

# PROCESS & TEMPORALITY: CHANCE & (AL)CHEMICAL TRACES INVIGORATING MATERIALITY & CONTENT IN THE FILMS OF PÉTER FORGÁCS, PENNY SIOPIS AND BEN RIVERS

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## Abstract

This article discusses encounters occurring between the hand of the artist and filmmaking processes that may bypass the intellect, identifying themselves through intuitive modes of production to reveal integral relationships between film form, materiality and content. In this way the results of non-human agency, registered within film chemistry and processes of production – physical, intellectual, 'spiritual', (un)conscious – interact as the filmmaker takes an idea from conception to projection. Jane Bennett's theorization of 'vital materialism' is important for investigations (2010), as is the role of chance discussed by William Kentridge (1993), whereby deliberations include the fortuitous manifestations occurring as encounters between hand, page and camera coalesce in the production of films. Additionally, approaches are informed by Vilém Flusser's description of the photographer as a '*Functionary*: 'a person who plays with apparatus and acts as a function of apparatus' (Flusser 2007, p.83). This is, arguably, equally pertinent for the cinematographer/ animator/artist who can 'creep into the camera [and processing/editing equipment] in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within' (Flusser, p.27).

**Keywords:** *materiality, vibrant matter, experimental film, chance, chemical traces*

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### Process & temporality: chance & (al)chemical traces invigorating materiality & content in the films of péter forgács, penny siopis and ben rivers

This article discusses encounters occurring between the hand of the artist and filmmaking processes that may bypass the intellect, identifying themselves through intuitive modes of production to reveal integral relationships between film form, materiality and content. In this way the results of non-human agency, registered within film chemistry and processes of production – physical, intellectual, ‘spiritual’, (un)conscious – interact as the filmmaker takes an idea from conception to projection. Discussions include the reworking of archival material and photochemical hand-processing, resulting from dialogues occurring between hand, unconscious and the camera-eye. Jane Bennett’s theorization of non-human agency and ‘vital materialism’ is important for investigations (2010), as is the role of chance discussed in William Kentridge’s ‘Fortuna’ (1993) essay, whereby deliberations include the fortuitous manifestations occurring as encounters between hand, page and camera coalesce in the production of his animated films. Additionally, intuitive approaches are informed by Vilém Flusser’s description of the photographer as a ‘Functionary: ‘a person who plays with apparatus and acts as a function of apparatus’ (Flusser, 2007, p.83). This is, arguably, equally pertinent for the cinematographer/ animator/artist who can ‘creep into the camera [and processing/editing equipment] in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within’ (2007, p. 27).

These critical/theoretical contexts are considered in relation to the experimental modes of operation and the ‘vibrant materiality’ (Bennett) evident in the films of Péter Forgács (Hungary) and Penny Siopis (South Africa), who reinvigo- rate archival material to problematise historical narratives whereby film materiality takes an integral part in shaping the final outcome. In this way new kinds of fragmented

film narratives are created whereby the films don’t fall apart but ‘include vacuums, tabulae rasae, all kinds of mistakes, pauses, taboos, and black holes (Macdonald/Forgács, 2011, p.17). Additionally, Ben Rivers’ hand-processed films, *This Is My Land* (2006) and *Two Years At Sea* (2012) are discussed as the ‘chemical landscapes’ oscillate ‘between the registers of photographic realism and abstract materialism’ (Tarrant, 2016, p.60). While documentary elements are evident in the films under discussion, they do not operate as more traditional documentaries, with these films opening up new critical engagements with place, space and history, recognising that ‘the open piece gives far more surface for the imagination than does the linear narrative’. (Macdonald/Forgács, 2011, p 17).

Importantly for discussions put forward here, the filmmakers recognise the importance of film as a physical entity, either replete with material traces of the past or the filmmaker’s intervention in the processing of the films. All three filmmakers, additionally, recognise the importance of revealing film’s material qualities, etched as it is with chemical and temporal traces of history. Siopis and Forgács home-movie footage includes evidence of chemical deterioration while dialogues between film content and materiality inform the reading of Rivers’ hand-processed films. The final films thereby include (as opposed to being edited out) material traces and incidental marks, fissures or erasures which significantly determine very specific final outcomes and readings of the film texts. Working with film in this way sets up a symbiotic dialogue between artist and materials:

Instead of a formative power detachable from matter, artisans (and mechanics, cooks, builders, cleaners, and anyone else intimate with things) encounter a creative materiality with incipient tendencies and propensities, which are variable enacted depending on the other forces, affects, or bodies with which they come into close contact (Bennett, 2010, p. 56).

Through a close examination of the individuals caught in the films discussed here one could perhaps surmise that they exist in timeless zones of quotidian tranquillity and domestic harmony severed from any historical or political contexts. While these films all document individual's lives, they are not documentary films in the more traditional sense, fitting more with notions of storytelling which might move between fact, fiction and 'imaginative invention' (Demos, 2010, p.104). The subjects of the original home-movie footage used in Siopis and Forgács films appear to exist without a context, but as Demos notes about Siopis' film (and arguably, equally valid for Forgács') the importance of the films' physical histories is as important as the content held within:

That history of filmic physicality leaves us with the ghostly trace of a past severed from meaning and context, marooned in time and place, which indicates a reality beyond what representation can capture, a realm that is more than and other to the meaning and significance of language (Demos, 2014, p.211).

The subjects of the films are granted a renewed existence by the filmmakers who acknowledge not only the turbulent histories encompassing the individuals in the films (and the material decay of time) but also locate them geographically. Rivers' subject similarly appears to live outside of the conventional time/space continuum but the title of the feature film, *Two Years At Sea*, indicates how it was possible for him to maroon himself in this quotidian idyll.

The impetus for writing this article came about not only through an interest in the films and the filmmakers' working processes, but in recognising commonalities in practice whereby the filmmakers under discussion recognise the inherent vitality held within the photochemical film strip, either replete with the temporality of decay or through

hand-processing. Additionally, their working processes also allow for an element of chance to enter into the fray when wrestling with materials and ideas. Bennett's assertion on 'trying to raise the volume on the vitality of materiality ... by focusing on nonhuman bodies' and 'depicting them as *actants* rather than as objects' (Bennett, 2010, p. 10) is important here<sup>1</sup>. For it is the photochemical residues inherent in these films that instrumentally also shape the narrative readings of the films. In my own experience as a filmmaker/photographer, spending significant amounts of time (analogue is a slow process), whiling away the hours in the dark without knowing exactly what will arrive from the latent photochemical surface, is central to the work. In the guise of an (al)chemist, creeping into the chemistry, processing tanks or trays I go forth 'in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within' (Flusser, 2007, p. 27). Operating in the slowness of time passing, counting seconds and minutes to conjure forth images and invoke the 'spirits of salt' or 'ghosts' in the machine is an immeasurable pleasure. Not only because I have a love of the analogue medium but because the distillation of time inherent to the processes of analogue filmmaking provides breathing space to think through ideas, concepts, 'narratives', etc. And for projects engaging with notions of memory, exile and identity it allows for an entering into the fissures and gaps of history to bring to the surface 'narrative' components central to the projects. I would also argue that an understanding of the making process also significantly informs the writing about film, as I found to be the case with a thesis focused on 1970s experimental film history (Gaal-Holmes, 2015).

The films referred to here include Siopis' *My Lovely Day* (1997), films from Forgács' *Private Hungary* series and Ben Rivers' *This Is My Land* and *Two Years At Sea*. Questions of home, identity and place, with their diverse historical and political contexts, informs each of the filmmakers under discussion. For Siopis

<sup>1</sup> The term is Bruno Latour's: an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events (Bennett 2010, p. viii).

and Forgács the apartheid and communist contexts respectively directly inform their filmmaking, and the films would not exist as they do without addressing these, while the subject of Rivers' films, Jake Williams, lives timelessly apart from the fast-paced contemporary present. Although the original archival films used by Siopis and Forgács are essentially apolitical texts, their insertion into historical contexts by the filmmakers renders them political. While Rivers poetic meditations on a life lived outside of the mainstream might appear apolitical, the act of living in such a way – outside the frame of the turbulent contemporary histories currently unfolding – is in itself, arguably, a political act.

## Films and filmmakers

Siopis' filmmaking is an extension of her painting and drawing practice which has, since the outset, addressed issues relating to history, identity, apartheid and colonialism. *My Lovely Day* (1997) was Siopis' first venture into filmmaking, motivated by the archive of family home-movie footage discovered after her mother passed away. The film montage opens with a scratchy recording of Siopis' mother singing the 1947 tune 'My Lovely Day', with the soundtrack additionally including a variety of musical pieces for oboe and Greek folk music. The scratchy recording also matches the grainy aesthetic of film (appearing to have been filmed off the screen), thereby pushing the viewer back into the past through its layer of visual and aural decay and disintegration. For Siopis 'the physicality of the film has a history that is often as compelling as the events pictured in the film, story or sound' (Demos, 2014, p. 211). The montaged sequences are narrated through the use of subtitles by the 'voice' of Siopis' Greek grandmother, with end titles noting this to be the 'true story' of Dorothy Frangetis (1896 – 1967). The home-movie footage includes public social events, like a gathering of white Afrikaners celebrating their Voortrekker history, but is essentially focused on family

antics like children at play and proverbial home-movie events like family gatherings. Frangetis' acerbic sub-titled narration is central to the unfolding narrative as she reflects on the family's history of exile from Greece and the island of Smyrna as well as family life in apartheid South Africa, throughout questioning the meaning of identity. Frangetis is critical of the children who play as if they have no cares in the world, as she reflects on the loss of her homeland, her husband's cinema in Greece which burned down and most particularly about this hedonistic life in the sun, reproaching the children so 'recklessly' at play: 'you live such charmed lives!' she admonishes, 'what do you know of the real world?' While this may indeed be the true story of Siopis' grandmother, the construction of the audio-visual narrative identifies Siopis' recognition of the vacillations inherent in acts of retrospective reconstruction of family history, in the vagaries of memory and in an understanding of the 'truth' of history as potentially veering between fact, fiction and confabulation:

It's like that in the films in a way, almost literally giving life to dead matter through animating it and through shaping a new story from the people caught in the footage, who you can assume are now dead and gone. We live by stories. We need them to make sense of the world (Siopis, 205).

Forgács' filmmaking forms part of his practice as a media artist. He has made over thirty films since 1978 with his 'Private Hungary' series by appropriating old home movie footage dating from the 1930s – 1960s. Due to his involvement in left-wing cultural activities he was, by 1973, cut off from Hungarian universities and institutional support, had no passport and was unable to travel, leading him to become 'a kind of archaeologist', excavating the history of his country through home movies (Macdonald, 2011, p. 8-9).<sup>2</sup> Forgács' fascination with the material discovered led him to want to meticulously place

2 In 1983 Forgács established the Private Photo & Film Archives foundation (PPFA) in Budapest which now has over five hundred (mostly Hungarian) home movies, dating from the 1930-80s.

them within their historical contexts, providing the depth and prominence that they deserved. For him these films documented ordinary lives oblivious to – or attempting to continue with the quotidian activities of family life – despite the extraordinary historical traumas unfolding around them, which would soon rupture their existence. As historical documents, he also believed they potentially revealed more than official records:

I'm interested in going beneath the surface of the home movies and amateur films I have access to, not because I want to patronize these films or to see them merely as examples of some idea, but because they reveal a level of history that is recorded in no other kind of cinema – a level of history that governments and large commercial enterprises don't see as important or valuable but that can show us a great many things about the realities and complexities of history as it is lived by real people (Forgács, 2011, p. 12).

Forgács' in-depth knowledge of European history informed the added layers of commentary into the re-worked films, providing 'linkages between private, family experiences and the larger historical forces that surround, and sometimes engulf, them' (Nichols, 2011). The film substrate with its live vibrant content and the decayed chemical surface arguably also acts like a layered time/space continuum, with the re-animation of the still frames ('giving life to dead matter') (Siopis 205) or the slipping beneath the surface (Forgács 12) bringing the past back to life.

Siopis' and Forgács' films are, however, not merely nostalgic reveries about the past but instead provide critical interventions into complex histories, revealed through the filmmakers' perceptive examinations of seemingly insignificant domestic gestures which provide evidence of real people caught within turbulent historical epochs. '[M]ore than merely deconstructing official history', the cultural critic, TJ Demos' notes about Siopis' films, 'the productive force of her films prompts new or under-represented historical insights that complicate our understanding of

the past' (Demos, 2004, p. 216). Demos' comment is arguably equally valid in relation to Forgács's work, with both filmmakers not only engaging with the films' content but recognising the significance of the temporal decay, imbued within the old photochemical filmstrips, in shaping the 'narrative' content. Despite Rivers' films being newly produced the photo chemical traces are also central in contributing to the films' reading.

Like Siopis, Rivers' background is in fine art, with 16/35mm film being his preferred medium, (alongside photography) and artisanal approaches to working with film being integral to the completed film's aesthetic register. Significantly, he works on all aspects of the filmmaking process – shooting, hand-processing and editing – with the films discussed here also foregrounding the films' material properties. The choice to work with film (over digital technologies) is central to Rivers' filmmaking and the distinctiveness of his films is additionally arrived at through his decision to hand-process the films, either intervening in the chemical process or allowing for it to follow its own course by imprinting incidental marks, patterns or blurs onto the frames. The image-laden film strip is therefore imbued with another layer, with dialogues occurring between filmed content and film materiality.

*This Is My Land* (16mm) and *Two Years At Sea* (16mm blown up to 35mm) are hand-processed portraits, centred on the life of Jake Williams, a solitary individual, living out a Thoreauian idyll on his land within the forests of Aberdeenshire, Scotland. Jake's two years at sea enabled this independent, and largely self-sufficient, life set apart from the hustle-and-bustle of contemporary living. Rivers first filmed Jake for his 2006 short film and was struck by the parallels between their approaches to work. While Jake goes about his days, making and mending, growing food, playing music and sustaining a utopian independent way of being, Rivers has attempted to remain independent of the film industry model (large crews, scripted films, big budgets and commercial emphasis). There is a timelessness about Jake's life – this could be a portrait filmed a hundred years ago – but instead of a hearkening back

to a nostalgic reverie about the past, for Rivers this points to the possibilities of what a very real utopian future might be. Chris Tarrant refers to Rivers' 'chemical landscapes' which include the material traces resulting from the hand-processing of the films:

Hence when an abstract shape briefly dominates and warps the photographic image of the path along which Jake travels in *Two Years At Sea*, Rivers makes use of the plasticity of a post-produced image to return to cinema the image of the landscape. It is not simply a self-reflexive reminder that landscape is a function of cinematic discourse. It also produces another cinematic landscape, a chemical landscape, which is itself the carrier of values (including, but not only, artisanal values) (Tarrant, 2016, p. 63).

As silver is the central activating force in photochemical film, Bennett's reference to the 'aliveness' of metal provides some pertinent references as '[a] metallic vitality, a (impersonal) life, can be seen in the quivering of these free atoms at the edges between the grains of the polycrystalline edifice (Bennett 2010, p. 59). Furthermore, she continues by referring to the 'spreading of cracks' in the life of metal:

The dynamics of spreading cracks may be an example of what Deleuze and Guattari call the "nomadism" of matter. Playing on the notion of metal as a conductor of electricity, they say that metal "conducts" (ushers) itself through a series of self-transformations, which is not a sequential movement from one fixed point to another, but a tumbling of continuous variations with fuzzy borders. What is more, this tumbling is a function not only of the actions applied to metal by metallurgists but of the protean activeness of the metal itself (Bennett, 2010, p. 59).

While Siopis and Forgaços do not hand-process the films they work with in the same way, the 'aliveness' of the archival films, activated as they are through the passage of time through heat, cold, damp or pressure, also results in an additional layered content instrumentally shaping the final outcomes of the films.

### Film materiality, temporality & traces of history

In all of the works under discussion film materiality forms a fundamental part in determining the reading of the films' narrative and content. This is evident in the way chemical 'disruptions' occur in Rivers' films and in the montaged reconstructions of *Siopis* and *Forgács*. Film materiality is revealed through Rivers' hand-processing while in the archival 'home-movies' used by *Forgács* and *Siopis*, film materiality is evidenced through the inclusion of chemical deterioration – the films' temporality or duration over time – as well as the mistakes which were either created (or not edited out) by the amateur filmmakers. This evidence of film materiality is therefore central in contributing to a reading of the films' content as it represents temporality, time passing, decay, and reveals the material aesthetic of the film medium. In this way, the chemical elisions arrived at through hand-processing or exposure to the elements over time become alchemical non-human agents haunting, infusing or penetrating the narratives unfolding on the screen. In these films, materiality is therefore revealed through allowing footage which would more commonly be edited out (light flares, end/beginning of film reels, scratched surfaces etc..) to become central to the films' meaning-making as *Siopis* observes:

I show the artefactual quality of the film – the dust spots, the sprocket marks, light flares, burnt film and so on. These help create ruptures in the narrative and, as "abstract" form, can stimulate affect (Olivier/Siopis, 2014, p. 200).

Furthermore, Demos' comments about Siopis' films (arguably, equally valid for Forgács' work) identify that the films are read 'with the effects of light and age disturbing their surfaces, as dreamlike sequences of apparently disconnected parts. Their surfaces connect us to the materiality of the past' (Demos, 2014, p. 216).

In Siopis' and Forgács' films the layering of visual information created by the filmic residue of deterioration are integral to the narratives shaped. Siopis noted that [t]he physicality of the film has a history that is often as compelling as the events pictured in the film, story or sound'. In his analysis of her films the critic, TJ Demos, furthermore elucidated:

That history of filmic physicality leaves us with the ghostly trace of a past severed from meaning and context, marooned in time and place, which indicates a reality beyond what representation can capture, a realm that is more than and other to the meaning and significance of language. This visual indeterminacy lies at the heart of Siopis's stories and reinforces the uncertain relation between their texts and images, images that often have no direct relation to the film's subject, but bear only associative connection (Demos, 2014, p. 211).

For Forgács the ghostly trace of the past is not only found in the images and the chemical deterioration but it also reveals evidence of the film's viewing as he observes that one can tell how many times a particular film has been screened – 'from the scratches you can tell how many times a family projected a particular film' (Macdonald/Forgács 2011, p.33). The scratches, additionally providing evidence of the protagonists' viewing is evidenced within the frames, contributing to the filmic temporal traces central to the shaping of the narrative:

The *Private Hungary* series is an attempt at a new kind of film narrative because it is always fragmented, and while the videos don't fall apart, they do include

vacuums, tabulae rasae, all kinds of mistakes, pauses, taboos, and black holes. These discontinuities offer the viewer an opportunity to reconstruct a narrative from the ruins of a filmic memory. (Macdonald/ Forgács, 2011: 16/17)

In Rivers' *This Is My Land* a number of the 100ft film rolls, containing images of a water tank and a burning log, are altered through the technique of reticulation, creating dynamic dialogues between film content and materiality:

Reticulation, or cracking of the film emulsion through the application of heat in the development process, produces an organic-looking pattern of fissures and shapes on the film. The clear correspondence between images of heat and abstract shapes caused by heat invites us to see these layers of visual information as interacting at a quasi-narrative level (Tarrant, 2016, p.64-65).

While Rivers' films are in their newness immune to the evidence of history etching the frames, they also appear somewhat marooned in another time. Alongside the infusion of Rivers' 'chemical oscillations', they also seem to capture not only the 'spirit' of Jake but also the environment he inhabits, equally inhabiting an otherworldly reality beyond contemporary representation.

Inclusion of these 'live' filmic traces of process, temporality and materiality not only contribute to stimulating affective engagements with the film texts but also, as Tarrant observes about Rivers' films (but equally apt for Siopis and Forgács) facilitates a slowing down of the eye:

If River's materialist complication of his photographic images achieved nothing else, we would have to acknowledge its power to slow down the eye [...] Slowing down the eye does not mean moving towards stasis or pinning down the image [...] Slowing down the

eye means slowing down the desire for perceptual mastery. Slowing down the eye opens up the possibility of discovery when it bypasses the cognizing effects of seeing (Tarrant, 2016, p. 67).

If one imagines the opposite – High Definition films cleanly and crisply unfolding on the screen – one can be clear of how incongruent such a medium would be for films dealing with lost histories, memory, historical amnesia and erasure and in River's poetic evocations: of a utopian, dreamlike slow time lived outside of the haste of the contemporary present.

### Between fact, fiction & confabulation

Despite working with historical documents/texts, these filmmakers' approaches differ from more empirical approaches to revealing the 'truth', and their execution as poetic, experimental narratives is approached through a way of storytelling, which TJ Demos notes may create 'a context for *imaginative invention* as much as a suggestive recounting of events' (2010, p.104). Random discoveries and incidental 'mark-making' combine with the photochemical vitality inherent within the film strips to shape the 'narratives' of the films, with the non-human agency play an important part in determining what is finally projected on the screen. In the process of working with film in a hands-on, intuitive manner (rather than through more tightly scripted approaches) and by responding to the films' subject and environment (as Rivers does in *TYAT* and *TIML*) or to the archival material (as Forgács and Siopis do), the filmmakers can to-and-fro between planned and unplanned action.

It is here also useful to consider the South African artist, William Kentridge's, 'Fortuna' as he refers to the intuitive, fortuitous materialisations, occurring in the making of his 'Drawings for Projection' series of animated films. "Fortuna", he notes is 'the general term I use for this range of agencies – something other than cold statistical chance, and something too outside the range of rational control' (Kentridge 1993, p.118). Kentridge describes the filming process (with

an old Bolex camera) as he draws, walks to the camera, shoots one or two frames, continues with the same drawing, walks back to the camera and shoots another few frames as being central to the unfolding of the work. Inviting in the non-human agents or incidental findings is an integral part of the working process, using what he refers to as 'stone-age technology'. Additionally, the to-and-fro between paper and camera and the not-knowing what is contained inside the camera as the thousands of latent images build up allows for a certain amount of looseness in the process unlike that which a tightly-scripted film plan would determine. Kentridge notes that he is not 'blind to the nostalgia inherent' in working with 'rough monochromatic drawings [which] refer back to early twentieth-century monochromatic filmmaking' but that it is particularly:

*The way in which different elements and impulses come together to make a final meaning. The contingent facts of the use of charcoal, the imperfection of erasure, the shakiness of the camera, all produce a film with a very specific nature, for which I have to take responsibility, but which was not consciously, deliberately or rationally planned* (1993, p. 114).

In his 'Fortuna' essay Kentridge describes the changing focus of the film *Mine* (1991) which is arrived at through an intuitive process of working. He mentions a particularly fortuitous decision to choose to take a cafetière into his studio and to finally resolve a problem he had been wrestling with for some time, namely how to move from one scene to another (an image of the central character, Soho in bed, to an image of a mineshaft):

I am not claiming the moment or image as a particularly potent one, but what does fascinate is to know where that image came from. It was not planned. I could not have predicted it at the start of the day. It was not an answer to a question I had posed to myself – "what is a domestic object that has affinities to a mine lift?" (1993, p. 118).



If he had had tea that morning, he wonders, 'would the impasse of Soho in bed have continued?' (1993, p. 118). In many ways it is hard to pin down exactly what it is – the intuitive hunch, the moment of knowing, the reaching to do something or make a random decision – that becomes a key important moment significantly contributing to a final film work. Certainly, a close engagement with camera, materials, the latent image held within the photochemical film strip enables the filmmaker to engage in a kind of (al)chemical process, arguably transforming base metals in gold.

The media critic and philosopher, Vilém Flusser, used the term 'functionary' for 'a person who plays with apparatus and acts as a function of apparatus' (Flusser, 2007, p.83) to describe the working relationship between the experimental photographic practitioner and her/his apparatus. This functionary, he says, can enter into the black box of their equipment to 'play' at the behest of chance, serendipity and intuition. Furthermore, they can 'creep into the camera in order to bring to light the tricks concealed within' and lose themselves 'inside the camera in search of possibilities' yet at the same time 'nevertheless control the box' like a *Homo ludens* (2007, p. 27). In his chapter on 'The Apparatus' he furthermore noted that the Latin meanings of the words *apparatus* and *praeparare* both mean 'to prepare' and that '[a]ccordingly, an "apparatus" would be a thing that lies in wait or readiness for something, and a "preparatus" would be a thing that waits patiently for something' (2007, p. 21). In this way, the relationship between filmmaker and camera (Rivers) and filmmaker and archival material (Forgács and Siopis) also becomes an integrated one of intention as they, arguably, lose themselves in the metaphorical 'black box' where the process of visual expansion and contraction required to examine the thousands of tiny frames of archival or filmed material, bring to light a narrative shaped by immersion ('creeping into the camera' or editing equipment).

In my own experience of blowing up 8mm home-movie footage to 16mm, for my Liliesleaf Farm Mayibuye project and hand-processing the films there was also something of

Flusser's entering into the 'black box' of the equipment like a *homo ludens*. In the first instance, in a fairly laborious process, and working on a somewhat unwieldy optical printer consisting of an old Bolex camera and projector and activated by an early Apple computer, there was a brief moment of transcendence when putting my eye to the viewfinder to examine and pull into focus, down the 'long lens' of the past, the footage filmed many years before. In one particular moment of time/space collision I inadvertently found myself standing in my father's shoes, looking down at the house through the pampas grass and filming the family playing on the grass. The 8mm film slipping off the reel also provided an incidental moment of film's physicality by revealing the sprockets and bringing to the fore the material processes of production. In many ways it felt like, as Flusser explains it, '[t]he photographic [/cinematographic] apparatus lies in wait for photography [/cinematography]' (2007, p. 21). The hand-processing of the films in an old Lomo tank likewise allowed entry into the metaphorical 'black box' to slow down time as the film was cranked, liquid poured, temperature measured and time taken all became key activists in bringing non-human agency to the reels spinning, sitting or lurking in the darkness. The resulting aesthetic includes accidental chemical 'spillages' or adherences where the film has stuck together, preventing the chemicals from reaching the films' surface and obstructing film content. These disruptions form an integral part in disrupting the viewing by alternately revealing or concealing the image/film content.

The materials used (archival and hand-processed film) by the filmmakers under discussion here provide evidence of events as well as filmic material traces – imperfections, erasures, camera movement, etc – to produce distinctive films where relationships between film content and film materiality are central in the final film's meaning-making. The aesthetic of Rivers' films, for example, and 'the elemental forces of Jake's world are in part suggested by the elemental forces of cinema in an artisanal mode: and include forces of turning, rubbing, drying, breaking, soaking and staining' (Tarrant, 2016, p. 60). It

could be said that the films' aesthetic is also arrived at in ways akin to Kentridge's 'Fortuna' or Flusser's *homo ludens* as these are not always deliberate marks etched onto the celluloid through the filming or editing process but are instead created by a playing with light and the chemical randomness arrived at through entering into the 'black box' of the processing tank:

More importantly, it is this line that graphically communicates Rivers's desire to present the landscape as something more expressionistic, personal and magical, than symbolic. This is magic in the sense that it is produced by a sleight of hand (processing), but it does not register, or read, as an attempt to capture the sublime, which might have been the case were it not for the fact that this is an authored, chemical landscape (2016, p. 65).

Forgács' films, with evocative scores composed by his collaborator Tibor Zsemző, also include freeze-framing, repetition and the inclusion of material traces of the medium in order to provide poetic entry into a memory-strewn past, rather than a more clear-cut objective documentary rendition of events:

My interest, and its maybe something typical of European ... or Central European cultures, is the psychology of dreams. My work does represent particular moments, some of them new for the audience, in modern history. But in a sense, the films I make are also dream works; they're about cultural dreams and nightmares (Macdonald/Forgács, 2011, p.22).

In conversation with Siopis, the critic Gerrit Olivier observed that immersion in the material is central to her working process. Starting by 'selecting the stuff that is eloquent, that is able to speak ... of vulnerability, of consciousness' is essential, and that the selection of raw material 'almost seems arbitrary, random, haphazard' (Olivier/Siopis, 2014, p.205), Siopis' approach includes harnessing her working process to the possibility of chance discoveries:

The documentary film-maker usually wants a more empirical approach. But for me the immersion in the stuff is a bit like immersion in the process of painting. I drown myself in it. I'm hyper-stimulated – and then there's just too much; the centre cannot hold ... It's trying to find another kind of truth ... I buy footage without knowing what is on the reels. Then I get the reels digitized. And I look at what I've got. That's a thrilling moment. And there's often a weird serendipity. Just when I was thinking about Lumumba there was a fantastic sequence of what looked like the Congo and then suddenly a road sign marked 'Elisabethville' appeared. How can anonymous footage contain Elisabethville just when I was thinking about the place? (Olivier/Siopis, 2014, p.205).

When asked about the process of making and the selection of material, Siopis notes that '[t]hose videos are montages, cut-and-paste images that move and unfold over time. Combined with text and music, film montage offers a wonderful opportunity to play with narrative, to condense time, space and information' (2014, p. 200). These filmmaking approaches therefore open up new lines of enquiry, dissonance and rupture, asking the viewer to *mediate* on historical events, rather than consume documentary facts and information, where 'text and image and sound' are often harmonized (2014, p. 205). 'It's not a documentary', says Siopis, '[i]t's art, which has its own believability that the dissonance paradoxically helps to create' (2014, p. 205).

In a not dissimilar way Forgács' experimental approaches to working with historical documents (home movies) also provides greater possibilities for interpretive engagements. Instead of taking more traditional documentary routes to situate his found films within their historical contexts, he values the possibility of more open-ended approaches:

As in literature (see Umberto Eco), in cinematography, the open piece gives far more surface for the imagi-

nation than does the linear narrative. This accounts for the associative jumps in my work, the shifts from the personal to the public, back and forth, and for the frequent lack of imagery. It allows us to follow the biographical ego's, the self's, amnesia and its constant quest for joy, for nice things, happiness. We become the analyst of what in effect are the amateur filmmaker's dream sketches, the structures of an intimate CV. The Private Hungary series is an attempt at a new kind of film narrative because it is always fragmented, and while the videos don't fall apart, they do include vacuums, tabulae rasae, all kinds of mistakes, pauses, taboos, and black holes. These discontinuities offer the viewer an opportunity to reconstruct a narrative from the ruins of a filmic memory (Macdonald/ Forgács, 2011, p.17).

While the discontinuities do indeed provide the prospect of reshaping narratives 'from the ruins of a filmic memory', they also importantly highlight film material, where time has intervened to etch its presence into the film texts.

In Rivers' films the 'chemical landscapes' – traces left behind from the hand-processing – also imbue the images of Jake's activities as he goes about his day, fuelling the narrative with a live patina, vibrating on the screen. While Rivers two films could be termed 'documentary' as they clearly document Jake's life, they equally don't fall under conventional documentary definition, with the materiality of the film medium playing a central role in:

*Two Years At Sea* and *This Is My Land* engage with both ethnographic and materialist film traditions. They complicate distinctions between the film document and narrative fiction, reality and fantasy, materialist reflexivity and expressionist meaning. Complications like these are central to the films of Ben Rivers, but in these two films in particular we discern the force of these complications in the wild oscillations

between an earthly indexicality and magic materialism, played out on a chemical landscape that is peculiar to a hand-processed cinema. (Tarrant, 2016, p.67).

Whilst all the filmmakers may have distinct intentions at the outset to shape their films, their working processes also includes an openness to discovery, either through a fortuitous encounter with found footage and approaches taken in editing together the material (Siopis, Forgács) or in encounters with subjects where unexpected moments are captured on film or where imagery is created through the non-human agency of chemical processes (Rivers). Importantly, for all the films discussed, the inclusion of 'images' showing evidence of analogue film's vibrant materiality (Bennett) or filmic traces also becomes central to the narrative content. This is not to suggest that there is no plan at all and that films emerge only through a sense of randomness, but instead that an openness to intuitive decision-making, chance discoveries and an (al)chemist approach also forms an important part of the film-making process.

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