

# Your History with Me

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*The films of  
Penny Siopis*

SARAH NUTTALL, EDITOR

Your  
History  
with  
Me

BUY

THEORY IN FORMS

Series Editors *Nancy Rose Hunt, Achille Mbembe, and Todd Meyers*

# Your History with Me

*The Films of  
Penny Siopis*

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1.

Penny Siopis's remarkable body of short films, made between 1997 and 2021, constitutes a centrifugal—and ravishing—intervention into the history of film. The films, from five to twenty-one minutes long, situate Siopis in the front rank of artist-filmmakers working across the world today.

In particular, she reworks the essay film genre so pivotal to late twentieth-century thought and now finding its twenty-first-century dimensions. Gilles Deleuze, Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno and the Surrealists before them were all captivated by cinema's potential to be an image of thought itself. Rather than the smooth and sutured narratives of mainstream film, they were drawn, in the post-war world of crisis and transformation they were so viscerally living through, to the cut, the gap and the interstice as places of radical disjunction from which they could produce thinking about the world before them.<sup>1</sup> If Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil*, set between Japan and West Africa, burst open the essay film to its then most radical potential, alongside experimental works by Agnès Varda, Trinh T. Minh-ha, the Black

Audio Film Collective, the Otolith Group and many others, Siopis works in conversation with all of them—and drives film form decisively in her own direction. Crucially inflected by her location in the African and Global South, Siopis's work deepens the registers of politics as form, in conversation with formlessness, as image and in text, to find the new.

Siopis situates herself as a South African artist in the world, working critically and materially with a complex politics of relationality that she has long articulated via notions of catastrophe, uncertainty and becoming.<sup>2</sup> She has embraced, at ever deepening levels, figurations of estrangement and dislocation that come with powerful forces of social change.<sup>3</sup> Her work undertakes the process not so much of representing as refiguring and reimagining the social, intertwined with the psychic and the personal.<sup>4</sup> We might think of Siopis's work across painting, installation and film in terms of a politics of turbulence and upsurge that is at once sensual and critical.<sup>5</sup> While the African South as well as her earlier Greek family histories of migration and diaspora constitute what Jennifer Law calls the "tacit vantage point" from which other histories

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are engaged, Siopis seeks out “the sympathetic points of convergence” with narratives across time and space.<sup>6</sup>

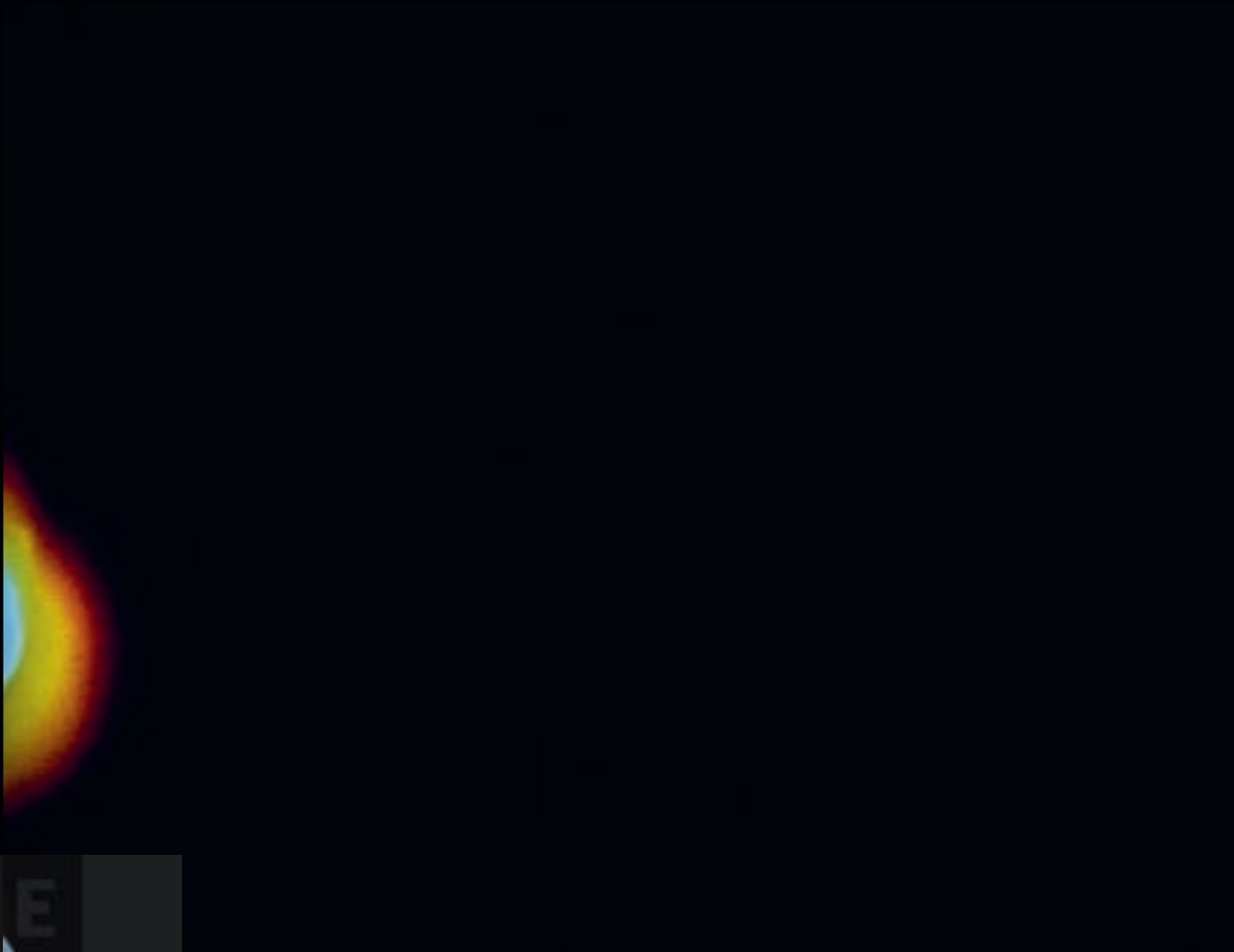
Siopis’s short films emerge from a four-decade oeuvre which progressively pushes into the outer limits of matter and materiality. Already, in her “cake paintings” and “history paintings” of the 1980s, the tension between reference and materiality, historical depiction and the significance of the (painted) surface, history and the history of art, was evident.<sup>7</sup> Her turn to collage in its capacity to “interfere with direct depiction” preceded what would become her interest in filmic montage.<sup>8</sup> In the course of all this work, including the movement from painting into film, she reaches in formally arresting ways far into the subterranean lives of others, elaborates the readymade as filmic form, arrives at a kind of cine-writing which is entirely her own, and draws celluloid to its most vital and often most broken edges.

Always remarkable in Siopis’s work, across her paintings, installations and films, has been her use of tools, prostheses and liquid substances. These range from her material encodings of feminist aesthetics in thick impasto oil-paint surfaces, sometimes using cake-decorating implements to paint with, to figurations of apartheid’s material excesses via piled-on paint, to depicting the debris of history and the afterlives of colonialism, to the use of plastic teeth, fingernails and eyelashes stuck into pink, fleshy paint in her 2001–4 *Pinky* series, to the mutable textures of memory to be found in broken celluloid. Closest perhaps to her radical filmic experiments with form and formlessness are her ink and glue paintings, mixing the two substances and moving her

canvases to allow lively matter to flow on its own terms and co-create her work. Enabling actual physical changes to occur in her materials speaks both to the workings of time itself and to the agency of non-human forms as they receive and react to age, heat, water damage and the vagaries of human-centred technological change.

Deeply influential in Siopis’s oeuvre, as we will see unfolded across this book, and leaking between her paintings, installations and films, is her remarkable *Shame* series of 2002–5. These friezes of miniature paintings, in their flowing liquidities of what by turn appear as blood, emotion, water, desire and devastation, not only explore inhabitations of extreme distress, intimate violation and vulnerability, especially in the lives of girls and women. They also take us, reaching as they do so deeply into psychic life, into questions of what has in recent years been called, following Marianne Hirsch, post-memory, transmitted across generations,<sup>9</sup> or what Catherine Malabou has termed the unheard histories of the subject that reside within.<sup>10</sup> Siopis’s 2021 film, *Shadow Shame Again*, is just one example of a recursive revisiting of an always deepening question, in ever more radical form, across painting and film.

Just as Siopis’s films emerge out of and re-mesh recursively with her paintings and installations, so equally do they draw on and intervene quite precisely in the genre of the essay film as such. In doing so, they enter a filmic terrain that draws together film and language, image and text. In particular, this is a filmic practice which draws on the essay form as an emblem of thought, seeking to rewire an originally literary



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genre into filmic form. In her *Shame* series, Siopis uses miniature stamps to embed words—often clichés quite inadequate to the task of reaching into meaning—in her paintings. In her films, she intervenes in language itself, breaking it apart into figments of something else, wresting it away from the authority of the “voiceover.”

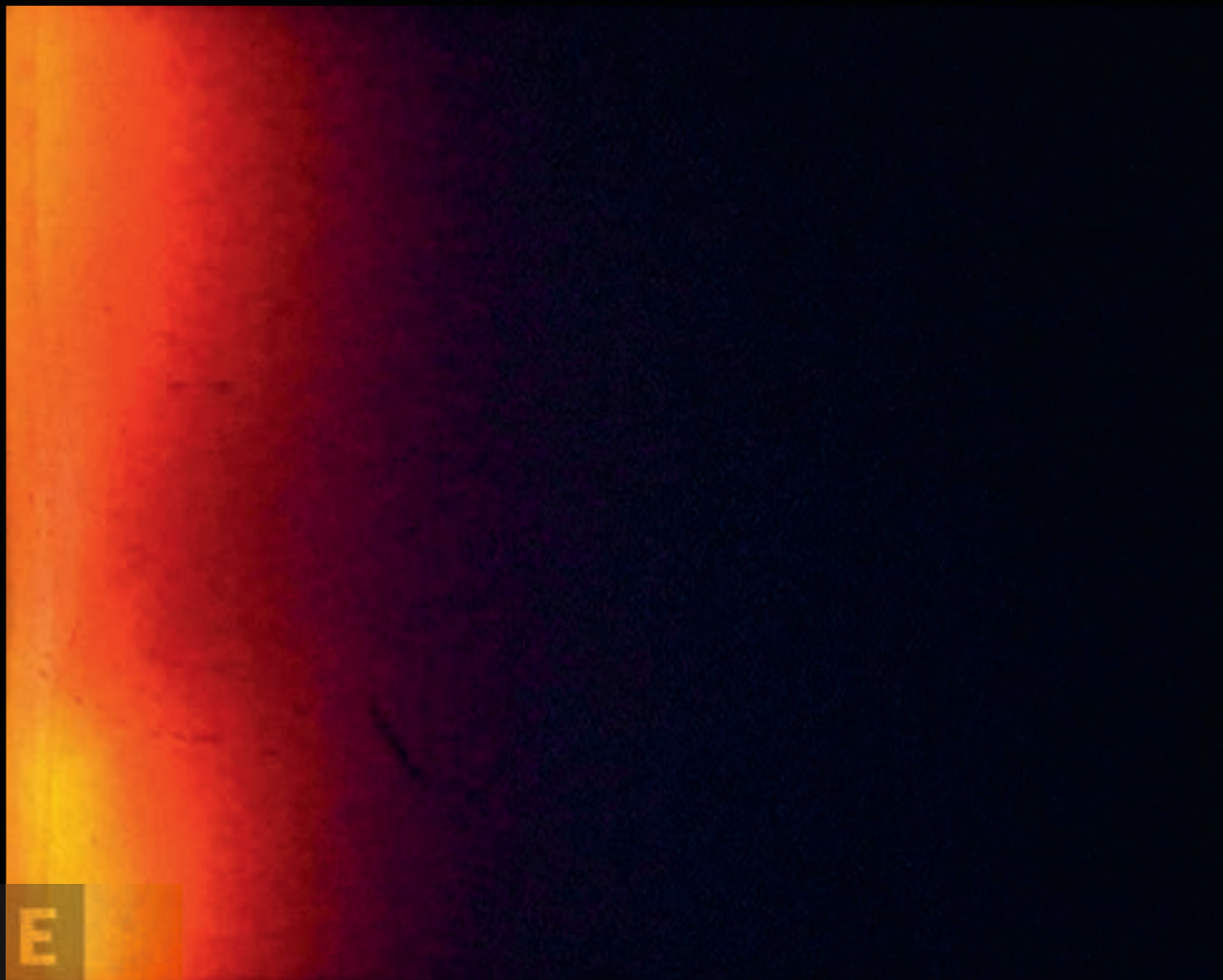
Theodor Adorno, in “The Essay as Form,” revels in what the essay can do, as a form of knowledge. He sees it as both conceptual and committed to what is demanded by its form. It rejects forms of knowledge which “preclude the power of small accidents.” The essay, Adorno suggests, draws the fullest consequences from the critique of the status quo, the authoritarian bent of the world and the modes of oppression that persist and haunt it: its brilliance lies in the fact that it erects “no scaffolding, no edifice,” defies certainty, insists that a matter be considered in its whole complexity—and does not long for totality. By labouring emphatically on the form of its presentation, the essay resembles art, is necessarily related to theory, recognizes no standpoint outside itself, and “takes arbitrariness into its own procedure instead of masking it as spontaneity.” The essay, verging on the logic of music, is for Adorno more dynamic than traditional thought—and in this it has affinity, too, with the visual image. It is “reminiscent of an intellectual freedom that has never really emerged,” an observation that points as much to its future forms as its present lives.<sup>11</sup>

How do the radical intensity and predilection of the essay to accident, chance and reflexivity translate into film form? Gilles Deleuze pushed this furthest in its

twentieth-century iteration: the interstitial or incommensurable moment between shots, the places where the gaps or cuts become larger and belong, he argued in *Cinema 2*, not to image or to sequence but, rather, assert their validity on their own terms.<sup>12</sup> In the “time-image,” images are now radically external to each other and yet “the confrontation between their inside and their outside produces something new” as Laura Rascaroli puts it.<sup>13</sup> The fissures that are created in the essay/film inscribe the potentiality of a breaking down, a dis-assemblage, she continues—and this latter constitutes an “unreserved openness.”<sup>14</sup> For Deleuze, writes David Rodowick, thinking is not to interpret or reflect, but to experiment and create. Accordingly, the viewer moves from perception to intensive speculation.<sup>15</sup>

The legacy of this film form lies in the 1960s, a decade of dissidence, even as it retained its modernist foundations, including in its desire for forms that could mirror processes of thought as such. Agnès Varda, one of the few female filmmakers amongst a sea of men at the time, described her method of filmmaking as *cinécriture*—cinematic writing, or writing on film. Deeply drawn to literature as intertext for her films, she also claimed to make most of her discoveries while editing her films herself. Like Chris Marker and Deleuze, she had a heightened interest in experimentation and in the treatment of film as art. Drawn to women’s lives, she sought, too, to engage filmically with figures she saw as living in the margins—squatters, gleaners and the urban poor.<sup>16</sup>

The Third Cinema manifesto of 1976, written by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, argued for a film form



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which contested the “second cinema” of largely European essay films that privileged the “liberty of expression” for individual auteur directors; instead, this third wave, drawing also on ideas of “imperfect cinema” developed in Cuba, argued for film as a collective practice, one which politicized and experimented with mostly documentary form. The aim was to make films that could not be assimilated by the neo-colonial status quo or which set out to explicitly fight it. Film-work should, more definitively than Varda had had in mind, express “the experience of the masses.” These were transnational, resistant, diasporic, exilic—counter-practices, drawing energies from “uneven centres of moving image making around the world,” as Brenda Hollweg and Igor Krstic see it.<sup>17</sup> They invoke Chilean Nelly Richard’s ideas on “peripheral operations,” oblique, imaginative montages and affectively charged ways of addressing injustice.<sup>18</sup> The manifesto called for “the myth of the irreplaceable technicians” to be exploded and for “permanent wariness” in making the work. Influenced by Third Cinema’s calls, Lebanese film director Heiny Srour insisted that work in this emerging tradition should resist a commitment to “harmony,” citing the experiences of Third World societies which had been “too lacerated and fractured by colonial powers to fit into . . . neat scenarios.”<sup>19</sup> Ousmane Sembene, best known for his novels, made his film *Mandabi* in Wolof in 1968, the year before FESPACO (the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou) was launched in Burkina Faso.

By the early 1980s Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha had produced her three-minute film *Reassemblage*,

a montage of fleeting images from Senegal which included no narration, only occasional statements by herself, none of which assign meaning to the scenes and all of which refuse to speak “about” a “culture” but rather, as the voiceover says, “just nearby.” This she saw as a way of listening to intervals as forms of proximity, soliciting a “new seeing.” The Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), launched in East London in 1982, reworked documentary form to articulate black British experiences, producing poetic, allusive and intensely personal films, videos and “slide-tape texts” drawing on film theory, politics and psychoanalysis. John Akomfrah, a leading member of BAFC, and in conversation with Siopis in this book, delineates discussion within the group at the time: “Was it possible to have a collective practice; to share a platform to make radical work? What was this in place for? What figurative, sonic, aesthetic narratives?” *Handsworth Songs*, which he made with the collective at the time of the 1985 riots, worked with sensations and feelings to create a new aesthetic regime that was “like riding a wild horse” and aimed to “destroy a certain kind of ethnographic veracity,” as Akomfrah put it.<sup>20</sup> The latter could not adequately persuade and counter ongoing police brutality and racialized narratives of criminality; for this to happen, he argued, the form of the work had to be engaged politically.

Also in London, working at the millennial cusp, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar formed the Otolith Group which sought to multiply resist “representation” as a mode and method of transnational film form. In one of their best-known works, the film *Nervus Rerum* focusing on the Jenin



1.

MY LOVELY DAY



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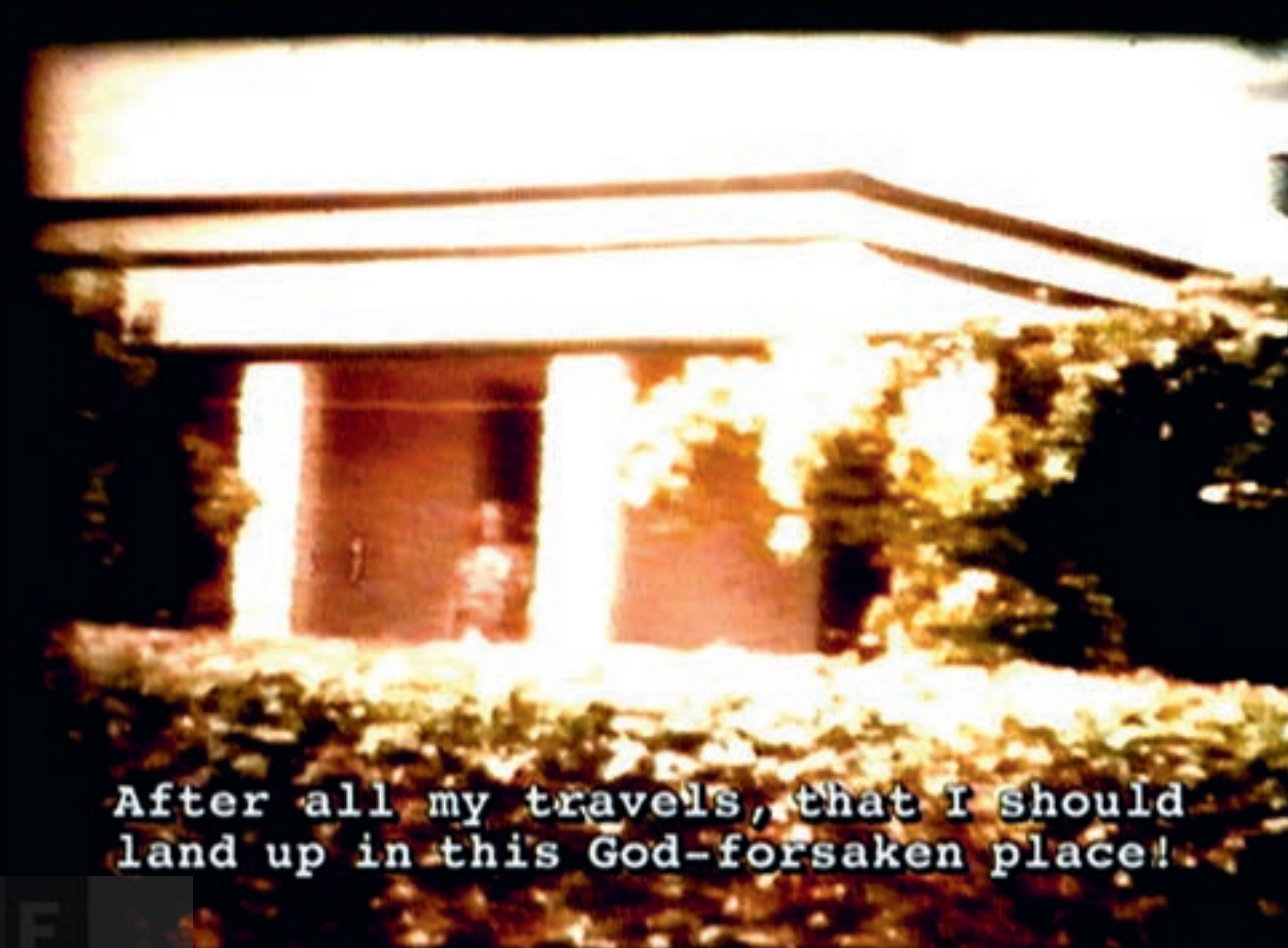
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refugee camp in Palestine, they find filmic ways to refuse anthropological insights and cultural access to Jenin's inhabitants, as T. J. Demos has put it, producing a film that "is ruled by opacity, by the reverse of transparency, by an obscurity that frustrates knowledge and that assigns to the represented a source of unknowability that is also a sign of potentiality."<sup>21</sup> As the Steadicam passes through labyrinthine passages in the camp, "we gain no access to the camp's inhabitants and there is no cinematic suture," writes Demos—the eyes of the camp's figures and those of the viewer "rarely meet, never become the site of mutual recognition."<sup>22</sup> The film, Eshun says, offers "intimacy without transparency" and the filmmakers draw on Édouard Glissant's ideas about the right to opacity as essential to decolonization. French-Algerian filmmaker Zineb Sedira, who is in conversation with Siopis and Akomfrah in this book, made earlier work in a documentary and autobiographical form, archiving and collecting stories between France and Algeria, but when returning to Algeria in the 2000s, after the civil war (the Black Decade), found that she began to adopt an aesthetic that was "less documentary" and "more filmic," increasingly poetic and less land-based, shifting too from filming her mother (*la mère*) to the sea (*la mer*) in works like *MiddleSea* and *Saphir*.<sup>23</sup>

Siopis's films can be situated in relation to all of these forms of experimental filmmaking traditions. In addition, her work could be placed in conversation with feminist films emerging from the United States in the late twentieth century, including works by Su Friedrich, Barbara Hammer, Abigail Child and Leslie Thornton, many of them using

experimental montage, found footage, movements between paintings and film as a mode of thought, and bits and pieces from consumer culture and pulp fiction, to explore ways of radically remaking narratives around gender. While in conversation with these forms, one of the most radical departures that Siopis makes is that she uses only found footage. She herself does not film the material; rather she inhabits and re-directs mostly home movies shot by others, ordinary people whom for the most part she has no connection with or knowledge of. With the exception of her first film (*My Lovely Day*, 1997), which even then drew not on her own camera-work but on her mother's home-movie footage, her material comes from discarded, anonymous home movies found in thrift shops and flea markets across the world, in addition to some old cinema reels. These she recomposes and draws into something new through editing bits and pieces together to become vital, encrypted, luminous and fragmented forms of thought and visionary parallaxes. This practice also takes on a particularly powerful political valence, so sharply articulated from the context and subject position from which she works: by drawing in the first instance on the filmed forms of others, she not only gives formal embodiment to the complex temporalities and valences of the phrase "your history with me" rather than foregrounding her own camera-I. She also finds the structural conditions that shape the lives and scenes she is working with, the political unconscious, as Fredric Jameson would put it, of world-making and historical time.<sup>24</sup>

As for Agnès Varda working in her flat in Paris in the 1960s, editing becomes art and artistry in Siopis's hands in



After all my travels, that I should  
land up in this God-forsaken place!

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Cape Town; in an echo of the calls of the Third Cinema manifesto, she wishes to work less with her own lens and life than in the first instance with the lives of others. Like the Otolith Group, she refuses representation and almost all traces of the documentary, offering neither harmony nor settled vision of any kind. Drawing on celluloid's broken and damaged forms to find the fundamental structure of the gap that Roland Barthes discussed,<sup>25</sup> to force thought in through the form of the films, takes on profound effect in Siopis's films and becomes, as Laura Rascaroli, writing about Siopis's work for the first time in this book, puts it, an "alternative form of history writing."

If the movements of diaspora, dislocation and migration shape aspects of Siopis's work, particularly her Greek family heritage, she is in other ways very much "at home" in her southern location, neither interstitial, exilic or transnational in quite the ways that much of the work on essay filmmakers tends to reify and suggest. This does not preclude the idea that being at home (including with the self) is often a dispersed condition in a formal sense. When William Kentridge writes that the films "will always be you," he points to the autobiographical fragments, refracted across the films, but recognizable as a deliberately dis-assembled self, a glimpsed self, woven in and through other(s) lives.


Of her time and place, Siopis's politics of interstitiality carries its precise inflections and potent rewirings. If *cinécriture* was the idea of writing with images, this relates, too, to the idea of *camera-stylo*, referencing the filmmaker who writes with his/her camera, producing forms of writing

that Rascaroli has characterized as "beyond the book." Siopis does not use her camera as a writer would a pen to fashion a personal style, Rascaroli argues: instead, she uses her pen as a camera to achieve a "cinema of the *stylo-caméra*." This is because Siopis so radically refashions notions of text, voice and ultimately subjectivity at a formal level far exceeding many experimental film traditions to date, in ways this book uncovers and articulates.

Insisting that the politics of her film-work lies more in its form than in its content, Siopis says: "Text undermines the authorial voice, the authority associated with the voiceover, and makes space for the voice in the head of the reader, the spectator. As there are no sonic clues—say, of accent—to locate the narrator, everything happens in the translation of the text, which enacts 'the voice' in the head, the subjective, the subject who's subject to change."<sup>26</sup> Who, then, is the me—and who, the you? This is the question implicit in "your history with me."

## 2.

*My Lovely Day* was followed by other major films a decade later and into the present, including *Obscure White Messenger* (2010), *Communion* (2011), *The Master Is Drowning* (2012), *The New Parthenon* (2016), *Welcome Visitors!* (2017), *She Breathes Water* (2019), *Shadow Shame Again* (2021) and *Celluloid Body* (2021), all of which run, in the form of selected stills, as parallel texts alongside the essays throughout this book (a full filmography can be found on page 478). The chapters in the book revisit the films recursively, returning



Spend my days watching from the  
verandah. At night I have to  
tell you stories of my travels.

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to them from a range of different but intersecting analyses each time. “Your history with me” is a phrase drawn from *She Breathes Water*, in which it is spoken, in one of its possible iterations, in an other-than-human register. As we have already begun to see, it is one that embraces Siopis’s mode of thinking and address across the body of her work. Both intimate and public, and in the end planetary, it encompasses multiple refractions of thought, positionality and time. Less “my history,” “your history” or “our history,” rather “yours with me,” it is a distinctive and telling mode of address capable of holding within it the complexity of these short films. Later in this introduction I will return to *She Breathes Water*, one of Siopis’s most celebrated films; for now, I discuss earlier films as highly complex historical and second-person syntagms.

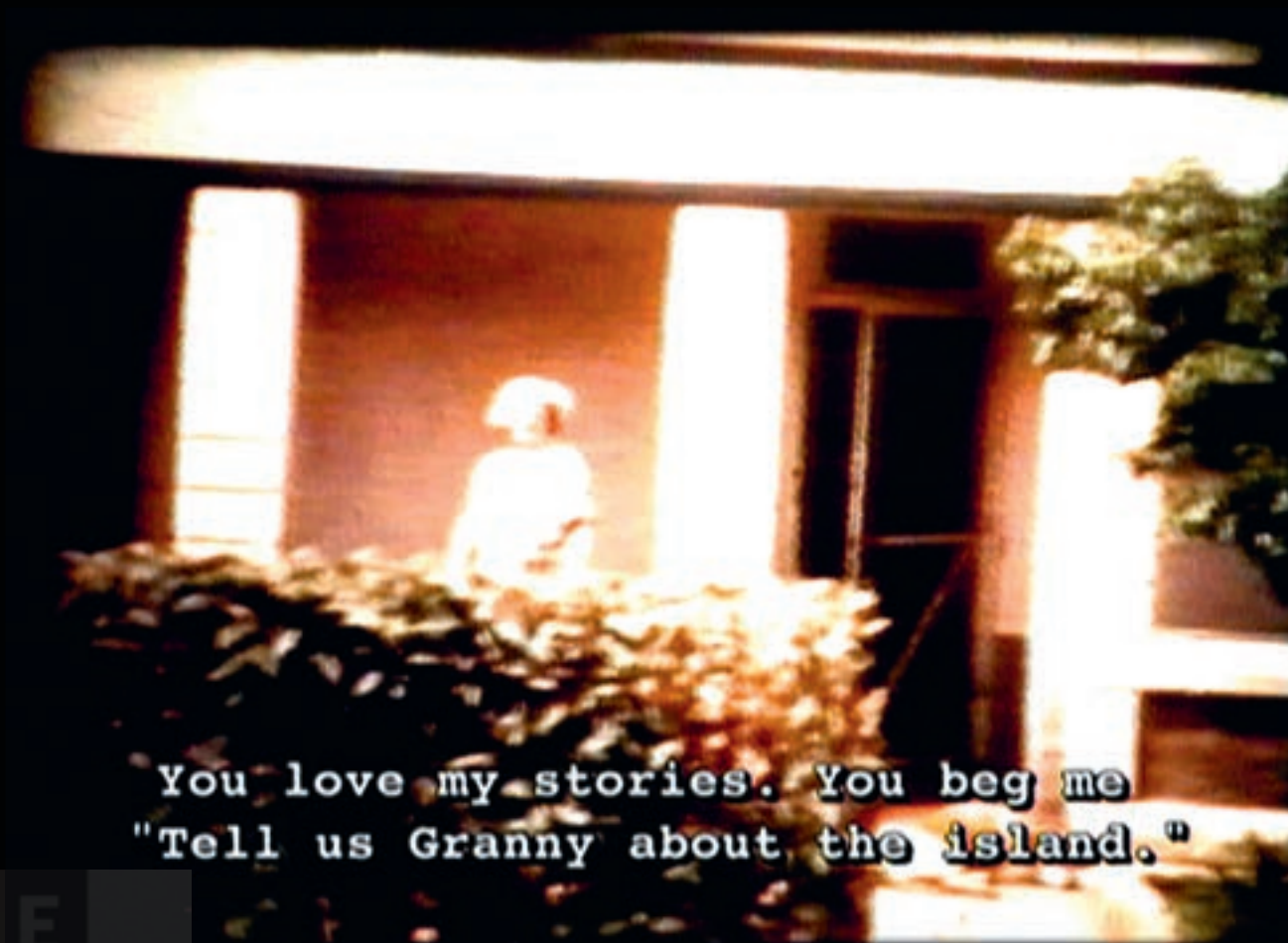
If Deleuze once wrote in an extraordinary vein about cinema (without, apparently, ever watching Marker’s *Sans Soleil*, produced the same year as *Cinema 1* and 2), female film philosophers have since driven our understandings of the essay film form and Deleuze’s work itself significantly forward. Griselda Pollock (in her work with Max Silverman) has developed the crucial notion of the concentrationary and Brenda Hollweg has relatedly taken Deleuze’s notion of the impossible to both open up Siopis’s work and rethink the concept from within her film form.

At the core of the concept of the concentrationary is not murder or mass destruction, Pollock explains, but a form of the destruction of the human, “within the human, while still living”: processes of dehumanization, forms of making

life disposable, diminished, reduced; erosions of the right to life, and “forms of violence that reduce life in the present.” Pollock refers to cultural forms and subjectivities that may be being reshaped through unremembered but assimilated legacies of the concentrationary and how art becomes a mode of resistance to these formations. The latter, she considers, is a “Lazarean art” that casts us into the “in-between.” Historical trauma and suffering, rather than being aestheticized, can be “riddled into critical consciousness and transformed”—as intimate traumatic residues not reducible to a representation or “sublime inexpressibility.”<sup>27</sup>

Pollock reads Siopis’s film *Communion* for its awareness of “the freight of historical art and the symbolic and mythic intensities held within images.” The five-minute film works with the story of an Irish nun, Dr. Quinlan (Sister Aidan), who set up a hospital at a mission in Duncan Village, South Africa. Caught up one day in a crowd that had been shot at by police, she herself was burned and killed by members of the crowd and parts of her body were allegedly cut and eaten for their power-giving qualities in the struggle for black liberation. Siopis’s film text continues through her burning (“I burned / my arm fell out, fingers moving / Was I dead?”) and into the next day (“sticks and stones lay around / with my remains”) and her inquest (“parts of my body were missing”). Pollock analyzes the film via Siopis’s stated interest in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (taking into one’s own body the body of the divine) in an already dense concentrationary mix of apartheid, colonialism and Christianity.

Brenda Hollweg refers to Siopis’s concentrationary mix



You love my stories. You beg me  
"Tell us Granny about the island."

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as “encrypted,” a form of what Deleuze called “crystalline narration,” a way of unhinging the present and mobilizing time so that different tenses and temporalities can coexist. Discussing Siopis’s film *The New Parthenon*, Hollweg points to Siopis’s radical use of found footage to deepen the reach of the “impossible” in a formal sense: sixty years after the original shots were taken and “stripped of their indexicality,” objects and things in these filmic fragments can reconnect with elements from a different time and place. The “outdated and afflicted” film material suggests to Hollweg corresponding relations between structures of forced migration, racial segregation and migrant labour across different times and places. This recalls Demos’s observation that Siopis’s readymade film surfaces “connect us to the materiality of the past.”<sup>28</sup> Symptomatically, he sees her archival explorations, built around centres of indeterminacy and uncanny resonance, as responding to the complexity of finding a deep enough language for historical memory in the wake of apartheid’s traumatic legacies.

*The New Parthenon* draws on Siopis’s father’s history but is not strictly biographical, Katerina Gregos explains in her essay in this book, showing how Siopis transforms her father into an “emblem” of a generation of men living in the dispersions wrought by a “transnationalism Hellenism” shaped by Greek diasporic histories from as far back as Byzantium times. Gregos unspools for us the highly encrypted and crystalline historical fragments that Siopis embeds in her short film, revealing and elaborating the historical depths of Siopis’s own recollections and reading. In all of this we

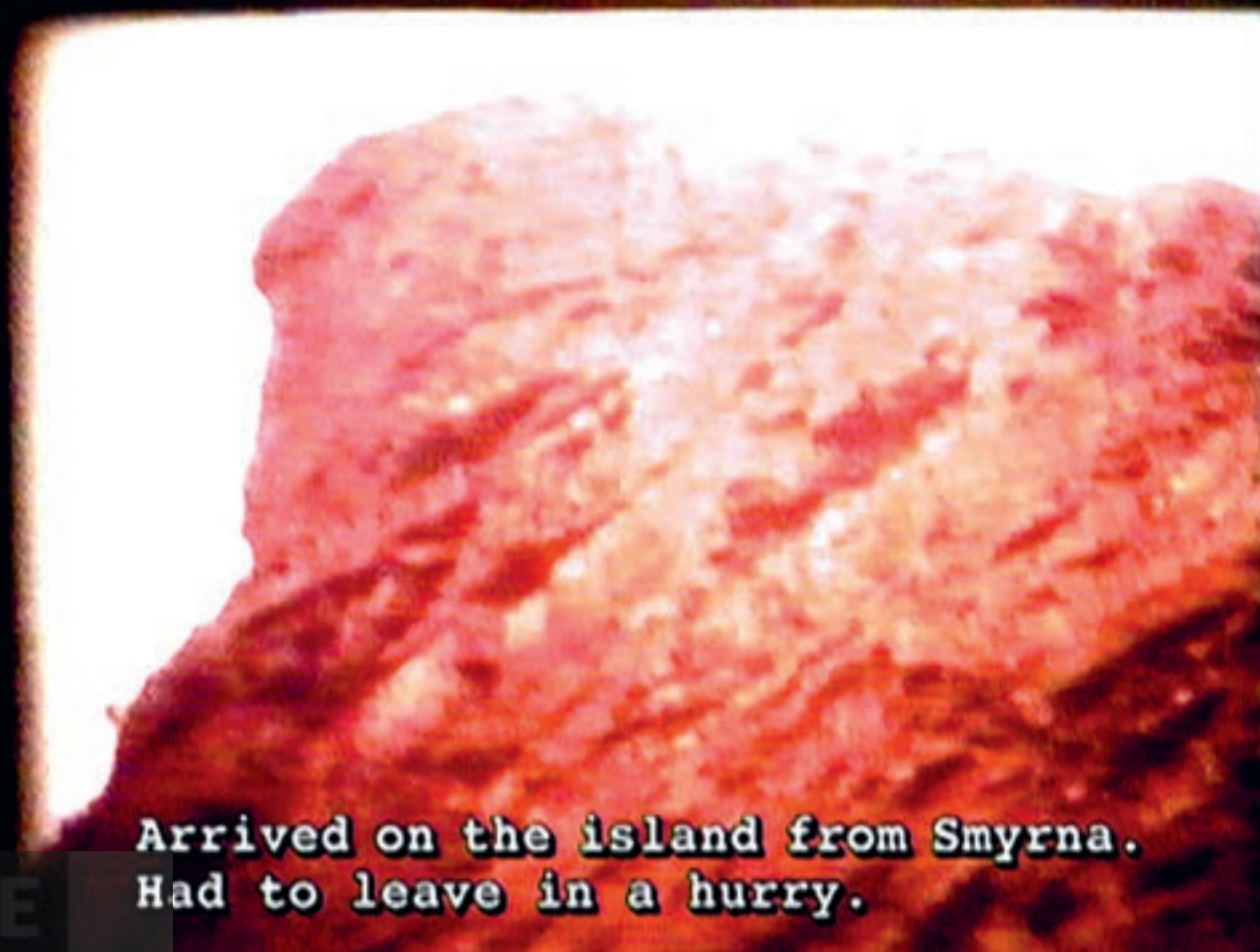
can see aspects of the concentrationary as historicized and psychic inference and compression across a series of Hellenic historical contexts.

### 3.

It is striking that two of Siopis’s films to date have centred on the attempted or actual assassination of H. F. Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, and, through him, the symbolic destruction of a system of legalized segregation.<sup>29</sup> The story of Demitrios Tsafendas, the man who killed him, has powerful resonances with Siopis’s interests, histories and preoccupations. Born in Mozambique, Tsafendas was half-Greek, half-African, and spent his life seeking “refuge” in many countries, eventually arriving in South Africa, finding a job as a parliamentary messenger—and then in that capacity stabbing prime minister Verwoerd to death. He declared to the authorities that “a tapeworm” made him do it; diagnosed as schizophrenic, he was written off as mad rather than as having executed a threatening and calculated political act.<sup>30</sup> As Achille Mbembe puts it in his essay in this book, the apartheid state presented itself as rational but undertook a “deranged racial project.” Therefore, “before whom would the killer be held responsible?” Mbembe asks.

In *Obscure White Messenger*, Siopis makes two memorably striking moves: she replaces the tapeworm to which Tsafendas refers, a psychosomatic figment of his imagination, with an octopus. As she incorporates badly damaged celluloid, full of sprocket and burn marks, she uses her medium this time to suggest neural disturbances and synaptic





Arrived on the island from Smyrna.  
Had to leave in a hurry.

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flickerings and emittances inside the brain. As she does so, she draws on but reimagines testimony Tsafendas gave after the killing, reconfiguring his words from various sources into her own narrative. As Mark Gevisser suggests in his essay in this book, the two start to come together as “octopus/brain”: the octopus’s protean and sometimes chaotic, even hallucinogenic, distributed neural pathways and sensors speculatively evoking the disturbed yet lucid brain of Tsafendas. The mind we feel we are seeing at work is one that, contrary to “life on the surface,” has its own “subterranean logic and beauty and reason,” Gevisser writes. Water, a medium Siopis constantly references in this and many other films, suggests Tsafendas being, in her words, “at sea, literally and metaphorically,”<sup>31</sup> and the octopus somehow takes on the figuring of an unconscious, producing what Mbembe terms the “turning liquid of the real.”

*The Master Is Drowning* also uses sprockety celluloid, jumpy and blurry, to suggest David Pratt’s state of mind when he attempted an assassination of Verwoerd in 1960. The holes, burns and scratches are, Kentridge observes in his essay, an astonishing evocation of “a brain storm, of things exploding in the brain, as if there’s a logic in film and you can represent the break in that logic in all the burning of the footage, in the scratches on the film, in the jumps across. And it becomes the medium of thinking. So it’s important that it’s not understood as a medium of illustrating a thought.” Mbembe, thinking about Siopis’s filmic montage of fragments of text, image and sound, sees that “whether they intersect at all may be a matter of pure arbitrariness”;

yet, if these dimensions are arbitrary, he expands, they nevertheless “work”—work to cross the borders of consciousness.

In *The Master Is Drowning*, Verwoerd is seen virtually drowning in his own blood after being shot in the face, these scenes preceded by Pratt having an epileptic fit while swimming in the sea, with a verbal sequence including the words “The Master is drowning!” and “She saved me”? Who is the Master—and who the “she,” as Siopis “gender-troubles the water,” Gevisser asks. Siopis’s film becomes, as always, its own theory as form, brilliantly revealing, by way of montage and the politics of the cut, how liberalism, to the tune of Frédéric Chopin, was playing in minor chords to high apartheid’s “master narrative.”<sup>32</sup>

#### ————— 4.

Sound, and its interaction with text and image, plays a crucial part in Siopis’s impossible filmic stratagems. Kentridge comments on the non-relation of sound to image in the films, making us open to what the sound *could be*—producing a viewer who is looking for connections, listening for echoes and becoming a “highly active sense-maker.” Hedley Twidle, in his essay in this book, observes how different Siopis’s use of sound is from “conventional idioms of soundtracking and documentary,” which usually provide “recognizable cues and structures of feeling.” Instead, “the sound is fierce and strange, more like a mantra or a dirge than a narrative proposition.” This, Twidle shows, gives scenes, including those depicting the already dense with meaning “waking dreams of colonialism,” new layers of psychic intensity.



The people on the island were kind,  
but strangers.

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Siopis's sound worlds are drawn, variously, from Greek and Turkish folk music, from African choral music, lullabies and jazz, as well as songs of popular political resistance and sometimes from fragments of Western classical music, piano sonatas or funeral marches. In *Obscure White Messenger*, for example, as Twidle points out, the "strong laments and hoarse chanting of the rough-edged Turkish music" that accompany the (improvised) words of Tsafendas seem discontinuous with the story the viewer is trying to piece together about the assassination of Verwoerd in South Africa. Yet they capture something profound about the psychological register, the psychic energy of not only his state of mind but of the past itself, as it might appear in dreams and in history as a haunting.

*Welcome Visitors!*—the only one of Siopis's films to focus primarily on a piece of music—draws us sharply but subtly to the politics of music and sound traditions, vulnerable to forms of cultural appropriation behind histories of syncretism, especially but of course not only by the United States and its cultural imperial ambitions. The film is based around the story of the jazz composition "Skokiaan," composed in 1947 by the Zimbabwean musician August Musarurwa, which then became an international hit and was covered by Louis Armstrong in 1954, to lyrics rewritten for a white "American" audience. Part of the film covers Armstrong's visit to the then colony of Rhodesia where he seeks out Musarurwa. "The words Siopis imagines for Musarurwa mix wild exasperation with a more intimate set of recognitions: an awareness of the partly debased, risky, easily misunderstood forms in which

both of these musicians were forced to work," writes Twidle in his chapter. Siopis's placing of the celluloid breaks and sound of the film reel static refute harmonious sequence when it comes to histories of African and African American music and their complex entanglements.

The sound worlds of Siopis's films return us to the ways she upends and breaks apart the location of voice. In her film *Shadow Shame Again*, intricately discussed by Sinazo Chiya in this book, Siopis draws on the voice of Mbali Ngube, who posted her rendition of the song *Askies I'm Sorry* on Twitter in response to the news of the murder of a pregnant woman in Gauteng province, South Africa, during the pandemic. The song, which sounds like it is sung by more than one voice, was made with an Acapella app, with Ngube layering recordings of herself over each other to create the final product. "Even though she is alone, she's singing as if she is many people," Siopis says, referencing a "whole" that relies on porosity but is nevertheless never without "holes," many of them wrought by utmost violence. Akomfrah says in this volume that in Siopis's films "there's a hole where the voice should be. . . . It's not that there's no voice at all, but it's not the authorial voice . . . [which] has somehow been ventriloquized by text."

5. Implicit in the address of "your history with me" is a reaching to "you," whose history I cannot fully know but with which I entangle and engage myself, as we have seen above. In *She Breathes Water*, "your history with me" is preceded in the textual fragments by a first splash, the liquid worlds of life



Was a sad time. The baby died.

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in its most elemental substance; following it is an allusion to time in its radical unevenness: “It started with a splash / your history with me / then in a flash / catastrophe.” In fact, what Gevisser recognises as this “taut rhyming quatrain” captures the “brevity and the violence” of the shift from the Holocene epoch to the Anthropocene, in the context of deep time.

The film shows flashing scenes of humans mistreating animals—and an angry white woman swimming in a body of water, possibly shouting “your history with me,” rendered in text on screen. Soon it dips below the waterline, there to find, or re-engage, an octopus. The “she” of the film is, for the first time, a more-than-human being—an octopus, now literalized as non-human presence, contrary to her more metaphorical uses in earlier films. Though again, as is Siopis’s wont, this “she” is not quite singular; rather she is encrypted into a syntagm of female possibilities, and an angry one at that, given patriarchal histories of “progress.” The sounds of cracking ice and repeated refrains from Franz Schubert’s “Ave Maria” form a non-human–human sound assemblage.

Zoé Whitley draws in her analysis on the “tentacular” approach which mirrors an octopus’s distributed intelligence that Siopis has articulated as central to her thinking in the making of this film in particular. Whitley reads this as a form of morphological experimentation, a heightened awareness of the energies around us and a form of filmmaking that is “flexible and anamorphous,” like the octopus. Whitley also draws effectively on Siopis’s interest in and writing on plasticity, contrasting it to formalism as such. Siopis has spoken of being drawn to the work of philosopher Catherine Malabou,

working at the intersection of philosophy and neuroscience, and showing that the brain, long thought to be in itself a rigid structure, is in fact a plastic one, capable of rerouting neural pathways and ongoing transformation. Interestingly, Malabou describes the structure of the brain as being akin to coral, moving and changing in the sea of the body. One can see in Siopis’s later films in particular her responsiveness to plasticity as an alternate mode of modelling thought itself and a filmic form of engaging with the vitality of matter and non-human forms of intelligence and activity.

Pumla Dineo Gqola focuses firmly on Siopis’s centering of women’s anger in *She Breathes Water*. If the phrase to “breathe fire” signifies extreme anger, then breathing water retains the anger in a different elemental medium while shifting it away from human capabilities. Gqola notes how in the opening scenes the camera slows down to “display the woman’s anger” and that as the film unfolds, Siopis attends to specific women’s faces, showing them to be different women, rather a singular woman or a collective Woman—and eventually a “she” who lives underwater. Here, Gqola points us towards Siopis’s filmic iteration of her long-standing concern with “de-mastering” strategies. This finds expression in Siopis’s formal experimentation: the fragments of her film-work and residues of her painting, Gqola shows, contest masculinist traditions of “ownership, stability and dominion over matter and talent.” Siopis unsettles the dominant paradigms of the “you” of the film, Gqola argues, inverting classic realist film text by centering women’s anger, often seen as monstrous.

A blurry, high-contrast photograph showing a dark silhouette of a person, possibly a woman, standing in front of a bright, fiery or sunset-like background. The image is out of focus, with streaks of light and color. The text is overlaid on the lower part of the image.

For most of my life I carried his  
photo. Lying in his little coffin.  
Tore it up in the end.

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Of Siopis's two pandemic films it is "the second pandemic" that she tackles first. After a film reel stained in red slides uncontrollably and a red velvet curtain opens a fraction, we read on the screen of her 2021 film *Shadow Shame Again*: "The 'other pandemic' that has plagued the world forever is exposed again in this time of crisis." This is followed with a quote from Gqola's work on the ubiquity of a gender-based violence whose survivors "walk the streets all day everywhere."<sup>33</sup>

In this film, referencing her *Shame* series as we saw above, Siopis "creates a context of danger with non-specific forms," Sinazo Chiya writes in her essay. As the film builds a sense of dread, it is as if, Chiya argues, one generation of survivors is "priming" the next. The film is dedicated to Tshegofatso Pule, a pregnant woman murdered by her boyfriend's male accomplice during South Africa's pandemic lockdown. Despite the film's characteristically complex image-text non-indexicality, *Shadow Shame Again* also plumbs the porosities of complicity and recognition: here "your history with me" can be heard as an implication of the watcher in what they are being shown. Chiya thinks of this in terms of Siopis's art as a "transmitter," drawing on Jeanette Winterson's term; here again, in yet another register, the film appears as co-produced between the artist's medium and the body and psyche of the "you." In both *She Breathes Water* and *Shadow Shame Again*, one could say, following Chiya, Siopis offers the viewer tools with which to create "their own

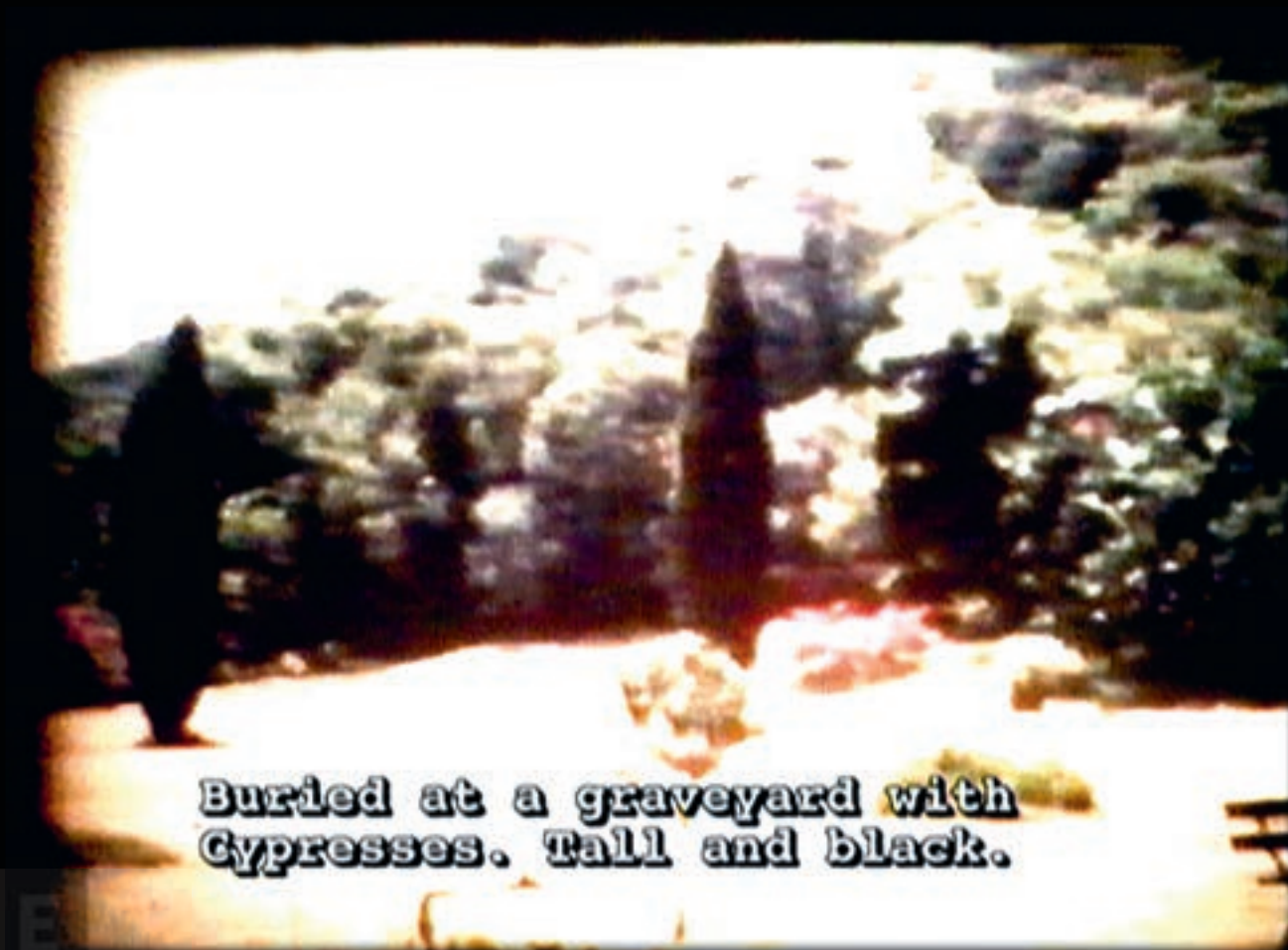
private concept of annihilation," whether on a personal or planetary plane.

The essay form, whether in text or film, Tim Corrigan has written, embeds and disperses itself within public experience.<sup>34</sup> Siopis, like other artist-filmmakers working during lockdown, was reaching out in isolation, too, to a wider world of women and other viewers, talking in public via digital platforms about intimate violation. Akin, too, to Ngube's multiple voices, stretching and testing the capacities of public art discourse in the time of Covid.

Siopis made her six-minute film *Celluloid Body* during the third wave of the Covid pandemic in South Africa, when the Omicron virus produced a spiked caseload more contagious and dangerous than the previous two. As I discuss in my closing essay of this book, the highly damaged and in parts entirely broken thermoplastic of the celluloid film now looks much like spiked and wheeled coronaviruses themselves. The bright flashes of projector light showing through the torn film plastic remind us of dense viral transmission images. Human activity in the found footage is almost completely obscured behind wheeling sprocket marks and darting white light on the screen. We glimpse a world as it once was but which is hard to grasp, so unrecognizable has it become.

Michael Taussig has written of "the divine hum of the reenchanting universe that opens the doors of perception





Buried at a graveyard with  
Cypresses. Tall and black.

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just as the virus does” and this finds echo in Siopis’s film.<sup>35</sup> Burnt and broken celluloid animates the film and the “coda” at the end is a poem spoken in the voice of a virus: “Universal me / spike all round.” The Covid coda, by a virus named for the letters of the Greek alphabet, is dense with reference to a pantheic Arcadian world, lost but reanimated in flashes of poetic insight and lockdown longing. Siopis’s invocation of Eros, Greek god of love and life, and of Pan, god of fields and fertility, at the end of her poem, appears to dive back into Olympian and pre-Olympian worlds to find succour and renewal out of a time of disease and death. One of the only glimpsed scenes freer from diseased material than the others is that of a woman diving off a river bank into water. Naked but for an open jacket, she leaps and swims animatedly. On Gevisser’s reading, the diving woman could be thought of as the artist herself, first seen in *My Lovely Day* as a young girl; she is there, too, in *Celluloid Body*, becoming alive again.

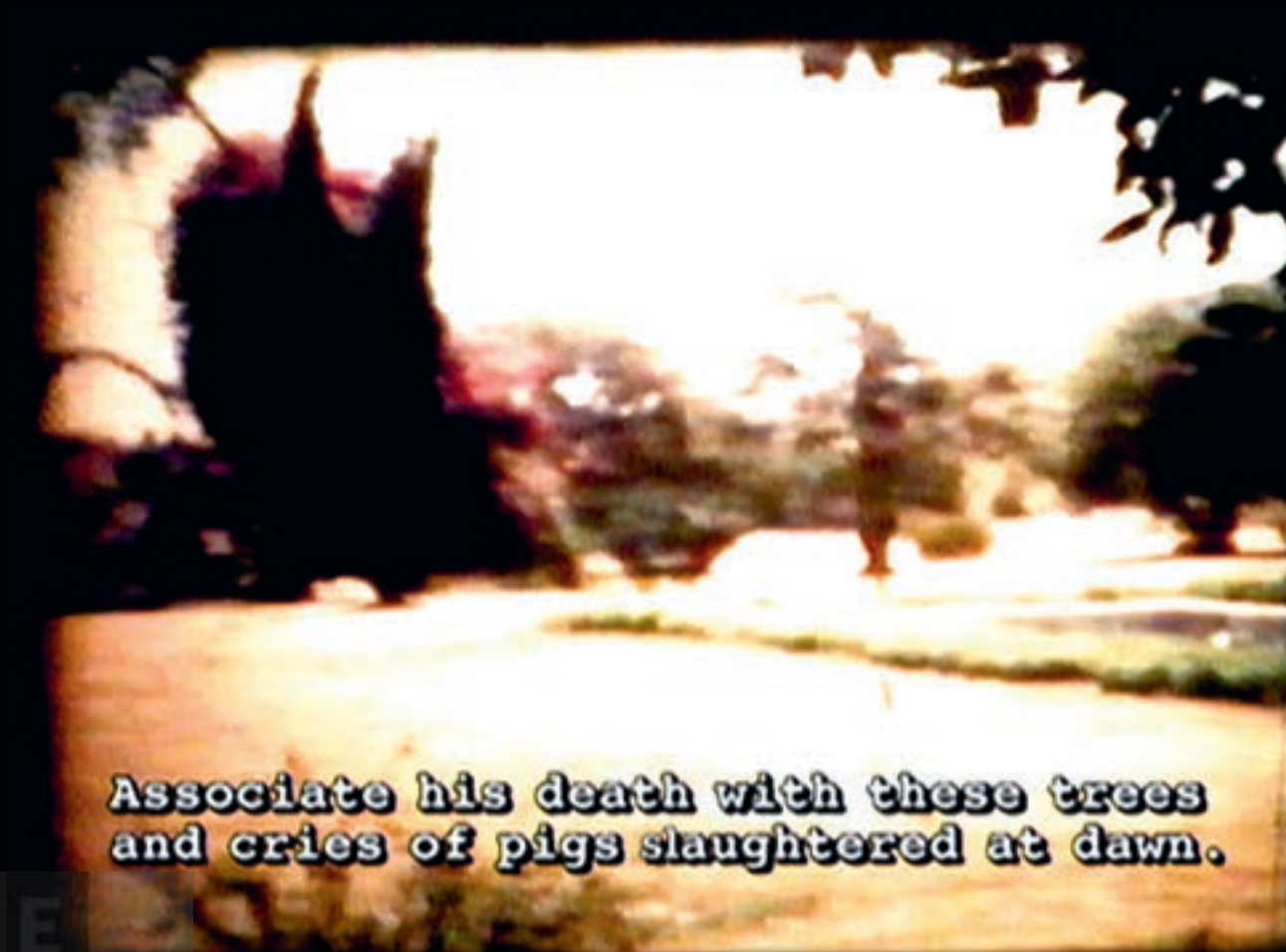
8.

The spike of a sea urchin—of a coronavirus, spiked all round—Covid, invisible sea urchin of the air. We try to think by association, metaphor, drift. The residue of this thing in that, in the next one, of how I was thinking then in what I am thinking now. How the two pandemics fold inward, causing damage and distress and a need for release and freedom and how their forms leak and spill across each other—sometimes Siopis reuses a piece of found footage from one

film to another, now giving the filmic fragment a completely different meaning; at others, she leaves it to us to make the associations, allow the inferences, echoes and shadows to form in our own particular minds. In this, she suggests to us the aliveness of things, the reverberations and vocabularies we make our own worlds from and keep extending, re-forming and repeating or rerouting, plastically.

So, too, Siopis infuses the essay film with new life, bringing it alive again as a form, a set of material acts which take more and more of life and history into themselves, a becoming alive again of form in action. What, precisely, does she do differently, bring to this form? Firstly, perhaps more than any other artist-filmmaker working today, she dislodges words from both narrative and even textuality as such: her words shift into other, unknown territories. They might come to belong to the camera, or, one could say, Siopis frees language increasingly from text and purpose, de-mastering it, making it available for other uses, including by those who have not been its envisaged subjects. The result is a pushing further into the gap, the interstice, and thus the potential of what thought itself could be, the forms it is capable of taking.

Secondly and in a related vein, her films go further than most, and certainly push beyond what twentieth-century and largely European writers and philosophers envisaged, in dislodging voice. In so doing, she contributes to a decolonization of voice, by insisting we engage it and the problematics it gives rise to. Her films, moreover, refuse to “give voice” in a simplified way to the marginalized; instead, they find a form



**Associate his death with these trees  
and cries of pigs slaughtered at dawn.**

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of enabling the voice in the head to make its own meaning, without being projected onto, ventriloquized or spoken for, or curtailed by an assumed or adopted subject position.

Thirdly, she pushes further into the worlds of more-than-human matter and the vitalities and speculative energies of the other-than-human worlds that make up the planetary than many filmmakers working both in the late twentieth century and today. In other words, her films increasingly push beyond the human as such, in a way and to a degree that Adorno, Deleuze, Varda and Third Cinema generally did not. Rascaroli writes of the uncanniness of the soundscape of a film like *She Breathes Water*: “We perceive it as the voice of Nature—as pure voice, a voice without speech—and yet understand that it is language.”

Lastly, Siopis works in a new technological era; while the 1960s were shaped by technological advances in which amateur film became a possibility, she works with all the digital editing tools computers today enable—but she does so with old film: rather than seeing such celluloid film as obsolete, the way most people would see it today, she is drawn to the self-reflexive distance it offers on an era that has so shaped our own. Extending the gap or interstice of twentieth-century short film and film theory, her theories in forms become the human-technological assemblages within which new explorations of the radical disjunctures of matter itself become possible.

Highly receptive to her time and place, Siopis refuses the seam and the suture, amplifying the gap in order to release thought, locating, in her words, the “unrecoverable

strangeness” of time and the underneath of things, redefining a world-making openness as plasticity and other-than-human form.<sup>36</sup> Enabling broken celluloid to inhabit the filmic syntagms she creates, she draws what is most damaged and what is most alive into the heart of what is being considered—and makes of a woman going under the waterline a figure of the artist herself.



But you play as if nothing is  
happening around you.

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ADDITIONAL  
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Sarah Nuttall

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## 2. Can You Write a History?

Laura Rascaroli

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