

Transcript

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Welcome to After the End from the Ethoc Centre at the University of Oxford, funded by the Wellcome Discovery Award Scheme.

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I'm Patricia Kingori, Professor of Global Health Ethics at the University of Oxford.

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In this series, we explore endings and their aftermaths.

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Who decides when an end has been reached, whether the end for one person is the end for everybody, and what happens after these so-called endings?

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In this podcast, we hear from Elicia Parinello at the University of Edinburgh on the treatment of endings in films related to climate change and the colonial era.

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I'm Caroline Brescia, which is a city near Milan where I'm from.

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I was involved with the After the End project as a postdoctoral researcher.

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My project was in collaboration between TORCH, the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities at Oxford, and the British Film Institute, the BFI.

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I recently finished my PhD and this was my first job, so that was very exciting.

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I began my research in mid-April 2024.

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I did most of my work online using the BFI Player website, but at the same time I went to the MediaTek in South Bank and we had a couple of visits at the BFI archives themselves, as Stephen Street Berkham said.

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At Berkhamsted, it's rows and rows of film in their material form, and you have all of the extra materials.

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So like film posters, scripts, and so on and so forth.

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So you have first all these stereotypical archive film infrastructure, very dusty, not to pass any judgment onto the BFI archivist.

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And then you have the library where they have all of the more kind of bookish

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materials.

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They also have very inflammable materials.

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So as soon as you get into the Berkhamsted archives, Patricia and I were told what to do in case there was an emergency, where the exit was, which was a first because it never happened before when I went into a library.

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And it's very cold, obviously, because they need to keep the temperature at a specific degree to preserve the materials.

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They're trying to digitize everything, but we've been told that most of the materials have not been processed yet, so they've not been digitized, but obviously it's an incredible amount of materials.

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The archive itself, I think, began with the foundation of the British Film Institute.

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It's in continuous expansion because they're trying first to digitize what they already have, so all the celluloid films themselves, but also each year they gather new materials.

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For instance, one of the film directors that I've worked on,

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told me that she gave them a USB stick with all of her films three years ago, and it still hasn't been digitized, but because they have years and years of backlogged materials, that still needs to be processed.

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So does an archive really end?

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Because in this case, the end is not nearly insight, but it's completely understandable because with that much materials, I think it would take quite a lot to be able to digitize everything.

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and also not only digitize, but restore what they have.

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For instance, when we visited one of the curators of the BFI told us that he'd been called to collect some old films that were in those tin cans, very stereotypical.

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He went to this house and obviously these materials were not completely well preserved.

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So not only you need to digitize, but you need to restore them first and then see what you can save and what you can't save.

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So what he was telling us is that not only there's an issue with time, but also an issue with selecting which materials are, and I'm using question mark, worth digitizing it because obviously all the time that you spend on one specific film, you're not digitizing other materials.

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It's one of the big questions that they're grappling with at the moment, trying to figure out which materials now are more urgent to preserve in this kind of infinity of material that they have.

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When Patricia and I visited the archive at Berkhamsted, we saw two presentations.

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One of those presentations was done by the curator called Jess Stewart, who deals with archive and non-fiction films for the BFI.

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I looked at the idea of ending and especially the aftermath of both environmental catastrophes.

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And then I also looked at the aftermath of colonialism.

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So what remains in terms of materials and especially in films.

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In looking at both

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environmental and colonial films depicting the aftermath or the ending.

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I mostly focused on the materials of the BFI collection, but I looked at non-BFI materials to grasp bigger trends in film history.

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For the first part of my research, I looked into environmental films,

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And I noticed that, especially if we look at the PFI collection, there are two trends happening.

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So for the most part of the last century, we have films dealing with nuclear threat or atomic bombs and so on and so forth, because it's reflected socio-political and broader situation.

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Then if we get closer and closer to the present day, this anxiety over nuclear threats

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shifts to anxieties over climate crisis and climate change.

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For instance, if we look at films made in the, let's say, 50s and 60s, most of these films depict nuclear bombs or different situations happening around that.

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For instance, there is a film called The Day the Earth Got Fire from 1961.

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It's a cult classic in the UK.

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It's a film in which there are two nuclear bombs that are set off in the US and in the

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the Soviet Union.

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And this causes a shift in the Earth's position in its orbit.

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This causes the Earth to get closer and closer to the sun.

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And obviously, the main consequence is an increase in the temperature.

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And this is told from a British perspective.

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So for instance, there are images in the film of people in London going sunbathing and being severely dehydrated because they don't know how to deal with this intense heat, which is

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harrowing and I think a bit uncanny in the sense of looking at the film now.

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It's interesting to see how it was represented in the 1960s, but in relation to a different kind of environmental threat.

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What happens in the film, especially if you look at it in terms of ending, is that there is not a linear narrative.

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So the film starts on the day the earth is catching fire.

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So the day that the earth is predicted to be the closest to the sun,

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And then we go back in time to, I think, at least a couple of months before that specific date to see how we got to that point.

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We see first what's happening in the aftermath of the catastrophic event, and then we go back in time.

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So we now question what is really an aftermath.

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If we look at that film, its ending is open.

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So we don't know if in the end humankind will survive.

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they set up a solution to reset the balance of the earth.

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But in the end, we don't know if that actually works out.

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And on top of this, I've read that the ending in the US version was edited to present a more positive ending of the film.

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So while in the British version, the ending is open, so we don't know what will happen.

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In the US version, it's clear that humankind will survive, which again speaks of different attitudes towards endings and

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aftermath or even the presentation of humankind's capabilities.

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Then if we shift in time to the present day, what happens is slightly different.

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The majority, let's say, of disaster films,

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that are very popular now, which now has become a whole genre of films depicting a kind of apocalyptic ending in connection to the environment.

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Now they only focus on monstrous, let's say, environmental crisis, the most famous of which is The Day After Tomorrow, which came out in 2004.

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This is not included in the BFI collection, but I think it speaks volumes of a kind of more global cinematic trend.

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It's interesting because its temporality is completely different from the one of

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with the idea of fire, the one big climatic event, and then a kind of linear narrative to a potential solution.

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In the case of The Day After Tomorrow, we have one single big disastrous event.

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And from that, we have a linear narrative of what the solution could be and what can we do to prevent this.

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And I think this is interesting in terms of imagination or how we can imagine a climate crisis film

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And in this, I'm referring to a very popular book called The Great Derangement by Amitav Ghosh, which came out in 2016.

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In the book, while he mostly refers to novels, Ghosh argues that today there is a crisis of the imagination for the way that we represent the environment and climate change.

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Because if we focus too much on grandiose, very dramatic images, we prevent the reader from feeling that he has a sense or they have a sense of responsibility

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on what to do and what to prevent.

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I then, with all of this, looked at the BFI collection.

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And what I found was films that followed a similar non-linear narrative.

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So these films contrasted the more popular mainstream Hollywood films and the depiction of climate events.

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For instance, I looked at the work of Kibwe Tavares, who's a young British filmmaker and who is also an architect.

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And in particular, I looked at two of his films, Robots of Brixton and Random Acts, and basically Random Acts.

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Max is the remaking of Robots of Brixton because the first film was made as his master's dissertation for the School of Architecture that he attended.

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The film is set in a dystopic or apocalyptic Brixton because there are no human beings, there's no vegetation, everything is completely barren.

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But what's interesting is that he's not just

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representing this dystopic environment, but he's remaking footage from the Brixton riots of 1981.

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So we do not have a single narrative of catastrophic event solution.

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Rather, we have this new kind of dystopic environment where some sort of climate crisis arguably happened in the past.

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Then this is used to look back into the past and construct potentially a different view from this.

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In particular, what Tavares does is that he physically takes images from the Brixton riots and just remakes them, substituting policemen with robots or protesters with robots.

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In this, I would say that there is a challenge to a temporal linearity.

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We look back, we reenact what we previously had, and we might potentially construct a differentiator.

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I would say that in the films by Tavares, while maybe there is a filmic ending in the sense that there is a conclusion to the narrative that is being portrayed on screen, it's different than the one that we see in mainstream Hollywood films, because the problem of the big climactic event is not present.

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And on top of this, from a kind of metafilmic perspective, the fact that he reuses the footage,

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allows us to see how his own film in the future could be reused and remade.

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So in this sense, I think we see how the film itself is never ending because we already see this opening up from a previous material and we see how his film could be remade, so on and so forth.

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So in this sense, his films, by the way that they're constructed, trouble the idea of a fixed ending and instead promote a sort of openness, which is different from the openness of *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, but maybe reflects different attitudes that we have regarding archival material, archival footage, but also our present time and our anxieties over climate change.

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The other task was to look at colonial endings and the way that they're represented in film and in the BFI collection.

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So I began trying to find similar narratives of remaking.

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And to me, it was surprising that similar ways of looking and engaging with the archive were not just present in films that engage with climate change or environmental disasters, but also in films that engage with colonialism.

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I tried to explore films that were not necessarily included in the BFI collection to better understand what was included.

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I discovered the amazing work by a British filmmaker called Donnieka Igue.

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I think she does amazing work in engaging with the aftermath of colonialism and the archive itself.

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For instance, she has a film called *No Archive Can Restore You*, which is inspired by the Giulietta Singh book,

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Archive Will Restore You, which is about Igwe travelling to Lagos to the Nigerian Film Unit, which was a branch of the larger colonial film unit developed by the British government.

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And she films the remnants of this archive.

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So we see the dustier

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a much more abandoned version of what I saw at Berkhamsted.

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So she films the cobwebs, the dust on the cans of films, and through her films she questions what is left in this aftermath, what can be restored in some way.

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This moved me to question what can we actually gather for all these materials if all these materials are just left to decompose and decay.

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So even if I look at the BFI collection, what kind of materials do I have access to?

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In particular, this moved me to think of whose perspective is present in these materials that I'm watching.

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And obviously, Gayatri Spivak came to mind with her question, can the subaltern speak?

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Because even in the films that are present, the voice of the subaltern woman is, for the most part, completely absent.

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There is a very

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I would say even funny cartoon from 1956 called the Battle of Wangapur, where you have this little girl living in between two camps.

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On the one hand, we have the British troops, and the other hand, we have the Wangapur locals fighting each other.

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And she's like a Tom and Jerry character, creating mischief here and there.

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But if we look closely, we don't see any women from Wangapur present.

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You only have the men, the local men, the military men.

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this young white girl, but no one else.

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And this was reflected in other films that I watched from the BFI collection.

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So for instance, there's another, it was catalogued under a travelogue called Egypt and Her Defenders from 1914.

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It's basically a collection of what now I would call touristic sites.

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So you have the pyramids, the harbour of Cairo,

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And you see white people, white tourists, presumably British because of the source of the film itself.

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You have local men present, especially you have a lot of military men parading, but women completely absent.

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Maybe at some point for one second you see one at the very corner of the footage.

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But what Igwe does in her films is that if not restoring

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those voices, she at least puts them front and center.

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For instance, in one of her films, she printed a still from footage coming from the Colonial Film Unit of a woman, and she prints it on a t-shirt that she wears throughout her short film.

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This involves the BFI in the sense that the original footage of the woman was part of the BFI collection.

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So we cannot hear the voice of this woman, but we see her once again.

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This is very similar, I would say, to what Tavares does in the sense that the colonial film unit ended 70 years ago.

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Most of the materials will probably never be restored, but we do have a continuation in this remaking and reenactment.

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When I looked at the BFI collection, more in general, so the films I mentioned of Kibwe Tavares, Un Ye Kaigwe, but also John Oconfra, for instance, or Ngozion Rua, what came to mind is that not only the archive is connected to a specific form of authority and power, but at the same time, the archive itself can be reworked.

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to present a different meaning.

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For instance, the film scholar, Laura Mulvey, argued that films and compilation films in particular, which are the ones that use previous footage, can create a second meaning.

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And what's interesting is that all these film directors, which arguably come from a marginalized perspective, because most of them are black, some of them are queer, and not just the ones that I mentioned, but also other ones,

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come with a perspective that was, for the most part of history, invisibilized and marginalized, especially in the archive itself, because these are voices, these are faces that we never see.

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But in this case, we have a new remaking of the archive, which brings back, or at least brings forth for the first time, all these invisibilized perspectives.

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So if we think back to the question, what's the aftermath, what's the ending,

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looking at the BFI collection or the archive, well, the archive does not really end.

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It continues, it's in a fluid state of transformation.

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And this is also reflected in the way that the materials are used and digitized, restored by the BFI collection and curators themselves.

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To me, it was very useful looking at all these materials through the idea of the heretical archive by Domito Torlasco.

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So Torlasco looked at the way that digital techniques remake the archive.

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And in this way, they blurred the distinction between the past and present, between cultural memory and present.

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I think this is a term that could be very well used to understand what is happening in all these films.

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So it's not the ending,

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but rather it's a continuous becoming of these films that find the second meaning.

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It's also been described as kind of archaeology by Catherine Russell.

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So a way to look at the archive that kind of reenacts it, revitalizes it, but also does something else that was maybe not present before.

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That brings us to the end of this podcast.

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Thank you for listening.

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Next time, I'm with Danya Carroll and Alicia Perinello for an exploration of indigenous and Western perspectives on time and the treatment of endings in films related to climate change and the colonial era.

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I'm Patricia Kinguri, and you've been listening to After the End, brought to you by the Ethoc Centre at the University of Oxford, funded by the Wellcome Discovery Award Scheme.

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