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Visual Thesis: Script & Link

The Afterlife of images: Preservation, Death, and the Archive in Ruin

Orphaned Frames (2025)

Digital Video

Archival footage sourced from the Internet Archive

December 10th, 2025

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[Link to Visual Thesis](#)

Introduction

(not voiced)

This video essay explores the archive as a place where preservation and loss exist side by side. I am interested in what becomes an image once its original context has dissolved, and how acts of preservation can transform meaning rather than protect it.

Through this work, I ask: *What becomes of an image when its body disappears, and what kind of afterlife does the archive produce in its place?*

The project places the analogue practice of Tacita Dean in dialogue with The Prelinger Archives, examining how each approaches preservation, decay, and repetition. Alongside these references, I reflect upon my own practice, using photography and moving image to respond to encounters within both material and digital archival spaces.

This project uses analogue film, duration, and refusal of repair to test how archival images persist beyond memory, positioning disappearance not as failure but as an ethical condition shaped by repetition, responsibility, and material consequence. The spoken text operates alongside the images rather than explaining them, while annotations function as a critical frame that situates formal decisions within archival theory.

Section 1

(Voiceover)

What becomes of a film reel after its subjects have been long forgotten?

Luminous slides in motion capture fragments of a life once lived.

Once, these figures were anchored to names and voices.

Now, they circulate within a wide digital net.

In the archive, images are replayed again and again, long after the bodies that cast their shadows have been buried.

The image continues to move, yet the subject is no longer there to return a meaningful gaze.

I return to the archive because it mirrors my own discomfort around how images persist once their original contexts have dissolved.

This question emerged while working closely alongside archival films that hold no identifying information about their origins.

No names.

No dates.

No contextual information.

Only a phrase placed within their description: '*To come.*'

The afterlife of an image is bound to its origin. Derrida describes the desire to capture time as a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic impulse (Derrida, 1996).

Preservation does not offer comfort against loss; it responds to it.

Rather than stabilising memory, preservation reflects an anxiety around disappearance and forgetting. Memory shifts from something lived and contextual to something shaped by what remains.

Images no longer function as records,

but as traces,

circulating beyond their origins.

In returning to the archive, we seek what Derrida describes as a desire to return to an archaic place of commencement (Derrida, 1996). Yet this return is never resolved.

The image is marked by distance from its origin and by the conditions of its preservation.

Derrida's notion of the archive's death drive positions preservation as a compulsive act:

An impulse to repeat,
to record,
to categorise,
to impose order.

In doing so, the archive produces erasure and fragmentation. Preservation becomes inseparable from destruction (Derrida, 1996).

This longing appears first within the domestic archive. Family photographs are among the earliest archival gestures, created in anticipation of loss. Image making often functioned as a response to grief, a way of preserving the presence of loved ones.

Post-mortem photography makes explicit what the domestic archive already implies.

Here, images are no longer created in anticipation of loss, but a response to it. These photographs attempt to stabilise presence after death, produced for a moment when memory begins to fail.

Through Derrida's notion of preservation as compulsion, post-mortem photography reveals an archive driven by anxiety toward loss, rather than confidence in memory (Derrida, 1996).

These images do not secure memory.

They generate afterlives.

Section 2

(voiceover)

As images move from private collections into public archival systems,
their meanings begin to shift.

Where the domestic archive prepares for loss, the digital archive exposes loss as an ongoing condition.

What was once embedded within domestic life can lose its names, its voices and its ownership. Images begin to circulate without stable authorship.

What is at stake is no longer memory alone, but responsibility.

Who is accountable for images that persist once their subjects, contexts, and authorship have disappeared?

In this transition, films become orphaned; detached from the frameworks that once anchored them.

The Prelinger archives present a distinct archival condition.

The collection is composed largely of orphaned films: educational reels, industrial footage, domestic recordings and amateur home movies. The archive prioritises access and circulation (Prelinger, 2012).

Many of these films arrive already displaced, detached from their original purposes and meanings.

Loss is not concealed; it is made visible through circulation.

With over sixty-thousand so-called “ephemeral” films distributed freely online, these images are not restored to their original contexts.

Their absences remain unresolved.

This persistence resembles survival through exposure rather than care.

Within the digital archive, contexts erode. Meaning becomes speculative.

The viewer no longer encounters the past as it was lived, but as fragments that must be reassembled in the present.

Rather than restoring coherence, my interventions deliberately interrupt circulation, making repetition visible rather than seamless.

Derrida describes the archive as site of repetition without resolution (Derrida, 1996).

Here, reproduction does not return images to their origin—it distances them further.

Hito Steyerl describes this condition as *the poor image*: copied, compressed, redistributed (Steyerl, 2009).

The poor image loses stability while gaining reach.

In this environment, preservation becomes detached from care.

Images persist not through protection, but through circulation.

As these images continue to move, an unease emerges.

The subjects of these films persist only as gestures, movements, expressions. Their bodies are gone, yet motion remains.

In reanimating these images, we do not restore life.

We produce a mediated simulation of it.

My own work is not exempt from this condition.

Even refusal circulates.

Even withholding becomes visible.

Derrida's hauntology is useful here, not as an explanation,

but as a way of naming a condition that resists resolution (Derrida, 1994).

These images exist in-between.

This unease shapes my visual response. I refuse clarity and completion.

Bodies fragment.

Faces dissolve.

The image is acknowledged as spectral-
not restored,
nor resolved.

If the digital archive sustains images through endless circulation, I question whether another
form of preservation is possible,
one that does not deny loss
but accepts it.

Breakdown Sequence

(Voiceover + silence)

(film cuts, colour rupture begins)

This is not interruption.

The film reaches its end.

(pause)

What follows
is not an image.

(pause)

It is residue.

(longer pause - colour distortion continues)

The material has exhausted itself.

This is not a glitch.

It is not restoration failing.

(pause)

It is time made visible.

(pause)

The archive cannot hold this.

(reel sound fades - heartbeat begins)

Mechanical time gives way to bodily time.

(let the heartbeat run)

The archive repeats.

The body does not.

(still eye appears)

What remains
is not a subject.

(pause)

It is a witness.

(pause)

The gaze persists.

The life does not.

(eye disappears - damaged film resumes)

This is the afterlife the archive produces.

(pause)

Not memory.

Not return.

(pause)

Endurance.

(midway through)

(long silence)

(towards the end of the sequence)

To continue

is not care.

(pause)

It is compulsion.

(final line before next section)

Some images
must be allowed
to end.

(home video continues)

Section 3

(voiceover)

If the digital archive survives by denying disappearance,
Tacita Dean's practice begins where disappearance is allowed.

Against endless circulation,
her work turns to film
as material.

Fragile.

Exposed.

Mortal.

Where the poor image survives through compression and reproduction,
Dean's films survive through vulnerability.

She insists on analogue film:

not as nostalgia,

but as truth.

As she reflects:

“With negative, it is the template. That is the truth.” (Dean in Anchard, 2025)

This truth is not appearance,

but indexicality.

The negative is not a copy,

it is the first imprint.

A physical trace

formed by light,

time,

and surface.

What is lost within the digital archive is this bond.

Dean’s practice does not attempt to stabilise the image.

Vulnerability is not corrected it remains.

Dust, scratches, flickers, and decay

are not flaws, but evidence.

Evidence that film is a body.

Unlike digital images,
which often circulate without material consequence,
film changes when it is handled.

It risks damage when it is viewed.
Viewing itself becomes an entropic act.

Film behaves like a body:
organic,
finite,
exposed,
mortal.

Dean's resistance to digitisation
is not about preservation,
it is about time.

Each frame carries duration
Each image bears loss.

These are not gestures of repair,
but acknowledgements of finitude.

Against the archive's compulsive repetition,

Dean's work interrupts.

She does not seek to overcome loss.

She makes room for it.

In doing so,

Finitude becomes an ethical position.

Section 4

My practice-led project *Residuum* emerges from repeated returns to archival spaces.

spaces not designed to be seen.

Storage rooms.

Back rooms.

Sites of holding rather than display.

These spaces prioritise preservation over visibility, revealing how care often depends on withdrawal rather than exposure.

Here, objects wait.

Removed from origin.

Removed from use.

Held in anticipation of a future viewer that may never arrive.

Working with 35mm film,

I photograph materials from both small, local collections and larger institutional archives.

The objects I encounter have already passed through systems of care:

Cataloguing.

Storage.

Protection.

Labels.

Straps.

Coverings.

These materials do not disappear in preservation.

They accumulate.

They become a part of the object's visual language.

By photographing objects within these systems,
I perform a secondary archival gesture.

Not to rescue.

Not to restore.

Not to complete.

But to acknowledge that preservation also rearranges,
distances
and wounds.

Photography is already an intervention.

Residuum accepts this rather than disguising it as care.

Analogue film is central to this process.

It introduces uncertainty,
delay,
and consequence.

It cannot be refreshed or endlessly replayed without cost.

Each exposure is finite.

Each image carries cost.

This limitation matters.

It resists the logic that everything must remain accessible,

visible

and available forever.

I do not correct the imperfections of my process.

Scratches, dust, uneven exposure

are not flaws.

They are inscriptions.

Traces of time.

Of handling.

Of movement.

Residuum resists the impulse

to reanimate the archive as spectacle.

The work does not restore narrative,
identity,
or historical clarity.

Objects are held
between presence and absence,
between preservation and abandonment.

This is not an attempt to overcome loss.

It is an attempt to remain with it.

The photographs do not recover meaning.
They function as residues.

Not evidence of what was,
but of what continues
despite erasure.

Residuum does not ask what the archive remembers.
It asks what it allows to disappear.

Conclusion

This visual thesis has traced

not how images are preserved,
but how they persist.

Across domestic collections,
digital archives,
and analogue film practice,

the archive emerges not as a sanctuary of memory,
but as a system shaped by anxiety toward loss.

Images do not endure unchanged.

They fracture.
They circulate.
They decay.

What survives is not the past itself, but its afterlife.

Through Derrida's archive fever, preservation reveals itself as a compulsive gesture:
a repetition driven not by care,
but by the fear of disappearance.

In the digital archive,
this compulsion takes the form of endless circulation.

Images persist through mobility and exposure,
but are stripped of context,
authorship,
and rest.

The poor image survives,
but at the cost of coherence.

Tacita Dean's analogue practice offers a counter-condition.

Not a solution.

Here, preservation does not mean permanence.

It means attentiveness to time,
to wear,
and to finitude.

Film ages.

It scars.

It ends.

Residuum exists within this tension.

It does not seek to recover lost meaning
or restore broken narratives.

It does not rescue objects from disappearance.

Instead, it remains with what persists after preservation has already failed.

By working within archival spaces and embracing analogue limitation,
the project acknowledges that every act of preservation is also an act of transformation,
distance,
and loss.

The archive does not keep images alive.

It produces afterlives.

Spectral.

Altered.

Unresolved.

This work does not attempt to repair that condition.

It refuses the promise of restoration
and accepts finitude as an ethical necessity.

Some images do not need to be saved forever.

Some images
must be allowed
to end.

(conclusion of voiceover)

Annotations

[Opening] End-of-Reel Introduction

The film opens with the final frame of a reel, marked by the title *The End*. This positions the archive not as a point of origin, but as a site that begins after completion. Rather than establishing narrative or context, the work foregrounds persistence beyond use.

By starting at the end, the image is framed immediately as archival residue rather than living memory. What follows is not recovery or return, but continuation after function has ceased. This establishes the archive as a system that sustains images beyond their intended lifespan, aligning with Derrida's understanding of archival repetition as an aftereffect of loss rather than its prevention (Derrida, 1996).

The opening refuses linear progression and signals that the work will remain with endurance rather than resolution.

[Throughout] Orphaned Home Movie Footage

The repeated use of a single orphaned home movie establishes endurance rather than narrative as the dominant archival condition. The footage no longer functions as personal memory, but as an image surviving beyond its context, detached from authorship, consent, and lived experience.

Its prolonged replay mirrors the archive's tendency toward repetition without return, aligning with Derrida's description of the archive as a structure driven by compulsion rather than resolution (Derrida, 1996). The image persists, but meaning does not stabilise. What remains is circulation itself.

[Throughout] Continuous Film Reel Audio

The looping sound of a film reel reinforces the image as mechanically replayed rather than remembered. This auditory repetition frames the footage as part of an archival system that sustains motion regardless of context or care.

The sound functions as a reminder that what is being witnessed is not life, but its technical afterlife, emphasising repetition as a structural condition rather than an expressive choice.

[Throughout] Abstraction of Bodies and Faces

Bodies and faces are partially obscured through masking, denying stable identification while allowing fleeting recognition. This refusal of full legibility resists the archival impulse to restore presence or identity.

Rather than erasing the subject, abstraction acknowledges the impossibility of ethical return, positioning figures as spectral traces suspended between visibility and absence. This aligns with Derrida's hauntology, in which the image exists neither fully present nor fully absent (Derrida, 1994).

[Throughout] Temporary Revelation and Concealment

Moments of partial visibility oscillate between revelation and withdrawal. This strategy avoids both total erasure and recognisable representation, allowing the image to persist without resolution.

This oscillation frames preservation as endurance rather than recovery, challenging the assumption that visibility is inherently reparative. The image is allowed to remain unresolved.

[Throughout] Film Noise and Visual Interference

Flicker, noise, and instability disrupt the illusion of archival clarity. Rather than simulating restoration, interference foregrounds material fragility and entropy as inherent archival conditions.

Degradation is treated not as failure, but as evidence of time, handling, and repetition, resisting the aesthetics of digital repair.

[6:20-7:46] Breakdown / End-of-Reel Sequence

The breakdown sequence coincides with the simulated end of a film reel. Light burn, colour rupture, and instability visualise entropy as inevitable rather than accidental, exposing the limits of preservation.

Duration functions as pressure: the viewer is not offered narrative progression or closure but held within exhaustion and material collapse. This mirrors the archive's temporal logic, in which the impulse to preserve accelerates decay rather than preventing it (Derrida, 1996).

[6:20-7:40] Collapse of Mechanical Time

As the reel sound fades, a heartbeat emerges, marking a transition from mechanical repetition to embodied temporality. While the archive sustains endless motion, the body does not.

Frames continue, but life does not return. What persists is not presence, but circulation, foregrounding the disjunction between archival endurance and human finitude.

[7:00-7:30] Appearance of the Eye

The brief appearance of a motionless eye introduces a figure of witnessing without identity. Detached from personhood, the gaze endures rather than returns a look.

Through a hauntological lens, the eye confirms existence while simultaneously announcing loss, positioning the image as neither fully present nor fully absent (Barthes, 2000; Derrida, 1994).

[6:40-7:40] Return to Damaged Footage

Following the breakdown, the home movie resumes in a visibly altered state. Collapse does not end repetition; it transforms it.

What follows is not restoration, but compromised endurance. Preservation sustains motion while meaning continues to erode.

[14:20–15:00] Refusal of Repair

The breakdown sequence refuses digital correction and narrative closure. Degradation remains visible, challenging the assumption that preservation is inherently reparative.

Disappearance is treated as an ethical condition rather than a technical problem. The work remains with what persists after preservation has already failed.

[Breakdown + Ending] Pacing as Ethical Duration

The pacing of the work slows significantly during the breakdown sequence and remains extended through the final moments of the film. This deceleration is deliberate. Rather than guiding the viewer through interpretation or progression, the work withdraws momentum, refusing narrative efficiency or temporal economy.

By prolonging duration at the point of material collapse, the work resists the archival impulse to move quickly past damage, loss, or failure. The slowed pacing requires the viewer to remain with exhaustion, instability, and repetition, mirroring the temporal conditions of the archive itself, where images persist without resolution or release.

This use of duration functions as an ethical constraint. The work does not seek to extract meaning, restore coherence, or offer closure. Instead, it holds time open, allowing disappearance, degradation, and endurance to unfold without intervention. Slowness becomes a refusal of instrumental viewing, positioning attention itself as a form of responsibility.

At the end of the film, the continued deceleration denies the satisfaction of conclusion. The image does not resolve; it lingers. This pacing affirms that the archive does not end cleanly, and

that persistence is not synonymous with care. What remains is not narrative completion, but temporal exposure.

References

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Figures

Note: All figures are time-based works derived from complete film rolls sourced from the Internet Archive (Prelinger Archive). The original films have been digitally reworked in their entirety by the author.

Fig. 1. Moving image from *Miscellaneous Old Film* (c. mid-20th century), creator unknown. Source: Internet Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/201455_Miscellaneous_Old_Film (Accessed: 16 December 2025). Digitally reworked by the author.

Fig. 2. Moving image from *Barber Collection 011002* (c. mid-20th century), creator unknown. Source: Internet Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/203894_Barber_Collection_011002 (Accessed: 16 December 2025). Digitally reworked by the author.

Fig. 3. Moving image from *Barber Collection 071150* (c. mid-20th century), creator unknown. Source: Internet Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/203472_Barber_Collection_071150 (Accessed: 16 December 2025). Digitally reworked by the author.

Fig. 4. Moving image from *Home Movie 004137* (c. mid-20th century), creator unknown. Source: Internet Archive. Available at: https://archive.org/details/201540_Home_Movie_004137 (Accessed: 16 December 2025). Digitally reworked by the author.

Appendix A

This submission is presented as a scripted video essay supported by written annotations. The written document includes a transcription of the film's voiceover alongside annotations that clarify theoretical references and visual decisions. The script is formatted for spoken delivery rather than continuous prose, reflecting the time-based and practice-led nature of the work.

Annotations supplement the narration by situating the project within relevant research contexts and explaining elements that are not fully articulated through voiceover alone.

This structure aligns with the requirement for a research-led video presentation supported by a written script and additional material.