money and burns his body in an incinerator, introducing the saliency of fire and its destructive power. This constitutes the culpable memory, which relentlessly haunts Mathias. The incinerator scene invokes associations with the terror of the Jewish Holocaust;¹² death signified by burning flesh mingles with the melting, nitrate imagery. The immanence of death is always more horrific than death itself. Likewise, the horror of hallucination is the inability to fully escape. The real remains haunting even in its disfiguration (see Figure 8).

Similarly, decaying artifacts have the potential of revealing tragic truths. In Morrison's account, reality is inescapable. After an episode of guilty conscience, the concluding scene involves the ghost of the Jew who appears to forgive the Christian man. However, in Morrison's account, he refuses to absolve the murderer. In the end, the forgiving ghost is just a hallucination and the Christian man remains guilty of murder. In its reconception, *The Mesmerist* reveals a more profound historical truth that simultaneously depends on contemporary audiences reading of the film. It invokes the remembrance of the Holocaust in Poland, Jewish suffering, and Christian guilt associated with it as well

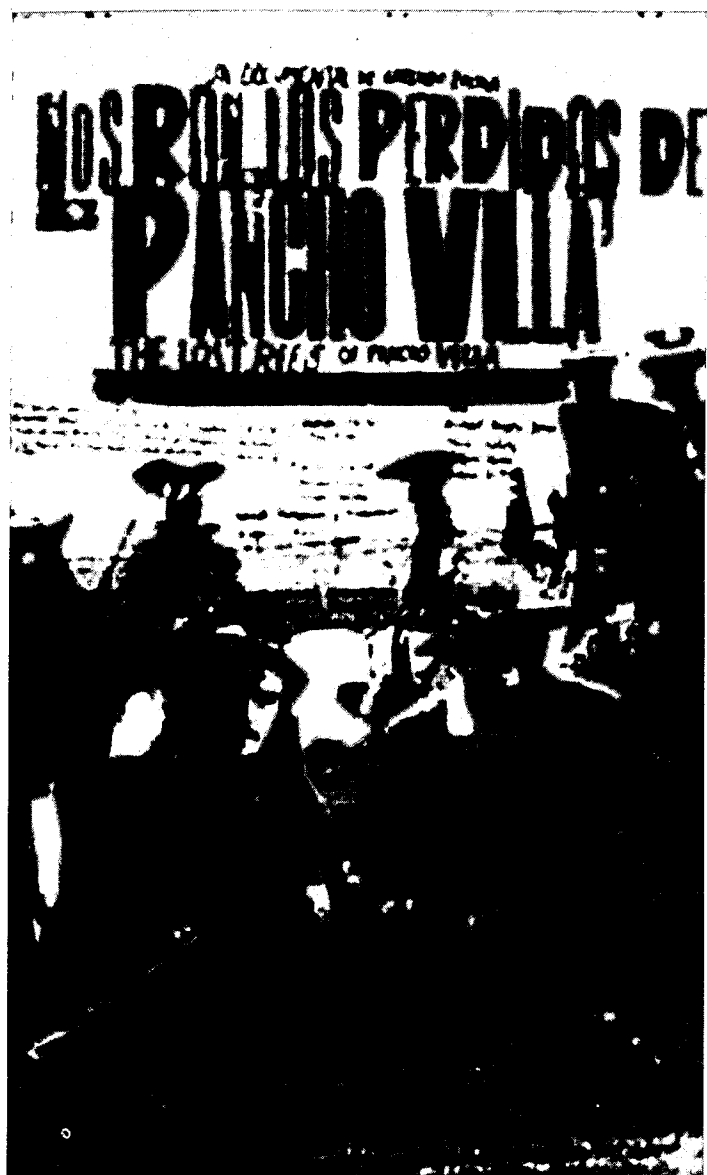


FIGURE 9. Poster for Gregorio Rocha's film, *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*. Courtesy of Gregorio Rocha.

as a critical analysis of prewar popular imagery in which anti-Semitism figures prominently.

At the 2003 Mead festival, filmmaker Gregorio Rocha presented *Los Rollos Perdidos de Pancho Villa* [The lost reels of Pancho Villa]. He reappropriated images of the Mexican revolutionary hero, Pancho Villa, in an American Hollywood production, to comment on Hollywood and its destructive perpetuation of racist images of Mexicans (see Figure 9). Pancho Villa is a salient figure, romanticized in Mexico, Europe, and the United States, and, yet, he is Mexico's most controversial figure in the Mexican Revolution.

Unlike other revolutionary leaders of the 20th century, Villa was not formally educated. He came from humble origins and did not belong to any political party. He is popularly conceived as the "true" rebel out for revenge (Katz 1999). Initially, Villa befriended the United States, accepting ammunition for the revolution and a contract with Hollywood to make a film about him and his role in the Mexican

Revolution. He would later become what Rocha calls "El Enemigo Publico Numero Uno" [Public enemy number one], the leader of the Kingdom of Terror. In my conversation with Rocha he explained,

When I was in Paris, I arrived to what I call the "manifesto seekers." Many art manifestos were written in Paris. When I was there, I thought, "Why don't I make my own here?" I had been researching a lot of what is known as "greaser" films. They are these early films that deal with farce and biased representations of Mexicans in American film. I wanted to identify with "greaser" films. I'm the greaser in this film, in my own film. I tried to go further with identifying with Pancho Villa, the savage and the rebel. I was identifying with Pancho Villa in the sense of being a rebel. My cause was to defy or to challenge all those representations that have been done of Mexicans and seeing myself as one of those characters denigrated. I tried to put myself in their skin. Even if these stereotypes were done almost a hundred years ago, I was trying to find a relationship between those past stereotypes and present day stereotypes. [personal interview, November 2003]

In his film, Rocha spins an amazing tale. He embarks on a personal journey searching for the lost film born of the contractual agreement between Villa and the American Mutual Film Corporation in 1914. Something of a Mexican Woody Allen or Chaplin, Rocha places himself in the film as a comical parallel hero to Villa. In this humorous juxtaposition, he playfully unveils the research process and reveals the subjectivity of constructing historical fact and images of the "real." He rummages through the world's largest archives from Paris to Amsterdam to New York City, only to find his sought treasure in Edward Padilla's garage in El Paso, Texas. Rocha's persona is charismatic and clever. When visiting an archive in Holland, he rides a wobbling bicycle, narrating his own alterity and financial constraint as a "Third World" filmmaker. In his film, Rocha is the film archaeologist trying to recover cherished disintegrating filmic artifacts. His search is desperate because it is a search for a lost truth, a quixotic quest.

Rocha's despair is most comic at a moment of lost hope, when his emotional well-being and finances have been exhausted. He contemplates re-creating the film without the lost footage itself. He tries casting actors who desperately attempt to convey the drama of the Mexican Revolution, utilizing melodramatic acting techniques similar to Mexican telenovelas or soap operas. Rocha stages a mimetic moment, in which Mexicans mock the fictions created by Hollywood in this hyperreflexive enactment of despair.

Even in the moment of triumph, a tragic truth is revealed. Wearing a secondhand surgeon's uniform and gas mask to protect himself from the noxious fumes of nitrate film, finally Rocha unveils the Hollywood's image of Pancho Villa. He narrates, "I did it! . . . [but] He was not the man I was looking for. He had become a blood thirsty animal." In Rocha's account, the recovered nitrate image of Villa perpetuates the stereotypes of the "savage" Mexican. It is symbolic of the U.S. betrayal of Villa. Rocha defiantly

challenges the Anglo-American viewer's gaze when he says, "I am the savage, the half-breed, the greaser." Using a reflexive approach, his search is one that engages the crossing of multiple borders and reveals a personalized crisis in representation.

As the rebellious orphanista, Gregorio Rocha reclaims the lost reels of Pancho Villa from Hollywood's betrayal. He allies with the betrayed Villa, challenging the authority of Hollywood in its production of the popular imagination and representation of Mexican history and culture. The Mexican government has also betrayed Villa, excluding him as an important leader in the Mexican Revolution. Abandoned by both countries, Pancho Villa inhabits the interstices of the United States and Mexico. As Villa's parallel hero, Rocha disrupts normative representations in Mexican official accounts of Villa and the Mexican Revolution and embraces what Gloria Anzaldúa called "a borderland consciousness" (1987:99). Rocha disrupts linear notions of time and space. In his journey, the past becomes the present and divisions between north and south collapse in the search for lost origins. Rocha demonstrates that truth is subjective, an inescapable mingling of fiction and real events. Through disruption, he makes space for an alternative representation of truth and history and provides an unforeseen home for the abandoned Pancho Villa, the betrayed revolutionary. By unveiling the politics of imagery, Rocha reveals another truth: Dishearteningly, stereotyped images of Mexicans not only persist in the contemporary popular imagination, but even in his relentless search to recover his betrayed hero from long past, the image of the brutal savage is unavoidable. By the end of the film, Rocha narrates his character as the deflated hero, in which his romantic passions are only met with a sense of disappointment—he is left to identify with Villa the savage, rather than the revered hero (see Figure 10).

CONCLUSION

Gregorio Rocha and Bill Morrison reveal how the politics of seeing take on a strikingly material form. Oftentimes, the visual is associated with oppressive social practices of surveillance, disembodiment, and hegemony. Alternatively, the visual can be constructed as an embodied form of critical inquiry and social activism, as seen in Rocha's and Morrison's "cultural activism" (Ginsburg 1998), in which they mine the film archive to contest the hegemony of popular media.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1969), Michel Foucault conceptualizes archives as an accumulation of rare material objects divorced from their origins. In the event of their discovery, these rare, accumulated objects transform according to new social relations, creating disruption and social change. By exhuming archival images and reclaiming them with new subjective meanings, the unspoken is articulated—or, in the case of silent film, the unseen is viewable—and a new historical consciousness is born. Foucault's comparison of the archive to an archaeologist's site speaks to both Morrison's and

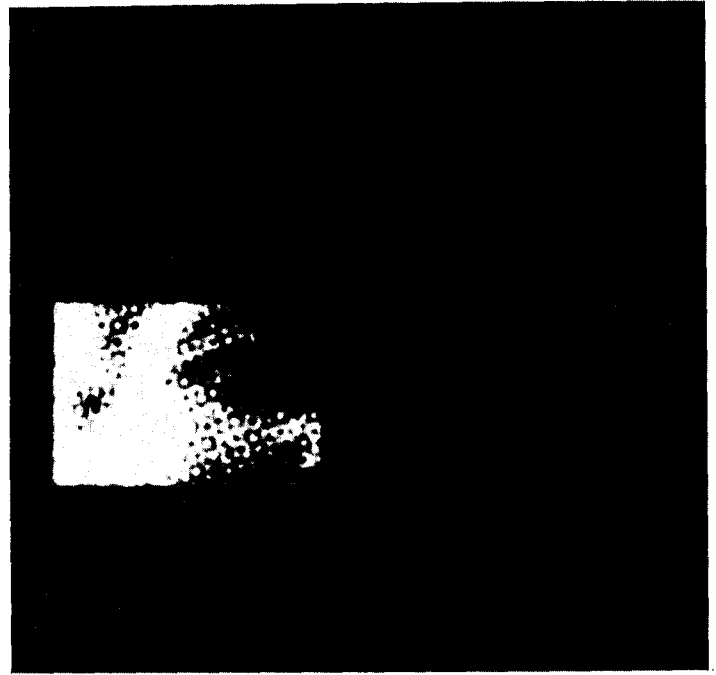


FIGURE 10. General Villa. Image featured in the *Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*. Courtesy of Gregorio Rocha.

Rocha's work, in which images are not only exhumed from the archive but edited and arranged into a new narrative that brings about new imaginings of cultural heritage.

Jacques Derrida's (1995) psychoanalytic perspective on the archive offers insights into the symbolic field of memory. Derrida views the archive as a patriarchal construct motivated by a desire to domesticate and shelter memory while maintaining authority over its possible significance. The act of archiving is an act of destructive aggression, a repression and filing of memories enacted by marking dates on the body of archived objects, which Derrida describes as analogous to circumcision. Metaphorically, marking dates on archived objects is like marking time on the skin of newborn sons. Nitrate films historically have been marked, filed away, and sheltered from the public domain under paternal state and private institutions that claim to house a nation's cultural heritage. Like the ritual of circumcision, which maintains tradition and seals a newborn son's relationship to a true life, old moving images gain ritualistic mystique as tellers of truths by virtue of their inaccessibility. Nonetheless, the ephemeral quality of moving images also makes them into mere signs that obliquely represent the complex multidimensionality of reality. Their meaningfulness is dependent on how they circulate and the context of their gaze. Yet the ability to replay film and video allows for the repetitiveness of these signs, which reinforces their salience within the cultural imaginary.

Referring to the ruins of Pompeii, Derrida describes the archaeologist as suffering from "archive fever" (*mal d'archive*), the drive to awaken the dead, those repressed effaced memories, to understand "her footsteps in the ash" (1995:98). Perhaps *mal d'archive* describes the emotional appeal of preserving orphan films. If Morrison and Rocha

seem to suffer from mal d'archive, perhaps it inspires the fans of their creative works. Kierkegaard also wrote of despair as a fever, a sickness of the self, a fire that has "entered into something that . . . cannot burn up" (Kierkegaard 1946:19). Likewise, Rocha is tormented by his inability to transform himself into the triumphant hero; in a second-hand surgeon's uniform, Rocha can only revive the racist imagery of the savage that cannot die. Morrison's melting images continue signing the horrors of history. Even in their element of death, they are as infinite as spinning reels of film; the viewers cannot divorce themselves from the torment of their cultural heritage. As Kierkegaard writes, the self experiences despair when it wishes to rid itself of itself and yet cannot.

Unlike Foucault and Derrida's museum archives of objects, filmic images' social lives persist through the advent of new reproductive technologies that require intensive labor. This embeds them in political, economic, and social relationships. In this sense, the film archive, unlike the museum archive, is more of a cloning bank than an archaeologist's site. To understand the complex politics of reclaiming archival films, I return to Usai's description of the film archive as an orphanage. As Usai pointed out, the concept of the "archive" obscures the political economy that shapes the production and reproduction of films at a particular historical moment. Most films have multiple offspring, reproduced through different technologies according to the historical moment they are conceived. Similarly, feminist scholars have noted, that "reproduction is always implicated in political life" (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:367) and that "by putting reproduction at the center [of social theory], we are able to view social relations in new ways" (Weiner 1995:407). Archives are not simply deposits of material memory; they are spaces governed by state politics, funding agencies, and preservation technologies, which relegate differential access to them. They also determine which films get resuscitated and reproduced as the living memories of film viewers.

Although technology may seem to secularize social relationships (Benjamin 1955), the uptake of video media by the Moral Majority during the 1980s (Harding 2000) and the televangelical boom initiated by Jim and Tammy Faye Baker have proved the opposite. Indeed digital media has maintained its own mystique as a charismatic force capable of provoking new imaginings. Digital reproduction has increased accessibility for proselytizing movements—Christian evangelism, environmentalism, antiterrorism, and now, film-preservation activism—to communicate to larger audiences. Apocalyptic images can be disseminated on a massive scale that organizes publics through various venues—theaters, festivals, television, and the Internet to name a few. Although archives block the public from attaining nitrate films, deteriorating filmic images are reproduced, reincarnated into a new medium, and further diminished: They are reduced into .jpeg images available on websites that mobilize film-preservation activism on an international scale. For many in the film com-

munity, imminent destruction seems to represent the coming of the end of cultural heritage. The archive has been transformed into an orphanage of innocent dying children betrayed by their patriarch: A landscape threatened by its own degradable nature or the degradation necessary to their digital dissemination. Unlike other apocalyptic movements, however, orphanistas are coming to represent the avant-garde. Morrison's trance-inducing montage and Rocha's search for fictive portrayals of real events wed these filmmakers to the surreal world of playful paradox, blurred distinctions, and multilayered realities; like film itself, they pierce into the discovery of hidden but very real worlds. Morrison and Rocha use powerful imagery in their works, which affect popular audiences by challenging cultural imaginings that are limited by racism and stereotypes.

As film orphans await the nurturance of adoptive parents, they inspire passionate debates concerning crucial questions of life, death, and the politics of reproduction of the nation's cultural heritage: a threatened heritage signified by decaying visual imagery. Reproducing orphans is no simple matter. It requires exasperating labor on the part of preservationists whose work is mediated by state politics, funding agencies, film collectors, the materiality of film itself, and the available technologies of reproduction that demand ethical considerations and redefinitions of what it means to preserve film. In this dramatic enactment of saving dying orphans, the film-preservation community remakes itself into a social movement, in which films and their reproduction continually redefine cultural memory and national heritage. Through labor among different social actors, an orphan is brought back to life and new imaginings of the past are projected onto the screen, and viewers and preservationists alike experience a transformative moment, a moment of social change.

NOTES

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1. Concurrently, the General Fire Proofing Company of Youngstown, Ohio, the National Archives, the National Bureau of Standards, and the Inter Agency for Nitrate Film Storage began a series of test vaults in 1937. They used concrete and tried different venting and sprinkler techniques, which resulted in more effective vault storage by 1948 (Grimm 2001).

2. WPAFB, in Dayton, Ohio, describes itself as "one of the largest and most important bases in the United States" (WPAFB 2004) and the birthplace of aerospace. Interestingly, nitrate explosives are commonplace at WPAFB, as aerospace technology used nitrogen to propel early rocket engines.

3. When the library's film laboratory moved to the military base in Ohio, the film-preservation community started joking of conspiratorial practices of the state. Perhaps the library had interests in protecting the lives of politicians in Washington, D.C., whereas risks of nitrate fires were OK in Dayton, Ohio, where lives were considered expendable (Slide 1992).
4. Derrida proposes that the archive's desire to resist forgetfulness only exists in conjunction with the threat of a destructive drive resulting in "archive fever" (Derrida 1995).
5. To find out more information about the Orphan Film Symposium, visit the webpage at <http://www.sc.edu/filmsymposium>.
6. Images from the Prelinger Collection have appeared in thousands of films and television programs yet have not circulated as widely within the public domain. In February 2002, Prelinger handed the collection over to the Library of Congress, securing long-term preservation and wider distribution of these films. The collection includes over 140,000 cans of film. These films can now be downloaded and viewed in high quality digital video from the Internet Archive without permission. For more information and to access links, go to <http://www.prelinger.com/lcfaq.html>.
7. To find out more about the Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival, go to the website <http://www.amnh.org/programs/mead/mead03/events.html>.
8. In 1971, Margaret Mead and James Baldwin engaged in a passionate debate on history and time at the AMNH. In this debate, Mead defined history as a linear chronology of factual past events. In response, Baldwin responded, "I don't think history is the past. . . . History is the present" (Rony 1996). While Mead pioneered the use of film as a serious anthropological practice, Baldwin forefronted a critical approach to history. Perhaps, this intellectual debate in 1971 opened way at the AMNH for films that appropriate orphan and decaying material within a revisionist paradigm as a provocative arena of inquiry for visual anthropology.
9. Michael Gordon and Bill Morrison debuted a new collaborative work entitled *Gotham* in New York City at the Carnegie Hall on February 27, 2004.
10. Historically, avant-garde filmmakers have altered the physical qualities of film as an aesthetic device. Man Ray and his 1926 ciné-poème, *Emak Bakia* developed film images by placing objects onto it, such as nails, and creating mesmerizing patterns. Poetically, he juxtaposed nonnarrative images through visual similarities. For example, an image of a human eye cuts to car headlights to the round goggles of the driver to altered film to a field of daisies; all of which share similar patterns.
11. Although a silent film, *The Bells* is not technically an orphan film because of its present-day wide distribution. By wide distribution, I mean that digital copies of a restoration, copyrighted by Film Preservation Associates, are easily purchased through Amazon.com or available at alternative video stores that carry silent films. However, Morrison used an orphaned decaying reel of *The Bells* archived at the Library of Congress.
12. Simultaneously signifying the Jewish Holocaust, the term *holocaust* means a great destruction resulting in the extensive loss of life, especially by fire.

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INTERVIEW WITH GREGORIO ROCHA

November 2003

Cohen: What attracts you to orphan films, lost footage, and imagined histories?

Rocha: There were previous works done by a few scholars, mostly from Mexico. They were talking about films that no one had seen before, not even them. I thought it would be a good idea to get a hold of these films to see if they actually existed. These films had been sitting in the archives for many decades, and I felt that I could do the work that historians had left out. I had a personal interest, but then I found that I could share it with a wider audience using this medium.

C: What are your thoughts about reclaiming film footage and reviving it on video?

R: I think that this is a way of connecting digital and analog, even though the film might lose some of its quality being transferred to video. I tried to get the best possible transfer to video, to respect the original, so that the dialogue would be more sincere.

I think that the digital format is the correct way to make these mediums available. Otherwise if they stay in their original format it is really difficult to make them available. In my work, *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*, I'm trying to create this dialogue between video and film and also between reality and fiction. I even tried to clash both mediums and see what the results were like.

C: As you have described, you cross many borders throughout your journey between film and video, fiction and reality, national borders and spatial and temporal borders. Could you elaborate more on this border crossing that you use throughout?

R: Yeah. It is true that there is a lot of border crossing in there. I have had a lot of interest in knowing, in exploring the crisis of representations. I thought that even at the very start in early film, there was this crisis of representation, so I pretended to explore more in the tradition of fakes and see how far it went into the past. I realized as soon as film was invented, fake representations were also invented. That's one border that was crossed, not by me, but I explore how these representations in actuality, or *actualité* films, were

done ever since the beginning. An example is from 1898, during the U.S. and Spanish American War. I take that as a starting point.

Another border I explore is the supposed one between fiction and fact. I have done that before in my previous work by going as far as I can into a subjective approach of history. I try to find objectivity in my own subjectivity. If I am able to be genuine in my own points of view and making the audience aware that I am using a subjective approach, then I may achieve some kind of truth that doesn't come from factuality but comes from an attitude of honesty. One strategy is to show the audience my known setbacks while doing this approach, and then I extend that to the historians' setbacks, some historians but not all historians. Historians are kind of hiding their strategy, and I try to see what is it that they are hiding. I do that with Kevin Bronlow for example. He kind of allowed me to do it. I tried to talk with him more than once. I tried to show him what I was finding and see if this would reveal something else. I try to unveil his strategy for changing meanings out of very well codified meanings. He constructed these meanings back in the early thirties, by adding new interfiles and then, with this, conveying meanings to the scenes that he was appropriating.

Borders between actuality and fiction attract me. I'm trying to go further. When I found Mr. Edmundo Padilla's materials, I found a great example of this. I called his film *La Venganza de Pancho Villa, The Revenge of Pancho Villa*. The one I found in El Paso, Texas. I find in that film a great example of what a border film is like. It's not only a film made in the U.S.–Mexico border but a metaphor of what "border" is.

C: How do you see your approach to history compared to a written approach to history? What do you see as a potential with video and film in reconstructing history?

R: I have a lot of interest in the history of images. It doesn't exist as a discipline. Not even nowadays. Historians always approach a history of events. I have tried to question the validity of images as a source for history. In this particular piece, *The Lost Reels of Pancho Villa*, I propose that instead of trying to have the images as a source for history, we should consider them as a history of the imaginary and for the history of actual facts. We need to see these documents in a different way. Fictional representations of the Mexican Revolution are valid documents. Not only newsreels but also fictional representations are as valid as documents, if we see them using a different perspective. Fictional representations talk about the history of mentality, the history of ways of seeing. Then we can talk about the history of representations in this case. So we have to be aware that all representations are fictions even if they pretend or claim to be representations of actual events.

C: This is an interesting play between fact and the imagination. There's a hilarious scene where you're almost at the point of giving up on finding these lost reels of Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution. You start to cast these

characters that would star in your own recreation of what these lost reels may contain. Could you elaborate on this scene?

R: At that point there were two situations that were coinciding during the search for the lost film. I was experiencing a crisis because I couldn't find the film I was looking for. I was really thinking of faking the whole thing by shooting the scenes I was trying to find. I had a lot of interest in finding the scenes where these American filmmakers were portraying the life of young Pancho Villa, because I understood they were trying to convey an intimate portrayal of him. I wanted to see what that looked like.

Since I didn't find the film, I wanted to recreate it, but not only recreate it. I had this idea to recreate and give the images an aura of antique vintage images. I was going to dig them somewhere in the desert and then I was going to shoot how I was digging them. [laughs] I wanted to show that to historians, not to tease them, but to see what their reaction would be like to a fake. My other intention is being so honest in doing a fake that it would become as valuable as a real finding . . . that it would be as important as finding the film itself.

Then I went into this crisis because I couldn't raise enough funds to do this fake, fortunately perhaps. [laughs] I wanted to show the crisis I was going through. The crisis coincided during the editing. At that moment of editing, I didn't know where to go. I was reviewing the footage I had, and the video recording of the casting, and then I said, "This is a good way to show my own crisis, a creative crisis and a financial crisis." I wanted to show not the actors' misery, but my own misery.

C: In a way you are a parallel hero of Pancho Villa and there is an emergence of a complex self that cannot be pigeonholed into certain stereotypes of Mexicano or Mexican American identity. Could you elaborate more on your decision of putting yourself in the film and this exploration of self?

R: In the original idea I had for this project, I was not supposed to be in front of the camera. I only wanted to do a compilation film using stock footage held in all the archives of the world. That was the original plan. But when I set off to Europe and while being in Mexico, I started to shoot my own research wherever I was going. I then decided to shoot the process of the research. While doing this, I realized this is what the film was about. It's about myself looking for this film. Then later on I was editing in Canada, I realized I had to be more in the film. Not in the sense of having the image of me there, but in the sense of what is it that I am really looking for. I was not only looking for a lost film, I realized I was looking for something in myself. I tried to see how I related to Pancho Villa.

When I was in Paris, I arrived to what I call the "manifesto seekers." Many of art manifestos were written in Paris. When I was there, I thought, "Why don't I make my own

here?" I had been researching a lot of what is known as "greaser" films. They are these early films that deal with farce and biased representations of Mexicans in American film. I wanted to identify with "greaser" films. I'm the greaser in this film, in my own film. I tried to go further with identifying with Pancho Villa, the savage and the rebel. I was identifying with Pancho Villa in the sense of being a rebel. My cause was to defy or to challenge all those representations that have been done of Mexicans and seeing myself as one of those characters denigrated. I tried to put myself in their skin. Even if these stereotypes were done almost a hundred years ago, I was trying to find a relationship between those past stereotypes and present day stereotypes.

Let me tell you one thing. There was this comment from a critic in Mexico. He said, "How do you dare to put yourself on the same level as Pancho Villa, at least in the poster? Why do you put yourself along with him?" I told him, "Why not?" That's something I wanted to say during the questions and answers sessions at the Mead. In Mexico, we have always been taught that the Mexican Revolution is an official matter and that only the government can talk about it. Most of the historical approaches to the Mexican Revolution have been from an official point of view, and I wanted to approach it in a very personal way. This is how I decided to explore the representations of the Mexican Revolution and how I came to identify with Villa. The government has not recognized Villa. He's still very marginal, same as Emiliano Zapata, because they are the most true, or most genuine leaders of the Revolution. They belong to the people, to popular origins. They didn't want the power. They wanted to change things. At some point, I decided I wanted to be very personal in my approach.

C: In handling the film footage, you have the gas masks on, because it's a very dangerous process because of the nitrates used in early films. Could you speak more about the preservation process?

R: Yeah. When I was doing the research, I realized most of the films were preserved, but I had the urge to actually touch and smell a nitrate film. I really wanted to know what a nitrate cellulose-based film was like. Archives don't usually allow you to see or touch these materials. They say, "Okay, go take this copy or this security film base that is already done." I was lucky enough to find all these films in Padilla's garage. I got bit by the nitrate bug when I got in touch with these films. When I found these films, I thought I had a good chance to be involved in the restoration. By that moment, I had already been at the Orphans of the Storm Congress, so I had become some sort of an orphanista. [laughs] So I thought, even without knowing, I would do whatever was necessary to have these preserved, but I wanted to be involved in the preservation process. That's why, in the first moment, I didn't want to call a big archive, because I knew they would send their own specialist or

expert. I knew I wasn't an expert but I wanted to help in this restoration.

C: Were there any copyright issues in reclaiming an orphan film?

R: No, I did some research with the help of the American Film Institute and we found that there were no copyright renewals. Most of these films were on public domain.

C: Where have you circulated this film and how did the reception of the film differ between different audiences?

R: I think that in Mexico, they have a very good reception because Pancho Villa touches fables that a lot of

people are sensitive too. I have found that while doing the film itself, I realized that Pancho Villa was dropped into the American region as well. So the reception here is also very good. Documentary films about U.S.-Mexico relations fall into one particular case. Whenever I watch the film, there are a lot of connections between geographical places with this film. Almost everywhere that I looked on a database, there was something about Pancho Villa. Those connections are apparent by the reactions of the audience that there's a trans-interest.

C: Thank you so much. Congratulations on such a wonderful film.