



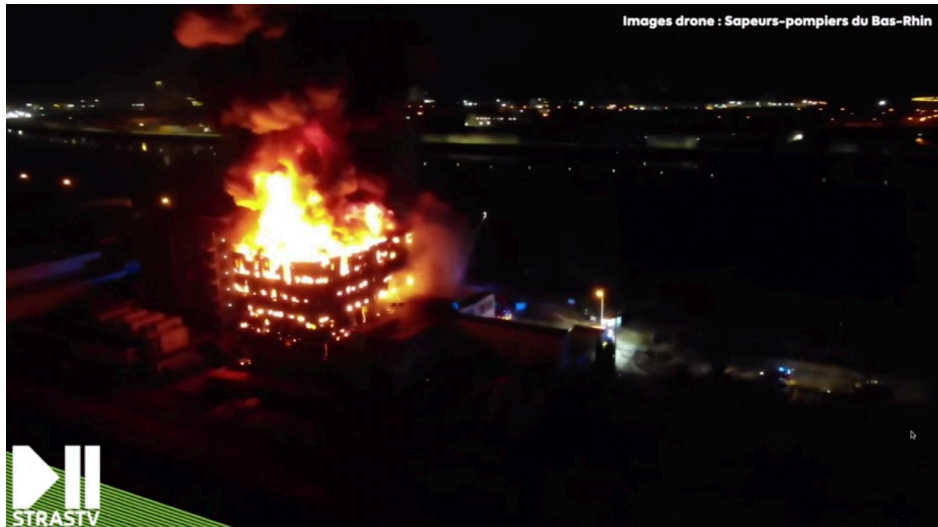
Machines in Flames: Computation, Destruction, and the Lure of Archives

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"Machines in Flames" is a secret history of destruction that follows the footsteps of a clandestine group of 1980s computer workers who bombed tech companies. The film combines archival traces, a viral desktop choreography, and late-night video recordings of the group's targets into a meditation on computation, destruction, and the lure of archives.





Creator's Statement

A protagonist propels “Machines in Flames”: a little-known group of French arsonists who operated in the early 1980s. They burst onto the radical scene under the cover of night, only to disappear without a trace a few years later. The collective left behind only a few traces of their actions: a prankish self-interview, two bold communiqués, extensive graffiti, and the smouldering embers of computers. In them, one finds the name they affixed to their work, “The Committee for the Liquidation and Subversion of Computers,” or CLODO—a French slang term for the homeless roughly equivalent to “bum.” After one final explosive attack on an American technology firm based in Toulouse, they vanished, never to be heard from again. Unlike nearly all the armed leftists stalking Europe in the ’70s and ’80s, they escaped both death and prison.¹ What happened to this group? Did they give up? Get absorbed into more militant collectives? Rethink their approach and settle down in ecovillages?

The film invites the viewer to join our painstaking probing of these questions. Like us, however, the viewer will be left with disappointment. As a film born from uncertainty, it offers nothing conclusive. For all our dives into archives (digital and on-the-ground), we encounter only dead-ends. CLODO was too smart, fighting off exactly these kinds of investigations, provoking new, pressing questions about the coming of ubiquitous digital devices—technologies that, following reviewer Amélie Bussy’s insightful comment, everyday users experience less as a breach of their private

¹ One might think here of the Cellules Communistes Combattantes (Belgium), Red Brigade (Italy), Red Army Faction (Germany), and Action Directe (France). The majority of central members of these collectives were imprisoned, and a minor portion died at the hands of the police or in prison.

lives than as dazzling objects containing potentials that we become affectively and libidinally invested in.²

The antagonist menacing the film turns out to be the archive itself, both as it appears in *our* film and in *film as a historical-political medium*. As an unnamed narrator guides the viewer, the limited aperture of the archive initially seems to be the only way to get a glimpse of CLODO. Newspaper articles, television footage, Excel spreadsheets, Wikipedia articles, and Google Street View all blend into an investigation board to map the network of connections behind CLODO.

Before long, however, the limitations of the archive force the film to admit its own failure. The investigatory techniques of documentary film are still too close to the policing techniques that failed to capture CLODO. As Bussy correctly points out, even in our attempts to evade a forensic approach, the deconstructive kernel of the film is doomed to failure—film alone is unable to locate a methodological outside to policing. Perhaps it is not through film or thought but through subversion, like that committed by CLODO, that the core issues may ever be resolved. And so, when the desktop pops up in the film—in a gesture that will not surprise those readers familiar with the desktop documentaries of Kevin B Lee, Gala Hernández López, and Chloé Galibert-Laîné—it serves neither as a backdrop nor a visual device. Rather, the desktop becomes an antagonist that must be foiled to get past the smooth flows of digital communication, production, and research that viewers have come to expect.

We began to worry: what if a film like ours, in propelling the archive with fresh impulses, reignited police interest in the group? Therefore, a key pivot point arrives as the filmmakers must pick between the cybernetic promise of coding social life and CLODO's path of self-destruction.³

Ultimately, what is at stake is the documentarian's archive fever.⁴ The calm voice-over asks: is not all documentation stuck in the fantasy of the silver bullet,

² The comment about this paradox was included in Bussy's initial (more extensive) review but was excluded from the abbreviated review presented here. In that same original version, Bussy continued by suggesting that we should have dedicated more time examining this paradox in the actual film. While we agree there is much to learn from transposing Debord's insights about the spectacular into the domain of cybernetic computation, our own quest is, in the final instance, less conceptual than political—instead of inviting viewers to ponder what limits them, we would rather instigate them to locate what would drive them to act. That said, post-screening discussions with political audiences invariably lead to discussions on what has changed since CLODO's era; namely, how the "consumers" in the 1980s were large corporate, military, university, and the police, not the "everyday users" of devices and platforms in contemporary digital capitalism.

³ It must be added that the two filmmakers had not met in person until after the film was released. The research collaboration underpinning the film—accelerated by way of COVID-19—was therefore thoroughly mediated through the frame of the desktop.

⁴ We take inspiration in this statement, and in the film more generally, from Derrida's theory of "archive fever," which he describes as "a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive" (91). Derrida, J. (1996) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. The University of Chicago Press.

where a detailed enough map and the precise amount of force makes a social ill come tumbling down? Unlike those films that end with a rousing call to action, the film offers no comforting resolution. Viewers are left instead with CLODO, who seemed to have known, all along, that the archive is always-already on a path of self-combustion. The only salvation comes with the hope that every something outside the archive could also bring another rupture, following Derrida.⁵ Rather than fighting off inevitable deterioration of every archive, film may do well to start from, and beg the arrival of, its own ashes.

Biographies

Thomas Dekeyser is a cultural geographer and filmmaker at the University of Southampton. His research and experimental films dig into the complex politics of digital technologies, refusal, and militant histories. He is currently writing a monograph on the philosophical histories of technological refusal titled *Techno-Negative: A History of Refusal* (under contract with University of Minnesota Press). *Machines in Flames* is his debut documentary film.

Andrew Culp works on media theory and radical politics. He is the Director of the MA Program in Aesthetics and Politics at the California Institute of the Arts, where he also teaches in the School of Critical Studies. His work includes two books, *Dark Deleuze* (2016) and *A Guerrilla Guide to Refusal* (2022), a recent limited-series podcast on the work of Alain Badiou, *Being & Event*, and over a dozen articles that have been translated into many languages. He is currently working on an anarchist critique of power and a critical history of cybernetics.

Review by Amélie Bussy, Université Lumière Lyon 2

The Flames of History: About “Machines in Flames” by Andrew Culp and Thomas Dekeyser

Haunted landscapes in a desktop movie

The CLODO (the French acronym for the Committee for the Liquidation and Subversion of Computers) is a group of French activists that organized several attacks on targeted computer engineering companies before disappearing until today, its members remaining free.

It is in Toulouse that the CLODO operated, and the moviemakers Andrew Culp and Thomas Dekeyser begin their quest in the middle of the night, down the streets of

⁵ Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

Toulouse, looking at the stones, the air, the trees, as if they were a deep receptacle of the memory of the events that struck the small town of South France in the mid-1980s.

The filmmakers have placed their camera in the very places and exact locations targeted by CLODO's actions and fire: the computer site of Philips Data Systems, attacked by CLODO on the night of April 6th, 1980 (which is now a transport parking lot). Next, we see a dark street where, at 3 a.m. in the morning of April 8th, 1980, the computer firm Honeybull-CII took fire (and which now is a daily supermarket in the center of Toulouse). So, if "Machines in Flames" appears at first glance to be a desktop film, these places in the present form its essential gesture: the film opens on the pink city, and these deserted locations and landscapes punctuate the stages of Culp and Dekeyser's investigation, recurring from three to five times as key points in the narrative. And indeed, the strength of this film lies in its reliance on places and sites to weave a ghostly, potential presence of past events. Thus, "Machine in Flames" creates a unique energy that encourages introspection and contemplation, allowing the past to affect us, to move us. Culp and Dekeyser's film focuses not only on history, but on our connection to it.

No forensic approach?

Culp and Dekeyser attempt to understand the insurrectionary aspect of CLODO by avoiding the perspective of an investigator or the police, opting instead for an investigation in which they "become CLODO." However, and regardless of what they say in the film about trying not to get trapped in a forensic approach, the principle is unconvincing. It is too similar to the phantasy promoted by TV crime shows, the one that consists of inventing " profiler " characters who can understand criminals by thinking like them.

Nonetheless, the fact that both authors admit that traces, texts, and acts should be left as events, without seeking to find the members of the CLODO, and by extension to identify them, opens the film up to a fine understanding of the writing of history in cinema. Archives are not evidence (of a crime), but rather the (historical) clues that form the material on which those who write history base their questions.

By so doing, Culp and Dekeyser's investigation delves deeper than just the staging of their legendary disappearances and the violent and pleasurable destruction of computers. It gradually reveals a complexity. CLODO's actions are not solely aimed at identified data centers and the demolition of expensive hardware belonging to major industrialists. They are also directed against the projects that these places and companies support, such as filing and surveillance, actions that are all too familiar to us today. CLODO aims not to destroy machines but to send strong signals to those who intend to use information technology for widespread surveillance.

Contemporary vs. history

As Giorgio Agamben argues, the contemporary is not someone who belongs to their time, but rather someone who sees things better because they do not walk at the same pace as their time (Agamben 2008, 11). Thus, the film explores what was intolerable in the past and how it is still intolerable today by looking at things from a different angle or taking a sideways step.

The desktop interface is used in a rather curious way: first, it's used to introduce the fact that the filmmakers made the film during the Covid crisis, without seeing each other except from a distance. However, we never gain access to their exchange. The window actually aims to show us two videos presented as two potential origins: the 1937 Fox Film Fire, that led to the destructions of all the movies that should ironically be preserved in the Fox vault, and a tale concerning the rise of "Operations Research" during and after the World War II and its desire to use calculation to make war and strategic decisions.

By presenting two potential origins for a history that remains undiscovered, the authors of the film introduce a political perspective. Rather than a counter-history, the film intends to examine the present in the context of the past, while also scrutinizing the past in light of the present. CLODO, that targeted and attacked several companies linked to the growing computerization of society in the 1980s, is understood in the light of our present.

I believe that is why the authors have chosen a female voice, in order to convey this disparity in a very poetic way. It is a strange voice, at once very embodied and very soft, like a gentle, benevolent machine that speaks to us from the future about what our present is to it: its benefit is to transform a simple documentary into a thought-provoking commentary on the computerized future of our societies. Plus, the female voice represents the voice of the authors, yet it is impossibly theirs. This is reminiscent of the use of voice-over in essay films such as *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) and *As You See* (Harun Farocki, 1986). As in Farocki's film *As You See* (with a female voice for a male director), Culp and Dekeyser's project can also be defined as an attempt to write the history of "roads not taken" in our societies of information, communication, the Internet and surveillance, especially when, at the 37th minute, the theme of war comes back, developing there what was said earlier about Operations Research during World War II: "With the help of computer, the military could commit the violence of the war at distance." It is also at this time of the film that "Machine in Flames" arrives to the conclusion that CLODO were computer engineer leftists playing their part in a larger protest against the collapsing "borders between the state, capital, and the military."

Today, CLODO is at large. The questions addressed by the group's actions in Culp and Dekeyser's film remain relevant to our times. By investigating from the present rather than simply reproducing police work and arriving too late, their film reactivates the political and critical energy that animated the French collective.

In conclusion, "Machines in Flames" is a contemporary film that aims to update our understanding of the role machines play in our lives and the need for rebellion that comes with it. Through a specific position towards history, archives and traces, as well as political choices, the two authors offer a deliberately deceptive film that holds power over the now-defunct French collective, CLODO.

References

Agamben, Giorgio (2008). *Qu'est-ce que le contemporain?*, Payot.

Review by Michael Goddard, Goldsmiths University of London

This is a multi-layered work of media archaeology, or perhaps more accurately media anarchy, that engages with the deliberately obscure CLODO collective, operating in the 1980s in the south of France. The mechanisms and activities of this group themselves revolve around the destruction in advance of the data surveillance of neoliberal capitalism, through the luddite activity of destroying computer equipment, accompanied by militant statements, an activity which was shared in some other radical movements in the 1970s and 80s. But the film is more than just an excavation of any linear chronology of this group's activities; rather, it engages with the questions raised by this collective's activities based as they are on the destruction of information, hence the title of "machines in flames." This is a point of departure to explore a range of archives from video recording of the sites where the collective performed its actions, to maps, spreadsheets, newspaper articles, and television news footage. The point is not just that archives fail and are necessarily incomplete but that they should fail, as complete and transparent knowledge would be a policing of the group's radical activities and the stubborn remainder of mystery surrounding the group. This is approached through complex audiovisual strategies that present absences as much as presences, and use text and narration evocatively, still leaving the viewer spaces for reflection not only on the subject matter but also of the cinematic pretensions and claims to knowability of the murky realities of the past, thereby critically exposing the archive fever of essay films and documentaries, and suggesting a different path for engaging with archives anarchically, embracing their gaps and failures as much as their revelations.

