a film by Kevin B. Lee

Afterlives

with **Morehshin Allahyari, Nava Zarabian, Anne Speckhard** | *based on the project Bottled Songs by* **Lého Galibert-Lainé & Kevin B. Lee** | *editor & script editor* **Janina Herhoffer** | *director of photography* **Ginan Seidl** | *sound recordist* **Aline Bonvin** | *sound design* Laszlo Umbreit | *sound mix* **Rémi Gerard** | *music* **Maya Shenfeld & Tadklimp** | *colorist* **Paul Millot** | *assistant to the director* **Konstanze Winter** | *creative producer & dramaturg* **Mareike Bernien** | *producer* **Caroline Kirberg** | *co-producers* **Beata Saboova & Vincent Metzinger** | *co-produced by* **Pivonka, Naoko Films, Umedia** | *produced by* **pong film**

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There's always questions from other people, like,
'Why do you do that?
Why do you watch it?
Why don't you do something else?'

There's always a part of you that has to explain this to yourself and to other people.

[ISIS] takes something you love and appreciate, that you really work on it or have some kind of connection to it.
And they take it and they do something completely different with it and it's such a harmful thing.

- Nava Zarabian

This film asks, can the same be done in response, in reverse?

Afterlives

Afterlives is a desktop documentary that critically engages with the historical and digital traces of extremist propaganda, questioning how images of violence circulate, mutate, and persist.

The film moves between virtual investigations and real-world encounters with artists, activists, and researchers who seek to resist the toxic effects of such media.

At its core is the figure of Medusa—a victim of violence whose gaze turned viewers to stone—invoked as a symbol of both the dangers and transformative potential of looking.

From museum archives to AI-generated reconstructions, the film explores how power structures, spanning from the colonial past to the digital age, shape the way we see and remember violence.

Can we ever truly look without being complicit?
And is there another way to care?

Five questions for Kevin B. Lee

The film explores the power of images designed to provoke fear and violence. What first drew you to analyzing an ISIS propaganda video and what did you learn from doing so?
I was a film critic at the time, and I was struck by the way Western media described ISIS videos as if they were Hollywood blockbusters. I thought if I could just describe the formal qualities of the films, I could reveal their inner workings as a way to neutralize them. Instead my analysis intensified their presence. After this I withdrew from engaging directly with the videos to reconsider them through different frameworks. I connected with others who worked with these videos to learn from their experiences and engagement strategies. Through their examples I built a multi-contextual approach for understanding extremist media and their lasting impact on the cultural landscape.

The film spans an extraordinary range of subjects – from ISIS propaganda videos and efforts to digitally reconstruct destroyed artifacts, to historical figures like Gertrude Bell and even the mythic image of Medusa. How did the creative process unfold in shpaing the film's narrative and style?
At first I strictly employed a desktop documentary approach that I've used in my past work, exploring the topic through internet searches and analyses of media through my computer screen. But I came to find this approach lacked access to a physical dimension of investigation involving real places and people.
A key turning point came when I visited an art exhibition in Mannheim and discovered the work of Morehshin Allahyari, who had digitally preserved artifacts destroyed by ISIS inside of sculptural hard drives. Ironically I went to a physical location in order to plug into an alternative digital realm which altered the course of my exploration. I started weaving together these disparate pieces – my first-person narration, archival footage, screen recordings, and in person encounters with other researchers including Morehshin. The creative process was very iterative and intuitive. The structure became more essayistic and personal as I followed my intuitions to connect the pieces.

What ties all these elements together?
These elements are connected by the idea of the afterlives of images: how these past images of violence continue to live with us, and how to engage with legacies of violence. I hope the film prompts viewers to consider our responsibility as spectators – to move from a place of passive unease to an active navigational engagement, considering and reconsidering an image across contexts.
At the same time, that engagement is not without risk, and it may lead to recurring confrontations with the implications of one's own curiosity. This is especially important when one's gaze forms the basis for retransmitting their way of seeing. That's one of the core tensions in Afterlives—is it possible to engage with violence without being complicit in its spread? And if there's an implicit violence in looking, how does one acknowledge and engage with that potential?

Medusa is a central figure in the film. What does she (or do they, as the film reconsiders Medusa's gender) represent in the context of violence and visual culture?
Medusa is one of the oldest and most persistent examples of an image meant to express power through violence: a monster whose gaze petrifies those who look at them. But they were also a victim of violence, and their story demonstrates how violence is performed not just through an image but also upon it. It was through an extended exploration into Medusa's history of being instrumentalized, objectified and appropriated that I could find a way to move beyond a two-dimensional, reactionary way of seeing the violence in an image.

Afterlives

AI and digital archives play a significant role in the film. How do you see technology reshaping how we remember acts of violence?
In making the film I encountered these strange paradoxes. Extremist videos get erased from the internet, yet their traces persist in AI-generated imagery. The violence enacted on certain cultures leads to efforts to preserve them digitally, at risk of benefiting power structures responsible for the violence. The film is concerned with detecting cycles that perpetuate violent effects and considering the ways to resist, subvert or create alternatives to them. Each protagonist in the film exemplifies this possibility in their own way. And so for all of the film's immersion in desktop environments and digital technologies, it searches for a way beyond them to reconnect with the human.

– Interviewed by Verde Cooper

"Staying with the trouble
means making oddkin;
that is, we require each other
in unexpected collaborations and combinations,
in hot compost piles.
We become - with each other or not at all."
- Donna Haraway

Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker and educator who has produced over 360 video essays exploring film and media. His work has screened at the Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of the Moving Image, and International Film Festival Rotterdam, as well as websites such as The New York Times and Mubi. His award-winning *Transformers: The Premake* introduced the "desktop documentary" format and was named one of the best documentaries of 2014 by Sight & Sound. In 2016 the Austrian Filmmuseum programmed a retrospective of his video essays. He was 2017 Artist in Residence of the Harun Farocki Institut in Berlin. He is the Locarno Film Festival Professor for the Future of Cinema and the Audiovisual Arts at Università della Svizzera italiana (USI).

2003: On Guard (Short)
2004: Dastaar: Defending Sikh Identity (Short)
2011: The Spielberg Face (Short)
2012: Viewing Between the Lines (Short)
2013: Lasting Elements on the Last Horizon (Short)
2014: Transformers: the Premake (Short)
2018: Reading // Binging // Benning (with Lého Galibert-Laîné) (Short)
2019: Re-enacting the Future (with Lého Galibert-Laîné) (Short)
2020: Once Upon a Screen: Explosive Paradox (Short)
2020: Bottled Songs 1–4 (with Lého Galibert-Laîné) (Video Series)
2022: Piazza Futura (Postcard from the Future) (Short)

From: PHYSICAL TACTICS FOR DIGITAL COLONIALISM (2019) by Morehshin Allahyari

ISIS takes pride in destruction. They are bold, direct. In their showcase of destruction, violence is presented as an eventful crisis; an explosive sudden kind of violence. You see it and it immediately shocks you. While for example the U.S. military hides, deletes, un-archives its violence and war crimes from public; or justifies it as a work that needs to happen for the safety of its people. Along side of this, those having access to platforms choose to participate in this kind of invisible violence.

Them and those speaking about ISIS violence remove themselves from that picture pointing fingers at what's obvious.

For example, after ISIS destruction of Palmyra's 1,800-year-old Arch, a project launched in London and then in NY as the result of major collaborations between the UK-based Institute for Digital Archaeology, UNESCO, and Dubai's Museum of the Future. In a video documentation of its ceremony, as a white fabric gets pulled down to unveil the reconstructed site of Palmyra, Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London, stands there to tell the audience: "No one should have the power to delete such monuments from our historical record. This is an arch of triumph and in many ways a triumph of technology and determination. We're here in a spirit of defiance, defiance of the barbarians who destroyed the original as they have destroyed so many other relics in Syria and the Middle East."

So the violence I am talking about here, is not just about how these figures remove themselves from a cycle they had been part of for centuries, but also a kind of Violence that is about Reclaiming.

ISIS reclaims the objects through destruction, through creating absence. The western governments and tech companies reclaim it after destruction, through a new kind of presence; and we fail to see the violence of that presence in the way we see the violence of the absence.

In 2016 I released a zip folder of my research and gathered files of the Material Speculation: ISIS project online, on Rhizome's website (the same materials that are inside the

USB drives sealed in the belly of my reconstructed artifacts). In a folder named Destruction Images, I included 44 pictures showing the destruction of the artifacts at Mosul Museum by ISIS. The titles of these 44 images are words organized chronologically that when read from beginning to end create a complete sentence. And the sentence reads:

"Ultimately the only way to stop the destruction of Iraq and Syria's cultural heritage is to stop the so-called war on terror and the military invasion of the Middle-East. Because everything is a cycle and nothing can truly be done without breaking that cycle."

This was perhaps my quiet, wishful way of wanting to activate something beyond the one kind of Violence that at the time many people and the media chose to focus on.

Afterlives

AFTERLIVES
Kevin B. Lee
(Germany/France/Belgium2025)

Desktop Documentary, 88 Minutes,
DCP, 16:9, Colour,
Original language (English)
Subtitles (German, French)

WITH
Morehshin Allahyari
Nava Zarabian
Anne Speckhard
Sebastian Baden
Bernd Zywietz
Yorck Beese
Katrin Radermacher

Written, Directed, Narrated:	Kevin B. Lee
Based on the project *Bottled Songs* by:	Lého Galibert-Laïné, Kevin B. Lee
Producer:	Caroline Kirberg
Co-Producers:	Vincent Metzinger, Beata Saboova
Creative Producer, Dramaturg:	Mareike Bernien
Editor, Script Editor:	Janina Herhoffer
Director of Photography:	Ginan Seidl
Screen Recording, Desktop Montage:	Kevin B. Lee
Sound Recording:	Aline Bonvin
Sound Design:	Laszlo Umbreit
Sound Mix:	Rémi Gerard
Music:	Maya Shenfeld, Tadklimp
Colorist	Paul Millot
Post-Production Services::	Empire Digital, Cobalt Films, Wave-line
Additional Camera:	Emerson Culurgioni, Jessica Köck, Philipp Fritsch, Kevin B. Lee
Additional Sound Recording:	Philipp Fritsch
Voiceover Coach:	Brigitta Wagner
Voiceover Recording:	Kai Hoffmann
Assistant to the Director:	Konstanze Winter
Production Coordinators:	May Santiago, Azza Kalfat, Konstanze Winter
Production Assistants:	Silvia Cipelletti, Saehee Hwang, Mara Kuntzer, Lea Röwer
Research:	Shivani Hassard, Lea Röwer, Konstanze Winter, Eliot Zepeda
Translation:	Mara Kuntzer, Konstanze Winter
Belgian Co-Producer	Naoko
French Co-Producer:	Pivonka
Produced by:	pong film

I have to take some images off the internet and hold them.

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pong film · Elvonka Production · (N) · umedia · uFund

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