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*Futurs de l'obsolescence: Essai sur la restauration du film
d'artiste* by Enrico Camporesi (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Futurs de l'obsolescence: Essai sur la restauration du film d'artiste

by Enrico Camporesi. Éditions Mimésis. 2018.
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reviewed by ERIKA BALSOM

As Enrico Camporesi details in his fascinating book *Futurs de l'obsolescence: Essai sur la restauration du film d'artiste* (Futures of Obsolescence: An essay on the restoration of Artists' Film), each act of Restoration—broadly conceived as the ushering of a work into the future—is an act of interpretation. Take Barbara Rubin's underground classic *Christmas on Earth* (1963), a film I saw twice in 2018. In both instances, the film was shown as a double 16mm projection, with one image projected in reduced dimensions inside the other. Gels were manipulated live in front of the projectors' beams, intermittently bathing the monochrome film in lush color. With its close-ups of genitals and orgiastic energy, *Christmas on Earth* possesses a spirit of riotous anarchism. Yet Rubin was fastidious in her specifications as to how it should be seen. In a note that would accompany the work when rented from the New York Film-Makers' Cooperative, she wrote, "PLEASE PROJECT MY FILM IN THE IMAGE IN WHICH IT WAS CREATED—i.e. EXACTLY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROJECTION INSTRUCTIONS!"¹

The screenings I saw, one in London and the other in Berlin, largely conformed to Rubin's wishes, but there was one significant difference



1 Rubin's instructions for exhibitors of the film are reproduced in full on the Film-Makers' Coop website. "Christmas on Earth: Barbara Rubin," Film-Makers' Coop, <http://film-makercoop.com/catalogue/barbara-rubin-christmas-on-earth>.

between them: the soundtrack. Rubin specified that “a radio must be hooked up to a PA system, with a nice cross-section of psychic tumult like an AM rock station, turned on and played loud.” AM radio was discontinued in Germany in 2010, so the Berlin organizers did their best, cycling through the FM dial to give *Christmas on Earth* the live broadcast accompaniment its maker imagined. The sounds of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” amid radio static lent Rubin’s images an inflection they would not have had in 1963 but also wed them to an unfolding now. In London, the organizers used a CD simulating 1960s radio (albeit without advertisements or much talk), compiled by Bradley Eros and distributed with the film print. This option tempered the anachronism of the Berlin presentation, but the chance collisions between image and sound, central to the filmmaker’s conception of her work, had vanished.

Anyone presenting *Christmas on Earth* must make a choice as to what soundtrack to use. The decision may seem a local matter of little consequence. Yet embedded in decisions regarding the conservation and presentation of works such as *Christmas on Earth* are theoretical judgments concerning authenticity, historicity, and authorship that evade easy certainties. Camporesi, currently a researcher in the film department at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, rereads the history of American experimental film between 1963 and 1982 through this lens, demonstrating the shortcomings of the tendency of textual analysis—still a dominant method in the subfield—to discuss objects as ideal rather than material, static rather than dynamic.

Drawing on the discourses of literary philology and art conservation, particularly Cesare Brandi’s 1963 book *Theory of Restoration, Futurs de l’obsolescence* considers what happens to filmic artworks as they circulate in the world, migrating to new spaces of exhibition and new material supports. The book’s examples will be well known to readers familiar with avant-garde cinema, but here they emerge in a dramatic new light. Camporesi shows how filmmakers such as Bruce Conner, Anthony McCall, and Carolee Schneemann embraced the variability and instability inherent in their medium, often emphasizing the performative dimensions of projection and producing works in multiple versions. Schneemann’s *Kitch’s Last Meal* (1973–1976), for example, was shot on 16mm and Super 8 and was initially shown as a double projection of selected reels in no set order, accompanied by a soundtrack on cassette, while Conner’s *COSMIC RAY* (1961) exists in an array of iterations, analog and digital, single and multiscreen, 16mm and 8mm.² Such practices can make it difficult to discern what constitutes the “text” of a given work and pose significant questions for those tasked with their conservation and exhibition.

Through a discussion of key examples, Camporesi demonstrates that the filmic artwork is not a static object but an entity that ages and changes according to diverse exigencies, exigencies that scholars often overlook but that Camporesi assiduously traces. *Futurs de l’obsolescence* is notable as the first book to consider the restoration of artists’ film, a domain that is doubly marginalized, situated as it is on the sidelines of both film archiving and contemporary art conservation. Yet the relevance of this study reaches beyond this enclave. The avenues of interrogation that Camporesi shows

2 In rendering the titles of Conner’s films in capital letters and without italics, I am following the stated preference of the filmmaker.

as long present within the domain of artists' film offer rich resources for approaching questions integral to the discipline of film studies in an age of unprecedented image circulation and technological change.

Although Camporesi provides an impressive level of detail about the various iterations of the works he discusses, on the whole his book is less concerned with the technical intricacies of conservation than it is with broader theoretical problems.³ Through a discussion of McCall's solid light films and works by Morgan Fisher, for example, Camporesi shows how architectural conditions, the performative dimensions of projection, and the idea of the score all become crucial in conceptualizing how these works travel through time. Here, the notion of the text proves an insufficient analytical frame for conceiving of the transmission of the work, making it necessary to open onto questions of site and event that prompt one to reconsider the notion that cinema is an art absolutely allied to reproducibility and its economy of the multiple.

The second half of *Futurs de l'obsolescence* fulfills the promise of its title by undertaking a discussion of the specificity of photochemical film and its increasing obsolescence. In our digital present, many of the artworks of interest to Camporesi meet a new kind of instability, compounding the variability they possessed already at the time of creation. Faced with the difficulty and cost of exhibiting photochemical film, they are now digitized for the purposes of display. The embrace of performative elements can present an obstacle to wide circulation, as such works are simply more difficult to exhibit because they depart from the conventional cinematic *dispositif*. But under the specter of the digital, variability can equally be a prerequisite for transmission, as when McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) mutates from a film projection in a smoke-filled loft to a digital projection in a gallery using a haze machine.

It would be easy to describe the life of *Line Describing a Cone* as existing in two stages: either filmic and cinematic or digital and gallery-based. It would be easy, but wrong. In connecting practices of the 1960s and 1970s to contemporary discourses on digitization, Camporesi does more than rehearse the now well-worn swan song of photochemical film. Rather, his excavation of versioning and instability in filmic artworks of the 1960s and 1970s provides a means to argue that the challenges posed by the obsolescence of photochemical film must be understood as a continuation of tensions already inherent in these earlier practices rather than an unprecedented crisis. *Line Describing a Cone* had migrated and mutated numerous times before its most recent iteration. Indeed, it has never ceased to do so. While Camporesi might have drawn more attention to the distinctions between different forms of material transformation (e.g., those undertaken by the artist versus those undertaken posthumously or those that initiate a change of gauge within the film medium versus those that shift mediums entirely), his provocation is a keen intervention into existing debates.

Against the conceptualization of digitization as loss that has frequently marked discussions of format shifting in experimental film, Camporesi remains sanguine: nothing lasts forever, and such metamorphoses can offer works a way of enduring into the

3 An exemplary instance of the former may be found in archivist Ross Lipman's account of his work on Conner's *CROSSROADS* (1976). See Ross Lipman, "Conservation at a Crossroads: The Restoration of a Film by Bruce Conner," *Artforum* (October 2013), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201308/conservation-at-a-crossroads-the-restoration-of-a-film-by-bruce-conner-43121>.

future and reaching new publics. In his account of Paul Sharits's *Sound Strip / Film Strip* (1972), for instance, Camporesi argues for the necessity of compromise. This installation for four Super 8 projectors, grounded in an attention to the material specificity of photochemical film, was seen only once in its original format before being exhibited as a video transfer. The difficulty and cost of showing the work on Super 8 rendered its display in that format unfeasible. One might argue that Sharits's investigation of the materiality of film makes such a work especially unsuitable for migration to video, but for Camporesi, this is not a problem because the alternative is invisibility: "In this case, only the *betrayed* work can be made visible, in the form of an *approximation*. . . . The video transfer becomes the very condition of the visibility of the piece."⁴

It is tempting to try to extrapolate general principles from Camporesi's examples, but the author discourages one from doing so. He insists repeatedly that his discussions of specific works should not be considered case studies, because their purpose is not to buttress larger theoretical claims. Instead, he argues for a dynamic and dialogic relationship between artworks and concepts, seeing each particular case as posing its own challenges for the theory and practice of restoration. When importing concepts from discourses of philology and art conservation—as in discussions of the *lectio difficilior* and patina, respectively—Camporesi is just as likely to foreground their lack of fit as he is to assert their usefulness.⁵ He urges us to learn from objects, from their particularities and their resistance to the generalizing thrust of theory, a conviction he shares with the art historian Hanna B. Hölling, whose 2015 publication *Revisions: Zen for Film* perhaps comes closest to Camporesi's method in English-language scholarship.⁶

In *Futurs de l'obsolescence*, difference and repetition are terms more important than "right" and "wrong" for evaluating the shifting presentations of filmic artworks. In a footnote, Camporesi notes that Bradley Eros now believes it was a mistake to compile the CD to accompany *Christmas on Earth*.⁷ Camporesi, by contrast, does not take such a hard line, finding value in this mode of presentation: "[T]he substitution of a programmed accompaniment for an aleatory one in the end reminds one of the differences that exist between the first configuration of the piece and its current actualization."⁸ He acknowledges that today, faced with multiplying possibilities of restoration qua interpretation, the curator's need to abide by the etymological duty to care, from the Latin *curare*, is greater than ever. For Camporesi this does not, however, entail a necessary fidelity to any notion of the original. What the archivist Paolo Cherchi Usai terms the "model image"—the image at the time of its origin—is forever lost; as Cherchi

4 Enrico Camporesi, *Futurs de l'obsolescence: Essai sur la restauration du film d'artiste* (Sesto San Giovanni, Italy: Éditions Mimésis, 2018), 273 (my translation).

5 The concept of *lectio difficilior potior*, or "the more difficult reading is the stronger," is a philological principle that suggests that when conflicting versions of a given manuscript exist, the more unusual text is to be considered the original, because a copyist would be more likely to substitute a familiar word for an unfamiliar word, rather than vice versa.

6 Hanna B. Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2015). In this publication, which appeared in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, Hölling traces the various iterations of Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962–1964), with attention to questions of materiality, versioning, performance, and museum policy.

7 Camporesi, *Futurs de l'obsolescence*, 162n63.

8 Camporesi, 162 (my translation).

Usai puts it, “The ultimate goal of film history is an account of its own disappearance, or its transformation into another entity.”⁹ Camporesi takes up this task, limning these many transformations with an attitude at once pragmatic and permissive.

If authenticity is but a chimera, then what guides the interventions of those who shepherd filmic artworks into the future? Camporesi suggests that what is most important is transparency: the key lies in making whatever actions have been undertaken legible to the viewer. If playing FM radio for *Christmas on Earth* is closer to the artist’s intention, the CD has the benefit of making clear the impossibility of reconstituting the work as it first existed. It candidly indexes the gap between then and now. Here, Camporesi follows Philippe-Alain Michaud, curator of film at the Pompidou, whose suggestion that curators can do whatever they wish as long as it remains evident to the public is cited in the book’s closing pages.¹⁰ Yet by what means do such curatorial *dé-placements* and *détournements*, to use Michaud’s words, become recognizable? And even if they are recognizable, are they desirable, particularly when dealing with this historically mistreated and undervalued field of practice? Is there not an enduring need to preserve the historicity of the work to the greatest degree possible? Can the idea that “every act of restoration is an act of interpretation” risk serving as an apologia for curatorial arrogance or carelessness? Camporesi may not provide answers to these questions, but beyond its detailed research on the lives of particular works, a signal strength of this book is its elaboration of a conceptual repertoire and analytical method that readers may use to draw their own conclusions about instances of restoration they encounter. Showing *Christmas on Earth* anytime soon? I say, turn the radio on and up. *

9 Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 89.

10 Camporesi, *Futurs de l’obsolescence*, 300.