

*VESUVIUS AT HOME*

*by*

*CHRISTIN ELIZABETH TURNER*

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*This thesis entitled:  
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*Kelly Sears (chair), Film Studies*

---

*Erin Espelie, Film Studies*

---

*Melinda Barlow, Film Studies*

---

*Jeanne Liotta, Film Studies*

Date\_\_\_\_\_

*The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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Turner, Christin Elizabeth (M.F.A., Art and Art History)

*VESUVIUS AT HOME*

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Kelly Sears

## ABSTRACT

*Vesuvius At Home* is a 14-minute experimental film that de-contextualizes Pompeii as a site of personal mythology and memory. Pompeii is the fulcrum of the “self” where the past and memories are unearthed. The text, on which the film circumnavigates and branches is a VHS tape of my third-grade class staging *The Fall of Pompeii*. With us, the children, acting as its inhabitants, we performed our lives and our deaths. Acting as archaeologists, we uncovered our artifacts and bones. Now, as the filmmaker, I use the camera to re-examine processes of memory, preservation, and the construction of self.

This film presents the original VHS footage and my two cinematic interpretations: mysteries crafted in the (Emily) Dickinson-ian mode, and the Vesuvius in an artist's mind whose doors haunt open for those willing to look at the world differently.

Pompeii is unique in that it is a landscape of a civilization preserved for two millennia as the result of cataclysmic destruction. Not until the invention of photography and cinema could a means of preservation be approached on a human scale. It precisely on this scale that the future of Pompeii lies. Since its discovery, each archaeological (and non-archaeological) dig paradoxically exposed Pompeii to entropy. Thousands of feet, bodies, and fingerprints erode the stonework. The economic power plays of the mafia destroy buildings outright and scorch the earth itself. Life will destroy the site's preservation. In the near future, all that will remain are mediated images of the site - 3D scans, x-rays, holograms, photographs, and films. Pompeii will

exist in computer memory, a digital dream. This film, utilizing the mediums of cinema, thus becomes a form of preservation; going beyond the preservation of a site, or idea, to oneself – my image, my mark as filmmaker. The singular presence of Pompeii looms in fantasy, replica and reality throughout *Vesuvius At Home*.

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# VESUVIUS AT HOME

## INTRODUCTION

In my thesis film, landscapes diverse in place and time are examined as sites of psycho-geography where history, memory, and myth are merged. Historic locations throughout the Campagna region of Italy are intercut with an elementary school in North Carolina in December of 1993, and an abandoned film set from the 1950s in the Mojave Desert of California, to uncover shared formal and thematic relationships embedded in their psycho-geography. Through including my own filmic or performative interactions with each location, universal ideas of death, destruction, and resurrection are grounded in the personal. *Vesuvius at Home* excavates a memoir of cinema and the self.

In the film, this excavation is portrayed visually using methods of media archaeology: mixing cinematic impressions of Pompeii as captured in my 3rd grade class's VHS tape and my own Super-8mm, 16mm and digital footage. In total, the film spans twenty-five years, a quarter of a century. The most contemporary footage used in the film documents the ancient histories located in Campagna, shot in (or digitally made to resemble) Super-8mm, the nostalgic home movie medium. I use exclusively "amateur" mediums – Super-8mm film, 16mm, and VHS - the stuff of "home movies," and "first films," the most self-oriented of all cinema forms. Throughout my work, I seek to elevate "low-quality" mediums out of practical and political needs. That is, as artist and media archaeologist Hito Steryl defines it, "In Defense of the Poor Image"<sup>1</sup> – or as

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<sup>1</sup> "In Defense of the Poor Image - Journal #10 November 2009 - e-Flux."

experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage phrased it, “In Defense of the Amateur,”<sup>2</sup> which he drew from filmmaker Maya Deren’s lecture “Amateur Versus Professional.”<sup>3</sup>

*Vesuvius at Home* visually associates media archaeology with processes of excavation by manipulating film emulsion and film digitization. By stripping away the original image through chemicals or mirrors I create a palimpsest of the original “text.” These manipulations of the film medium intersect, bind together, and bleed into the next disparate layer of history expressed in human memory, interaction, and interpretation of Pompeii.

The film is structured in a braid, images emerging and spiraling like the twists of an unspooled film reel to allow its past, present, and future to collapse upon itself. Each segment of the braid can be broken down into categories of a mythological, anthropological, geological, economical, and personal exegesis of Pompeii. Each visual segment of the braid is audibly bridged by the voices of children, a repeated literary quote spoken in Latin and ancient Greek, the soft hiss of a film’s empty optical track, and synthetic sounds of an otherworldly nature. Visual elements are repeated throughout as anticipatory symbols for the film’s shift from the *personal* to the *universal*. The *personal* as my performance as a child in 1993 of a Pompeian fantasy and my subsequent journey to Italy as an adult to excavate its ancient and contemporary reality. The *universal* as an artist’s unique ability to resonate with and illuminate the prophecy of entropy and renewal that spirals and repeats throughout celluloid and centuries.

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<sup>2</sup> Brakhage and McPherson, *Essential Brakhage*.

<sup>3</sup> Deren and McPherson, *Essential Deren*.

## VESUVIUS AT HOME: THE FILM

Part one of the film introduces the filmmaker as participant and producer beginning with my class performing *The Fall of Pompeii* for my teacher's roving camcorder. I situate the childlike fantasy of the past in the prophetic reality of the present: the decadence, destruction, and resurrection of California, Campagna, cinema, and myself. The film leads the viewer from an exposition of the past and present, through an aperture, into an unstable and uncertain future where the film's former boundary (4:3), i.e. the frame, disappears to reveal a vaster horizon (16:9). It goes beyond film language into actual *alchemy*, aka *sorcery*, or as psychologist Sigmund Freud defines it, *endo-psychic perception*.

“Once he had made his own childhood coincide with the classical past (which it was so easy for him to do), there was a perfect similarity between the burial of Pompeii - the disappearance of the past combined with its preservation - and the repression, of what he possessed a knowledge through what might be described as ‘endo-psychic’ perception.”<sup>4</sup>

Freud associated Pompeii with repressed memory, and archaeological excavations as analogous to the process of psychotherapy and the interpretation of dreams. This is a subtheme of *Vesuvius At Home*, as is Freud's source text, Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva: A Pompeiian Fancy*.<sup>5</sup> The repressed memory of *Vesuvius At Home*, which the film excavates through the process of psycho-geography (and cinema), is an *anamnesis*. In Platonic philosophy, anamnesis is a recollection of the world of ideas in which the soul dwelled before incarnating in human form.<sup>6</sup> In Jensen's *Gradiva*, archaeologist Norbert Hanold, develops an endo-psychic perception of his forgotten past when confronted with an *engram*: a trigger event to produce anamnesis. For

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<sup>4</sup> Freud, “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*.”

<sup>5</sup> Jensen, *Gradiva; a Pompeiian Fancy*,.

<sup>6</sup> Dick, *Exegesis of Philip K by Philip K. Dick*.



Hanold, his *engram* is an ancient bas-relief of a woman walking, mid-stride (like a still from Eadweard Muybridge's proto-cinema image sequences<sup>7</sup>). This charged object, confronted in a museum, sparks a series of recurring dreams. These dreams cause Hanold to travel directly to Pompeii where he excavates his anamnesis. In *Vesuvius at Home*, the VHS tape of my third-grade class is my *engram*, my trigger event that when activated by the medium of cinema produced my anamnesis. The film weaves in and out of the present, past, and future like a psychopomp<sup>8</sup> leading the soul of the filmmaker and film towards an archetypal self: one's Anokhi (Hebrew for "I am").<sup>9</sup>

The opening of the film is a color field of blue accompanied by the electronic hum of magnetic tape pressing against the video head. A white arrow emerges, then the word "Play," a glitch in the tape, myself age 8. My classroom's third grade teacher, Mrs. Loomis, is operating the camcorder and orchestrating the students. She chooses my image first, as if pointing the finger of fate through her lens. The film glitches, I match-cut this image myself in 1993, with an image of myself in 2007. In 2007, I took my first film production class and was asked what film I wanted to make, the trigger event: *The Fall of Pompeii* was an engram, my story to tell that can only be told in the language of cinema. As quick as a pin-prick the punctum portrait glitches and disappears, replaced by a title card: "The Fall of Pompeii." A young boy in a blonde bowl haircut announces, "we would like to present *The Fall of Pompeii*." His image turns red, and glitches into an abstraction of silver halide crystals oscillating between a sliver of light and a pulsing red rip.

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<sup>7</sup> "Eadweard J. Muybridge. Woman Ascending an Incline."

<sup>8</sup> "Psychopomp." – In Jungian psychology, the psychopomp is a mediator between the unconscious and conscious realms. Derived from the Greek word *psuchopompos*, literally meaning the "guide of souls," and is symbolically personified in dreams by a wise woman or man or helpful animal. The Roman god Mercury, god of communication, is a psychopomp to the recently deceased, providing safe passage to the underworld.

<sup>9</sup> By C. G. Jung *The Undiscovered Self*.

This vibrant red color is from the tails of a Super-8mm film reel. I layer and repeat the this red, existing only in color film stock, to be a reverberation of history. The symbolism behind this red reverb is manifold: the red walls of the Villa of the Mysteries, the walls that begat Rothko's Seagram Murals<sup>10</sup>; the red skies following the eruption of Vesuvius on August 24, 79 A.D. and Krakatoa on August 26, 1883, the skies documented by artists William Ashcroft, Frederic Edwin Church, J.M.W. Turner and Edvard Munch;<sup>11</sup> the red lava flows of blood coursing through the heart and mind of the artist, the lava from Emily Dickinson's poem #1705 - the final line is this film's namesake.

Volcanoes be in Sicily  
And South America  
I judge from my Geography—  
Volcanos nearer here  
A Lava step at any time  
Am I inclined to climb—  
A Crater I may contemplate  
Vesuvius at Home.<sup>12</sup>

To Dickinson and this film, lava *aka* red represents an artist's intuition, the muse, simultaneously creative and destructive. With each repetition, the saturation of meaning deepens. It is endo-psychic perception, anamnesis, Anokhi. Red focuses behind the retina, which forces the lens of the eye to grow more convex to pull it forward. Therefore, we perceive that red areas are moving forward, from the back to the front, advancing.<sup>13</sup> Closing one's eyes to the sun fills our visual field with red. The literal inner vision. Red can (and does) emerge at any time in the film, like lava from a volcano. It is associated with the streaks of red at the end of a film strip, a visual and formal motif.

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<sup>10</sup> Coates, Lapatin, and Seydl, *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

<sup>11</sup> "The Krakatoa Sunsets – The Public Domain Review."

<sup>12</sup> "Volcanoes Be in Sicily by Emily Dickinson."

<sup>13</sup> "Red."

In my film, *What Happens to the Mountain*<sup>14</sup>, I first incorporated red tails as part of a layering technique to generate chromatic psycho-geographic experiences in a film. In Bruce Baillie's film *Castro Street*,<sup>15</sup> I first became aware of the color red's ability to advance within in the retina, to generate an awareness and attention. The cool tones of the railyard and train cars moving in thick layers filled with steam and soundscapes. Any fragment of red that passed or seeped through Baillie's isolating black glove were vibrant omens from another world, beckoning forth. Furthering the association of red as a charged force were Ann Carson's *Autobiography of Red*<sup>16</sup> and Carl Jung's *The Red Book*<sup>17</sup> and *Seven Sermons to the Dead*<sup>18</sup> - suggestions presented to me during studio visits. Jung's *The Red Book* and its closing pages, *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, stemmed from a series of imaginative journeys into his own unconscious. He meets a psychopomp, the Babylonian god Abraxas, who guides him through the landscape of his psyche. Abraxas speaks to Jung in poetry and myth. Whilst featuring a smoldering volcano on the cover, *Autobiography of Red* introduced "the remoteness of ancient myth crossed with the familiarity of the modern setting creates a particularly Carsonian effect: the paradox of distant closeness."<sup>19</sup> Thus, I associated red with the arrival of an invisible psychopomp from the ancient past, speaking truth in a modern setting subconsciously through dead language and ecstatic visions. Red is the base layer of emulsion, the longest wavelength at the end of visible spectrum of light, sustaining its visibility the longest over time and space.

The vibrant red tail breaks, tears into a white void that dances in a greyscale soup of Kodak Tri-X reversal film grain, then shudders against shadows of sprockets that seep into the

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<sup>14</sup> Turner, *What Happens to the Mountain*.

<sup>15</sup> "Castro Street - Bruce Baillie - NY Filmmaker's Coop."

<sup>16</sup> Carson, *Autobiography of Red*.

<sup>17</sup> Jung, *The Red Book*.

<sup>18</sup> "The Seven Sermons to the Dead - Kindle Edition by Carl Gustav Jung, Basilides . Politics & Social Sciences Kindle EBooks @ Amazon.Com."

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, "The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson."

frame. This is the first appearance of a unique technique I developed with Kevin T. Miller of Pro8mm in Los Angeles. This abstract sequence is the inverse of a later scene, together they bookend the film. The process requires film-to-digital transfer machine with a y-front gate. Only with a y-front (so called because it's shaped like a Y), is the opening between the gate and the film strip wide enough to insert objects, objects like mirrors or plastic. By inserting mirrors or plastic between the gate and film strip during the process of digitization can you alter the image, split it apart, or create wide vibrant swaths of yellow. At Pro8mm this was only available in standard definition. Miller had created custom mirror pieces with scrapes and emulsion, and had plastic scraps of variant densities. The segment at the beginning of the film uses an etched mirror, separating the image to create fissures of light in the emulsion. These fissures take on the mirror's etched shapes: lines, isolated floating islands in a sea of white, wobbling stripes, or sprockets seeping through the edges streaking yellow and red. I call this process Miller developed "refraction," and will refer to it as such throughout. "Refraction" is defined as the fact or phenomenon of light, radio waves, etc., being deflected in passing obliquely through the interface between one medium and another, or through a medium of varying density; the measurement of the focusing characteristics of an eye or eyes; from refringere "break up." Thus, while this is a formal technique, it can be considered a reflexive psychological / psychoanalytic process for the film.

"Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nabokov, "Speak, Memory: A Memoir."

A certain type of large-sized writing paper used frequently by European papermakers is called “foolscap,” due to the relief of a jester (wearing twin-peaked cap with bells) pressed into the page. The watermark is only visible when held up to the light. To Nabokov, each individual’s life is like a blank sheet of paper whose design (-err) is visible only when held up to the lamp of (their) art. In Tarot, the Fool card represents the beginning of one’s journey through life. This passage also speaks of Nabokov’s desire to find the exact moment his life as an artist was formed, a moment which he cannot locate. I am more fortunate, in this sense, than Nabokov. The exact instrument, the engram, that fashioned me as a filmmaker is the camcorder possessed by my third-grade teacher Mrs. Loomis, staging our class’s cinematic recreation of *The Fall of Pompeii* one December day at Morehead Elementary, North Carolina, 1993.

Placing this footage at the introduction alongside abstract shafts of light breaking through film emulsion is based on this quote from Nabokov’s memoir *Speak, Memory*. The shaft of light represents the lamp (or Arclight) of art shining through my life’s “foolscap”: my VHS tape. I directly juxtapose the abstract imagery against the VHS footage so that it shines through the “foolscap” just as Nabokov described. The intermittent flashes of red film tails layered over refracted sparkling water rhythmically break through the surface, like the unpredictable and subterranean nature of mine and Nabokov’s intuition. *A lava step at any time.*<sup>21</sup>

Over this abstract imagery, a low voice is heard, speaking the epigraph of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*,<sup>22</sup> and thereby speaks the epigraph to *Vesuvius At Home*:

Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; respondebat illa: ἀπο Θανεῖν Θέλω. [I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a bottle, and

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<sup>21</sup> “Volcanoes Be in Sicily by Emily Dickinson.”

<sup>22</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land*.

when the boys asked her: “Sibyl, what do you want?” she answered: “I want to die.”]<sup>23</sup>

Taken from Petronius’ *Satyricon*, it reveals the *cupio dissolvi* feeling (literally meaning “I wish to be dissolved”) present in some Latin literature dating to the first century, and captured by Eliot in his seminal poem of cultural disintegration. For Petronius, this alluded to his own wish for suicide, which he carried out in 65 A.D. following his arrest in Cumae. In the film, it functions rather to introduce the Cumaean Sibyl,<sup>24</sup> to support the visuals (film grain dissolving into dancing shards of light), and to introduce the theme of prophecy. Perhaps it was the Sibyl’s will to die that summoned the Vulcan from Vesuvius in 79 A.D. A ghostly strip of Super-8mm film spirals through the breach of light and a pulsing noise ends the epigraph. The pulse noise is quotation reversed upon itself to form an unearthly reverberating sound. The beginning is the end, and repeats throughout.

“It seems to me impossible to see *Viaggio in Italia* without receiving direct evidence of the fact that the film opens a breach, and all that is cinema, on pain of death, must pass through it.”<sup>25</sup>

This quotation from French filmmaker Jacques Rivette in regard to Roberto Rossellini’s *Journey to Italy* directly informed the montage of the sliver of light morphing into a twisting Super-8mm film strip, the emulsion scraping away to reveal my own voyage to “Italy” both figurative and literal (the itinerary of my journey retraced that of Ingrid Bergman’s in Rossellini’s film). The light of Nabokov, my refraction, is the breach for cinema to pass through on pain of death. My choice to use multiple film mediums (Super-8mm, VHS, 16mm, digital) is informed by twin specters: the “death of cinema,” the “death of film,” which have haunted the

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<sup>23</sup> “Nam Sibyllam Quidem - Epigraph - The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot.”

<sup>24</sup> “Cumaean Sibyl.”

<sup>25</sup> Rosenbaum and Rivette, “Letter on Rossellini.”

production workflow of my films since I began. And yet, this dedication to film form also opened a breach for film technique to pass through.

The spiraling Super-8mm is a home-made special effect created in the darkroom by flashing a strip of Super-8mm reversal stock from the film twisted and secured to a strip of 16mm film stock. A fiber optic cable attached to a flashlight kept the light low enough to be able to control exposure and direction. I decided to twist the Super-8mm film strip for both dynamic visual interest, but also out of reverence for the famous Neapolitan Giambattista Vico's philosophy of *corso* (development) and *ricorso* (collapse): a cyclic philosophy of history based on a period of advancement followed by a regression back to a more primitive stage. Vico's spiral structure of time deeply influenced the media historian and forefather of media archaeology, Marshall McLuhan.<sup>26</sup> McLuhan's analysis of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* predicts the circular relationship of *Vesuvius At Home* to cinema and media archaeology:

“Vico, like Joyce, insists that new technology is not added to culture, but it “ruins” whole societies, tossing them onto the middenhide or heap, whence they are forever being retrieved and refurbished by succeeding generations... The whole of *Finnegan's Wake* is a *ricorso*, a scrubbing purgation of private and corporate experience in the ‘dreaming back’.”<sup>27</sup>

In a visceral sense, while in Campagna, at every roundabout circumnavigated by the Fiat I repeated Vico under my breath: “*time is a spiral*.”<sup>28</sup> With each repetition, the film spiral is retrieved, refurbished, ‘dreams back’ to the epigraph, the end ‘dreams back’ to the beginning, as if it had unspooled into a heap.

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<sup>26</sup> Pruska Oldenhof and Logan, “The Spiral Structure of Marshall McLuhan's Thinking.”

<sup>27</sup> McLuhan and Watson, “From Cliché to Archetype.”

<sup>28</sup> Pruska Oldenhof and Logan, “The Spiral Structure of Marshall McLuhan's Thinking.”

The spiral decomposes into blobs of processing chemicals and then strips of emulsion that have undergone a film processing technique called Chroma-flex (however, on Tri-X reversal, being black and white stock, there is no chromatic spectrum so the terminology is imprecise). This technique was taught to me during a workshop hosted by filmmaker Richard Tuohy at Colorado University at Boulder. This method makes a striking appearance seen later in the film, the solarized/negative portrait of “the soldier.” Chroma-flex is billed as an alchemical act of sorcery, allowing selectively controlled negative and positive images to occupy the same strip of film, the chemistry working its magic under full light.<sup>29</sup> It’s an archaeological dig, stripping away layers of emulsion and chemical processing to preserve an image’s beginning and end in the same frame. This sequence is layered with red tails, to predict the re-emergence of red in the following segment.

Soon after we met he introduced me to the work of an older writer, whose profound wisdom is so refreshing and edifying to all Italians of this generation who are friends of justice. His name is Giambattista Vico, and they rank him above Montesquieu. From a cursory reading of the book, which was presented to me as if it were sacred write, it seems to me to contain the sibylline visions of the Good and the Just which will or should come true in the future, prophecies based on a profound study of life and tradition.<sup>30</sup>

At the end of a tunnel resembling Hieronymus Bosch’s painting *Paradise - Ascent of the Blessed*<sup>31</sup> we see an image, a broken column. The gate isn’t centered, the frame out of focus. It re-orientes itself, and focus is achieved, but the tunnel vision remains. Like remote viewing or astral projection, the Super-8mm camera, myself, moves through montage broken plaster casts of vessels, shattered television sets, statues, tattered books, Roman columns, torn couches strewn

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<sup>29</sup> “Chromaflex Workshop with Richard Tuohy — WNDX Festival of Moving Image.”

<sup>30</sup> Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786-1788*.

<sup>31</sup> Bosch, *Ascent of the Blessed*.



throughout what used to be Nelson Studios in Lucerne Valley, California. Nelson Studios was built by a background actor in the Hollywood epics of the 1950s-1960s, despite the Mojave Desert being more suitable for a spaghetti Western. It fell into disrepair, abandoned for decades. This location represents my Home, both internal and external, my Pompeii. The internal, the personal aspect is reinforced with images taken from Pompeii: my feet traipsing the stepping stones, an archway reflected in the middle of my shadow - a gateway into my mind. The external as my geographic home of Southern California's Inland Empire, as a film set of the Roman Empire, as an environment of economic and cultural *ricorso*. The Inland Empire was "ground zero" of the housing bubble, the economic Great Recession. Recent graduates like myself (of any discipline) were under-employed in whatever work was available. Unemployment and economic desperation changed the location more and more each year. Unmanaged sites like Nelson Studios were stripped of sheet metal and copper wire or used as an illegal dump. The fires and drought wrought by climate change transformed the landscape and atmosphere. The duality of destruction by the hand of nature and the hand of man merged in the emulsion of the film. In economic and personal ruins, I discovered my voice as a filmmaker.

The discovery of Nelson Studios was the result of answering a question: "If you were making a film for yourself and no one else, what is the one film you want to make?" I answered without thought, "Pompeii." The querent led me four hours north to this location the following week, on a spring day in 2011. Out of the ashes of my cinema dreams, burned by the "Great Recession," I felt a Phoenix, a fire bird, pulsating beneath ready to burst free. *A lava step at any time*,<sup>32</sup> the creative fire within. Red emerges like lava from crevices and vases, beneath my sandaled feet on Pompeii's cobblestones, smoldering.

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<sup>32</sup> "Volcanoes Be in Sicily by Emily Dickinson."

Like a moth to a flame, I returned to this site every year from 2011 - 2014 shooting on a Minolta with rolls of Super-8mm color reversal. Super-8mm was the medium of choice out of economic and technical needs. I had been gifted two Minoltas, the cherished intervalometer resembled my thought process, my interior dreams. In 2016, on a trip funded by the Virgil Grillo Memorial Grant, I returned with Tri-X B/W reversal stock and what was ostensibly the last roll of Hi-Con Super-8mm left in the world, gifted by Kevin T. Miller, digital transfer included. Shot on a Beaulieu, which was less intuitive than the Minolta, technical mistakes became assets. The shifts of gate, focus, and focal length stress reflexive awareness of cinema as a medium. On this journey, a new detail in the dross: unspooled magnetic tape dancing in the sun while pinned beneath a melted bas relief of embracing lovers, smashed VHS cartridges ground into the dirt. A *corso* to the *ricorso*, a natural progression returning to the 1993 VHS of The Fall of Pompeii.

The montage asserts Nelson Studios, Morehead City, and Pompeii are symbolically linked. “This is the city of Pompeii,” the girl states holding a book with an illustration. Mrs. Loomis silently zooms into a close-up of her face. In cinema, a close-up transforms the face into a landscape of emotion. However, these children lack emotion, transforming the landscape into an uncanny valley: youth frozen in time, in confusion, in boredom. Regardless, from this tape the seed was planted in me for an obsession with the visage.

When first conceiving Pompeii as *my film to make*, it was out of a desire to film a series of portraits sculpted in light. Specifically, portraits in the style of cinematographer Helmar Lerski<sup>33</sup>, or directors Carl Theodor Dreyer<sup>34</sup> and Alexander Dovzhenko<sup>35</sup>, have power when the emotion is motivated; a cataclysmic event exceeding human comprehension as a motive is a

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<sup>33</sup> Lerski, *Verwandlungen durch Licht* =.

<sup>34</sup> Dreyer, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

<sup>35</sup> Dovzhenko, *Earth*.

logical conclusion. However, as evinced in 1993, dumbfounded silence is the result, but the penny drops - figuratively and literally. "*The penny drops*" is an English idiom for *a belated realization of something after a period of confusion or ignorance*. Off-screen, a child drops a penny, this sound cuts to the Jewelry Shop, where I, a "rich lady" purchase a ruby ring.

It has always been a city of ruins and of end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy or making it my own. At least once in a lifetime, self-reflection leads us to examine the circumstances of our birth. Why were we born in this particular corner of the world, on this particular date? ... I sometimes think myself unlucky to have been born in an aging and impoverished city buried under the ashes of a ruined empire. But a voice inside me always insists this was really a piece of luck.<sup>36</sup>

I am clothed in a Tyrian purple princess costume from Halloween. Mrs. Loomis assigned roles to the class the night before, and I concluded a member of a royal family has wealth beyond common means. Like the Inland Empire, Morehead City was made for common means, a satellite for the military to live off-base in a home that wasn't military-issued. Thus, in costume, I am in character. I speak properly, I twirl for the camera, I wriggle my fingers to show how shiny properly cut rubies can be. I insert a match-cut teleporting to my hand in 2017, wriggling a ruby ring, on the streets of Pompeii. Returning to my twirl, *time is a spiral*. Mrs. Loomis pans across the girls in the class, the "rich ladies." As she comments on how well dressed we are, I walk through an archway in Pompeii, also panning with a camera. I catch a young female tourist twirling for social media selfies with her friends, *time is a spiral*. One of the children provides a reaction shot, twisting her mouth. During a visit to the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, I read of a dramatic increase of artwork in Pompeii depicting Narcissus in the years leading up to 79AD. The rise of selfie culture is aligned with the culture of Ancient Pompeians,

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<sup>36</sup> Pamuk and Freely, "Istanbul."

and with the culture of cinema. Throughout the film I insert allusions to this condition, this awareness, of decadence, of obsession for one's own image, for appearance.

A woman's hand swishes over the volcano, nails painted red. Mrs. Loomis is heard, "This is Mt. Vesuvius," (*a crater I may contemplate*).<sup>37</sup> The camera pans over Vesuvius, dry as a Colorado gulch. At the end of the pan, the color image switches to black-and-white Super-8mm. I lean on the guard rail pointing a boom mic at the volcano, my silhouette merges with the rocky vista. Standing on the summit of Vesuvius I envisioned myself as Empedocles, pupil of Pythagoras, who had gone public about remembering his past lives, he told his friends privately he was Apollo. His golden sandals were later found near the top of the volcano Mt. Etna. It was believed that either Empedocles, like Elijah, had been taken up into heaven bodily or he had jumped into the Volcano.

This choice of self-reflexive image was inspired by Basma Alsharif's film *Deep Sleep*.

A hypnosis-inducing pan-geographic shuttle built on brainwave-generating binaural beats, *Deep Sleep* takes us on a journey through the sound waves of Gaza to travel between different sights of modern ruin. Restricted from travel to Palestine, I learned auto-hypnosis for the purpose of bi-locating. What results is a journey, recorded on Super-8mm film, to the ruins of ancient civilizations embedded in modern civilization in ruins, to a site ruined beyond evidence of civilization. *Deep Sleep* is an invitation to move from the corporeal self to the cinema space in a collective act of bi-location that transcends the limits of geographical borders and plays with the fallibility of memory.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the film, Alsharif situates herself in the landscape from a first-person perspective. Her feet walking along the stepping stones leading to ruins in Athens and Jordan, carrying a microphone and recorder. Lying on the shore panning the camera across her body, across the oceanic vista. Her hand outstretched she pretends to touch the highest peak, the

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<sup>37</sup> "Volcanoes Be in Sicily by Emily Dickinson."

<sup>38</sup> "Deep Sleep | Video Data Bank."

Acropolis. She pans up from her feet to the Parthenon, swallowed in a quixotic rainbow soup, and then back again. She uses the self as a locus for the filmic journey. I choose to represent myself in the film in much the same manner, my sandaled feet traipsing cobblestones to place myself as Gradiva, as active participant, active maker. Contrapposto to the era of the selfie is the presentation of self in a position of active listening, active making.

In reality, it was a wind tunnel on the summit, but in the edit I capture the rumbling mystery of its interior. I build a psycho-geographic soundscape layering a burbling magma pit in Hawaii, the distant sonic spikes of Mt. Saint Helens erupting in 1980, a small explosion of an Indonesian volcano, and a gong made to sound like the planet Pluto. In mythology, Vesuvius was one of the portals to the underworld, ruled by Pluto. The only warning volcanologists have come from seismographs and auditory measurements piercing the magma chamber. Off-screen, my assistant cameraman Ciro pointed down to the heart of the crater, at a seismic monitor, “I was there, twenty-five years ago, filming the scientist install it.” What could Ciro hear?

The reality of Vesuvius fluctuates with its fantasies. The children from 1993 chant how Vesuvius always looked so calm, tame, gentle. Cuts to a scenic view of Pompeii, as seen from the street of the dead (this same image, but in 16x9 composition, ends the film). Vesuvius is seen from a further vantage point, miles away from Pompeii at the ruins of the Villa Ariana in Castellammare di Stabia. This is the final viewpoint Pliny the Elder had of Vesuvius before his death during the eruption of 79 AD.<sup>39</sup> The day was so beautiful, and the reference so grim. I held a red gel filter against the lens, flapping in the wind, a home made visual effect used in an ironic attempt to bridge the gulf of time. The artificial red color field provides a smooth match cut to the artificial red lava misting from the ceiling of MAV - the Virtual Archaeologic Museum

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<sup>39</sup> Pliny and Whitton, *Pliny, the Younger*.

in Herculaneum, pulsing to ominous bass tones. The camera passes through to the other side where the red and green lights that gave form to the mist blob on the floor aimlessly. Birds are heard chirping to peaceful music tones, mimicking the children's false sense of calm. *Boo!* The red and green lights from MAV become Green and Red tissue paper held against the camcorder lens by Mrs. Loomis in 1993. The green crumpled tissue paper of a dormant magma chamber is replaced with red crumpled tissue paper of an active magma chamber. The folds of tissue form a V in the middle of the frame, appearing fleshy and unsavory. All you need to represent the unfathomable - lava flows to Krakatoa skies to the green ray throbbing on a horizon – is a thing as simple as diaphanous colored tissue, or colored lights on mist. Cinema and art have always relied on imagination. We rattle our desks to audio effect, while the color vibrates with volumes of “magma.”

The class surrounds a picnic table outside, looming over the wooden block city of Pompeii. We chant, “but now I hear rumbles! And now I see ash falling down ashes falling! Falling down on the houses! It hurt! We’re going to get buried, we’re going to get killed. I can run fast! Run away!” Thick clods of ash from a barbeque dump on a tinker toy model of Pompeii, punctuating each line. Little girls in their best Sunday dresses run for their lives, emerging from the shade into the midwinter sun of December. Their escape is thwarted by a chain-link fence (made out of this mortal coil). One turns their head to look left, in 2017 my head turns left after her. I am making a selfie, with Narcissus and Agnes Varda<sup>40</sup> in mind. I, as filmmaker, am journeying to Italy, to Pompeii, I am active I am aware. The producer, Tommaso, is driving and is heard speaking to my assistant cameraman, Ciro, on the phone - listing the equipment needed for the next day's shoot. Tommaso's favorite Neapolitan musician, Pino

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<sup>40</sup> Varda, *The Gleaners & I*.

Daniele is in the CD player. We pass under an overpass saying the exit for Naples is after Pompeii, on the other side is Vesuvius. Cumulus clouds clustered around the summit resemble pyroclastic ash. Daniele croons *questo immenso* [how immense]. The immensity of the cataclysm is unfathomable, illustrations in a book or a baking soda reacting to vinegar pales the imagination.

Reality is willing to fill in the gaps. While touring the ruins at Herculaneum, a brushfire broke out directly adjacent to the ruins. My producer asked why I was filming clouds. I replied it wasn't clouds, it's fire. I shot it with my Blackmagic Pocket camera, and then Super-8mm time-lapse. As the siren wails drew closer, I moved to more open areas to judge the scale. Because I was filming digital, I thought about how a filmmaker of durational cinema would shoot. While I had approximately 20 minutes of footage from the fire, I decided it was best to create a sequence where the smoke rose like an escalator in direction and size. The concluding shots of the apocalyptic sequence were taken from a larger brushfire that engulfed 80% of Vesuvius. This act of arson by the mafia took place three days after the Herculaneum fire. I had already left Italy, so I downloaded cell phone videos of the event from YouTube and treated them in post to resemble film stock. I selected a video of the fire from the ruins in Pompeii to contrast with a video from the contemporary city area. The past, the present, and the future on the horizon. The rising smoke resulting in my childhood sign of "Dark Times" is an allusion to the contemporary cataclysm facing us: climate change. Furthermore, the content of the film shifts to darker content – corpses and caves.

"If the plastic arts were put under psycho-analysis, the process of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation. The process might reveal that at the origin of painting and sculpture there lies a mummy complex. The religion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic

psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time. To preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.

...Hence the charm of family albums. Those grey or sepia shadows, phantom-like and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrouded as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber.”<sup>41</sup>

The inclusion of the corpses and bodies as a running motif is inspired by the beginning to André Bazin’s essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, as a component of answering his own larger question *What Is Cinema?* It was this essay, read in 2007, was the match point where I connected *The Fall of Pompeii* with cinema, and *only* cinema. To Bazin, cinema had a mummy complex, and while I do possess footage of a plaster cast Sarcophagus lying in the chaparral of Nelson Studios and a mummy on display at the Vatican Museum, I decided in a short film these visual allusions to Bazin would confuse at best and be redundant at worst. The museum case around the plaster cast bodies of Pompeii and the hold of life in its death throes evident in the form were ample enough. It is fitting, however, that the only student viewing Pompeii in this perspective is myself, out of costume and pointing directly to the objectivity in time. I match-cut my present self-filming with myself excited “here’s another one!” to stress, as in the beginning of the film, it is me. My attention to detail is unmatched by the other students, understanding the lesson plan but also not understanding the bone study revealing exploitation of a slave girl. I point to each phase reconstructing the soldier’s face, the match-cut to a solarized look-alike of the soldier deconstructing each layer of film emulsion. The hand-processed Chroma-flex portrait

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<sup>41</sup> Bazin and Gray, *What Is Cinema?*



transitions to another soldier, a face in darkness. “This is what the soldier looked like when he was alive. That’s his face, and here’s his skeleton.” The young man turns his face to the camera, breaking the fourth wall at this moment, his illuminated eyes contradicting the verbal information of death. This is the power Bazin describes, as if bottling youth and beauty, bottling the soul, bottling the Cumaean Sibyl (whose only wish is to die, to be released from the prison of time).

We close in on the soldier’s face, illuminated by a single candle flame. This is how all faces for centuries were lit, the last sight of the Pompeiian soldier 2000 years ago. In the caverns, stables, and storage sheds of Pompeii and Herculaneum they found oil lamps among the dead. Making a film where death and destruction is already guaranteed, shifting the time, place, and impetus of the film is needed of this moment. Instead of holding a light against the darkness, the light at the end of 79AD, the now CGI soldier enters a room of the Villa di Papyri in Herculaneum. He raises the lantern towards the scrolls, illuminating the same texts that 1700 years later brought about the Enlightenment. Like the scrolls prophesying the entire history of the Roman Empire, thrown into the fire by their author, the Sibyl of Cumae, one by one with each barter by the Emperor for a lower price. The face of the soldier, visible only by the “light of truth” in his eyes, emulsion and half processed chemicals softly swirling. A strip of an actual scroll from the Villa di Papyri encased in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples passes top-to-bottom. A strip of film twists through the frame in the same direction. A second strip of a charred ancient scroll moves bottom-to-top, followed by a thread of spider’s silk leading from the depth of a cave to trees blowing in the wind. This is a modernist take on Bazin that flows from preservation, to illumination, to knowledge, to cinema, to the unbroken spider thread of time leading directly towards the Sibyl. This montage is only possible in 2017, wherein through

the development of x-rays and “unfolding” software development can the content of the scrolls be read and interpreted. In the *Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, author Stephen Greenblatt asserts as much in his conclusion, arguing that a second enlightenment could be upon us once these scrolls are interpreted.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, in choosing this montage, I considered the countless nitrate films lost to time, like scrolls, through volatile combustion and devaluation. The layers of knowledge behind my editing choices are not necessary to enjoy the work, but are very much a part of the work.

Observation as metabolized by education results in something akin to the supernatural, a *sorcery* of cinema. The spider’s web in the alcove of the Sibyl’s cave in Cumae is an image I return to and develop throughout the piece. In the film, Arachne’s weaving is a web of time, it is Ariadne’s thread for the minotaur’s labyrinth. Ariadne gave Theseus a thread to guide him through the labyrinth, if he broke it, his life was over.<sup>43</sup> This thread, be it spider web or film strip, leads the audience through the labyrinthine unconscious that underlies Vesuvius At Home’s structure and themes:

Ariadne's thread, named for the legend of Ariadne, is the solving of a problem with multiple apparent means of proceeding. It is the particular method used that is able to follow completely through to trace steps or take point by point a series of found truths in a contingent, ordered search that reaches an end position. This process can take the form of a mental record, a physical marking, or even a philosophical debate; it is the process itself that assumes the name.<sup>44</sup>

Ariadne’s thread came from the Ananke’s spindle, the primordial deity who marked the beginning of the cosmos, along with her father and consort, Chronos (time). She is the mother of

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<sup>42</sup> Greenblatt, *The Swerve*.

<sup>43</sup> “Ariadne.”

<sup>44</sup> “Ariadne’s Thread (Logic).”

the Fates, and is a personification of inevitability, compulsion and necessity.<sup>45</sup> In the film, these strands, which must not be broken, guide us. These strands indicate that we are in the presence of a prophecy, an oracle. The thread leads to the trees, where oak leaves dance in the breeze. This same breeze centuries earlier inspired Percy Bysshe Shelly's poem *Ode to the West Wind*.<sup>46</sup> These same oak leaves that author Mary Shelley collected from this same cave in Cumae; deciphering the Sibyl's prophetic scrawls on their surface to write a post-apocalyptic novel set in the year 2100, *The Last Man*.<sup>47</sup> These leaves pulse red, saturated with prophecy and intuition. These leaves lead to the Sibyl's cave, to Plato's cave, inside the camera, through the aperture to another world, to the second part of the film.

The second half of the film is its denouement. The opening of the cave of the Sibyl in Cumae is suspended in the darkness like the glass ampulla that imprisoned her. A dense soundscape of the oak trees, the West wind, Plutonian resonances, and an ethereal vocal (the Sibyl's) provided by Krzysztof Penderecki's "Psalmus."<sup>48</sup> Psalmus is ancient Greek for the sound of a stringed instrument – a harp, or lyre – while playing sacred songs. Anagrams for "psalm" are lamps, palms, and plasm. Approaching the end of the tunnel, as if re-entering Bosch's *Ascent of the Blessed*,<sup>49</sup> the opening blurs and becomes a Stargate. It's a Manichaeist image: the material world is a realm of darkness from which spiritual light must be extracted through ritual and practice. The voice of the Sibyl is at its peak, instantaneously transporting to the alcove of Ariadne's thread, the spider's web. A voice asks a second time, "Σίβνλλα τί Θέλεις;

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<sup>45</sup> "Ananke (Mythology)."

<sup>46</sup> Foundation, "Ode to the West Wind by Percy Bysshe Shelley."

<sup>47</sup> Shelley and Luke, *The Last Man*.

<sup>48</sup> "Psalmus 1961."

<sup>49</sup> Bosch, *Ascent of the Blessed*.

ἀπο Θανεῖν Θέλω.” [- Sibyl, what do you want most? - I want to die.]<sup>50</sup> Repeating is a return, a *ricorso* to the beginning of the film. A ricorso to its origins, placed in context of the very cave where the Sibyl was suspended in an ampulla, asked what she wants most. The thread of Sibyl’s fate leads into her prophecy.

A bas relief of Demeter, goddess of August (24, 79AD) shifts into sculptural forms. The case contains a body, a “mound” on display, in one of the few quiet moments in “sacred” alcoves. A museum display of the dead. Jacques Derrida associated the need to archive, for museums as part and parcel with Sigmund Freud’s death drive, specifically in reference to his psychoanalysis of Gradiva and Pompeii. Derrida completed *Archive Fever* in Pompeii. The museum, the archive as death drive was associated with cinema as death drive by Bazin. Filmmaker Chris Marker’s man from the future in *La Jeteé* dive through time and memory to wander the glass cases of a museum housing taxidermy animals. The man lives in an age of *ricorso*, an age of ruins, and is being sent back in time through his mind (dreams, memory) to the *corso*, in a futile attempt to change the future that is predestined to take place. In Gradiva, Norbert Hanold dreams that Gradiva is a victim of the eruption of 79 AD, who lies down before the temple of Apollo as if asleep – a sleeping statue. The image of my reflection in the glass to reveal the “sleeping” or “dreaming” “mound” is my interpretation/response to these notions. The segment surveying the storage facility of reproductions (or originals? The only way to tell is if bone or teeth peek through the plaster), displays the scale of archive fever, these mounds tour globally as history and curiosity. Hard to discern on Super-8mm, my voice echoes from the past and points at the mounds, the dog right there. In this moment, deep time condenses, people from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, cast in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, spoken of in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, depicted in a “dead”

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<sup>50</sup> “Nam Sibyllam Quidem - Epigraph - The Waste Land by T. S. Eliot.”

medium in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have archive fever, I had the death drive as early as age 8 (if not earlier). Now, twenty-five years later, like Vesuvius I wield the death drive for a creative purpose. I am the dreamer, I am the dream. This is where the fated thread from Ananke's spindle led. The shaft of light in the room of the dead, streaming in at a 45-degree angle match-cuts to Arachne's web of time followed at a 45-degree angle.

The thread returns for a third and final time, leading out of the labyrinth to the celestial heavens that glint, speak, and sing through the oak leaves. We are the Sibyl now, we see the world as she sees, we have dreamed her prophetic dream. Her words, sung in a choir of voices to Phillip K. Dick in a dream, "*you must put your slippers on to walk toward the dawn.*"<sup>51</sup> Aside from being where I received the notion to associate Penderecki's chorale <sup>52</sup> with the Sibyl, this passage pointed where to go next. To retrace my sandaled steps as Gradiva. Norbert Hanold, in his delirium, perceives Gradiva as a ghost in the city of the dead. <sup>53</sup>In cinema, ghosts are either seen or heard but never both, thus footsteps are never heard with feet. I step into the frame, approach the overlook at Cumae where Ingrid Bergman stood in Rossellini's *Journey to Italy*<sup>54</sup>. However, we never see Bergman's view, it is too picturesque for a film about the downfall of a marriage. The choice of black and white Super-8mm, its home-movie intimacy, informality, and timelessness was informed by writings by Jacques Rivette and Jean Luc Godard about *Journey to Italy*. Their relationship to *Journey to Italy* was akin to the Surrealists relationship to *Delusions and Dreams in Wilhelm Jensen's 'Gradiva A Pompeiian Fancy*, it became the foundation of their practice. <sup>55</sup> Using both texts as the foundation of my film, I thereby incorporate the surrealists

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<sup>51</sup> Dick, *Exegesis of Philip K by Philip K. Dick*.

<sup>52</sup> "Psalmus 1961."

<sup>53</sup> Jensen, *Gradiva; a Pompeiian Fancy*.

<sup>54</sup> Rossellini, *Journey to Italy*.

<sup>55</sup> Corrigan, *The Essay Film*.

and French new wave by proxy. I have, through form and thought become the ontology of my own photographic image. I Bazin-ed myself, I am a filmed artifact, internalizing (externalizing?) the “death drive” for preservation in cinema. The West wind keeps the image alive in my dress, my hair, the leaves and the water as I gaze towards the horizon.

On the horizon is Mt. Vesuvius, as seen from Miseno – a geographic fiction feasible through cinema. Bookending the view from Stabia, Miseno is the first view held by Pliny the Elder, and his nephew Pliny the Younger of Vesuvius’s eruption 2,000 years ago.<sup>56</sup> This was the perspective held as the decision was made to rally the navy and approach the inferno spewing from the mountain. *She will see the sea.*<sup>57</sup> The waters ripple off the bay he embarked upon. Watery subconscious, the intuitive red pulse transforms it to Dickinson’s lava flow. The bird chirps in time, for a single frame my sleeping face from 2007 is visible beneath the rouge waves, a callback to the sleeping mound, a callback to the surrealists, a callback to the *Delusions and Dreams in Wilhelm Jensen’s Gradiva*.<sup>58</sup> I am the dreamer, this is my dream, refracted. Shimmering water torn from a film strip rises into full view. The Sibylline song, the choir of Penderecki reverberates over the water ethereal, celestial, prophetic. The Anima of the film is animated in the advancing red that moves through the charged landscape of time and space. The red to ruins of California where Ananke’s spindle pierced my trigger finger on the Super-8mm camera. The refractions and shimmering yellow plastic wash over the ricorso, the overturned plastic patio chair, charred wooden beams, plaster arches. The text in a tattered book’s pages flipping in the desert wind reads like a Sibylline scroll: “Epoch,” “The Glacial and Interglacial.” Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines “epoch” as a period of time in a person’s life, typically

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<sup>56</sup> Pliny and Whitton, *Pliny, the Younger*.

<sup>57</sup> Dick, *Exegesis of Philip K by Philip K. Dick*.

<sup>58</sup> Freud, “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*.”

one marked by notable events or particular characteristics; or, the beginning of a distinctive period in the history of someone or something. Before the inherent meaning can be fully discerned, the frame moves on, tears, parts to reveal my face from the beginning of the VHS tape. The *ricorso* to the *corso*, the return to the beginning.

The fractured, dancing landscape overlaying glitching chromatic VHS footage from *The Fall of Pompeii* is the result of several layers of footage combined together. 2-3 layers of the refracted image created in collaboration with Miller, one layer of VHS footage, and two layers of scrambled VHS tape created with Wyndham Hannaway. This imagery, reminiscent of the excoriating processes of abstract painter Mark Bradford, rips through layers of present, past and future to blur the boundaries between them. To take another line from *The Waste Land*, (a key text for my previous film *What Happens to the Mountain*), through the layers we see a series of broken images. The bread, the bread of life: when PK Dick experienced *his* engram, he recalled his past life as an early Christian in the Roman empire during the first century AD<sup>59</sup>; the rise of Christianity and the doomed fall of paganism in righteous fire was the key plot point to the Pompeian fantasies *Last Days of Pompeii*, and Théophile Gautier's *Arria Marcella*.<sup>60</sup> The tile they found on the floor was underfoot of Gradiva, the patterned mosaic structure of Vesuvius At Home. Jewelry, decadence, wealth embedded in the ruins of *ricorso*, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a gilded age as much if not more than centuries ago. The soundtrack of hammering nails (Christianity? Construction during the housing bubble? Hammering the point home?) mixes with audio of film sprockets rhythmically pulled through the camera's gate, the garbled voices of children through magnetic audio decay. The entropy of society, of memory, of time tear at the fabric of time from whence the film began. The colors, too, are the result of light splitting through a prism. As the

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<sup>59</sup> Dick, *Exegesis of Philip K by Philip K. Dick*.

<sup>60</sup> Gautier and Hearn, *One of Cleopatra's Nights*.

breach seals, tries to heal itself, the layers die away until the song of the Sibyl stops at a punctum sound: the same gate/arch/column in color switches to black and white.

I had switched Super-8mm film reels – swapping the 50D color for Tri-X b/w while sitting on an upturned paint bucket on location. It's the same angle, the same camera, a perfect graphic match. I pan over the detritus, which includes a shattered television set and VCR player. I have never planted anything at a location, the gift of psycho-geography is if you truly *know* what you're doing you're usually *right*. The camera pan becomes a camera dolly past a half-constructed apartment complex a hundred feet outside the archaeological site in Pompeii. Freeze frame, like the oak leaves, over the written sign Vendesi [for sale]: the *ricorso* is global. Red flash to the Basilica in Pompeii, intuiting the silhouette of the modern ruin is akin to ancient ruin.

In the crevice of the ruins is a flower used as a tea in ancient times for divination, the dandelion (it wasn't the season for asphodel, yet it is one of the "Flowers of Pompeii"<sup>61</sup>). This empty city, the city of the dead, grows like a weed in the mind. The camera dances over the columns, arches, and prosceniums of the forum to Penderecki's tune<sup>62</sup>, animating stone, advancing rock. Time is a spiral, the camera spins out of the forum and into the coliseum, whirling so fast the windows become sprocket holes in a film strip. The magic spell takes hold, the 4x3 ratio falls away and a full-frame 16x9 strip of Super-8mm film emerges, rising and falling and rising again. The spool of film runs out.

What you have to come to is the last few frames of the long reel of film which was your first-born ego or personality or consciousness. When the final frame is gone, only the void would remain. It would seem evident that when the final frame is gone, only the void would remain, however the void is I guess god himself. He fills it up. We have an incorrect idea of the nature of the void.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Brakhage, *In Consideration of Pompeii*.

<sup>62</sup> "Psalmus 1961."

<sup>63</sup> Dick, *Exegesis of Philip K by Philip K. Dick*.



Aside from the *sorcery* of a graphic cut from coliseum walls to sprocket holes, the choice to end the film with the unspooling Super-8mm from the beginning, but horizontal, was out of Vico, Phillip K. Dick, and my mother. The unspooling spiral of time from Giambattista Vico is referred to by Marshall McLuhan, P.K. Dick, and now myself. However, the specific description from Dick in his exegesis reminded me of a dream my mother told me. She once had a dream where she saw God, and it was as she approached a mountain. On top of the mountain was Jesus, and as she got closer the image of Jesus became unstable and revealed sprocket holes on the side. She kept approaching, and his smile radiated to her very soul, and at that moment of sublime bliss the film strip ran out and left her in a void. She woke up. She was 21 at the time, and teaching experimental camera-less animation to schoolchildren at a Catholic school in Florida. In the amalgamation of these sources, one personal and rest intellectual, the film had to end with the catalyst of it all: the impersonal natural force, god-like in its destruction and impact, Mt. Vesuvius. Specifically, the shadow of Vesuvius looming over the gate of the dead, whilst photographed and lightly traipsed upon by blithe young women.

Thus, one is tossed about between the acts of Nature and the acts of men. One would like to think, but feels to incompetent. Meanwhile the living merrily goes on living. We, of course, did not fail to do the same, but people of culture, who belong to the world and know its ways, and are also warned by grave events, are inclined to reflections. As I was lost in contemplation of an unlimited view over earth, sea, and sky, I was called back to myself by the presence of an amiable young lady who is accustomed to receive attentions and is not indifferent to them.<sup>64</sup>

The women at the gate are my avatar. I found them, when turned the camera onto the golden hour view of Vesuvius and Pompeii, situated across from the ATM. They entered the

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<sup>64</sup> Goethe, *Italian Journey, 1786-1788*.

frame from the middle ground, and I patiently shot as they dipped in and out of alcoves taking selfies in the newest sense: they would post the picture their friend took of themselves to their own page. The age of Narcissus predating the fall had returned, gracefully. The girl in black comes down the lane and pans her camera phone to capture the row of sarcophagi on the street of the dead. I cannot tell if she knows I see her, and she sees me and we mutually capture each other, becoming each other's muse. Women looking at women looking at women. I had tried capturing this same gate three times, at similar hours, because it was mentioned in *Gradiva* as the entry point Norbert Hanold took in his delirium search for her. I found her, two *Gradivas*, a doppelganger gift. Her friend comes down the lane, twirls like the girls I had captured in the basilica, *time is a spiral*<sup>65</sup>. They exit the frame, we exit the film. In mythology either ancient (The Cumaean Sibyl, Ananke, Ariadne, Arachne, Demeter, Persephone) or modern (the blind girl of Pompeii, *Arria Marcella*, *Gradiva* – whom the Surrealists termed a “modern myth” and became the nickname of any woman, gallery, or muse in their social circle i.e. Gala, Dora Maar<sup>66</sup>), women are the psychopomp to Pompeii in all its artistic incarnations. Be they goddesses, be they oracles, be they citizens, be they victims, be they phantasms, be they sorceress, be they schoolmates, be they teachers, be they tourists, be they poets, be they writers, be they actresses, be they filmmakers, they navigate their reality through a psycho-geographic realm that can only be dreamt of by those outside the frame.

In effect, nothing dies; all things are eternal. No power can annihilate that which once had being. Every action, every word, every thought which has fallen into the universal ocean of being, therein creates circles which travel, and increase in travelling, even to the confines of eternity. To vulgar eyes only do natural forms disappear, and the specters which have thence detached themselves people Infinity...A few passionate and powerful minds have been

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<sup>65</sup> Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*.

<sup>66</sup> Coates, Lapatin, and Seydl, *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

able to recall before them ages apparently long passed away, and to restore to life personages dead to all the world beside. Faust has had for his mistress the daughter of Tyndarus, and conducted her to his Gothic castle in the depths of the mysterious abysses of Hades. Octavian had been able to live a day under the reign of Titus, and to make himself beloved of Arria Marcella, daughter of Arrius Diomedes, she who was at that moment lying upon an antique couch beside him in a city destroyed for all the rest of the world.

- *Arria Marcella*, Théophile Gautier<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Gautier and Hearn, *One of Cleopatra's Nights*.

## AFTERWORD

*Vesuvius at Home* is an investigation into the convergence of both personal and universal anamnesis spurred by an historic event. The power of the engram, either a VHS tape or a bas relief of a woman mid-stride in a museum, sparks a chain reaction of events that lead toward anamnesis. The psychopomp, the guide, to personal and universal truth is represented by the Cumaean Sibyl. The Sibyl speaks in resonant tones in red, pulsing like lava through a crevice. The multi-layered references to history, literature, cinema, and the self, assert the universal processes of anamnesis.

This process is personal, as in my VHS tape or Wilhelm Jensen's *Gradiva*, and universal, as in Giambattista Vico's theory of the *corso* and *ricorso* of societies. The *corsi* and *ricorsi* of time spirals throughout the film as a rotating strip of celluloid. Modern and ancient ruins are only one form of archive, another form, plaster casts of body cavities frozen in their final breath of life. It is this latter form: a sculpture of time, that separates Pompeii from all similar historic events and brings it closest to cinema: sculpting in time.<sup>68</sup> Cinema is the only form that re-animates the ruins, the people through slices of time embedded in slices of emulsion.

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<sup>68</sup> Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*.

## CONTEXT AND INFLUENCE

*Something came into his consciousness for the first time: without being aware himself of the impulse within him, he had come to Italy and had traveled onto Pompeii, without stopping in Rome or Naples, in order to see whether he could find any traces of her. And 'traces' in the literal sense; for with her peculiar gait she must have left behind an imprint of her toes in the ashes distinct from all the rest.*

- *Gradiva, a Pompeiian Fancy*, Wilhelm Jensen<sup>69</sup>

Hanold suffers from archive fever. He has exhausted the science of archaeology. He had, the novel says, become a master in the art of deciphering the most indecipherable, the most enigmatic graffiti. But he had had enough of his science and of his abilities. His impatient desire rebelled against their positivity as if before death. This science itself was of the past. What it taught, he said to himself, is a lifeless archaeological intuition. And in the moment when Pompeii comes back to life, when the dead awake, Hanold understands everything. He understands why he had traveled through Rome and Naples. He begins to know what he did not then know, namely his “intimate drive “or “impulse.” And this knowledge, this comprehension, this deciphering of the interior desire to decipher which drove him on to Pompeii, all of this comes back to him in an act of memory. He recalls that he came to see if he could find her traces, the traces of Gradiva’s footsteps.

- *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida<sup>70</sup>

My thesis film is in the infamous non-genre: the essay film. Nora Alter insists the essay film is “*not* a genre, as it strives to be beyond formal, conceptual and social constraint... The essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, it is self-reflective and self-reflexive.”<sup>71</sup> The interest in essay is not to communicate as a lecture, or narration, but positioned through the apparatus of a personal camera: a framing device for a filmmaker’s ideas communicated through experience. As Louis D. Gianetti states, “an essay is

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<sup>69</sup> Jensen, *Gradiva; a Pompeiian Fancy*.

<sup>70</sup> Derrida and Prenowitz, “Archive Fever.”

<sup>71</sup> Alter, “The Political Im/Perceptible in the Essay Film.”

neither fiction nor fact, but a personal investigation involving both the passion and intellect of the author.”<sup>72</sup> The essay film is the *only* genre where the filmmaker is positioned as author not of narrative, but an author in the sense that they are central to the ideas presented. Furthermore, this is an essay film as Paul Arthur suggests that “one way to think about the essay film is as a meeting ground for documentary, avant-garde, and art film impulses.”<sup>73</sup> *Vesuvius At Home* utilizes the essay’s ability to incorporate methods from Avant-Garde and art films not to serve narrative or conversely pure form, but emotional intelligence. Thus, this “genre” is an appropriate choice for a film that, like Norbert Hanold in *Gradiva*, quests not for fact, narrative, or artistic expression alone, but rather for impressions (intellectual, spiritual, prophetic, cinematic) left at the *moment of their making* in the ashes of Pompeii. *Vesuvius at Home* (like all essay films) originates from the filmmaker’s archive fever: intimate drives and unconscious impulses led me to excavate the meaning embedded in the psycho-geographic spaces of Pompeii, California, and North Carolina. To me, film is a terrain, inseparable from the environments that shape its ideas and emotional resonance. Like Hanold, only when the destination of dreams and delusions (psycho-geography) is physically reached can it be psychologically reached. Thus, in *Vesuvius At Home* the journey is as important as the destination.

The members of Cahiers du Cinema, Jacques Rivette and Jean-Luc Godard amongst them, considered *Journey to Italy*<sup>74</sup> by Roberto Rossellini to be the first essay film. An experiential essay on the dissolution of a relationship communicated through a charged psycho-geographic landscape of Campagna and Pompeii. Landscape becomes a necessary stand-in since the disaffected couple inherently cannot communicate to each other. Prior to arriving at the term

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<sup>72</sup> Giannetti, *Godard and Others*.

<sup>73</sup> Arthur, “Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore.”

<sup>74</sup> Rossellini, *Journey to Italy*.

essay, they compared *Journey to Italy* to home movies, to reality.<sup>75</sup> In truth, *Journey to Italy* was a hybrid form, not glossy enough to be Hollywood narrative, not factual as a documentary, but a veiled presentation of Ingrid Bergman's pathos in Italy while she is estranged from her husband by falling in love with Roberto Rossellini. Each location served as a metaphor for Bergman's internal development, each location is steeped in a phase of her emotional arc: disgust, desire, loss, reproduction, intuition, transcendence. This film thus became the foundational text for the French New Wave, and the location itinerary for *Vesuvius At Home*.

Like Rossellini in *Journey to Italy*, I consider landscapes as repositories for mythos, a place to embody or project our collective memories, experiences, and emotions. A journey, and those that journey or wander, are thus informed by landscapes. Location is the key influence for *Vesuvius At Home*, it is impossible to make a film about psycho-geographic obsession without actual locations. I discovered this through my own work, my films *What Happens to the Mountain*<sup>76</sup> and *Limbo in Paradise*.<sup>77</sup> These three films could be considered a mountain trilogy, where there are no actual mountains in the traditional sense, instead only their psychological impacts on their participants, all individuals navigating a landscape that can only be truly perceived through a mythic lens. An experimental film, *What Happens to the Mountain* was driven by a need to see and experience the charged landscape of Devil's Tower, a location famous for its obsessive psychological presence in the mind of Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*<sup>78</sup>. My task as a filmmaker was to re-claim and re-frame the mountain and its surroundings to convey its mythic origins and the poetic experience of the journey itself. This necessitated borrowing from genres of cinema and literature structured for

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<sup>75</sup> Corrigan, *The Essay Film*.

<sup>76</sup> Turner, *What Happens to the Mountain*.

<sup>77</sup> Turner, *Limbo In Paradise*.

<sup>78</sup> Spielberg, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

and by the unconscious motivations of self and societies. I choose the poetry of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* due to its visual resonance with the material – red rocks, the land of the dead, a journey to transcendence. Structural and Avant-Garde films that studied the impact of color & after-image on the psyche, like Paul Sharits' *Ray Gun Virus* <sup>79</sup> instilled confidence in the resonant power of pigment, and black frames for resonance. Using these forms enabled me to transform the geographic landscape of America's first National Monument from geography to psycho-geography, a place for the psyche.

In *Limbo in Paradise*<sup>80</sup>, an experimental narrative film, I challenged myself to strip down to the essential elements of the frame to transform the space. No layers, no color, no distortion outside of what is spoken internally and externally by the character, and the people and places they traverse. The impetus of the work was to perceive psycho-geographic space as instead originating from a character but informed by the location. This conceit became essential to crafting the structural concept of *Vesuvius At Home*, which was shot and edited as originating from the filmmaker. The narrative itself for *Limbo in Paradise* was an improvisation of the terrain, the scaffolding being real events that had happened to one or more of the characters prior to filming. It focused on notions of place within a state of “placelessness.” None of the characters, or the audience, can quite place Aloysius. Aloysius consistently attempts to place himself within society with varying degrees of success. The location itself changes rapidly, the light and shadows coat Aloysius in an oscillating chiaroscuro as he walks by the creek. The picturesque Flatirons can oscillate in and out of inclement weather. Aloysius's internal monologue shifts in subject and narrative just as rapidly. In building my sensitivity to the ideas

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<sup>79</sup> Sharits, *Ray Gun Virus*.

<sup>80</sup> Turner, *Limbo In Paradise*.



embedded in the forms of the land, the motion of the personal camera through that land, was I able to confront a landscape I had obsessed and dreamed of for a quarter century: Pompeii.

As in the Derrida analysis of *Gradiva*, I had to become a master in the art of deciphering the most indecipherable, the most enigmatic graffiti scrawled on each location. To approach Pompeii, I had to research the marks that came before me. The graffiti left behind by those who shared this location, this obsession in film and other forms. In 2012 the Getty Villa, an exact replica of the Villa di Papyri in Herculaneum, hosted an exhibition titled *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection*.<sup>81</sup> This exhibit placed Pompeii not in a historical context (as did most travelling installations) but within an artistic context. All at once was I able to perceive and digest the resonant ideas excavated from Pompeii and interpreted through all mediums: literature, theater, photography, cinema, painting, and sculpture. The curators traced the history and influence of excavations' impact on the Surrealists, Freud, Warhol, Rothko, Turner, Goethe, Rossellini, and more. The skeleton keys of *Journey to Italy*, *Gradiva*, and the color red were found in this exhibition. From this point, the research into Pompeii, *Gradiva*, and its cinematic forms required five years of investigation.

Knowing I was interested in psycho-geography and the essay film for *Vesuvius At Home*, I restricted my investigation of filmmakers to those operating in the short form, making works specific to Pompeii or *Gradiva*, or films that juxtaposed personal memory with ruins. For *Gradiva* there have been four films made titled *Gradiva*: two feature-length narrative films, *Gradiva*<sup>82</sup> by the star of *Last Year at Marienbad*<sup>83</sup>, Giorgio Albertazzi, and *It's Gradiva Who Is*

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<sup>81</sup> Coates, Lapatin, and Seydl, *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

<sup>82</sup> Albertazzi, *Gradiva*.

<sup>83</sup> Resnais, *Last Year at Marienbad*.

*Calling You*<sup>84</sup> by the screenwriter of *Last Year at Marienbad*, Alain Robbe-Grillet. In some cases, *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*<sup>85</sup> can be considered veiled interpretations of *Gradiva*; and two short art films, *Gradiva Sketch I*<sup>86</sup> by French cineaste Raymonde Carasco (with Bruno Nuytten as cinematographer), and *Gradiva*, also titled *Coiled*<sup>87</sup> by Chicago queer filmmaker Zack Stiglicz.

The feature films and Carasco's short liberated *Vesuvius At Home* from needing to be directly representational of the source material. Stiglicz's film was a hybrid of personal essay and experimental form aligning his subconscious erotic desires with Norbert Hanold's repressed erotic memories. Stiglicz's visual structure blends the real with the surreal. Multi-layered, solarized images transform water into lava, a face to a bas relief, and an unblinking eye to inner vision. These enigmatic images contrast with the realities Stiglicz confronts: men cruising ancient ruins in a park and beach, heterosexual couples dancing in a town square. Illusions and delusions are confronted with the realities of his desire. Or, as Stiglicz puts it succinctly: "Sumptuous color and fragmented narration are used to explore heterosexual desire amidst a homoerotic 'fever—zone'." <sup>88</sup> Stiglicz's own voice narrates the film, summarizing as if from memory the plot for the novella *Gradiva*, Sigmund Freud's interpretation, and Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Freud in *Archive Fever*. With this film, the necessity of having a personal narration was released. I decided to keep the soundscape of *Vesuvius At Home* grounded in experience, and avoid an embodied voice. I decided "psychedelic" chromatic imagery was now unnecessary for my version, a notion reinforced by Basma Alsharif's use of such in *Deep Sleep*,

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<sup>84</sup> Robbe-Grillet, *Gradiva (C'est Gradiva Qui Vous Appelle)*.

<sup>85</sup> Resnais, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

<sup>86</sup> Carasco, *Gradiva Esquisse I*.

<sup>87</sup> Stiglicz, *Coiled*.

<sup>88</sup> "The 4th Annual Inside OUT Lesbian Gay Film + Video Festival of Toronto Programme Guide."

but appreciated the rhythmic divergence from reality to the surreal or interior vision.

Furthermore, Stiglicz inspired the process of fully digesting the source text of *Gradiva*, Freud, and Derrida and in doing so leave the unnecessary details and density out.

Thanked in the credits of *Vesuvius At Home* is Basma Alsharif, whose *Deep Sleep*<sup>89</sup> inspired modes of self-representation as filmmaker, using the camera apparatus and self as the locus for the journey. Knowing the film had to incorporate VHS footage of myself and my classmates as children, I had to represent myself. Akosua Adoma Owusu asserted that I must show myself, since my face and personality hardly changed with time. Myself, Alsharif and Owusu have incorporated ourselves in our work in methods pioneered by Agnes Varda. In the *Gleaners and I* she turns the camera on herself, to show time's impact on hands or hair. She holds the camera and makes fingered frames for cars. She holds her camera in mirrors, aligning the camera-eye at eye-level. Both Alsharif and Owusu helped me understand Super-8mm film as an intimate and liberating medium, the best medium for self-expression. Alsharif and Owusu both used Super-8mm film to keep both crew and equipment to a bare minimum while traveling abroad to locations of ruins in Africa, Athens, and Lebanon. The practicality of the portability and affordability of Super-8mm was the reason I myself shot *Nelson Studios* in this format. The need to be "taken seriously" by one's medium is a problematic one, and both Alsharif and Owusu removed these doubts for me and allowed me to focus on what truly matters: the film. Alsharif and Owusu, during separate studio visits in regard to *Vesuvius At Home*, pushed me to reinforce my commitment to travel to Pompeii. *Deep Sleep* was a creative response to a filmmaker being denied a location essential to her practice by the State. By presenting the idea of

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<sup>89</sup> Alsharif, *Deep Sleep*.

never going to Pompeii and making the film with what I already had, I recognized the need of a film based in psycho-geography to be *in situ*.

On the opposite end of this spectrum of contextual representation and self-representation is Stan Brakhage's *In Consideration of Pompeii*,<sup>90</sup> an abstract work optically printed to an unheard score, to an interior rhythm famously Brakhage. Color and light moved between in inter-titles of enigmatic phrases or ideas pulled from the larger narrative of history: "The Flowers of Pompeii," "Ashen Snow," and "Angelus." I understood this structure to be a means of expressing inner feelings or inner vision as reaction to a dense and loaded historical event. One does not need the full story, the full context, or the full view to understand an idea. Paring down 2000 years of history and context to its essential components, the essential themes, is why *Vesuvius At Home* is an essay film that requires an essay to fully understand, but not an essay to fully experience – an artist's intuition is enough.

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<sup>90</sup> Brakhage, *In Consideration of Pompeii*.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the connections between my filmmaking practice, Mt. Vesuvius, Nelson Studios, *The Fall of Pompeii* (the real and the re-enacted), and my personal journey through this psycho-geographic terrain towards anamnesis as filmmaker, we have traversed beyond thinking of them as individual sites, but as layers in an interconnected process. Like strips of carbon in the geologic record, or carbon dioxide bubbles trapped in ice cores, the pressure of time seals our fate. The fate of an artist is to communicate, like Mercury as psychopomp, the soul of their medium. The soul of cinema, dead celluloid, to its underworld.

In preparing for one's own voice, in excavating previous interpretations of this material, the baggage of narrative is removed and replaced with direct enigmatic experience. It is through direct experience of fate, of the *corsi* and *ricorsi* of the ages, can cinema spiral down to its core.

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