

# Allegories of the past: nitrate film's aura in postindustrial Rochester, NY

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, 'Tables turned as vinyl sales overtake digital sales for first time in UK', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2016, <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/dec/06/tables-turned-as-vinyl-records-outsell-digital-in-uk-for-first-time>>; Bill Desowitz, 'Oscars 2017: why cinematographers for Scorsese, Chazelle and more shot on film', *Indie Wire*, 10 November 2016, <<http://www.indiewire.com/2016/11/oscars-2017-cinematography-shooting-on-film-la-la-land-fences-silence-1201745115/>> both accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>3</sup> 'Theatrical market statistics 2016', *Motion Picture Association of America*, p. 4 <[https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016\\_Final.pdf](https://www.mpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2016_Final.pdf)> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>4</sup> 'Kodak Super 8: analogue renaissance', *Kodak*, <<https://www.kodak.com/kriko/consumer/products/super8/default.htm>> accessed 9 June 2019.

Over the past two decades we have witnessed the gradual disappearance of old media such as vinyl, cassette tapes, VHS, analogue photography and film. More recently, however, the hype around some of these formats has led to them acquiring an aura of superior authenticity and a renewed cultural respectability, so much so that we are now observing a 'return' of old media.<sup>1</sup> Kodak's resumed production of Super 8 cameras, the surge in vinyl record sales (which in the UK overtook that of digital formats in December 2016), and the embrace of analogue film as the prestige choice by Hollywood directors such as Damien Chazelle in his retro musical *La La Land* (2016), exemplify this current fascination for all things analogue.<sup>2</sup> At the same time that ninety-five per cent of cinemas worldwide have turned digital, a new awareness of analogue film formats has found its way into the consciousness of cinephiles, film scholars, and industry and archive professionals.<sup>3</sup> As Kodak puts it in its new promotional campaign, celluloid film is enjoying an 'analogue renaissance'.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years a number of film archives, including the BFI National Archives, MoMA, Anthology Film Archives and the George Eastman Museum (GEM), have launched programmes and travelling exhibitions to draw attention to the specific visual properties of analogue formats such as acetate, Technicolor and nitrocellulose film.<sup>5</sup> This essay focuses on one such event, the Nitrate Picture Show, a film festival launched in 2015 at the GEM in Rochester, NY, which specifically screens uniquely preserved nitrate films. Nitrate film stock has been out of production since 1951, and it is widely believed that its visual properties cannot

- 5 Nick Pinkerton, 'Medium rare', *Artforum*, 28 May 2015, <<https://www.artforum.com/film/id=52534>>; see also 'Technicolor 100: past events', *Eastman Museum*, <<http://eastman.org/technicolor/events>> both accessed 9 June 2019. The BFI plans to launch an archival film series that will be screened across the UK exclusively in analogue format. Robin Baker, BFI Head Curator, interview with the author, 15 November 2017.
- 6 See Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Classics, 2000), p. 1, and Leo Enticknap, 'The film industry's conversion from nitrate to safety film in the late 1940s: a discussion of the reasons and consequences', in Roger B. N. Smith and Catherine A. Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film* (Bruxelles: Federation Internationale des Archives du Film, 2002), p. 209.
- 7 Martin Scorsese, 'Foreword', in Smith and Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous*, p. ix.
- 8 Kevin Brownlow, 'Dangerous stuff', in Smith and Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous*, p. 178.
- 9 Deborah Stoiber, Collection Manager, and Jared Case, Curator of Film Exhibition, at the GEM, interview with the author, 14 July 2016. Stoiber and Case are co-directors of the Nitrate Picture Show. See also Stephen Herbert, 'Projecting nitrate', in Smith and Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous*, p. 103.
- 10 See Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: University Press, Amsterdam, 2013). See also 'Desmet Collection', *UNESCO Memory of the World*, <<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-2/desmet-collection/>> accessed 9 June 2019.
- 11 See 'Discontinued films', *Fujifilm*, <<http://www.fujifilm.com/>>

adequately be reproduced either on acetate film stock or digitally, due to their different rendering of colour tones and light grading.<sup>6</sup> For many film connoisseurs and enthusiasts, nitrate film displays a 'luminosity and a sparkle (supposed to be a result of its silver content) that is unattainable with later film stock'.<sup>7</sup> Blacks appear exquisitely velvety and images possess a 'pin-sharp definition' resulting from its distinctive tonal palette.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the GEM, only a few other institutions in the world (among them la Filmoteca de la UNAM in Mexico, the Stanford Theatre and the UCLA Film and Television Archive) can still publicly exhibit nitrate – there are strict fire regulations over its high flammability – while prints that are still projectable today might not be so tomorrow, due to shrinkage and brittleness.<sup>9</sup>

These characteristics make the Nitrate Picture Show a unique and exclusive event, at least for those of us not lucky enough to live in Rochester, Mexico City, Palo Alto or Los Angeles year-round. It epitomizes the process of 'museumification' of analogue film under the impact of new media – that is, film's display within the institutional spaces of the art gallery, museum and film archive, and its recognition as cultural heritage (sanctioned by the 2011 inscription of the first archival film collection into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register).<sup>10</sup> Within the historical context of shifting film preservation practices and a changing media landscape, this essay reads the Nitrate Picture Show as the culmination of archival debates not only on the issue of nitrate film, but more broadly on the status of archival film artefacts in the digital age. Fast-paced digitization has made theatrical film projection economically unsustainable and has nearly supplanted the production of acetate stock. Between 2012 and 2013, two of the major producers of motion-picture film stock filed for bankruptcy (Kodak) and discontinued the manufacturing of film (Fuji), putting the survival of film at serious risk – an event temporarily avoided by Kodak's 2015 agreement with Hollywood studios to maintain a minimum of film stock production.<sup>11</sup> Against the backdrop of celluloid film's paucity, the rarity of nitrate film screenings contributes to shoring-up the aura around this obsolete format, reinstating attributes of uniqueness, authority, authenticity and unattainability – qualities that Walter Benjamin's 'Work of art' essay famously ascribed to traditional artworks and claimed that cinema had dispelled.<sup>12</sup>

The GEM's 'auratization' of nitrocellulose film and the emphasis on its authentic visual properties and unique materiality, however, run the risk of abstracting nitrate film from the very context in which such celebration is occurring. It is no coincidence that the Nitrate Picture Show takes place in what was once Kodak-founder George Eastman's residence, later turned into a museum, in a town that was, at the turn of the last century, transformed by the manufacturing of nitrocellulose film into an early 'silicon valley'. Thus Rochester has been the stage upon which the photographic and motion picture industry's rise, boom and eventual demise has taken place for over a hundred years. This essay

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Giardina, 'Kodak inks deals with  
studios to extend film's life', *The  
Hollywood Reporter*, 4 February  
2015, <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/behind-screen/kodak-inks-deals-studios-extend-770300>> both accessed  
9 June 2019.

- 12 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), pp. 211–44.
- 13 See Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience: the blue flower in the land of technology', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987), pp. 179–224, and 'Benjamin's aura', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2008), pp. 336–75.
- 14 Walter Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', in Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, pp. 152–90, and *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999).
- 15 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 16 Ricciotto Canudo, 'The birth of a sixth art', in Richard Abel (ed.), *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, Volume I, 1907–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 58–66, and Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1916).
- 17 See Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer and Michael Cowan (eds), *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory 1907–1933* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), and Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the US Study of Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).
- 18 Iris Barry, 'The film library and how it grew', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1969), p. 26.

questions the GEM's celebration of nitrate film's authenticity, rarity and uniqueness, and by rethinking the experience of analogue film's aura, it reintroduces Rochester's own industrial history, opening film's auratization to the politics of place and history.

Building on Miriam Hansen's critique of the reductionist reading of Benjamin's aura as a notion of traditional aesthetics, I interpret aura as a hermeneutic category – that is, as a mode of historical interpretation.<sup>13</sup> I counter the 'eternal value and mystery' of the auratic work of art (described in the 'Work of art' essay) with a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's aura (as found in his Baudelaire essay and the *Passagenwerk*), which is the ability of historical objects to harbour collective dreams and trigger memories of the bygone past of which they bear traces.<sup>14</sup> Benjamin's contrasting conceptions of aura – a historically transversal, dynamic and dialectical experience pitted against an abstract and ahistorical one – actualize the longstanding opposition between *allegory* and *sign* so central to German aesthetic debates, from J. W. Goethe to Benjamin's study of Baroque tragic drama and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.<sup>15</sup> Bringing such debates into the current discussion of the GEM's Nitrate Picture Show, this essay reads obsolete nitrate films as *allegories* of Rochester's bygone industrial past. A different kind of aura (from the one predicated on nitrate film's authenticity, uniqueness and rarity) allegorically emanates from these obsolete commodities, from which broken dreams of consumerist happiness and collective wellbeing resurface to haunt the city's postindustrial present.

About two decades after Auguste and Louis Lumière's legendary screening at the Parisian Grand Café in 1895, several intellectuals, including the Italian expatriate Ricciotto Canudo in Paris and the North American poet Vachel Lindsay, were already hailing cinema's invention as the birth of a new and distinctly modern art form.<sup>16</sup> A variety of debates – around cinema's artistic promises, the expressive possibilities that its technological apparatus allowed, and its aesthetic specificity – sprang up in film societies, cafes, film journals, university corridors and the press.<sup>17</sup> The richness of aesthetic debates around cinema played a significant role in the history of its cultural appreciation, institutionalization and understanding as an art form. With his 1930s lectures on film art, Erwin Panofsky, for instance, had a powerful impact on the reception of MoMA's newly founded Film Library, endorsing the project across New York's artistic and cultural circles. Panofsky's references to Greta Garbo's and Buster Keaton's films alongside mediaeval paintings lent cinema an unprecedented cultural, historical and artistic legitimacy. 'What snob could venture now to doubt that films were art?', asked the Film Library curator Iris Barry jokingly.<sup>18</sup>

While scholars had begun to debate the medium's distinctive expressive capabilities as early as the 1910s, in the preservation field the

19 Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 30.

20 Christophe Dupin, 'The origins and early development of the National Film Library: 1929–1936', *Journal of Media Practice*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2007), p. 202.

21 Wasson, *Museum Movies*, p. 20.

22 See, for instance, British Kinematograph Society, *Report of Special Committee Set Up by the British Kinematograph Society to Consider Means that Should Be Adopted to Preserve Cinematograph Films for an Indefinite Period* (London: BFI, 1934), BFI Conservation Centre.

23 See Paul C. Spehr, 'The Library of Congress and its "nitrate problem"; or, it was necessary to destroy the nitrate in order to preserve it?', in Smither and Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous*, pp. 230–36.

24 Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait*, p. 1.

identification of archival films with physical art objects followed a somewhat awkward and longer path, spurring an institutionally specific debate that largely continues today. Despite the MoMA Film Library's 'institutional home within a museum of art', for instance, Haidee Wasson notes that 'film's museological value was associated less with an art that had been neglected and more with a history that had been lost'. While 'film art' was a useful 'rhetorical category', Wasson explains, 'film's historical value became the stage upon which film's status as museum object was negotiated'.<sup>19</sup> A similar rationale, placing higher stakes on films' historical, documentary and educational value, prevailed also in the case of the publicly sponsored creation of the British Film Institute. As Christophe Dupin highlights, while in 1932 the commission in charge of the BFI's creation 'acknowledged the preservation of films in the national interest', at that stage it did so only 'with a view of film as a *documentary record* rather than as an art form'.<sup>20</sup>

Amidst competing discourses that emphasized film's value as a (national) historic document over its artistic accomplishments, the establishment of film archives in Europe and the USA sanctioned film's metamorphosis into an archival and museum object, embedded within a set of increasingly standardized protocols. 'Borrowing from museological ideals, films became more clearly defined as objects. Separated from their prosaic contexts of production, distribution, and exhibition', Wasson observes, 'they were collected, catalogued, placed discretely in cans, arranged on carefully labelled shelves next to others similarly processed'.<sup>21</sup> As cinema's cultural value gained public recognition, the physical conservation of films for the indefinite future soon became one of the archivists' major concerns, with nitrocellulose films' preservation appearing as the most daunting of their tasks.<sup>22</sup> While in 1889 the combination of tensile strength and flexibility had enabled the Eastman Company to commercialize nitrate film, nitrocellulose's chemical instability and high flammability was now a severe threat to its physical permanence. Nitrate film's unpredictability, along with its industrial replacement with triacetate in 1951, led many archives to embark on expensive duplication programmes and to destroy their nitrate films in the hope of better preserving their collections.<sup>23</sup> Nitrate's intrinsic impermanence was to become the symbol of archivists' (still ongoing) struggle for more adequate funding. In the late 1960s, American Film Institute archivist Sam Kula's warning 'Nitrate won't wait!' became 'the rallying cry for film archivists, in their efforts to raise funds as well as public consciousness of the need for such funds in the preservation of the world's film heritage'.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1990s a more recent strand of research began to overturn such gloomy prognostications, showing that cool temperature and controlled humidity vaults could significantly improve nitrate film's longevity. Despite having earned preservationists' trust again, however, in the film world's imaginary this format is nevertheless still highly symbolically charged. Nitrate film has retained its reputation as 'gold standard', its

25 Dominique Paini, 'Reproduction ... disappearance', in Smither and Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous*, p. 171.

26 D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 8.

27 Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer, *Restoration of Motion Picture Film* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), p. 1 (my italics).

28 Motion Picture Department at the George Eastman House, 'School of Film and Video Preservation', *The Journal of Film Preservation*, vol. 25, no. 53 (1996), p. 26.

29 See, for instance, Andreas Busche, 'Just another form of ideology? Ethical and methodological principles in film restoration', *The Moving Image*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2006), pp. 1–29.

30 See Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI, 2000), pp. 52–54, and David Francis, 'Second century forum – Stockholm June 2003', *The Journal of Film Preservation*, no. 67 (2004), p. 8.

31 See also Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein, *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna and Pordenone: Österreichisches Filmmuseum and Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2008), pp. 84–85, and Ray Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* (Paris: UNESCO, 2016), p. 4.

'aura of danger' and its mystique, while gaining what curator Dominique Païni refers to as a renewed *valeur d'ancienneté*.<sup>25</sup> The work of experimental filmmakers such as Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian, Peter Delpout and Bill Morrison, for instance, has celebrated the undying beauty of nitrate and the poetics of nitrate film decomposition, while in Quentin Tarantino's blockbuster *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) a nitrate film fire becomes a theatrical weapon of revenge against the Nazis.

Nitrate film's unique visual look, its obsolescence and the rarity of its public screenings today forewarn of what might happen if digital technologies phase out analogue film – an occurrence that seemed imminent some years ago in the wake of Kodak's 2012 bankruptcy. Digitization's fast pace has profoundly altered how many curators, filmmakers and cinephiles perceive not just moving images but celluloid film specifically as a (now endangered) form of artistic expression. Not coincidentally, at the same time that *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) demonstrated the increasing photographic realism of computer-generated images, a new more precise definition of analogue film began circulating within the archival world.<sup>26</sup> Paul Read and Mark-Paul Meyer's widely adopted film restoration textbook now defined motion picture film as 'an *artefact* that consists of a transparent plastic base on which a photographic emulsion has been coated'.<sup>27</sup>

This semantic shift coincided with a number of changes in the fields of film preservation and visual technologies. In the *Journal of Film Preservation*, the term 'moving image artefact' appeared for the first time (with the same meaning as later appeared in Read and Meyer's restoration manual) in an 1996 article launching Rochester's film preservation school,<sup>28</sup> it has remained in use ever since. The opening of the 'L. Jeffrey Selznick School' in 1997 actualized questions of the film 'original' and its historical interpretation and restoration.<sup>29</sup> Such issues, which had long been familiar to the art restorer, now demanded greater self-awareness in the work and formation of the film archivist and restorer, leading to the formalization of a film preservation curriculum. As film stock manufacturing began dramatically to contract, so analogue film ceased to be a mass-produced industrial good. As a consequence, film archives' reference prints – duplicates of the oldest archival film elements, made for exhibition purposes – were on the verge of turning into 'irreplaceable artefacts', a shift that the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) had predicted back in 2003.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than its automated mechanical features, the understanding of film as an artefact emphasized the degree of human intervention in its making, and the knowledge and craftsmanship its preservation and exhibition required. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, an artefact is 'an object made or modified by human workmanship, as opposed to one formed by natural processes'.<sup>31</sup> Early theorists' fascination with film's unlimited technological reproducibility beyond

the boundaries of time and space had left room for an unprecedented awareness of its 'finitude' and the need for its active preservation. The introduction of the concept of artefact, from the field of art restoration to the vocabulary of film archivists and curators, entailed the identification of archival films as unique and irreproducible art objects with individual histories.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the equation of archival films with physical art objects remained problematic. As film archivist and scholar Giovanna Fossati argues, there is in fact an irreducible dichotomy between the 'conceptual' film artefact – such as the film *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), subject to analysis by historians, theorists and critics – and the 'material' film artefact, namely the nitrate print of the very same title preserved, for instance, at the GEM.<sup>33</sup> To such ontological ambiguity may be added that of a medium whose very apparatus and functioning systematically conceals its own film artefacts. As Alexander Horwath highlights, even when we identify archival films as material artefacts in the same guise as museum items, 'the experience of witnessing the artefact, does not include [...] the artefact itself, because as an object it's hidden in the projection booth'.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, one might argue, what is screened by film archives and museums are not their archival masters – the closest surviving elements to the original camera negatives, regarded as the 'original' for restoration and preservation purposes – but reference prints, mere 'replicas'.<sup>35</sup> The awareness of the existence of at least a print generation between the original and its screening 'replica' thus undermines for many the experience of beholding a film artefact, which in fact is not authentic.

Within the logic of the film artefact, however, the recently launched Nitrate Picture Show ostensibly does away with any residue of ambiguity that might still hinder curators as well as audiences from fully experiencing films as museum artworks. In practical terms, this means that rather than screening prints of later generation duplicated from archival masters, the GEM's nitrate festival in fact projects only authentic nitrate films with original Technicolor dyes and gleaming black and whites. In symbolic terms, it means establishing film's status as unique museum object, bolstering its aura of authenticity. 'If we dared to go this route', claims archivist David Francis, 'it would make it much easier for us to justify the argument of association with [art] museums'.<sup>36</sup> The festival takes its title from The Last Nitrate Picture Show, a programme of mostly nitrate films that the BFI and the Imperial War Museum's Film and Video Archive organized on the occasion of FIAF's London conference in 2000.<sup>37</sup> Now in its fifth edition, the Nitrate Picture Show has attracted a growing audience of both international and local film preservation students, film archivists, critics, collectors, historians and cinephiles of all ages.<sup>38</sup>

After its 2015 pilot, which mainly screened material from the GEM's own vaults, subsequent shows began increasingly to screen nitrate prints from other international archives, ranging from the National Library of Norway to Japan's National Film Centre, and from the Czech National

<sup>32</sup> See Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 151–80.

<sup>33</sup> Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 105.

<sup>34</sup> Cherchi Usai et al., *Film Curatorship*, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> See National Film Preservation Foundation, *The Film Preservation Guide: The Basics for Archives, Libraries and Museums* (San Francisco, CA: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004), p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Cherchi Usai et al., *Film Curatorship*, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> 'The Last Nitrate Picture Show: FIAF 2000', 1–10 June 2000, BFI, London, pp. 28–33, BFI Reuben Library.

<sup>38</sup> 'We meet the film buffs flocking to New York's Nitrate Picture Show on today's "Daily VICE"', *Vice*, 16 May 2016, <[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wd7w5w/daily-vice-nitrate-picture-show](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wd7w5w/daily-vice-nitrate-picture-show)> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Stoiber and Case, interview. See also 'The Nitrate Picture Show', *Eastman Museum*, <<https://eastman.org/nitrate-picture-show>> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Stoiber and Case, interview.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Herbert, 'Projecting nitrate', in Smither and Surowiec (eds), *This Film Is Dangerous*, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> Stoiber and Case, interview.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai, in 'George Eastman House launches the world's first festival of film conservation to showcase vintage 35mm nitrate prints at the historic Dryden Theatre', *Eastman Museum*, <<https://eastman.org/george-eastman-house-launches>> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>45</sup> See Pinkerton, 'Medium rare'.

<sup>46</sup> Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 214.

<sup>47</sup> Pinkerton, 'Medium rare'. See also Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 127–65.

Film Archive to Mexico's Cineteca Nacional.<sup>39</sup> Thanks to such collaborations, curators have been able to put together programmes that survey a variety of genres, including 'a little bit of film noir, comedy, drama, musicals, but also animated shorts, avant garde films, documentaries and cartoon sing-alongs'.<sup>40</sup> The festival's search for projectable nitrates among various institutional collections has also encouraged other archivists to start monitoring not only the levels of decomposition but also the shrinkage, splices and brittleness of their nitrate prints. (Shrinkage, which the festival's programme notes specify for each of the titles, needs to be less than one per cent in order to safely run the films through a projector.<sup>41</sup>) This has begun to shift the ways in which preservationists are inspecting nitrate film, no longer only as archival masters but also with a new 'goal of projection in mind'.<sup>42</sup> The Nitrate Picture Show is thus indirectly changing how film archivists approach inspection, preservation and exhibition. 'These artefacts', explains the festival's co-director Jared Case, 'have a life, now and in the future, as a source for both preservation and presentation, as opposed to being retained only as master material'.<sup>43</sup> In continuity with the GEM's first film curator James Card, the festival's titles remain secret until its opening – a move criticized by some (particularly those attending from abroad) but one that nevertheless reflects the event's pledge to foreground, in Fossati's terms, nitrate film artefacts' unique 'material' features, over their 'conceptual' significance.

'There is an inherent beauty – a true "aura" – in moving images made on nitrate stock', observes the GEM's former senior curator Paolo Cherchi Usai.<sup>44</sup> One by one, the Nitrate Picture Show restores all the characteristics that Benjamin identified with traditional art's aura – uniqueness, rarity and authenticity – which, ironically enough, film had extinguished for good, in Benjamin's view, by virtue of its mechanical reproducibility. Take, for instance, the nitrate print of Edwin Carewe's *Ramona* (1928). This film artefact bears the unique traces, both visible and invisible, of the singular vicissitudes that in 1945 brought it from Nazi Berlin to the Russian film archive (Gosfilmofond), along with many other confiscated properties.<sup>45</sup> As Benjamin might have put it, this print's unique existence and history, in a way analogous to that of traditional works of art, 'includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the rarity and preciousness of contemporary artists' moving images in the gallery, artificially imposed through the practice of the limited edition, the aura of these unique nitrate film artefacts stems from a kind of 'aristocracy of scarcity' that is the result of decades of obsolescence, fires, decomposition, shrinkage and neglect.<sup>47</sup> To the uniqueness of the film artefact we add the rarity of its exhibition, as in the case of the print of *Les Maudits/The Damned* (René Clément, 1947), acquired by the BFI in 1957, projected only once in 2010 before the Nitrate Picture Show, and in the future who knows when or if it will be seen again. The unique presence, in a particular time and space, of these



48 Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 214.

49 André Habib, "The Nitrate Picture Show": *Quelque notes sur la couleur (1)*, *Horschamp*, 13 August 2015 (my translation), <<https://www.horschamp.qc.ca/spip.php?article5939>> accessed 9 June 2019.

50 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 79.

51 Deborah Stoiber, 'The true nitrate experience', *My Nitrate Memories: The Nitrate Picture Show Blog*, <<http://mynitratememories.tumblr.com/page/2>> last accessed 30 March 2015.

52 Michael P. Steinberg, 'The collector as allegorist: goods, gods and the objects of history', in Steinberg (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 94–95.

53 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 78.

'original' archival films – with original dyes, silver salts, splices, scratches and end-of-reel cues, dating to the time of their first distribution – thus marks them as authentic film artefacts.<sup>48</sup>

'At each opening of the curtain', André Habib describes, 'we felt, a kind of thrill at the certainty that we were witnessing a kind of *re-exposition of time* [*réexposition du temps*], somewhere between a tomb opening and the penetration into a prehistoric cave, a crypt or a chapel rarely open to the public'.<sup>49</sup> In Habib's auratic impression of nitrate film, the filmic past is re-exposed to light, re-emerging and revealing itself to the present – an experience of simultaneity where the past appears in the guise of epiphany. Like the rarefied and sanctified space of the art museum – or, by the same token, of a secluded prehistoric cave, a crypt or a chapel – the GEM's Dryden Theatre turns into a 'site for simultaneity' for the appreciation of authentic, unique and rare nitrate films' aura.<sup>50</sup> With its exceptionality, intensity and mystique, the auratic experience of beholding a museum work opens a spatiotemporal breach in the otherwise disciplined pace of our lives. Viewing nitrate films becomes an exceptional aesthetic experience, simultaneously merging aesthetic pleasure and historical appraisal. In the words of the GEM collection manager Deborah Stoiber, for instance,

if you are surrounded by those who appreciate not only the movie, but *the nitrate film itself*, it is simply magical. You feel as if you belong, as if you are a part of the movie. You are seeing what the filmmakers wanted you to see and feeling what the audiences of the past felt when they experienced nitrate projection.<sup>51</sup>

In the auratic experience of nitrate film, the cinematic past reappears in the present, and aesthetic appreciation and historical understanding commingle inextricably, fusing into the film artefact, which eventually attains the status of 'timeless' museum artwork.

Rather than fostering a specific historical interpretative approach, the auraticization of nitrate film is predicated upon simultaneity, timelessness and universality. More generally, 'the aura of a historical object or discourse', Michael P. Steinberg observes, tends to posit 'all contextual reality into a shadow realm of marginalisation'.<sup>52</sup> An aesthetic experience of this kind, according to Gadamer,

is directed towards what is supposed to be the work proper – what it ignores are the extra-aesthetic elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, [and] the significance of its content. These elements may be significant enough inasmuch as they situate the work in its world and thus determine the whole meaningfulness that it originally possessed.<sup>53</sup>

Such process of 'aesthetic differentiation', to put it in Gadamer's terms, severs artefacts from both the past whence they originated and the present in which they currently circulate, placing the artworks within the suspended temporality of an aesthetic experience beyond time. As the



54 Wasson, *Museum Movies*, p. 22.

abstracting and reifying process of film's museumification – extracting 'films from their material conditions of production and usual contexts of exhibition, turning them into objects' – culminates with the Nitrate Picture Show, so too the downsides of conceiving film as a material artefact become finally apparent.<sup>54</sup>

According to Caroline Frick, the notion of the film artefact prioritizes an ideal of tangible heritage moulded after the western-centred models of the universal museum and cultural heritage, neglecting the intangible cultural practices surrounding historical objects. While the Nitrate Picture Show admittedly makes an effort to reintroduce some context within its celebration of nitrocellulose film (with tours to Rochester's Kodak factory, visits to the museum's Louis B. Mayer Conservation Centre, and demonstrations of nitrate film stock's artisanal making), overall the festival runs the risk of fetishizing the legendary format. One workshop, for instance, promises through inspection on a rewind bench to acquaint participants with the 'nitrate touch', 'the material evidence of original 35mm film artifacts – splices, perforations, edge codes – as well as their distinctive optical qualities, which are so difficult to reproduce in analog and digital media'.<sup>55</sup> Attention to nitrate film support's authentic material and chemical features seems, according to Païni, paradoxically to have ousted curators' pleasure (and privilege) 'in *choosing*, in *creating a hierarchy*, in *advancing taste*'.<sup>56</sup> Such a fetishizing, 'positivistic attitude' has ennobled nitrate film, conferring upon it an auratic authority that *eo ipso* drives out questions about films' content and their cultural, historical and political significance, an attitude exemplified by the festival's decision not to release its titles; in the end, only the auratic encounter with nitrate matters.<sup>57</sup> As filmmaker Hito Steyerl argues, and the Nitrate Picture Show programmes largely confirm, the auraticization of analogue film formats tends to reinforce 'high-end economies of film production' still firmly 'anchored in systems of national culture, capitalist studio production, the cult of mostly male genius, and the original version'.<sup>58</sup>

There is something sublime, incommensurable and unattainable about the phenomenon of aura. Benjamin famously defined it as the 'unique phenomenon of a distance' in space as well as in time, as exemplified by the contemplation of a 'mountain range on the horizon'.<sup>59</sup> Aura's ontology remains uncertain, resisting unequivocal definition; its temporality is that of simultaneous epiphanies. In the case of the Nitrate Picture Show, aura's evasive epistemology leaves Habib unable to precisely locate the 'nitrate experience' and wondering 'does "nitrate" exist?'<sup>60</sup> While Habib's answer is affirmative (and in a passage, he defines the 'nitrate experience' as the composite result of an antique, miraculously surviving film support, its particular visual qualities, and the full exploitation of those qualities on the big screen by the films of the time), a profound ambiguity remains at the heart of nitrate film's aura.

Yet despite such indeterminacy, the experience of aura is a historically situated phenomenon. Originally tied to the circulation of artistic objects

55 'The 3rd Nitrate Picture Show: Festival of Film Conservation', 5–7 May 2017, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY, p. 20, <<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0TTVsrv1oMQcmRacTMyU1VfYzQ/view>> accessed 9 June 2019.

56 Païni, 'Reproduction ... disappearance', p. 173.

57 Ibid.

58 Hito Steyerl, 'In defense of the poor image', *e-flux*, vol. 10, no. 11 (2009), <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>> accessed 9 June 2019.

59 Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', p. 236.

60 Habib, 'The Nitrate Picture Show'.

61 Steinberg, 'The collector as allegorist', p. 95.

62 See Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', pp. 152–90.

63 Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience', p. 187.

64 Hansen, 'Benjamin's aura', pp. 337–38.

65 Ibid., pp. 338–39.

66 Charles Baudelaire, 'The taste for nothing', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Keith Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), p. 102, and Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', p. 180.

67 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', p. 178.

68 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume I*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1992), pp. 58–64, and Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', pp. 154–55.

within the domain of religious rituals, the aesthetics of aura made a comeback in the German Romantic ideology as bourgeois individuals retreated into the private sphere of the self, cultivating aesthetic sensibilities and experiences.<sup>61</sup> Similarly Benjamin's diagnosis of the modern withering of aura coincided with mass industrialization and the transformation of experience, from a sensuous, intense encounter with the world (*Erfahrung*) to a functional response to its new stimuli (*Erlebnis*).<sup>62</sup> Within Benjamin's work too, as Hansen highlights, aura was 'conceptualized, from the start as dependent upon the social conditions of perception, as contingent upon historical change'.<sup>63</sup>

Today, as in previous instances, the surging aura of analogue media is subject to current modes of perception, structures of production and modalities of cultural consumption. Rather than attempting to shatter analogue film's aura (which would amount to denying its existence and cultural relevance), reading this phenomenon historically calls for a thorough conceptual redefinition. Indeed, for too long, according to Hansen, Benjamin's notion of aura has mostly been understood as a category of traditional aesthetics, due to the canonization of his 1936 'Work of art' essay, particularly within the field of film and media studies. At the time, Hansen notes, Benjamin's confinement of 'the meanings of aura into the privileged sphere of aesthetic tradition [...] was the only way the term could be introduced into Marxist debates at all, in an intellectual and political gamble that would legitimate it as a philosophical category'.<sup>64</sup> Beyond the essay's Marxist critique, Hansen reads the concept of aura across Benjamin's oeuvre as one describing a 'cluster of meanings', associated (often implicitly) with the experiences of *flânerie*, the optical unconscious and profane illumination.<sup>65</sup> With its polymorphous semantics, Benjamin's concept of aura appropriated and re-elaborated a philosophical trajectory that went from Charles Baudelaire's poetics of synesthetic correspondences to Marcel Proust's *mémoire involontaire*. Baudelaire's mournful lyrics about the modern loss of an intense, empathic experience with the world (*Erfahrung*) – an 'adorable springtime' that had 'lost its fragrance' – deeply inspired Benjamin's philosophy of modernity.<sup>66</sup> The motif of sensuous correspondences held particular sway on Benjamin, who (like Proust) interpreted it as an experience of remembrance of an anterior temporality and an irremediably lost time, a 'murmur of the past' or an 'encounter with an earlier life'.<sup>67</sup> Unlike the Baudelairean correspondences' power to transcend earthly experience, Proust's *mémoire involontaire* was the unexpected resurfacing of a past memory, as in his recollection of a partly forgotten period of his childhood life in Combray, triggered by tasting a madeleine cake.<sup>68</sup> Benjamin took up the concept of involuntary memory and expanded its reach from the enclosures of an individual past to the shared experience of a collective history, while also overcoming Proust's distrust of photography. Benjamin thus identified aura with 'the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception', and similarly, in the case of utilitarian

69 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', p. 182.

70 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 880.

71 Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), p. 229.

72 Benjamin, 'On some motifs in Baudelaire', p. 178, and *The Arcades Project*, pp. 268–72.

objects, with 'the experience which has left traces of the practised hand'.<sup>69</sup>

Aura therefore emanates not only from the authority of unique, authentic and unapproachable works of art, but can manifest itself through old objects and media, traces and remnants of the recent past – combs, silk stockings, stamps, photographs and phonographs. In the age of industrial modernity, Benjamin argued, aura was notably to be found in the mundane landscape of Paris and its commercial arcades, the splendour of which by the 1920s and 1930s had dramatically declined. In a scene that bears resemblance to Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, Benjamin described a *flâneur* wandering through Paris's empty and somewhat sinister streets until a music box, 'a toy from long ago', catches his attention. Its nostalgic tune brings back a past, whose living traces survive in the streets around him, 'not a past coming from his own youth, from a recent youth, but a childhood lived before then that speaks to him, and it is all the same to him whether it is the childhood of an ancestor or his own'.<sup>70</sup> It was in this semi-deserted urban landscape, suspended between early and Fordist modernity, that obsolete commodities and architectures – 'the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them' – could become affectively invested with aura.<sup>71</sup> For Benjamin, aura was thus a feeling of yearning triggered by old objects and media, a particular mode of perception in which past affective investments resonated powerfully with present ones.

What distinguishes this different, more nuanced reading of aura from its materialist exposition in the 'Work of art' essay, however, is not only the artistic prestige of the objects that can induce such feeling, but also the temporal and hermeneutic dimension of its experience. To the epiphany, the mystic, instantaneous revelation of an idealized (or, by the same token, fetishized) work of art, this formulation of aura now opposes the extended temporality of the interpreter's mnemonic work and hermeneutic engagement with the object's past. As in Baudelaire's allegorical lyrics, the phenomenon of aura does not reveal 'simultaneous correspondences' (as in Arthur Rimbaud's and Stéphane Mallarmé's mystic symbolism), but rather poetically mediates between the author's unquenchable desires, located in a past beyond reach, and his modern experience of loss (of that past).<sup>72</sup>

Aura's conceptual dichotomy actualizes the longstanding opposition between *symbol* and *allegory*, critical to German literary, aesthetic and philosophical debates, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. In his study of the German tragic drama, Benjamin argues that the *symbol's* 'measure of time' 'is the *mystical instant* in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior'. The interpreter thus encounters the symbol (or the symbolic object) as a revelation; its instantaneous meaning transcends the reader's own context

73 Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 165–66 (my italics).

74 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 67.

75 *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 66.

of interpretation, merging at the same time the object's external appearance with its essence. On the other hand, the *allegories* (found, for instance, in Baroque tragedies, Baudelaire's poems and Benjamin's own *Passagenwerk*) set in motion a *dialectical* exercise that 'immerses itself into the depths which separate [the object's] visual being from [its] meaning [and] has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign'.<sup>73</sup> Gadamer's hermeneutics implicitly builds on Benjamin's re-evaluation of allegory, turning it into a category of historical interpretation. According to Gadamer, like hieroglyphs 'interpretable only by an initiate', the symbol features a 'metaphysical connection' between visible appearance and invisible significance, 'a "coincidence" of the two spheres [that] underlies all forms of religious worship'.<sup>74</sup> Against the timeless, instantaneous and transcendental essence of the symbol, Gadamer's hermeneutics privileges allegorical modes of reading, which instead dialectically bridge the object's original context of circulation and signification, on the one hand, and the interpreter's present context of reception, the 'sphere of talk, of the logos', on the other.<sup>75</sup> In Gadamer, as in Benjamin, allegories indicate a particular form of historical and aesthetic interpretation, a hermeneutical work that while remaining immanent to the interpreter's own situatedness, strives to connect present spheres of signification and reception with the object's historical past.

In this new light, the aura emanating from old, obsolete commodities or media, including film, can be read as an experience that brings the interpreter allegorically back to these objects' past world (to the initial meanings, dreams and hopes accruing around their first appearance) and dialectically connects that past to the interpreter's own present. The surging aura of obsolete media such as analogue film and photography, cassette tapes and vinyl records, can thus be reinterpreted through a hermeneutical and allegorical reading of auratic phenomena. Such a reading differs substantially from the GEM's mobilization of nitrate film's new-found aura. It positions nitrate film's (and by extension analogue film's) aura within the context of Rochester's industrial history, allegorically bridging that history with the present – a time in which investments in the past, present and future of manufacturing seem to resurface within political agendas (see, for instance, Donald Trump's, Theresa May's and Angela Merkel's pledged alliances with domestic industries) as well as within the collective subconscious. In this way, nitrate film exhibition acquires a different kind of auratic resonance that connects it to the work of photographers such as Robert Burley, Rebecca Norris Webb and Alex Webb, which similarly eulogizes analogue photography while at the same time engaging with the politics of Rochester's industrial history.

Burley, Norris Webb and Webb have attempted to capture the aura of analogue photography, the desires, hopes and illusions once attached to this medium, against the present background of Rochester's urban fabric and decaying industrial infrastructure. There is no place on earth where

**Fig. 1. Robert Burley, *Wreckage of Buildings 65 and 69, Kodak Park, Rochester, New York* (2007).**



**76** See Daniel Cohen, *Three Lectures on Post-industrial Society*, trans. William McCuaig (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2009).

**77** Robert Burley, *The Disappearance of Darkness: Photography at the End of the Analog Era* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2013), p. 20.

the aura of analogue photography and film is more keenly felt than in Rochester, the place still often associated with Eastman Kodak and once known as the ‘city photographic’. Its metamorphosis from prosperous industrial city to postindustrial centre went in parallel with analogue photography and film’s transformation from industrial commodities to quasi-obsolete media, against the wider historical transition from Fordism to the information age.<sup>76</sup>

Burley’s photographs of the ruins of Rochester’s Kodak plants belong to a larger series documenting the demise of photographic factories between 2005 and 2010, from the monumental, windowless complex of the Belgian firm Agfa-Gevaert to the empty dark rooms of the Canadian branch of Kodak. A receding microcosm appears amidst these larger-than-life decaying architectures – a corner photo studio now out of business, a crumbling photo booth, and the end of an employee meeting on the last day of operations – that testify to the human scale of this industrial disintegration. In Rochester, Burley pointed his lens at Buildings 65 and 69 of Kodak Park at various moments of their implosion on 6 October 2007 – an event attended by crowds of Kodak employees, all ironically armed with digital cameras.<sup>77</sup> He captured the scene preceding the detonation; the surreal instants in which smoke and detritus enveloped everything; the explosion’s aftermath in the inert chaos of rubble (figure 1); and the now empty site, covered in green grass.

Meanwhile, armed with an analogue camera, Norris Webb explored the lives, homes and dreams of suburban residents such as Amanda Webster in Rochester’s 14621 Neighbourhood (figure 2). Amanda, whose father and grandfather were employed at Kodak, and whose great-uncle helped to build Rochester’s famed Times Square Building, is

**Fig. 2. Rebecca Norris Webb, 14621 Neighborhood (Amanda and Her Flower Girl Dress), Rochester, New York (2012).**



<sup>78</sup> Rebecca Norris Webb, in Alex Webb and Rebecca Norris Webb, *Memory City: The Fading Days of Film* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Burley, *The Disappearance of Darkness*, p. 15.

currently studying photography at Rochester Institute of Technology. Norris Webb took pictures of Amanda's christening, her flower-girl and wedding dresses, along with other residents' prom dresses – 'those silk or satin or organza dresses worn only once to a memorable event' and cherished like photographs and old memories.<sup>78</sup> Alex Webb, on the other hand, turned his camera to the city's own acts of commemoration, as in his black-and-white *Mt Hope Cemetery* or in his shot of the frescoed walls of a care home in downtown Rochester, picturing the landmark Sibley's department store, the Savings Bank and the High Falls.<sup>79</sup> Shot on Kodachrome (the colour film stock that Webb used throughout his career until its discontinuation in 2009), his pictures can now be processed only as black and white. Processed as negatives, these images seem 'slightly distressed, almost weathered', 'from rich, vibrant color to deep blacks and whites, like a fading memory'.<sup>80</sup> Shot between 2012 and 2013, Norris Webb's and Webb's photographs capture Rochester's inhabitants as they become living traces of a historical transition, along with city streets and empty corners allegorically turning into a 'memory city'.

Today, like the ageing Parisian arcades of the 1920s and 1930s, Rochester's Renaissance Revival architecture, the tall chimney towering over Kodak Park and Amanda's flower-girl dress all exude a powerful aura. They have become allegories of an industrial past facing a new uncertain future. Through the pictures of Burley, Norris Webb and Webb, these places and objects radiate an aura at once melancholic, sublime and ironic.<sup>81</sup> Shots of Javier's barbershop by Kodak's building 29, or of the barren landscape of Rochester's downtown alleys and the photographic series of Marianne's red second-hand prom dress on nearly-discontinued Fujicolor Pro 800 stock, stand out as what Benjamin

<sup>82</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 881.

<sup>83</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2001), p. 41, and Burley, *The Disappearance of Darkness*, p. 13.

<sup>84</sup> See 'The architectural heritage of the Warners in Rochester, NY', *Monroe County Library System*, <<http://www.libraryweb.org/rochimag/architecture/Architects/Warner/Work.htm>> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>85</sup> 'Kodak Park through the years', *Democrat and Chronicle*, <<http://media.democratandchronicle.com/kodak-park/>> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>86</sup> 'Kodak Next: out of bankruptcy into a new era', *Democrat and Chronicle*, <<http://media.democratandchronicle.com/kodaknext/>> accessed 9 June 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Rochester City, New York, US Census Bureau, 2012–2016, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

<sup>88</sup> Michael Leavy, *Rochester's Historic East Avenue District* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), pp. 84–85.

<sup>89</sup> George Eastman House, *A Collective Endeavor* (Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 1999), pp. 5–19.

might have described as 'profane manifestations' of a recently fading past.<sup>82</sup> 'What has been', the lives, desires, hopes and illusions of parents and grandparents, still breathe through these traces of a glorious bygone time that has yet to turn into history. These pictures hermeneutically traverse different temporalities and generations, bridging past and present yearnings; paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan, they 'look at the present through a rear-view mirror'.<sup>83</sup>

By enacting a mediation between the analogue, industrial past and its most tangible remains in Rochester, these photographers' tributes to the aura of analogue photography turn medium-specific concerns into site-specific interpretative interventions. Rochester's postindustrial aura can hardly be missed. Every building, every road in downtown Rochester and the suburbs – the city's arteries and its very fabric – seem to carry traces of the bygone glory of analogue film production. Built between 1912 and 1914 in the Renaissance Revival style, Kodak Tower still unmistakably defines Rochester's skyline as a monument to celluloid film. Rochester's University Campus, Opera Theatre and Dental Care Centre, the Eastman School of Music and the George Eastman Museum of Photography and Film still bear the name of Kodak's founding father, the philanthropist who brought prosperity to the city, nurturing its cultural life and wellbeing. Landmark buildings such as the 1893 Granite Building and the 1906 Sibley's department store, designed by architect J. Foster Warner when the city was the 'Silicon Valley' of the Second Industrial Revolution, stubbornly stand out in the downtown urban landscape, now desolate and deserted after dark.<sup>84</sup> Of the more than 150 buildings that once dotted Kodak Park, formerly the largest manufacturing facility of photographic products in the world, only two small film manufacturing and coating plants remain. The others disappeared with the 2007 demolitions, Kodak's 2012 bankruptcy and the subsequent sale of most of its industrial complex.<sup>85</sup> Since 1982, nearly 120,000 employees have lost their jobs worldwide and over 55,000 locally, more than a quarter of Rochester's current population.<sup>86</sup> Rochester's poverty rate is currently at 32.8 per cent, placing it among the USA's poorest rust-belt cities, after Detroit, MI, and Cleveland and Dayton, OH.<sup>87</sup>

What today is one of the most internationally prestigious museums of photography and film was once George Eastman's own baronial residence. Here, in his Colonial Revival mansion, designed by J. Foster Warner with the New York firm McKim, Mead and White, Eastman entertained his most distinguished guests with regular organ concerts and galas.<sup>88</sup> Following his death in 1932, the house was bequeathed to the University of Rochester and it was only by the end of World War II that talks began about the creation of a 'historical photographic institute'.<sup>89</sup> Since its opening as 'George Eastman House' in 1949, the museum's history has been intimately intertwined, more than any other film archive or museum in the world, with the rise and fall of the photographic industry. The museum's film collection, for instance, developed from an initial lot of Kodak industrial films and expanded thanks



90 Herbert Reynolds, "'What can you do for us Barney?'" Four decades of film collecting: an interview with James Card', *Image*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1977), pp. 13–31, and Ed Stratmann, Associate Curator at the GEM, interview with the author, 24 July 2016.

91 Paini, 'Reproduction ... disappearance', p. 172.

92 George Eastman, 'The Kodak Manual', manuscript, Richard and Ronay Menschel Library, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.

93 Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience', pp. 194–95.

94 On the connections between Kodak's hiring practices, Rochester's 1964 riots and African American political activism, see William C. Martin, 'Shepherds vs flocks: ministers and negro militancy', in *The Atlantic*, vol. 220 no. 6 (1967), pp. 53–59.

to the company's powerful mediation with the Hollywood studios, from which curators began borrowing and duplicating original negatives.<sup>90</sup> Half a century later, the dramatic downsizing of film stock manufacturing occasioned its near extinction, indirectly magnifying analogue film's aura and allowing for its museumification.

'We project many things onto nitrate', Paini suggests, 'for want of being able to project' or see it.<sup>91</sup> What then do we project onto nitrate films while watching them at the Nitrate Picture Show? When exhibited at the GEM, analogue film seems to shine with a renewed aura, resonating with Rochester's photographic past and condensing the vicissitudes of its industrial history. Against Rochester's rust-belt scene, nitrate film – the 'gold standard' that reigned for over fifty years, unthreatened by its safer acetate successor and technological obsolescence – allegorically brings back the Fordist dream of a golden industrial age with its promises of everlasting prosperity and collective emancipation. In the digital, postindustrial present, in which matter seems to dematerialize, transmuting into code, and human labour has been made seemingly redundant, it is precisely a longing for a lost industrial past, for tangible objects and analogue media, that we now project onto nitrate film, investing it with a new aura.

As allegories of the Fordist industrial past, nitrate films unearth collective memories, both pleasant and painful, and buried histories, awakening latent dreams of consumerist happiness, full employment and social wellbeing. These now fragile film artefacts bring back to mind Kodak's unfulfilled pledge of eternal preservation against the odds of time, its promise 'to bring one back by the light of his own fireside to scenes which would otherwise fade from memory and be lost'.<sup>92</sup> The aura of nitrate films cuts across the self-enclosure of these archetypal film artefacts, their intrinsic material and visual qualities, reaching out to the image of a bygone past and carrying it over into the beholder's present. Such auratic encounters thus hermeneutically mediate past and present affective projections, harbouring a 'density of meanings, at once habitual and disjunctive, intersecting past and future, history and myth, loss and desire, individual recollection and collective unconscious'.<sup>93</sup>

As a form of art, nitrate film exhibition provides an opportunity to engage critically with the past. Treating nitrate films as historically immanent allegories of Rochester's past, however, must not lead to a self-gratifying celebration of Kodak's history, but instead should bring to light the contradictions of that industrial past. Along with Eastman's cultural patronage, a history of film and its industrial production in Rochester must also unveil Kodak's contested hiring practices, and the racial segregation and protests they helped to spark.<sup>94</sup> This is a story of the photographic industry's promises of happiness, wellbeing and eternal memory, as much as of the inequalities and struggles it fuelled. This story of institutionalization, industrialization and de-industrialization plays a key role in the history of the medium's development and aesthetic investments. Only by addressing these questions will future work in

<sup>95</sup> Paolo Cherchi Usai, 'The Moving Image Department at George Eastman House: strategic directions and principles, 2014–2023', 3 January 2014 (approved by Bruce Barnes, Director, 18 June 2014), p. 4.

archival film research and curatorship be able to 'present the history of the medium as a living laboratory of ideas and innovation rather than a "heritage" to be observed with passive deference'.<sup>95</sup> It is by hermeneutically interrogating this more prosaic, often politically problematic, film history that film curatorship may become a transformative practice.

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