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Olesen, C.

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Found footage photogénie

An interview with Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi and Mark-Paul Meyer

Christian Olesen

Since the late 1980s, EYE Film Institute Netherlands (formerly the Netherlands Filmmuseum) has been collecting and preserving unidentified film fragments from its collection to create an ongoing series of compilations titled *Bits & Pieces*. The compilations consist of fragments which the majority of film archives would tend to disregard in favour of restoring complete films, but which EYE considers to contain a certain kind of cinematic beauty which deserves to be preserved and shown. Currently, the series counts 623 fragments, each of which has been assigned a number, and spread out on 56 reels of 300 meters.

The initiative to create *Bits & Pieces* was taken at a time when film archives increasingly developed different institutional deontologies of preservation and when film historians went into film archives in a revisionist spirit to rediscover neglected directors, actors, exhibition practices, and technologies. The Netherlands Filmmuseum – then headed by deputy director Eric de Kuyper and assisted by staff members Peter Delpout and Mark-Paul Meyer – gained a significant reputation at this time by propagating the view that film historians continued to neglect the fact that film archives contained a substantial amount of film fragments which could not be attributed to an author or fit into an aesthetic school. Pointing to a discrepancy between the theory of film history and film archival practice, the Filmmuseum's staff began to plea for new forms of presenting and valorising the fragments they found, which ultimately materialised in the *Bits & Pieces* project.¹

Since then, *Bits & Pieces* compilations have been in high demand. They are continuously programmed in festivals and have provided source material in numerous filmic appropriation works – uses that have received widespread attention in literature on found footage and recycled cinema. However, it remains relatively unknown how the curators work with the collection on a daily basis and how their selection has developed since its launch. In this interview the current curators of *Bits & Pieces* – silent film collection specialist Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, involved in *Bits & Pieces* since 2000, and senior curator Mark-Paul Meyer – met for a conversation about the appraisal of fragments at EYE and the initiative's imperative in a past and present perspective. The interview took place in the nitrate identification facilities of EYE located on the outskirts of Amsterdam.

Olesen: How did the *Bits & Pieces* project begin?

Meyer: The archive was not so well kept. It was catalogued, but nobody really knew from top to bottom what was there. A lot of material had not been viewed for decades, so the only way was to go through it piece by piece. In that process you find a lot of material that is rubbish, but when you view it you discover that for a number of reasons it is also fascinating, for example because of mise-en-scène or a certain setting. Then you want to keep it. In the beginning of the 1990s in the archive world this was quite revolutionary.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: The first *Bits & Pieces* reel is in color, so I think the idea of having all these films surviving in color in itself was a revolution to Peter Delpout and Eric de Kuiper, because no archive was even talking about color. They were all focused on big titles, big names. To find these insignificant images, but incredibly gorgeous colors, I think, was such a shock that they got this instinctive feeling of really having to preserve it and to show it to people.

Meyer: During the process of cataloguing all these interesting fragments we put them aside. Once or twice a year we sit together, and then we select fragments to create 300 meter reels, in which you have 10-15 fragments. To preserve a fragment of 20 meters is impossible for a lab, so the only thing possible is to collect 10-20 of them and then put them on one reel, to make rolls only with color fragments or black and white fragments, so that they can copy them in one go. That is the formula.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: When I started out 13 years ago, if I encountered something, I would write it down as maybe being for *Bits & Pieces* and then put it away for Mark-Paul or someone else to pick up. Now, these past few years, we started doing them together, and what I noticed is that the process changed in that, within our silent film department, our knowledge has increased. We work internationally, with everything being digital, so what happens is that today, even 100 meters of Asta Nielsen would be identified and registered according to its title. That is an example of something which would never make it into *Bits & Pieces*. So now, when

it comes to defining and collecting *Bits & Pieces* I am much more strict. I will not include a trailer of a film or something that we presume will be known or identified easily, so in that respect I have become more picky and choosy.

Meyer: I think this also reflects a change in the last 20 years within the museum – not only have the resources and possibilities to find historical information become much more easier, the historical awareness of people is much stronger. Initially, it was really about the ‘cinematographic appreciation’ as we call it; it was about your personal experience, a kind of filmmaker’s attitude: what do these fragments do to my imagination? Sometimes we were not really interested in identifying them because it was fine not to know; if it was a beautiful fragment, you could come up with arguments to keep it, and we would. Now indeed, the general historical awareness is much larger. You can now send scans much more easily to the other side of the world. Before, we had to wait for a year or so to have a visitor from Germany or from France come and identify a Pathé film.

Olesen: An aspect which is crucial to *Bits & Pieces* is its reliance on a subjective aesthetic experience as a criterion for selection. In order to be included in a compilation, a fragment not only has to be unidentified, it also needs – to borrow the words of Eric de Kuyper – to ‘impose itself.’² To impose itself means that a fragment speaks to the aesthetic sensibility of the archivist because of a particularly curious, bizarre, or surprising feature. This notion is, as you have pointed out, to some extent reflected in policy documents under the expression of ‘Cinematographic Appreciation’, a loosely-defined selection criterion which defies, but does not exclude, traditional selection criteria based on the recognition of film style and form.³ With this in mind, how would you articulate your respective experiences and criteria for selecting fragments?

Meyer: That’s a difficult thing. In a way it is integrated in our whole collection policy from the very beginning. The Raad voor Cultuur (Council for Culture) wanted to have criteria posing the question, ‘why do you preserve this?’ We have been explaining from the very beginning that yes, we can give some very vague criteria, but the only thing is really to watch the film and try to describe what your experience is, what your appreciation is. That appreciation can refer to a scene with a wonderful detail or something else. It can be a lousy production, but if you see that the director is doing something which is remarkable, then you go for it.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: I strongly believe that the whole idea of selecting films for preservation, and not only for *Bits & Pieces*, has to be a subjective thing. In the end the curator must make a choice to take one out of ten. That definitely has to be something which is interesting to the curator; it has to captivate your attention, and I believe that the basis of this is the fact that you have seen the material. When you read something on paper, for example, about some shorts from a Krupps

factory, then there can be ten films from the Krupps factory and maybe nine of them are extremely boring. But one of them can be extremely interesting, not because I am particularly interested in heavy metal industry but maybe because of the way they filmed it, the way the sparks are coming in combination with the colors can just appeal to you. We watch this and we know what is interesting and what is boring, but we don't say this. We try to show this to people and hope that they will appreciate it as well. I must say, I am not interested in aesthetics at all. But still, there can be something in the image that captivates me or triggers me.

Olesen: Listening to your explanations, I cannot help thinking that they touch upon something fundamental in the legitimisation and patrimonialisation of cinema as an independent art form, which goes back very far. It reminds me of accounts of how cinephile film critics and directors in the 1920s used a concept such as *photogénie* to discern moments of cinematic beauty, and then structured histories of cinema around them. Evidently, *Bits & Pieces* counters the models and canons of these aesthetic histories, but the project still plays with the idea of particularly beautiful cinematic moments and aesthetics. Can you relate to the experience of *photogénie* in your appreciation?

Meyer: I think it is very good. The contradiction is that at the time in the early 1990s, or maybe for the whole of film history, the focus was really on the aesthetic object, on the masterpieces. Our approach is aesthetically-driven, but in a much more naïve and intuitive way. When you say that it is aesthetically interesting it is not that it has a unique form of montage or wonderful lighting or such – of course all these elements can be part of it, but it is not that you have a checklist. That was a little bit of the Bordwell and Thompson approach at the time, which was the irritating thing for us, because those were the theory books. When you go to the archive you find all this rubbish which is just wonderful.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: I come from a popular culture background and I want to reject these aesthetic theories and the idea of the masterpiece. So for me, I think what you say about *photogénie* is recognisable in the sense that I now work very directly on lost and forgotten films. The only way to explain the significance of lost and forgotten films is actually this *photogénie*. So basically, the idea is to say to people seeing an actor that there is this chemistry, or whatever you want to call it; to explain the effect the actor might have had upon the audience back then. So yes, I recognise exactly what you are saying, and to me that is important to feel again. When I see an actor that nobody recognises anymore, like Billy West for example, I get very excited today. That again is the very essence of *Bits & Pieces*, to have that moment.

Olesen: One of the aspects in which *Bits & Pieces* differs significantly from classic aesthetic parameters is in its appreciation of film's materiality. The compilations embrace and foreground the materiality of film by showing deterioration and deliberately maintaining the material condition the fragment is found in. What role does the aspect of film's materiality play in a *Bits & Pieces* reel?

Meyer: The materiality of the object was a crucial part of it. One of the concepts was to keep it as we found it. We were very tempted to edit a little bit, to make it more beautiful, but the whole idea was really to say that we found it like this and we keep and preserve it like this. Even when it was a negative, we preserve it as a negative – we are not going to make a positive print. Or when we have only sound without image, we do only sound. We have had preservationists who tried to make a beautiful restoration of the negative fragment and they just made a positive. Then we had to say, 'but that was not the idea!' Also, when you make a reel like that, you use the fragment's material characteristics in a way to make it work within the reel. So if you have stenciled film you are not putting a lot of stenciled material after it in order to make variations.

Rongen-Kaynakçı: The idea is to recreate the confusion we have as archivists. When we open the can for the first time, we put the material on the editing table and we don't know if it is the beginning or the end of the reel. If the fragment is in Hungarian or only has three-four frames of intertitles which can be very confusing for the audience, then that is it – exactly because that is how the material survived, and then something else did not, meaning that this is not a projection print for the local distributor. That is the subtext of the whole project: sharing this with people as a way of confronting them.

Olesen: So the fragments' varying material characteristics to some extent provide a coordinate for structuring the compilations. Can you elaborate on how you edit fragments together?

Rongen-Kaynakçı: It is all instinct. For example, if we have two costume films we will never put them together. We take 8-10 different fragments in a can and then we try to put it all together.

Meyer: You make reels that have a certain balance, you edit a little bit – mentally, in your head, let's say – because if you do only ten animation fragments one after each other then it becomes a very boring reel, so you have to have variation within the reel. It may be musical, contrapuntal, because the appreciation of a fragment depends very much on the context, what is before and what is after. If you find a musical variation, then it comes out.

Rongen-Kaynakçı: But we have to admit that in the last two reels or so, we also added closure. In the last that we did, one closes with a woman crying in a window, while the other one closes with a sunset. That fragment is not selected

because it provides closure but because it is interesting in itself. You could put it in the beginning, but then also in the end. I have to add in relation to that, as a cataloguer, that *Bits & Pieces* were initially and intentionally catalogued kind of poorly, not attributing an author to them, which was a practice I was against. I wanted to be able to say that this one was made by Peter Delpout and this one by Mark-Paul, while at the same time respecting the fact that assigning an author to them is not the idea. I never see myself as behind a creative process in this respect.

While editing and composition play a central part in creating a reel, Meyer makes it clear that a Bits & Pieces reel cannot be considered a compilation film or a found footage work. While Bits & Pieces has been widely studied because of its uses in acclaimed contemporary works of appropriation such as Fiona Tan's Facing Forward (1999) or Gustav Deutsch's Film Ist. 7-12 (2002), the latter works depart from a clear artistic concept and have a filmmaker as author. Bits & Pieces, it could be said, is instead meant as a format without an author, which allows the spectator to look over the shoulder of the archivist and into the archive. In this respect, Bits & Pieces represent an interesting tension as a form of valorisation, by opening up to varying conceptions of the material. The project invites a traditional way of looking at a film fragment, which is to try to identify it, while it also encourages interpretation and emotive responses through artistic appropriation, as a form of valorisation. I asked Meyer and Rongen-Kaynakçi what they think of these various uses.

Meyer: Well, my purpose is absolutely not to have these fragments identified. It is to make something that is pleasurable and which can inspire people to do further research and stimulate the reuse of material or fragments. From the beginning, the idea was to allow people to play with these fragments, so that they would be able to cut the fragments and make edits by themselves. For instance, there was a musician at the time at the film museum, Stefan Ram, who would prepare a show in a reverse process so to say. He had the music ready and then he found the images that fit the music, instead of the other way around, which was a different way to play around with it ('Symphony in E motion' [1995-1996]). The examples of Gustav Deutsch or Fiona Tan, who made works almost entirely based on *Bits & Pieces*, are for me very important. Deutsch or Tan start with *Bits & Pieces* to research what we have in the archive, and from there they get ideas to develop their own projects. Also, of course, because those fragments are 'orphans', people do not really know what it is in most cases, which makes it an easy entry point also. It is such a rich source, and people often start there, then they go into the archive to look for other things.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: To me, in my own personal development, it worked to free the fragments that are floating around the archive and are still worth seeing. Although they are not whole films you can offer them to a festival for viewing. I am not confined or limited by the fact that the film is incomplete. I have been

showing *Bits & Pieces* in the last ten years almost as a quiz, asking people to identify the fragments, and that worked really well. With today's knowledge, people can identify things easily. I think that also goes to show the importance of such a project, the fact that I can bring a *Bits & Pieces* reel to Stockholm and that now we can put them online and ask the world to identify them, which is the result of being able to show them to people in this form.

Olesen: Considering that more archivists and scholars are taking an interest in hitherto neglected and marginalised archival material – for example an institution such as the Austrian Filmmuseum, which has experimented with programming rushes, home movies, and industrial films alongside experimental films since the 1980s, or the biennial event of the Orphan Film Symposium established in 1999 – has that development changed the role of *Bits & Pieces* in the world of film archives?

Meyer: It has changed, because the whole archive world has changed. When you speak about Vienna for instance, those people have been here, they have seen our *Bits & Pieces*. They then had a collaborator, Edith Schlemmer (former chief archivist of the Austrian Filmmuseum), who received an enormous collection of only frames of film – it is on their website (the Schlemmer Frame Collection), which is very interesting in itself. But there is a generation now, in several archives, that understands this and appreciates it as a practice. If they have the funds and the resources they do it as well. The landscape is also changing because maybe in the beginning it was a way for us to really preserve something which was unpreservable, and now it is very much accepted within EYE and even promoted very much. So it is no longer controversial but still a way of creating a picture of the archive that is not easily accessible otherwise.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: I think as long as we keep receiving things like this, we should keep making *Bits & Pieces*, even if only to put out the message that things survive in these forms. We still challenge the other archives on the idea of something not being presentable because it is not complete. That is a point which continues to be important.

Olesen: What is the future for *Bits & Pieces* and how would you like to develop it? Analog projection is gradually becoming more limited to specialised venues, art cinemas, and film museums, while digital forms of access invite new ways of encountering and appropriating fragments. Where do you see *Bits & Pieces* going?

Meyer: We will continue as long as we can, as long as we have material available, money, and lab facilities. I would hope that other archives would pick up this idea more than they do now, because there must be a lot of wonderful material around which there is an enormous demand for. As for our material, I would not say

that I know all the things already, but I would like to see more things from other archives. Some uses will continue, but in a digital way. For example, ten years ago DJ Spooky transferred a lot of *Bits & Pieces* onto 16mm for a show at the Louvre ('Les Vestiges: de la techno au Louvre?' [20 November 2000]). He edited on 16mm, creating a film which was a show in itself, and then he made music to it. That is something which would be done completely digitally now. There have also been dance events, where they create 360-degree projections with a lot of material from *Bits & Pieces*. Within the movement of using archival material, which is becoming more and more easy nowadays, *Bits & Pieces* play a large role for us, and we try to encourage as many uses of the material as possible in different formats. This also includes use by students, for example in the form of *Celluloid Remix*. To do that now in a digital format, that makes life so much easier, because to go back to the vaults, to take the can, and to take just one fragment out of a reel of 300 meters, and then to do the editing again, it is so time-consuming.

Rongen-Kaynakçi: Generally speaking, the appreciation of the fragment is changing. I think it is also due to its online availability. I am not sure what kind of effect it has had on what you see. I do not object to seeing *Bits & Pieces* on my telephone screen. I think it is very good to watch a clip on a train, for example. So I think that in all these things they remain very topical and useful. I personally tend to watch shorter things and I enjoy that. So I think that the appreciation may grow. There is more demand for short clips that are not copyrighted, and I think that it does appeal to general users out there.

Notes

1. De Kuyper 1994.
2. De Kuyper 1992.
3. Meyer 1998.

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About the autor

Christian Olesen is a doctoral candidate at the University of Amsterdam.



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