Collaging the Remains

Lindsay Greer

The fragmentary aesthetic of collage provides a methodological frame for exploring the equally fragmented nature of memory and history within the disciplines of film, performance and visual art. The following essay uses Amy K. Kilgard’s article “Collage: A Paradigm for Performance Studies” as a model, playing with collaged fragments of memory and film in an effort to explore related themes of nostalgia, modernity and ephemerality. **Keywords:** collage, film, ephemerality, performance, ruins, Alzheimers.

**FADE IN:**

INT. APARTMENT--NIGHT

A graduate student, LINDSAY GREER, sits on her couch, surrounded by books, papers, and various scraps of things.

**LINDSAY (VO)**

Using collage as a scholarly method proves more difficult than Amy Kilgard made it look. Collage plays with the dialectical tensions between control and chaos that emerge in the creative process. I inhabit the space between control and chaos.

She paints a printed photograph with watercolor.

“…it seems more important to revisit this unfinished critical project of modernity, based on an alternative understanding of temporality, not as a teleology of progress or transcendence but a superimposition and coexistence of heterogeneous times.” (Boym 30)
Performance Title: Frayed Endings

The stage is dark except for a single spotlight upstage. We hear footsteps approaching. Lindsay walks into the light.

LINDSAY

The threat of dementia circles my mind like the persistent hands of a tiny clock. I fear that the archive of images and moments I’ve spent my life collecting will one day simply vanish, or that the pieces will fade like old strips of film causing my story to end in a dark silence. What if the rope I’ve been holding onto starts to knot until it breaks down into nothing but frayed endings?

An image of a clock projects onto the stage. She walks around it, trying to keep a step ahead of the hands.

Amy Kilgard offers the fragmentary nature of collage as metaphor for the unsettled nature of performance studies. She envisions the field itself as a collage of methods and theories that uses performance as the adhesive. The aesthetics of collage are evoked in a variety of performance techniques that combine movement, sound, image, and text. Meredith Monk calls her work “composite theatre” which Louise Steinman explains as what emerges when “one takes the elements, the sounds, the images, the gestures revolving around a given theme and place them in fertile contact with one another” (124). Steinman emphasizes that the “final juxtaposition of the elements” is one the artist chooses rather than accidental (124). The processes involved in making collage and performance may appear messy and random but what remains after the chaos is carefully selected, each element carrying traces of a different history. Amy Kilgard reminds us, “Each performance choice we make for a staged work carries with it its history in a world or worlds outside the performance” (7). Collage draws attention to the ways multiple histories impact one another by overlapping and critiquing one another and discovering the relationships that form between the various parts making up the whole. Collage as a performance method creates

Lindsay Greer is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Southern Indiana where her teaching and research focuses on performance studies and visual culture. Her artist website: lindsay-greer.com

Author note: The images in this essay originated from negatives found in my Grandmother’s camera bag after her death. After scanning the negatives, I printed the images onto watercolor paper, added paint and pastel manually, pasted cut-outs from catalogs and magazines, and added text in Photoshop.
dialogue between the various texts and artifacts that preserve, reimagine, and reconstruct history. Through collage, this essay demonstrates the fragmentary nature of memory and history through a variety of approaches that include poetic responses to Bill Morrison’s found-footage films *Decasia* and *Light is Calling*; mixed media collage made from photographs of/by my grandmother; responses to some of the scholarship on media and memory; along with fragments of screenplay and performance.

*Lindsay sits in the middle of the clock projection, fraying the end of a rope with scissors.*

**LINDSAY**

My Grandma Wilde was the type of woman others describe as sharp. Her edges were clearly defined so you wouldn’t bump into for risk of hurting yourself. As a little girl, I alternated between a loving awe and an anxious fear of her. She wouldn’t bend the way my mother did: there was no alternate path around her.

Kilgard suggests that despite it’s popularity as a method, the embodied practice of making collage remains under-theorized. Performance scholars are in the unique position to make collage theory through embodied insight. Kilgard offers her own process of writing, staging, and making collage performance as an example of embodied insight. Reflecting on her thesis production on American women serving in Vietnam, she describes her body’s reaction, marking the feelings and sensations she experienced as the pieces of her research fell into place like pieces of a collage: “I felt like I was going to explode, that I had to explode or be crushed.” Feeling the tension mount between the different
elements, her body reacts to the collisions within the collage: “And that moment, before exploding or being crushed—wedged, perched, balanced, poised between creation and destruction—that moment, I seek that moment again and again” (5). Insight emerges from the explosions of collage, when the tension between disparate elements mounts towards a point of near crisis. This moment of crisis, according to Kilgard, is where collage creates meaning.

“Off-modern art and lifestyle explores the hybrids of past and present...In this version of modernity, affection and reflection are not mutually exclusive but reciprocally illuminating, even when the tension remains unresolved and longing incurable.” (Boym 30)

Decasia I:
A whirling dervish spins the gears inside an old grandfather clock.
Tension builds the movement of glaciers
Their stillness cutting deep into the landscape
Glaciers are unaware of what their stillness carves
Stillness allows us to forget that we are falling.

EXT. BACKYARD AT GARRET’S HOUSE—DAY

LINDSAY sits with her MOTHER and brother, GARRET.

MOTHER
...and that was right before your
Grandmother really went downhill.

LINDSAY
So mom...how old was Grandma when
she started experiencing symptoms
of Alzheimer’s?

MOTHER
Oh, 65, I think.

Author and Garret exchange a glance.

GARRET
How old are you?

MOTHER
64.
LINDSAY
Uh oh. You better make sure this year is a good one.

All laugh. Then silence.

Bill Morrison works with the crumbling images of flood-damaged and other aging nitrate films. The resulting work becomes sculptural as it stages the incongruence between film image and organic matter: the process of decay playing with and against footage filmed over fifty-years ago. Beneath a layer of decay the film denotes scenes of nature and industrialization: the ocean and the birth of a child, images of carnival rides and planes. In a different scene, a Sufi whirling dervish transforms into a rotating reel of film. This interplay between image and decay allows time itself to emerge as the ultimate subject of the film. The film plays against a haunting original score produced by composer Michael Gordon, sounding at times like the howl of wind against an old house as it settles. The film and score create uncomfortable collisions like shifting tectonic plates, unnerving viewers through glimpses of our own mortality as the skin of the film becomes undone before our eyes.

“...I suggest that identification is a bodily relationship with the screen; thus when we witness a disappearing image we may respond with a sense of our own disappearance.” (Marks 92)

One by one the images of Betty Wilde fade from screen and stage. Lindsay scratches the stage with the needle.

LINDSAY

She lost her ability to speak. My articulate Grandmother’s words vanished, erased from the crossword puzzles of her mind. She was forced to express herself through sounds and gestures.

She knocked her fists furiously on the table as her eyes became angry pools of icy steel. Can movement fill the absence of last words?

As Lindsay circles the clock projection, other clock projections appear around her onstage. Unsure of which clock to circle, Lindsay hops from clock to clock as they travel around the stage, meeting and overlapping at points, disappearing at others.
Ephemerality is often discussed in performance evoked as both an argument for and against documentation. Rebecca Schneider suggests that performance itself can be read as archival since it already carries residues of previous performances through the restaging and transfer of texts between bodies. She conceptualizes performance “not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of re-appearance and ‘re-participation.’” Through the act of remaining the body becomes an archive and we are forced to “admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh” (101). Understanding ephemerality as an ontological requirement of performance overlooks the ways the body always acts as archive. Schneider’s allusion to the bone and flesh of performance honors the live and recorded elements of performance equally rather than favoring the bones over the flesh.

“I suggest that secondary identification may be with an inanimate thing or things; and that primary identification itself may be an identification with dispersion, with a loss of unified selfhood.” (Marks 97)

As I watch the films of Bill Morrison I find myself mapping the various processes the image in front of me might have travelled. I imagine the image’s journey as follows: 1. Morrison finds the original reels of decaying film; 2. He uses an optical printer to transfer the images; 3. He transfers the film to a digital file for editing; 4. He transfers the edited digital file back to film for screening (back when they still did that); 5. He transfers the film back to digital so he can make dvd copies. My imaginary journey undoubtedly emits some of his labor, but I offer it as a glimpse in order to illuminate the multiple generations traveled by the image in front of me. His work demonstrates the dialogue that occurs between multiple generations of technology in order to realize this single image in the present. The lineage of a single image contains traces of countless histories.

“The desire for the auratic and the authentic always reflected the fear of inauthenticity, the lack of existential meaning, and the absence of individual originality. The more we have learned to understand all images, words, and sounds as always already mediated, the more it seems we desire the authentic and the immediate.” (Huysssen 20)

1See Philip Auslander’s Live: Performance in a Mediatized Culture and Peggy Phelan’s Unmarked.
2See Amelia Jones “Presence in Absentia” and Diane Taylor’s The Archive and the Repertoire among many others.
LINDSAY

The dementia in grandma’s brain started slowly, picking up speed as she tunneled forward with closed eyes, unable to distinguish the future from the past as her life gathered in piles and her mind turned to ruin.

*Lindsay pulls the frayed pieces of rope apart before attempting to braid them back together.*

Catherine Russell calls found-footage filmmaking “a discourse of surfaces” whose “origins and sources are effaced, producing an image sphere with a highly ambivalent relation to history” (271). Films made with found-footage release images from their original context, allowing filmmakers and viewers to discover relationships emerging from new assemblages as they offer ironic and/or allegorical juxtapositions.
INT.APARTMENT-Night

A projector flickers. Faces light up the screen.

LINDSAY
Most of the found-footage comes from estate sales or ebay, films that haven’t seen the light of a projector for decades. I wonder about the people whose faces occupy the frames as they circle the reel, those whose bodies I now paint and bleach. Where became of them? Have they ever watched themselves on the screen? Do they remember making these films that now sit in dusty basement archives? What about the films themselves, what histories do they carry? Did teachers use them in health classes? Did a family watch them after dinner? What life did they live before me?

“Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of rememberance.” (Boym 41)

Morrison’s films offer an example of what Marks calls “haptic visuality” allowing the body to become involved in the process of seeing. Marks writes “Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image” (3). Watching the films of Morrison, the eyes become organs of touch, feeling the deterioration of film as it relates to the deterioration of the body, witnessing film not as a purely visual medium but as body equally susceptible to the processes of time and nature. Marks observes how “Engaging with a disappearing image invites a kind of compassion and open-ended love that can also be a way to engage with people and with death” (Marks 109).

“In such practices—coded (like the body) primitive, popular, folk, naive—performance does remain, does leave ‘residue.’ Indeed the
place of residue is arguably flesh in a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment—evidence, across generations, of impact.” (Schneider 100)

Extending Russell’s idea of found-footage as a “discourse of surfaces” to the surface image and/or skin of film allows relationships to form between discussions of handmade approaches to film, processes of collage, and the role of the body in the production of both. When two surfaces meet they change the composition of the other, the body leaving traces of itself on the materials of the collage, just as the materials themselves leave residue (dried glue, ink from magazine clippings) on the surface of the artist’s body. In digital collage the body interacts with the computer, meeting multiple layers of screen and the various histories contained therein. Like the films of Bill Morrison transferred to DVD, digital collage merges generations of technology to realize a single image. Viewing media with a haptic visuality allows time to extend within each of the images, each containing an archive just as our bodies hold an archive of knotted muscles and affect.

_EXT.LIGHT IS CALLING—Day_

A close-up of a woman fills the frame, or at least she fills the frame for a couple of seconds before the nitrate burns a hole through her chest. Two seconds. She lives for forty-eight frames before the nitrate burns her heart…and then gives it back. I imagine life is this way. Forty-eight frames of wholeness. A heart of hole-ness. Forty-eight frames of sutured wholeness until the next fire.

Collage as a paradigm for performance studies “begins with the idea that all performance is intertextual” (Kilgard 11). Intertextuality locates meaning in the relationships that unfold between texts in the broadest sense of the term to include practices beyond the written word. Performance studies draws from a variety of cultural texts to provide new insight through the embodied act of performance. In this sense, performance acts as sort of affective archaeology, uncovering latent meaning of texts through the process of embodiment. Intertextuality is equally important to the study and practice of found-footage filmmaking, as it relies upon preexisting texts in the production of new compositions. As with collage, the new composition produces new narratives and juxtapositions to unfold. Russell calls the resulting film “a montage of memory traces, by which the filmmaker engages with the past through recall, retrieval, and recycling” (238). Performance engages similarly in practices of
“recall, retrieval, and recycling” through text and embodiment. Pulling texts off the page and from the archive, performers interpret them through the body to create a new archive of embodied memory.

Lindsay looks at the images through the eye of the giant sewing needle, as if binoculars. She shifts her gaze to the audience, still looking through the needle. She begins playing with it, twirling it like a baton. Every so often, she remembers the rope and pulls it back towards her.

**LINDSAY**

The smell of Grandma’s house was a mixture of catnip, dill weed, and pipe tobacco. She never let Grandpa smoke his pipe in the house, but the smell still arrived regardless. I’m glad it did. The smell was so sweet and earthy like soil after the rain. It was the type of soil I remember my Grandma sinking her hands into when she planted seeds and bulbs. The hollyhocks reached into the clouds from the perspective of my small body.

Lindsay attempts to sew using the frayed rope as thread and a giant needle to sew projected images together.

“These images appeal to a look that does not recoil from death but acknowledges death as a part of our being. Faded films, decaying videotapes, projected videos that flaunt their tenuous connection to the reality they index: all appeal to a look of love and loss.” (Marks 91)

**Decasia II:**

The carousel spins like a loose reel of film
Flames curl as though on the edge of burning paper
horses gallop into holes.
We sink slowly into darkness like singing.
A mouth opens to swallow us.
It opens again to spit us out.
History is full of empty pockets.
A clock is a mouth filled with dull teeth.

Lindsay uses giant needle to make light scratching sounds against the stage.
Rebecca Solnit writes on the competing temporalities introduced through 19th century technology, specifically the effects of the railroad and photography on perceptions of time and space. Riding the train allowed people to watch the landscape zoom past as they travelled farther and faster than ever before, moving away from the agrarian pace of agriculture into the dizzying buzz of the quickly expanding urban centers. In this way, the railroad acted as a kind of pre-cinematic device, introducing audiences to a number of images as they viewed them in rapid succession. This new perception of time and space prepared audiences for the arrival of cinema. Conversely, photography froze time in place as it captured the moment racing past, holding the subject within the frame like hands made of silver or pixels. These technologies illustrate the
tensions of modern life by demonstrating the desire for speed paired with a nostalgic longing for the passing moment.

“If we consider performance as “of” disappearance, if we think of the ephemeral as that which ‘vanishes,’ and if we think of performance as the antithesis of preservation, do we limit ourselves to an understanding of performance predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural) logic of the archive?” (Schneider 97)

INT. DECASIA-Day

A BOXER raises his fists
Throwing punches at the emptiness
It rolls over him
a scab in the shape of a tornado
It covers his hands
He is here and not quite
His phantom fingers wondering
If they should form a fist or reach for
the dirt as it rushes to meet him.

Writing on the concept of nostalgia produced through modernity, Svetlana Boym points out “modernity was first explored by poets, not political scientists” as a way to differentiate modernity from the social practice of modernization that “usually refers to industrialization and technological progress” (22). Modernity was the cultural response to the experience of modernization. She calls modernity “contradictory, critical, ambivalent and reflective on the nature of time; it combines fascination for the present with longing for another time” (22). Using Baudelaire’s poem from the essay “The Painter of Modern Life” she illustrates how desire and loss haunt every modern experience. In the poem, the man experiences love at first sight when he glimpses a woman amidst the bustling urban crowd. She wears a black veil as if mourning the loss of someone, which adds another mysterious layer to this fleeting experience. Catching her eye for a brief second he exclaims, “Lovely fugitive whose glance has brought me back to life!” (20). This promise of love quickly dissipates as the woman disappears into the flocking movement of the crowd. Boym suggests that this longing for the present moment as its passing captures the transient nature of modernity. She writes, “Modern experience offers him an erotic encounter and denies consummation” (21). This tension between what is promised and what can be attained drives the pace of modern life and our own desire. Boym offers the vision of modernity that Walter Benjamin glimpsed in the Paul Klee
painting, *The Angel of History*: “The angel can neither make whole the past nor embrace the future” (29). The angel in Klee’s painting, as witnessed by Benjamin, can’t see the future because its eyes are watching the past as history gathers in a pile of refuse. As time moves further into the future, the angel is forced to watch the wreckage gather without being able to intervene.

“And if Photography belonged to a world with some residual sensitivity to myth, we should exult over the richness of the symbol: the loved body is immortalized by the mediation of a precious metal, silver (monument and luxury); to which we might add the notion that this metal, like all metals of Alchemy, is alive.” (Barthes 81)

*Decasia III:*

It’s a gray day and I’m already feeling lonely.

Water slides from empty tree branches

Cupped like hands trying to catch but missing

My poor dog is so bored

He starts playing with his food to amuse himself.

This soundtrack might force

Someone without a center

Over the ledge into darkness.

Bill Morrison’s short film *Light is Calling* rings with echoes of the Baudelaire poem in which he recalls a missed encounter with a woman whose eyes he catches for an instant before losing her to the bustling urban crowd. The film similarly offers the possibility for two lovers to meet amidst decaying layers of film emulsion. As the film burns and tears, their faces sink in and out of the blooming detritus, becoming an abstract representation of our own desire.

*The film of Roland Barthes in the winter garden plays. Photographs of Betty Wilde project onto the surface and around the stage. Lindsay dances with the giant needle and thread.*

**LINDSAY**

I remember my Grandma’s face, the way she smelled of pressed powder, and the delicate sound of her charm bracelet ringing like small bells against the bones of her wrist.

*Soft jingling bells as she dances.*

“Thus nostalgia, as a historical emotion, is a longing for that shrinking ‘space of experience’ that no longer fits the new horizon of
expectations. Nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress. Progress was not only a narrative of temporal progression but also of spatial expansion.” (Svetlana Boym 10)

The films of Bill Morrison offer a materiality that extends beyond optical modes of viewing into a felt sense of bodily identification with the material of film. Marks writes, “Haptic images do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image” (3). Watching the films of Morrison, the eyes become organs of touch, feeling the deterioration of film as it relates to the deterioration of the body, witnessing film not as a purely visual medium but as a body equally susceptible to the processes of time and nature.

“These works of disappearing images encourage the viewer to build an emotional connection with the medium itself. We are not asked to reject the images on their surfaces, themselves precious indexes of long-ago events, but to understand them to be inextricable from another body whose evanescence we witness now, the body of the medium.” (Marks 109)

INT. ANTIQUE SHOP–DAY

Author browses, eventually finding a roll of 16mm that she inspects in the light.

**LINDSAY (VO)**

I purchase film whenever I come across it at garage or estate sales. I have reels of 8mm shot by someone else for a student project. I bought an old 8mm porn from the 70’s that I’ve since cut apart and hot glued onto 16mm clear leader. I have 16mm reels of a circus I’ve never been to except in my mind. I scratch and paint the surface of the film to layer my own memory on top of it, adding my fingerprints to the world contained within the image. The surface of my skin meets the surface of the image creating a
haptic conversation between
image, memory, and materiality.

**Light is Calling:**
Sometimes the possibility of love is enough.
The anticipation burns in sweet slow streams
Pushing slowly like blood through a blocked valve.
I romanticize the image of two lovers losing each other
to busy streets or train cars.
The missed moment feels like hunger.
I am fed by the longing as I drink its shadow

**INT.STUDIO-DAY**

Lindsay paints the shirt of a young girl in the film frame. Playing it back we see the pink moving,
animating the shirt. The girl walks holding a woman’s hand.

**LINDSAY (VO)**
As I paint the girl’s shirt the
paint slips over the edges
becoming a pink aura that
surrounds her. I remember moments
from my childhood when I held hands with mother as we walked.
My fingers touch the surface of
the film, blending the paint with
my fingertips. This little girl
and I share the frame together.

“Cinema disappears as we watch, and indeed as we do not watch,
slowly deteriorating in its cans and demagnetizing in its cases. Film
and video, due to their physical nature, disintegrate in front of our eyes.” (Marks 92)

Inevitably the question of authenticity arises from any discussion of history,
memory, and media. According to Andreas Huyssen, the notion of authenticity
“became more desirable and intense the more it was threatened by alienation,
inauthenticity, and reproducibility in the course of modernization” (18). This
notion of authenticity demands an unquestioned acceptance of an original and
seems tied to notions of ephemerality since originality is distinguished by the impossibility of its exact reproduction. In an age of remix and remediation, the concept of authenticity becomes simultaneously contested and fetishized within the recycling of texts. Perhaps the sentimental response to the films of Morrison rest in what some may perceive as a loss of the original through its degradation and decay. Conversely, this same decay might serve to authenticate the work by giving it an air of antiquated authority.

“They were all technologies of grief, technologies for building a bridge across the painful divide between the living and the dead, between what had been and what is, for defeating the trauma of time itself.” (Solnit 116)

Decasia V:
She is the star who doesn’t smile.
The window left open on a cold day
Until the cold stings hot
the slow procession of spider legs
gathering in ice castles over her face

Laura Marks makes a welcome departure from the gloom and doom that dominates much of the writing on film and decay. Though she never addresses Morrison specifically, she still offers a light at the end of the literature review by offering the degraded image as a means of connection rather than a way to fixate on mortality, as she writes, “Loving a disappearing image draws us into a deep connection with all things, absent and present” (110). Watching Morrison’s Light is Calling fills me with this sense of connectedness Marks speaks of by allowing me to witness the enduring character of hope as it extends through our constructions of time and space.

LINDSAY

Grandma was always making things. She cross-stitched while watching her nature programs, memorizing the rhythm of the needle, letting it sink in and out of the cloth as she stitched flowers with vibrant shades of thread. Countless hours of nature programming she recorded on VHS tapes still sit in the family garage, fading images of dramatic scenes starring meercats, scenes of colorful fish swimming through cities of coral. Her landscape paintings of trees and riverbeds, painted from the images lodged in her memory, find rest as they relax on the wall in the living room. So many hours spent watching birds through binoculars and the lens of her Minolta camera. My grandma was an artist. I know how she looked as a young woman from the photographs.
Lindsay tries to fit all the frayed ends of rope through the eye of the needle.

FADE OUT:
Works Cited


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