

ALICE IN SHREDS

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These images originate in the first film adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, produced and directed in 1903 by British pioneers Cecil Hepworth and Percy Stow. The stills are taken from the only surviving copy of the film, the color changes reflecting the source film's tints, each devoted to one particular episode of the story.

The true protagonists of this alternate version of Lewis Carroll's classic are not Alice, the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat and the much-loved White Rabbit but ectoplasmic shapes pouring in from every angle and spot of the screen, sometimes in the form of free floating pellicles of protozoan organisms of varying shapes and sizes, sometimes as an eerie exoskeleton growing out of what still resembles a tree trunk, sometimes as an instant flaming arson mystery attacking May Clarke, the first cinematic Alice, who also, incidentally, features in Hepworth's earlier trickier short, *How It Feel to Be Run Over* (1900).

The handpicked stills capture the parasitic disruptions in the interstitial moment of their birth-through-decay within the ongoing narrative of the silent film. They tell the story of celluloid characters, objects and backgrounds struggling to survive the effects of time while awaiting their museal preservation (the film was partially restored

in 2010 by the British Film Institute). Emerging from the images as well as from the shredded source text which serves as their subtitles, the sequence's plot becomes that of found art's participation in what Bataille described as an aesthetics of the *formless*, not so much an absence of form as a third term between the visible and the invisible, the legible and the illegible, denying representation as soon as it conjures it up.

Alice in Shreds disrupts the telos of a familiar tale haunted by its own unformulatable materialities, leaving the viewer free to rummage through the fragments and debris of a splattered narrative shredded into detached moments of lyrical disorder and ambivalence. Such hauntological premises are marked as much by the spectral presence of Lewis Carroll's familiar tropes and characters as by the medium of film itself. In doing so, they harken back to Paul Sharits' 1982 *Bad Burns* or, more recently, Bill Morrison's *Decasia* and Eric Rondepierre's *Précis de décomposition*, all of which make – in different but related contexts – the irremediable decay of celluloid their main field of investigation.

In spite of the logic of (self-)destruction and de-figuration which underlies this experiment, it is our hope that the spectral beauty of the source images and texts still haunts the disfigured stills and their appended legends. It is also our hope that they radiate a different kind of beauty born out of disrepair, exhaustion and impermanence.

This “revisitation” of the Alice tale (in the sense of revisiting a familiar work as well as in the Freudian sense of *Nachträglichkeit*) often evokes the stop tricks and multiple exposures of early horror flicks. In a delightful twist of

irony, Cecil Hepworth directed what is arguably the first splatter film, “Explosion of a Motor Car” (1900), which features the dismembered limbs of the driver and his passengers falling out of the sky. More fundamentally, however, it seems to us that the uncanny shapes and textures of *Alice in Shreds* point to a different, deeper kind of terror, one which is less akin to Méliès’s grand guignol sensationalism than to Poe’s tales of the individual mind prostrated in the fear of the archetypal otherness of darkness and oblivion the author of the Alice stories was all too aware of.

Methought I walked a dismal place
Dim horrors all around;
The air was thick with many a face,
And black as night the ground.¹³

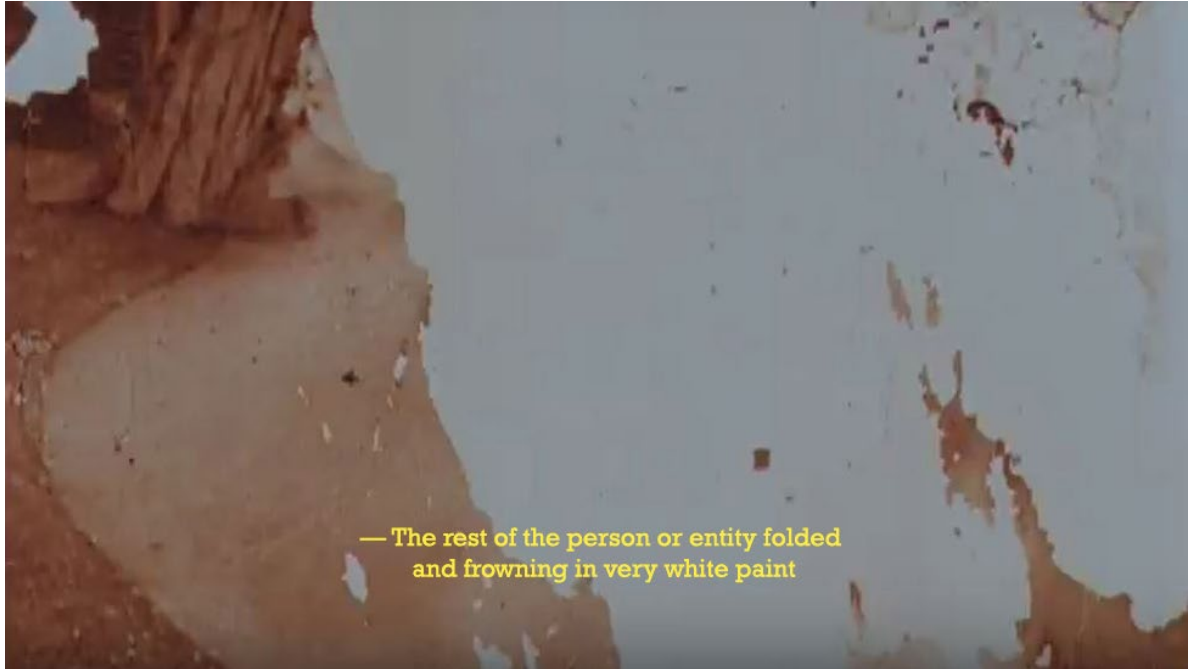
13. Lewis Carroll, “Horrors”, *The Rectory Magazine*, 1850.



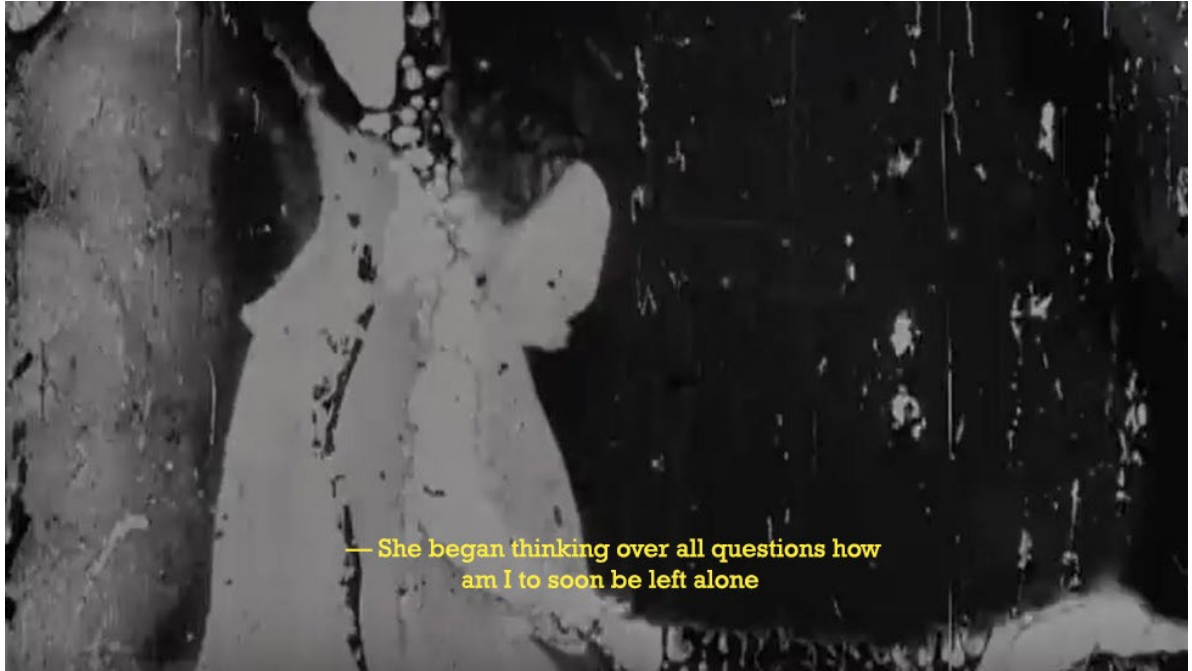
— Everything begins with anxious additions and deletions

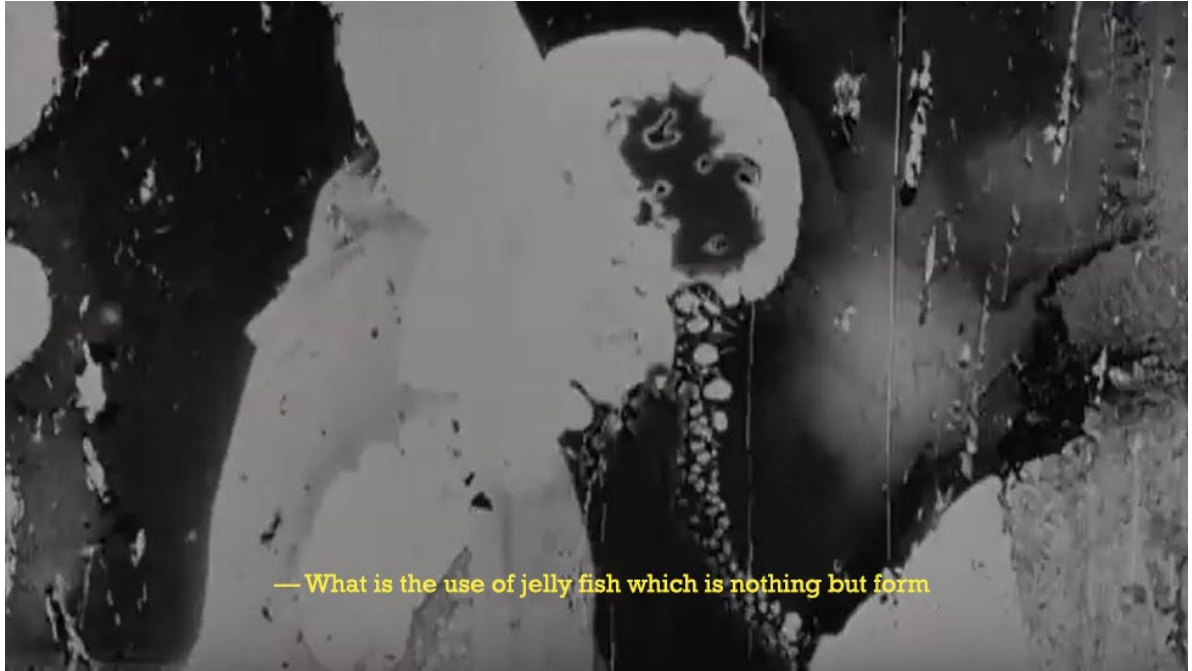


— Alice was a body cut to time

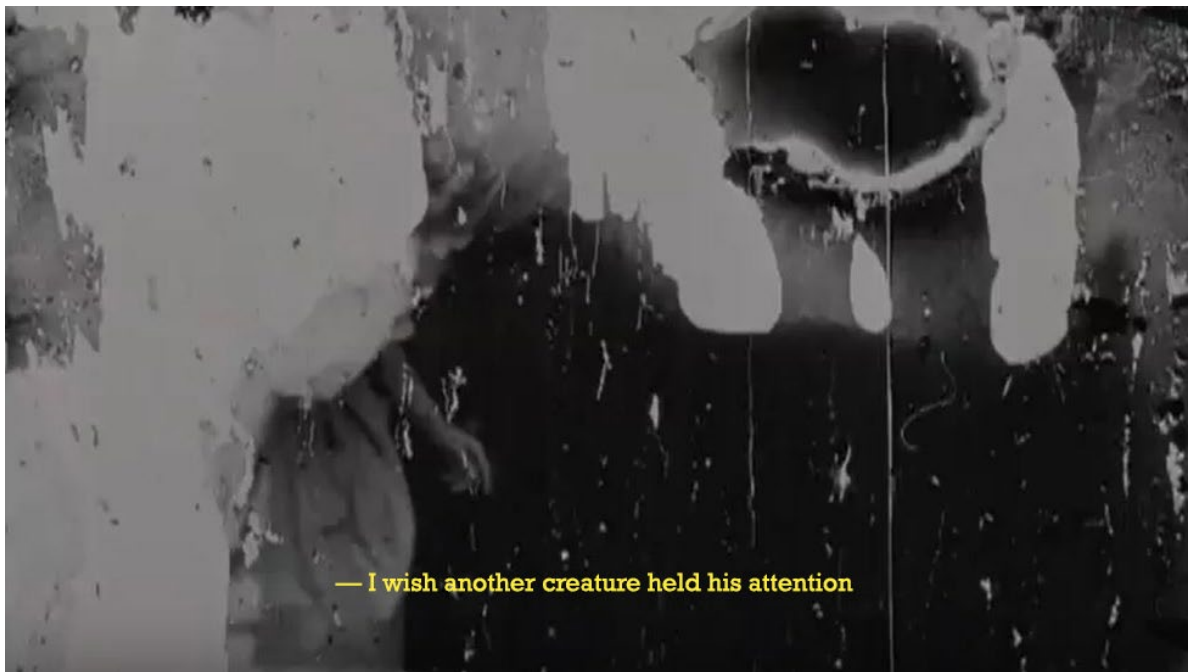




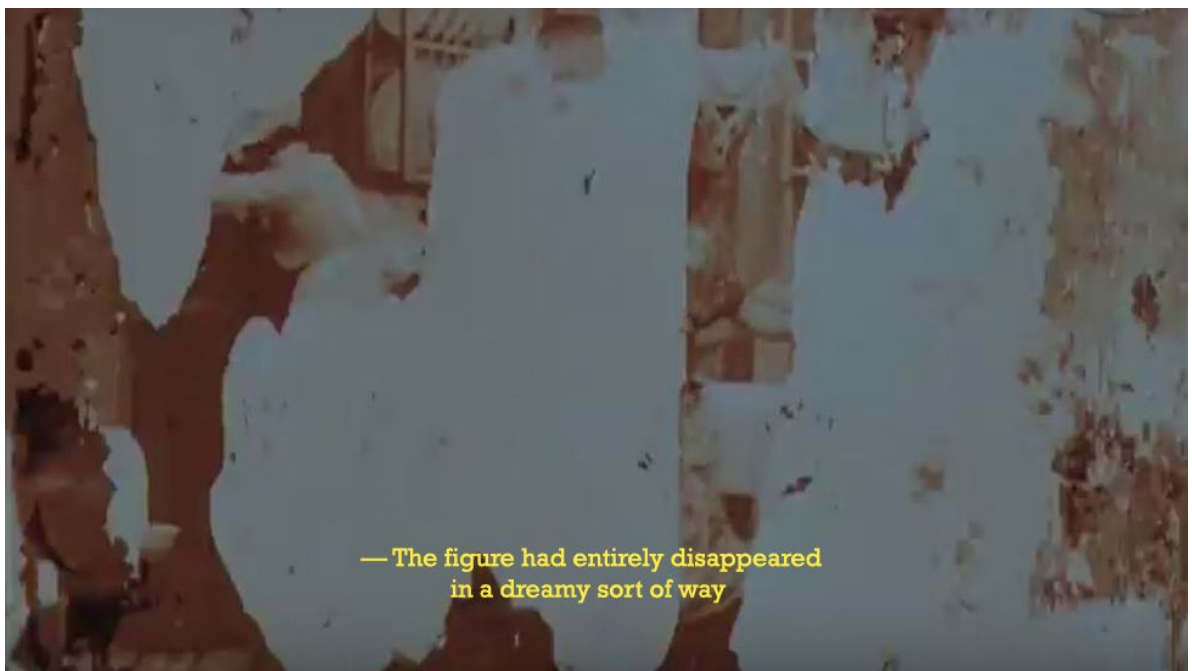


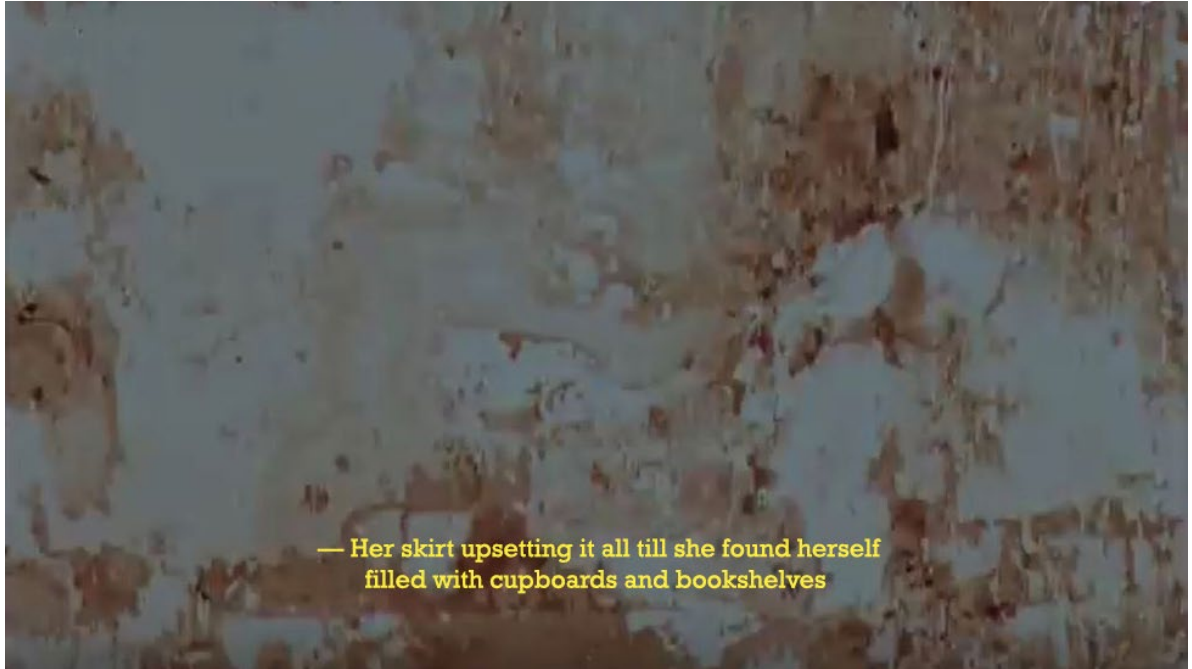


— What is the use of jelly fish which is nothing but form

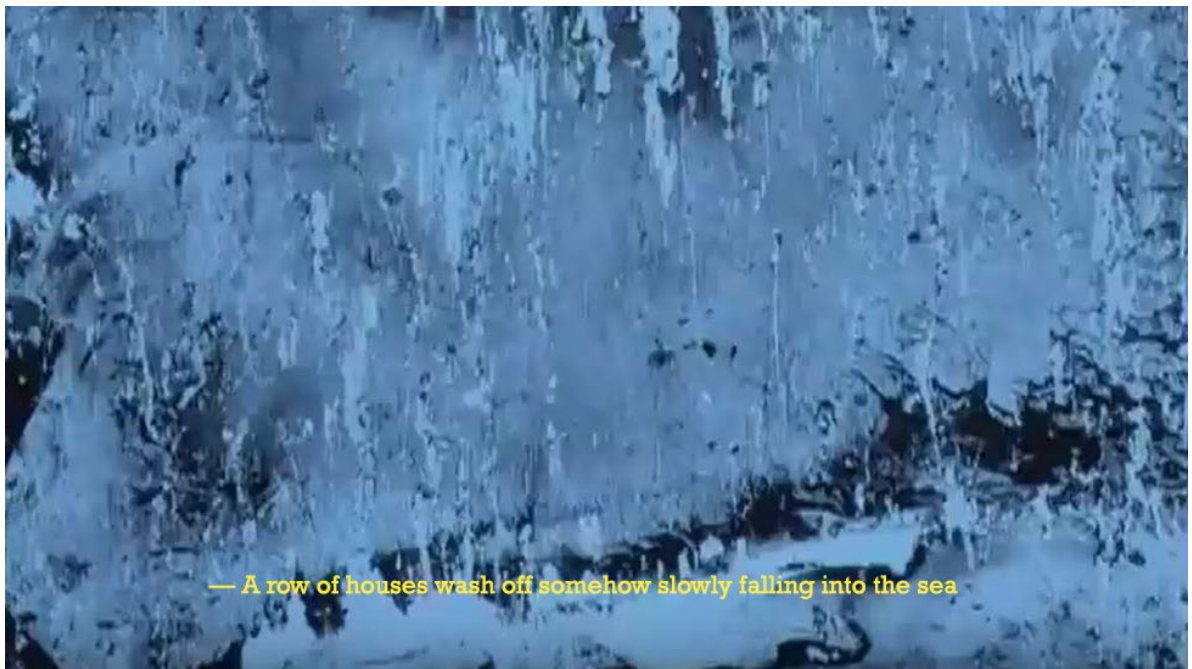


— I wish another creature held his attention

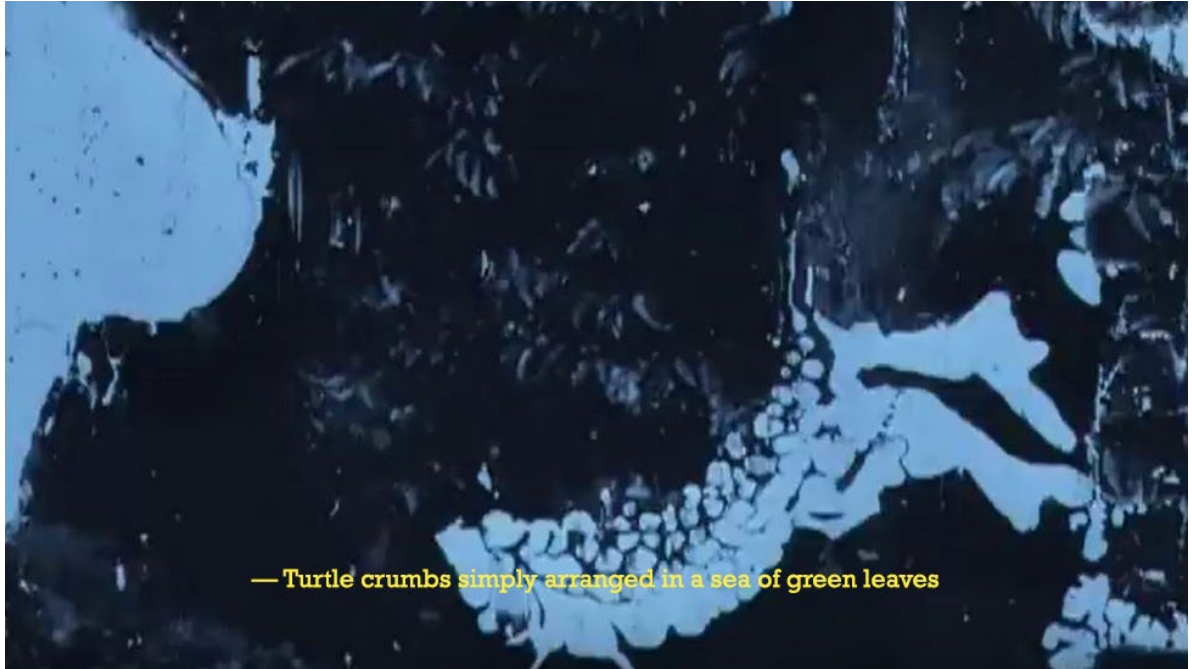




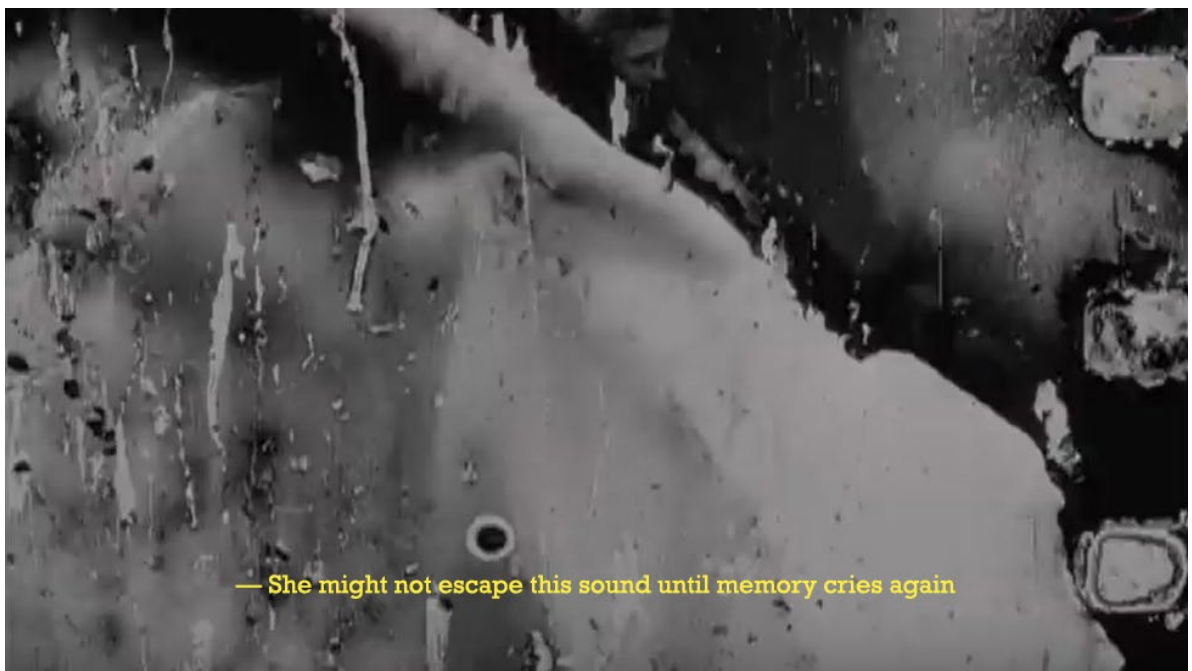
— Her skirt upsetting it all till she found herself
filled with cupboards and bookshelves



— A row of houses wash off somehow slowly falling into the sea



— Turtle crumbs simply arranged in a sea of green leaves



— She might not escape this sound until memory cries again