

**Randall Halle & Reinhild Steingröver (ed.):
After the Avant-Garde –
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**QWERTY Cinema: Christoph Girardet/Matthias Müller's *Phoenix Tapes* (1999)
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On February 25th, 2007, at the 79th Annual Academy Award ceremony at the Kodak theatre in Hollywood a telephone rang. Lucille Ball ran to pick it up, Jackie Gleason picked it up, Humphrey Bogart picked it up, Marlon Brando, Jerry Lee Lewis, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, all answered the call. In the end there were 24 more (and more recent ones) of the major actors in Hollywood's Who is Who, including Audrey Tautou, Betty Rubble and Mr. Incredible, who had picked up the phone while lying in bed, standing in the kitchen, sitting in a car, working in the office. The entire moment lasted exactly 29 seconds and was the launch of the new Apple iPhone teaser ad. There are more found footage films – a filmic form that consists of newly edited materials of other films–shown at this global TV event that likes to present itself as the champion of film history, most of them commissioned by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts. Blending nostalgia for Hollywood feature film, the star system and a feeling of “avant-garde” by means of a found footage film at the Oscar ceremony, comes in handy at a time, when the filmic past “has become one of the major sources of revenue for the large media conglomerates that dominate the global media economy.”¹

Presenting a new communication technology via an appropriated Hollywood past at the Oscars is not without irony. Looking at the number of communication media that are fused in a single machine this time, one can easily see that whatever the brand, there will be a portable Classical Hollywood that we will carry around with us in the near future. Digital camera, i-Pod video player and internet access will fully integrate production, distribution and exhibition, making what had been just a telephone before a pocket version of a major U.S. film studio of the 1930's. As we listen to the call of the future telephone, we can happily see Hollywood's claim of global mastery dissolve once again and for all.

While the Oscar celebrations were still going on, the commercial was being discussed already in film-critical terms on the internet, most likely the major channel for the distribution of films in the future. The ‘touchexplode’ blog presented a short synoptic family tree of the clip on the internet which included the clips in question or at least parts of it for everybody to compare:

“I did see the new Iphone commercial that ran for the first time during the Oscars which is quoting heavily from Christian Marclay's *Telephones* (1995). Which is kind of quoting Matthias Mueller's *Home Stories* (1991). Which is probably quoting something else too.”²

What is interesting about this little genealogy, where one of the traces happens to lead to Bielefeld and Braunschweig in the early nineties, is not just that the pretense of the global can always be dissolved in a series of decisions that are made within various local cultures that influence each other. This in turn helps to understand Hollywood as what it in fact is: just another local culture. In a year, when Hollywood announces “the creation of a long overdue institution – a museum devoted to motion pictures,”³ the understanding of film language as a code that affects all aspects of the cinema and not just speech⁴ is what is perhaps more key than ever. Faced with Hollywood's eagerness to cement its idea of what really mattered over the years and to further enforce its filmic monolingualism, to define foreignness along its own terms, the practice of found footage film, which points to the making of the codes, to how they operate, can come to the rescue.

While found footage film is clearly not the aesthetics that the Academy promotes for productions that want to succeed within the framework it provides, it is this quintessentially metafilmic form ranging from works as different as Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* to George Landow's *Film in Which There Appear Sprocket Holes, Edge Lettering, Dirt Particles, etc.* that is the most sophisticated in rethinking and reconceptualizing film history. This is the case not the least because it challenges the notions of the original and the auteur, which have turned out to be essential to both Hollywood and the European arthouse cinema, its supposed antipode. As Hollywood has developed into a copyright industry and now depends on DVD sales, “the notion of the original plays a decisive role in shaping the accessibility and driving the calculation of old film. ... As a marketing tool, the notion of the original is particularly efficient when it is coupled with the notion of the auteur” (*H* 143), a critical filmic practice is needed whose playful dealings with notions of the auteur and copyright help regaining a working relationship with contemporary forms of image production and image transfers.

What the three found footage films of different quality and with different agendas that framed the Oscar ceremony of 2007 shared, was Hitchcock. All three tried to transform particular motifs or fetishized objects from

Hitchcock films into something else: a brand name, a sound device and a blueprint of Hollywood melodramatic storytelling. It was watching avant-garde films in school and Hitchcock at home that had led Mathias Müller to the making of *Home Stories*, a 16mm film of 6 minutes length, back in 1991. Bringing home and school together resulted in an aesthetic that transformed both:

The new cinephilia of the download, the file swap, the sampling, re-editing and re-mounting of story line, characters, and genre gives a new twist to that anxious love of loss and plenitude, if we can permit ourselves to consider it for a moment outside the parameters of copyright and fair use.⁵

In 1998 Matthias Müller (Bielefeld) and Christoph Girardet (Hannover), who had met in the film class of Birgit Hein at the Braunschweig University of Art and had gone separate ways since then, join forces for the first time for an exhibition on Alfred Hitchcock and contemporary art in Oxford. They named their contribution *Phoenix Tapes*.

Phoenix? What is this? Where was that again? What exactly was it that took place there? It takes a minute to remember, to locate Phoenix, Arizona in the landscapes of Hitchcock's films. The name does ring a bell, though. Phoenix, Arizona is where the secretary in *Psycho* is from. Phoenix is what is left behind way back in Hitchcock's ground zero.⁶ By deciding on *Phoenix Tapes* as the title of their contribution, *Psycho* – the film that Hitchcock considered “more than any of my other pictures ... a film that belongs to filmmakers”⁷ –, a film that is famous for, among other things, having its star, the secretary, killed in its first third, is reinscribed in the notion of notoriety, canonicity and stardom that underlies the very concept of *Notorious*, the exhibition in Oxford on how one of popular culture's biggest names relates to contemporary art.

Taking their share of what belongs to them anyway, there is evidence that Girardet/Müller's video installation – which consists of six loops with newly edited, appropriated footage from thirty nine Hitchcock films – is as much about the shifting parameters of filmmaking in the late nineties as it is about Hitchcock. The highly dramatic subject matter of the loops should not deceive us too easily:

“François Truffaut: Would you say that *Psycho* is an experimental film? Alfred Hitchcock: Possibly. ... I don't care about the subject matter; I don't care about the acting, but I do care about the pieces of film and the photography and the sound track.” (T 282)

Although one might dispute the reading of *Psycho* as an experimental film, it undoubtedly has an experimental film embedded in its beginning that provides us with first clues on how to understand the highly abstract idea of Phoenix it deploys. If we follow Saul Bass's famous title sequence, *Psycho*'s Phoenix is first and foremost an effect of recording. The immediate transition from the vertical lines of the grid deflecting from the director's name in the moving graphics to the high rises of the urban landscape of Phoenix in the photography of the establishing shot of the diegesis, indicates that this Phoenix directly emerges from writing. From an authorless writing, to be more precise, from an invisible apparatus that makes the writing of a name the mere oscillographic effect of a suspense indicator. Twenty years before the beginning of the digital age, these high rises already come out of a machine. The audience moves around in a landscape that is implied by the effects of canonicity, which in turn is guaranteed by a machine. It is a reversed camera stylo: the editing-table writes the filmmaker the way the typewriter does the author. The appearance of letters, which create the names that produce the canon are measured as mere deflections of a pointer.

The person usually handling the machine, typing the names and the text is the secretary. Secretaries traditionally embody the organizational memory of an enterprise. A secretary accepts, filters and forwards the telephone calls, keeps the books, and takes dictation. If she is the figure that *Phoenix Tapes* is working with, what then is dictation supposed to mean in this context? Is *Phoenix Tapes* about preserving the voice, the idea of the boss? (Hitchcock's “signature”?) Are we to understand Girardet/Müller as waiting for Hitchcock to tell them what to do? Is it about thirty-nine films of his, newly edited by two of his fans, who are handcuffed together to make this film? Just another chicken and egg paradox?

Far from being an original instance commanding [Girardet/Müller's] reproductive desire or their desire for reproducing themselves in another body, [Hitchcock] is a double in a larger series of doubles and cancellations. In this respect, [Hitchcock] cannot be considered as an original or first double, but always as a substitute for another double whose apparitions are several and imitative of one another.⁸

As her initial break facilitated lovemaking with the out-of-towner, it is Marion Crane's final breaking off her routine, her fleeing the logic of this landscape of dictation (which we have begun to call Phoenix) with the assets of her employer, which sets off the uncanny flight of the images. Her act of appropriation, understood as theft, shows that once the fantasy of the secretary is on the loose, the doubles fly. It does not take long until, Crane, the overview, disappears.

Of course, one cannot simply run away from the logic of this place with its seemingly clearly defined and protected roles of authority and zones of empowerment, where it is delineated who precisely has to speak, and who has to listen, and see. It is not just at the outset of the film that the heroic fable of agency still seems to be intact. It proves to be still pervasive and definitive on the road, when Marion Crane seems to give in and to calculate the wins and losses of the money she has appropriated, apparently willing to retribute the difference. And it is to this fantasy of authority, that we, the audience know so well to which Marion Crane, our role-model in the making, finally seems to succumb, when she considers returning right before she takes a shower and the car disappears in the bog:

Marion tears up the toilet paper with monetary calculations, the writing of numbers (or letters), a small scrap of which is retrieved by Lila from the toilet, identifying character script with excrement. ... So the positive inflection of the phoenix-car can here be 'read' as an alteration in legibility, in the archive, translation. (C 96 f.)

Phoenix as that, which has to be worked through marks Girardet/Müller's symbolic point of departure. Directing our attention to the Phoenix in transition in 1999 is telling in various respects. First of all it says, as much as we might like it, we, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, do not live in Hitchcock's world anymore. How is that? Do we have to let Hitchcock go in the very moment we have found him? Once we have happily located Phoenix in his universe? Where is Phoenix in ours? Here, today?

Phoenix in *Phoenix Tapes* does not simply repeat the gesture of *Psycho*'s beginning: emphasizing the "everywhere/nowhere" by randomly picking the name of a place that is most notably unspectacular, unglamorous and therefore perhaps even more anonymous than the usual suspects of cinematic glamour production. In 1999, Phoenix may still resonate with these associations, but it does definitively not connote contingency/arbitrariness anymore. Phoenix is not just one of many cities anymore. And this not only because the name has also become indicative of a major filmic ground zero in the meantime and therefore also belongs to, among other things, film history now. It is the very distinction between "in the past" and "today" that Phoenix as a name acts out.

It is the logic of this topography, the topography of Phoenix, Arizona, that re-surfaces as the actual specificity of location in Girardet/Müller's installation in 1999. But didn't the exhibition take place in Oxford, England? Is it possible for an installation to position itself spatially to a metaphor in motion? And can it be precise with this positioning? In 1999, Phoenix, Arizona, which has changed beyond recognition in comparison to Phoenix, Arizona 1960 is exactly this: one of the most rapidly growing cities in the world⁹, it is one of the key examples of what has been dubbed "100 Mile City"¹⁰ in the urban studies of the nineties. An urban stretch without a traditional center, which is emblematic for the rapid change of information processing in post industrial societies and which has as its anchor point a museum, whose function has been radically redefined:

Museums are pump primers, their presence can be compared to the opening of a subway station, or even an airport: an investment, which has the effect of raising property values. ... Once it was a place that had instruction and the propagation of a particular view of the world as its underpinning. Now it has come to be seen as an urban landmark – a replacement for the missing agora, a place devoted to spectacle. (S 133 and 135)

It is from here that a new understanding of film will surface. *Psycho* is already poking fun at this: Checking in at the Bates Motel, where she will vanish, Marion Crane from Phoenix picks "Los Angeles" aka "Hollywood" as the place she is from.

Now that we have found the museum with the help of the title of the installation, we can calmly look at the images the last one provides. Appropriately for an installation getting its inspiration from a secretary who works in a real estate office, *Phoenix Tapes* starts with an image of an empty property. The very first image that we see is a fence next to a road in the middle of nowhere. The space is marked, it seems to belong to somebody. And indeed it does. The site is actually quite famous. We all have been there several times. If we were asked to give its coordinates, to provide its location, we could easily identify the spot as right next to the section of Corcoran Road and Garces Highway outside of Wasco, California and we have most likely visited it in our living room. The fact that this image from *North by Northwest* is famous is probably also the reason why together with the next two shots it is associated with, it looks as if it were to begin a slide show at the wall in Oxford. In highly ironic fashion *Phoenix Tapes* alternates each take with a black frame of pronounced length throughout the first block of the installation. It is ironic as it recalls how crucial the photographic presentation of artworks via slide shows has originally been for the formation of art history at the universities. Experiencing photographed images of art in the dark of the lecture room lies at the very heart of the bourgeois art sentiment since the 19th century. Since then art has always been what the photographic reproduction has made out of it. It takes a crop dusting plane flying through the image far away in the background in the third take to realize that the images, we are dealing with, are actually not stills, but moving

photographic images. Of course, the question whether or not the images move does not dispense us from the basic question of “how the corresponding photographic archive restructures knowledge of art (history).”¹¹

As for “Hitchcock,” the moving images categorized under this name, always seem to solicit their appropriations more than others. To take Hitchcock’s motifs or objects as moments of alleged familiarity to anchor texts, to reassemble them into walking encyclopedias has become a common practice in film¹² and film criticism. Today, due to the easy access to the films and to the technology required for the capturing of clips, found footage films with elements of Hitchcock films have become an everyday finger exercise in the classroom for the training of students in design, film, and media and film studies.¹³ “Hitchcock” as the name that supposedly is in control of the encyclopedic order and that is capable of overwriting the archive in the end has become the very fantasy of filmic empowerment:

“The best example of the degree to which the *politique des auteurs* can be carried is the Hitchcock case. ... *Cahiers* once devoted fourteen pages to a thematic index of objects in Hitchcock’s films: glasses, throats, clocks, cats, eyes, knives, keys...”¹⁴ an article in *Sight and Sound* states as early as 1960. In 2005, the author of *Hitchcock Motifs* which presents several more series of his own comments on this passage that is still pertinent: “Although he [Richard Roud] has invented the throats, clocks and eyes, he had grasped the principle: they would not have been out of place.”¹⁵ Parallel to the Oxford exhibition celebrating the Hitchcock centennial, the four German cinemateques in Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Munich and Potsdam had joined forces in 1999 to celebrate Hitchcock’s centennial with an exhibition that traced back dominant motives and techniques in his work such as staircases, mothers, back projections, grids, uncanny houses etc.¹⁶ No other filmmaker has ever been as excessively presented like this.

The play with disorientation and familiarity in a space where a compass is not really of much help is continued throughout the first block of *Phoenix Tapes*. Phoenix southwest meets (among others) snippets of *North by Northwest*, a film about mistaken identity. And as with Hitchcock missing the bus (the metaphor aka the means of transportation) in his cameo at the end of an again famous experimental film again by Saul Bass at the beginning of *North By Northwest*, *Phoenix Tapes*’ empty property at its beginning is picked up by a series of directional street signs and chalk arrows on a wall in the very same block, which point to wherever that may be. Hypostasizing a tabula rasa is the working hypothesis of this installation.

It is obvious that this installation in Oxford is not just about the images it finds buried in films, but always also about how the knowledge of the proper display of filmic/photographic images is organized. *Phoenix Tapes* combines its own reading and making of art with a general reflection on the techniques of art history, watching art. If “Hitchcock” is supposed to be seen as art, he has to be dissected and compared to other shots (ideally in a parallel projection) as we do it with other art too.

To associate Phoenix with “Tapes” in the title of the exhibition emphasizes the mediality of the new spatial logic of exhibition and marks its area of discovery as factitious. In a way, *Phoenix Tapes* is just another word for “Found Footage,” which it translates. A place that signifies chance (where something was found) substitutes a name that is considered to point to an essence. It takes anonymity to once more understand the division of labor that extends to the doubles and the ghosts as the basic component of the uncanny potential of cinema.

What about the actual place of the *Notorious* exhibition? Does it matter at all? Is it already sufficient for identifying the site-specificity of an installation to say that it is the place of the museum where the equally subtle and paradoxical inscription of *Phoenix Tapes* (which is very well aware of what it is replacing and what it is supposed to stand for) both intervenes and situates itself? Of course, it was not really surprising in the nineties that the proven specialists in spectacle were remembered, once spectacle was asked for. It was in the 1990s that museum and cinema came to function no longer as opposites: moving images entered the museum space on a large scale: Although largely invisible in gallery-based art of the 1980s, by the mid-1990s video suddenly appeared everywhere, as increasingly monumental installations supplanted older, more modest forms like single-channel videotapes. In museum exhibitions, the divide became clear: while conventional tapes remain marginalized in physically segregated ‘screenings,’ installational and sculptural projects claim space on the main floor.¹⁷

In the 1990s a new cinema of attraction emerged at the site of the museum. Cinema and museum, once antagonistic locations of popular and high culture, have merged into something new. With museums changing in general during this period, could the intervention of *Phoenix Tapes* also have taken place with the same precision at any other museum as well (as it later will, apparently with ease, when the exhibition goes on tour)? What is special about the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford?

The *Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* exhibition in Oxford, which makes its only commissioned work, *Phoenix Tapes*, the main thread through its galleries distinguishes itself from its two “Art and Film”-exhibition forerunners¹⁸ by straightforwardly foregrounding the name of a Hollywood director as the guiding principle that organizes an art exhibition. The linkage of Hitchcock and contemporary art in one phrase signals that Hollywood no longer has to wait for artists to rework its products in order to get redeemed. What art is and is not is not an inherent quality, something automatically given with an object, but instead the result of referencing processes,

one discusses something as art or as not art, one can never be sure where to find it. According to this logic, Oxford's *Notorious* exhibition opens up lines of communications, a dialogue among equals, among, let us say, candidates for art. As for Hollywood: "Hollywood" becomes visible, but is challenged at the same time. At this place here, it does not have the monopoly of image production anymore. It has to stand its own ground in comparison to rival logics of image production. Each of the visitors can visually compare the various claims with which they are confronted. Hollywood is not safe anymore. Nor is contemporary art.

Like Hollywood, contemporary art also obtains a higher degree of visibility in the context of this exhibition, while losing its former monopoly of image production in the museum space as well. There are multiple ironies at work. Probably for the first time in his life, the name Hitchcock is used to tell the audience: Don't be scared! This won't be just art. You do not need special training to have fun. It is 'Hitchcock,' the familiar name that has to divert *Schwellenangst*, the fear of entering a museum in the first place. Out of the blue, one of the most paternal institutions of them all, the museum, tells us, don't be ashamed anymore of what you like. We like it too. Of course, this attractiveness also belongs to the business aspect of the museum: *Notorious. Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* also and importantly tests an event that promises revenues in a major scale. And it did: the concept had global appeal and could be sold. After its opening in Oxford, the exhibition went on an extensive world tour: Sydney, Tokyo, Odense, Hamilton.

The site for the original exhibition itself could not have been chosen better. The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford is a prestigious exhibition place, a good joke, wishful thinking, and a chapter in the history of hauntology. Exhibiting Hitchcock in a Museum of Modern Art is a rerun, of course. It recalls the first time Hitchcock was exhibited in a Museum of Modern Art, which was planned right after *Psycho* was released:

[M]arketing and publicity strategies Hitchcock helped to develop for both *The Birds* and *Marnie* ... reflect his desire to be accepted by more elite audiences. During the period of these two films, Hitchcock dealt behind-the-scenes with cultural institutions (e.g. The Museum of Modern Art), film figures (e.g. François Truffaut), and newspaper and magazine critics in order to promote his image as a serious film artist. ... In truth, MOMA's film department was hardly a bastion for Hitchcock studies. ... The Museum of Modern Art agreed to present a film retrospective entitled 'The Films of Alfred Hitchcock' with the understanding that [the public relations firm handling publicity for *The Birds*] agreed to pay the costs of the exhibition, including 'the writing, designing, and printing of a monograph to accompany the exhibition' ... [A] memo to Hitchcock ... described the unusual procedure for mailing the monograph. 'They will be mailed ... from the Museum of Modern Art and not from our office.' ... In return for sanctioning the retrospective, the museum would present Hitchcock's films over a six-month period at no cost to the museum In addition to generating income, the retrospective ... provided MOMA with the opportunity to expand its audience by attracting a different segment of the public to the museum.¹⁹

Back in England, almost 40 years later, Hitchcock and his current reputation is exhibited at another MoMA: The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. A Museum of Modern Art, which is, first of all, no Museum of Modern Art at all nor has it ever been one. True, it always had the aspiration, but it never received the endowment from the university to build up a permanent collection. It took until 2002 for this contemporary art gallery to finally give up on its dream and be renamed Modern Art Oxford, or MAO for short. On the website, the new name had to be explained for matters of name recognition with a tiny grey subtitle: "Modern Art Oxford. The New Name of the Museum of Modern Art Oxford established 1965." This subtitle has vanished in the meantime.

Although the MoMA, Oxford as weighed down by the millstone of the "wannabe-institution" most of its life, it was able to quickly build up an international reputation as "one of Europe's leading progressive spaces," by housing a series of very prestigious temporary exhibitions. Among its fields of specialization is contemporary photography. As early as the 1980's, the MoMA, Oxford begins to exhibit video art, and in 1988, it presented an exhibit, whose unhappy title is typical for beginnings, expressing a desire to go in a certain direction, uncertain as to exactly how accomplish this: *Sergej Eisenstein: His Life and Work*.

All the above is the institutional background for the exhibition of 1999 Girardet/Müller exhibit in a fake MoMA and place the name of their work under a misnomer. A title, again, that emphasizes that the meaning of names also shifts. Not even a name can be simply taken for granted: A MoMA is a MoMA is a... Don't believe in institutions! Don't believe the hype! Before there was painting, there was the mirror. Already in *Blackmail* in 1929, Hitchcock had entered the British Museum with a trick.²⁰ Which helps in turn to rethink the museum now.

Since permanence had been erased out of its original plan, the MoMA, Oxford could specialize in the effects of temporariness without apology. Perhaps, in retrospect, this is why, on the brink of its new christening at the climax of its own history, it had begun keenly looking at processes of collecting, sampling and circulating photographic and filmic images. *Notorious. Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* is just one of three related exhibitions in four years, which were curated with this perspective in mind. After the end of this series, the MoMA, Oxford can finally come to rest and can let its name and millstone go.

With all this new emphasis on mortality gained, we recollect that the secretary, a figure of modernity, is dead at the beginning of the exhibition. What happened to the principle of classification that belongs to her space? Is it still valid? Could it happily live on? *Phoenix Tapes*, which had dissolved a canonical name into an archive of shots free for general appropriation, directs our attention to the former order. It does so by bringing back the archive to the museum. Two years ago the first of the three exhibitions at the MoMA, Oxford *In Visible Lights: Photography and Classification in Art, Science and the Everyday*, had put the multiple uses of photography and the various ways, we make sense of it, on display. Sticking to the archive and exploring the inherent potential of an uncontained encyclopedic approach in an art museum, the exhibition sought to tackle the supposedly stable line between art and science, as well as modernism's claim, according to which the precondition for an aesthetic understanding of photography is its liberation from its former contexts:

Photography's entrance into the museum on a vast scale, its revaluation according to the epistemology of modernism, its new status as autonomous art — this is what I mean by the symptoms of modernism's demise. ... When modernism was a fully operative paradigm of artistic practice, photography was necessarily seen as too contingent ... to achieve the self-reflexive, entirely conventionalized form of modernist art. ... [The] entry of photography into the museum and the library's art division ... establishes a wholly new and radicalized artistic practice For ... it contaminates the purity of modernism's separate categories, the categories of painting and sculpture. These categories are subsequently divested of their fictive autonomy, their idealism, and thus their power.²¹

If for the museum shaped by modernism, the aesthetic ambitions of photography and film can only be realized by resisting the model of the archive, which “tended to relegate the individual photographer to the status of a detail worker, providing fragmentary images for an apparatus beyond his or her control,”²² the consequences of the archive's return to the museum in photography's disguise are massive. How much do we think we are in control of the meanings of the objects we put on display? What objects?

As for *Phoenix Tapes*, it is again the name of Phoenix, which indicates the retrieval of the object that got us here. An object pulled out of oblivion:

How, moreover, can that fabled bird be other than mockingly meant to celebrate a rebirth of flight ... as drawn, dredged by pulleys, as a dead mechanical vehicle (a Ford at that) emergent from a fecal burial pond, a bog? What car-tomb, what retrieved newspaper folded over what deficit of cash, resumes the upward trajectory – in abject mockery, or otherwise? – of a phoenix, at the point where traces are being recovered from what seemed a pure act of vanishing (Marion's), and that of another bird-name signaling a cinematic aerial shot (*Crane*)? (C 82)

Phoenix Tapes deals with the objects that brought us to the museum in its second block. Aptly titled, “Burden of proof,” we witness the secretary this time starting the series. As it is her who is in charge of the transaction of the business, she is officially introduced by a series of forged business cards. *Phoenix Tapes* is right: let us not fixate too much on Marion Crane. As we can see, the very one and only secretary, who already shares her office with another secretary in *Psycho*, could also be called Marion Holland, Mary Taylor, Margret Edgar or Martha Heilbron. And the film could be called *Marnie* or... The series of displacements of functional equivalents is more illuminative than mere elements of plot. More than with just single objects or motifs, the *Phoenix Tapes* installation is concerned with the network of rules of filmic statements [énoncés] seen as effective in Western societies in the 1990's:

[T]he keyboard of a typewriter is not a statement; but the same series of letters, A, Z, E, R, T, listed in a typewriting manual, is the statement of the alphabetical order adopted by French typewriters. ... [T]he statement is ... caught up, like the others, in a logical, grammatical, locutory nexus. It is not so much one element among others ..., as a function that ... enables one to say of a series of signs whether or not they are present in it. The statement ... is a function of existence that properly belongs to signs and on the basis of which one may then decide, through analysis or intuition, whether or not they ‘make sense’, according to what rule they follow one another or are juxtaposed, of what they are the sign, and what sort of act is carried out by their formulation.²³

The statement of the alphabetical order adopted by typewriters (the main tools of the trade for secretaries such as Marion Crane or Marion Holland or Martha Heilbron) is none that sticks to the alphabetical order that we have learned in school as the basis for the cultural technique of writing, but to statistics instead: to the frequency of use of single letters in writing. QWERTY, the invisible grid in the shape of the order of its top row of keys that the typewriter imposes on the body of the typist, who has to internalize it, in order to be able to write with her eyes shut, brings into the light of the day that the technologies of recording are not simply reproducing reality, but determining

it. “The medium of the secretaries is substituted by machines, which calculate on their own.”²⁴ This is especially true for the digital age, where the computer, further developed in the spirit of calculation, gradually replaces the keyboard as the privileged man-machine interface with the mouse. The iPhone-gadget, for instance, announced at the Oscars in 2007, has a touch-screen as one of its most characteristic features.

As the impact of secretaries on book keeping and data storage in our culture is vanishing, the installation that recalls the film of the secretary as the precondition of its own existence, memorizes her effect by presenting in six steps an archive of versions of sequences which mimics a narrative that can not decide on just one diegesis. As film history is always fictitious, the basic rule of combination of the dispersed, plotless elements we can find, is gaining in importance. In “Burden of Proof” this rule could be described as hyperarticulation. Those equally inconspicuous or highly dramatic sequences, used in the film to introduce and better stage the by now famous plot elements that we are trained to keep in mind, are presented here without their referent. It is a technique of excess, presenting not just the clue that is needed, but clue after clue after clue. The use of close-ups as a series of its own is one such example:

[T]he close-up ... is that which functions precisely as *extra-* (extra-scenic, for example) and, as such, is a sign of the discontinuity of the discourse, at once already perforated in order to facilitate the fetishistic cutting up of the body of the text [T]he close-up [is] an excess of writing: ... It is of the order of an almost caricatural hyper-articulated writing, in a sense the grimace of the filmic text.²⁵

This inflationary practice is also true for the soundtrack, which – particularly in the fifth block “bedroom,” which adds the self quote of the concept of *Home Stories*, the own classic, to the mix – is holding the series of plotless elements together. It works in the very same hyperarticulate way as it had in its old days of pre-museum found footage festival film. ²⁶

In order to make us feel even more safe in the museum, these close-ups in the monitor mounted against the wall in broad daylight again function ironically both as a variation and as a recourse to the slide show presentations of art history, which made remote objects first and foremost comparable. As larger-than-life enlargements of the object in question these close-ups traditionally evoke fantasies of true essence. True grandness always stands the proof of detailed, microscopic inspection.²⁷

Phoenix Tapes is eager to keep alive traces of the former contexts of the film-takes it uses. One hidden erasure in particular, an erasure that is typical of the transfer of filmic images to the aesthetic realm is revoked. How are we supposed to read the way *Phoenix Tapes* is spelled out before our very eyes? Are we given any clues? Looking again at the source material for the title of the installation, there is in fact a little tutorial in Saul Bass’s famous title sequence for *Psycho* on how to understand the sequences of *Phoenix Tapes*. The first image on a big screen that the audiences of 1960 see of Hitchcock’s film and which provides a first reading of it is the Paramount company logo, but this time a distorted one, as it is filmed from a TV set. It takes a very special permission for a filmmaker to be able to manipulate a studio logo, which as the sign of undisputed authority and power is meant, of course, to show up uncorrupted in all its glory. At the beginning of *Psycho*, the new logo tells us: the film you are about to see is only understood as mediated in the context of TV culture. Everything you are accustomed to, everything you always took for granted, is subjected to the logic of electronic recording first. “It was an experiment Could I make a feature film under the same conditions as a television show? I used a complete television unit to shoot it very quickly.”²⁸ The psychosis always starts at home.

Phoenix Tapes without the context of TV culture would only make half as much sense. *Home Stories*’ dependency on television still applies here:

Scott MacDonald: Am I correct that the entire film was recorded off television? Would you rather have used film excerpts, or is the television-ness of the imagery one of the ‘home stories’? Müller: The film uses shots that were elaborately produced for the big screen. However, I’m only familiar with them from television: that is, incredibly shrunken. The shabby aesthetics of my film, which are far from the original glamour, are supposed to say something about the path that brought these images to me. At the same time, I wanted to bring them back to the screen, but in an altered, damaged form.²⁹

The quality of the takes in *Phoenix Tapes* points to the process of recording at a time in digital culture when the various copies made of an original are not characterized by visible data loss anymore. The source material for *Phoenix Tapes* are VHS video tapes. And it is the deliberately bad quality of the takes, which provides the first major irritation for viewers of the installation in the age of production value. Deciding not to purify the images that we know from TV, not to uphold the basic difference that is supposed to be needed for art, namely being explicitly non-TV, Girardet/Müller make what we see even worse. What we see is not just Hollywood, but it is also TV – within Western cultural ranking, the lowest of the low.³⁰ And not only that, the artists also obviously enjoy both. With this

decision, both artists make, among other statements, an explicit statement on the changing function and presentation of video in the redefined space of the museum. It is not formats that should be hidden or stored away, once we begin to talk about cultural values. Nothing is bad about any format.

Like all technologies of 'space-binding,' television poses challenges to fixed conceptions of materiality and immateriality, farness and nearness, vision and touch. It is both a thing and a conduit for electronic signals, both a piece of furniture in a room and a window to an imaged elsewhere, both a commodity and a way of looking at commodities.³¹

Television is also "a form of writing across space, a remote inscription that produces – and annihilates – places: the place of the body, the place of the screen, the place of dwelling." (M, 93) It is the site of the monitor where videos are usually allowed to enter the space of a museum. The TV box is their commonly allotted space. For the museum, the box in the room provides some means of distancing with respect to the reputation of this still pretty young art form. As precautionary measure it is better off having dubious pieces still boxed in.

Phoenix Tapes reflects on this situation and proposes a change. To be aware of the way how Girardet/Müller presented their work in Oxford, the way how they are equally eager to make us aware of and to move out of the box and take us with them, is key for the understanding of the work. Originally, the installation was not shown in one continuous piece. Instead its six different sections were shown separately in various rooms at six different places. Each section was shown in a loop without its title, which one could find in the catalogue, and had the average length of a conventional short film as it is officially defined.³² This also explains, why the filmmakers have no problem taking a part out of the installation and screening it separately in new constellations of other works nowadays. (The extended length of *Phoenix Tapes* as one whole, which posits new problems of its own, later causes the filmmakers to insert inter-titles to separate and emphasize the blocks.) As visitors have to walk from film loop to film loop in Oxford, they encounter a whole variety of contexts, of artworks that might be related and refashion the film and vice versa. With this, *Phoenix Tapes* opens up lines of communication. While the first narration is the narrative of the exhibition itself, it creates a space that is quite different from the way images had been projected so far:

[P]rojected images elicit ... specific forms of spectatorship, engendering a psychic mobility paradoxically dependent on physical immobility. In effect, techniques of projection offer ways of joining a space, an image and a subject. This relationship is curiously intertwined: not only does the fixed position of the viewer stabilize a system of visual relations, but decades of film theory have argued that the apparent unity and stability of the subject is itself a property of the optical system. While cinema most visibly demonstrates the power of this orchestration, its effects are everywhere in our culture. And while film exhibition remains confined to theatrical formats, severing the space of the image from other lived spaces, projected video potentially intersects these domains. With their greater mobility and technical flexibility, emerging video-based 'screen practices' would seem to offer rich possibilities for rethinking and restructuring these core relationships – between viewing subject, moving or still image, architectural space, and time – that are so fundamental to modern visual culture.³³

For the filmmaker the move from the cinema to the museum is perceived as liberating:

Of course, a much larger audience can be reached over a weeks-long exhibition than at a single film festival showing. Furthermore, art critics acknowledge film and video in the context of art, whereas film critics generally ignore short film and media art festivals. More important to me, though, than wider visibility for my work, is that other works, whose content and form relate to my work, surround it in the gallery.³⁴

Seen within the history of film, this kind of programming brings the early programming days of the French Cinémathèque, the breeding place for the filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague to a new level – "Langlois would run three films every evening in unexpected yet revealing juxtapositions ... Those who were regular members of his audience were among the first to have their sensibilities immersed in the history of images"³⁵ – as the mix does not stick to just film anymore. With their exodus from cinema, the safe grounds of their children's' room, filmic images are ready to enter the challenge posed from all kinds of other images. In the context of an exhibition, the various loops of found footage film can become a find again.

Just distributing monitors all over an exhibition is, of course, not a major liberating move yet. Girardet/Müller go further than that. They self-confidently claim a higher degree of visibility and the space of the gallery by taking their sixth block *Necrologue* out of the box and projecting it in a large format against the wall. Contrary to the other blocks, this block just consists of one single shot that is slowed down. A close-up of a dying Ingrid Bergman with a tear dropping from her eye oversees the exhibition. We are confronted larger than life with an emotion that is

commonly most easily dismissed as transient, unreflective, kitsch, as what separates movies from what is supposed to “remain” aka “matter” for a museum. “[N]o, I don’t recall having wept in front of a painting, though certainly at the movies or reading a book”³⁶ Crying takes better place at home or in the dark. In 1999, a woman’s weepie is contesting the artworks next to it. Spilling Ingrid Bergman out of the box into the gallery becomes a metaphor for the archive unbound.

[photo, Necrologue]

While the loop itself recalls both Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho* of 1993³⁷, which is also part of the exhibition, and Christoph Girardet’s *No Forever (Golden)* video projection of 1997,³⁸ it also plays with notions of familiarity and the difference of private and public on a more general level. As it is true for so many takes in Girardet/Müller’s single blocks, one has the feeling that one knows the shot and one does not. Doesn’t the fact that it has become emblematic for the exhibition itself that it was chosen for the cover of the catalogue, indicate that it must be from *Notorious*? No. It is stardom and our fixation on plots, which are in the way of recollection and paralyze our associations. Stars are not simply made of famous films. As we realize that it is the lesser known *Under Capricorn*, from which the shot is taken, we understand again that this installation is not primarily about films, but about how the knowledge about film is organized. How we are trained to watch films. It is as much about the books that made the films, about the way how evidence is constructed as it is about feelings or particular sensitivities that we can find in films. Feelings and theory are closely related. *Under Capricorn* is the very film, which stood in the center of attention, when Hitchcock was first claimed as an auteur and an example of great art by other filmmakers:

This film ... is the story of a face, that of Ingrid Bergman. It is this face that the lens scrutinizes, searches, now etching it, now softening it. It is to this face that the homage of the most beautiful effects is made. ... The majestic beauty of *Under Capricorn* foreshadows that of *I Confess*. ... At the highest point of the emotion in which they grip us they nevertheless permit us the distance necessary to the contemplation of great works of art.³⁹

In the moment of liberation from the constraints of the box, Girardet/Müller project at the wall in Oxford, how Chabrol/Rohmer fantasize Hitchcock. How their colleagues have prepared another colleague for the museum. *Phoenix Tapes* is about the programming of images and how it activates the cultural archive and sets it in motion. It helps to start thinking about these rules and mechanisms at a time when “the shift from a cinema to a copyright industry matters to film historians in that the market for classic movies is also a market for the knowledge they produce.”⁴⁰ There is indeed some truth in that one always gets the films that one deserves.

Carving the tear out of the slowed down filmic image as the ultimate proof for a new understanding of filmic time and space activates a very particular moment within a canonical work of film history itself. In Michael Powell/Emeric Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* of 1946 the film stops out of the blue and turns into a tableaux vivant to give the delegates from heaven time to walk around in the image. Looking for love they dab the emerging tear with a rose off the frozen face of radio operator June as a proof that they can bring to the celestial court, which has to decide on whether bomber pilot Peter Carter is allowed to live on. It is the very tear in the making that confronts everybody, this tear that everybody sees coming all of a sudden, which documents that filmic images are very well capable of showing emotions once they are arrested and if we are only given enough time to walk around in them. It also highlights once again the more than blurry boundary between the documentary and fictional registers of film.

It is because of the renewed awareness for spatial constellations and bodily perceptions that installations such as *Phoenix Tapes* have brought about that films such as Müller’s *Home Stories* can enter different contexts now. *Le Mouvement des Images*, an exhibition in the Centre Pompidou in 2006, presents *Home Stories* in its rereading of 20th century art through the cinema, as one of the defining, canonical examples for the area of ‘narrative’ in general.

Throughout the 20th century, the experience of cinema has been amalgamated with that of the public projection of films in spaces borrowed from the theatre, whose particularities are adopted in cinemas: division of the auditorium into stage and seating areas, a converging and immobile point of view, seated spectators, representations devised with a beginning and an ending, etc. Yet, the cinematographic spectacle is not the whole of cinema ... Today, as cinema, thanks to the digital revolution, goes out from projection rooms to exhibition areas, it has become possible, if not necessary, to reconsider its history in a wider perspective and thus go back to its prehistory, its interactions with and prolongations of all the visual arts⁴¹

On its reentry in its former context, the festival circuit, *Phoenix Tapes*, the found footage installation formerly called

experimental film, challenges us, its viewers, to test new rhetorics in the workings of the epitexts. I was given one page in *Jungle World*, a weekly from Berlin, to cover the 46th International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen 2000, which also showed *Phoenix Tapes*. I decided on presenting the first shots of the films in the competition (by avoiding, if possible, the titles) in the order of the box of the program committee as it was given to me beforehand for as long as the page allowed for. No further commentary was included. *Phoenix Tapes*' fence around the empty space is the second image to the right in the first row.

[Photo "Erste Bilder aus Oberhausen"]

While the article is not up to reinventing the (film) wheel, it points to the task of establishing a working relationship vis-a-vis the circulation of images that reworks the surface of what is officially handed out to us.

The problem now is to constitute series: to define the elements proper to each series, to fix its boundaries, to reveal its own specific type of relations, to formulate its laws, and, beyond this, to describe the relations between different series, thus constituting series of series, or 'tables' [7-8] ... But there is a negative work to be carried out first: we must rid ourselves of a whole mass of notions, each of which, in its own way, diversifies the themes of continuity.

Author, original, work, nation, you name it.