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Hussein Shariffe's Filmic Ruins: Archival Noise and *The Dislocation of Amber* (1975)

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://youtu.be/W4QjbiCazPo>

Abstract

My audiovisual essay explores Hussein Shariffe's *The Dislocation of Amber* (1975) as a filmic "ruin" within his archive. Described by collaborator Sondra Hale as "Sudan's first art film," *The Dislocation of Amber* was filmed in the Sudanese city of Suakin, which lies in ruins. The available digitised copies of the film are degraded and disrupted by noise. Hale interprets the film as "a metaphor for a society decimated by colonialism," and this essay uses Shariffe's approach to the ruins of Suakin as a model for how to approach the ruins of Shariffe's film itself, along with the political and personal histories that entwine around this material object.

I pay close attention to the degradation of the images in Shariffe's film to open up questions about the political realities of Sudanese cinema. This videographic scholarship is influenced by Jiří Anger's "film theory from below": a speculative and concrete way of thinking about images *through images* that "inherently depends on the material qualities of the digitised objects, the traces and gestures embedded in the individual frames and between them." If the film's future is one where restoration can help gain a larger audience for this extraordinary work, it is also vital to mark this moment of its material history, to stay with the noise and retain its loss as an index of political contingencies.

Keywords

Sudan, archives, noise, experimental, ruins



Creator's Statement

This audiovisual essay explores an archival film text by placing it within the context of its material life — as a multiplicity of film materials and paratexts, including treatments and preliminary notes — and the degradation of its physical being, the “noise” accrued in the archive.¹⁾ The objects in question surround Hussein Shariffe's *The Dislocation of Amber* from 1975, described by collaborator and anthropologist Sondra Hale as “Sudan's first art film.”²⁾ Shariffe's film and surrounding materials form part of a living archive,³⁾ which I have been fortunate to play a small part in developing, along with Shariffe's daughter, Eiman Hussein, Erica Carter, Samar Abdelrahman, amongst others.⁴⁾ If, as espoused by Amalia Sabiescu, “at the core of living archives is the performative celebration of the past through contemporary acts of creation and transmission,” then my work here aims to contribute creatively to the growing and abundant life of Shariffe's archives.⁵⁾

- 1) This conception of noise is indebted to recent interventions in the developing field of Noise Studies, such as Cécile Malaspina's 2018 *An Epistemology of Noise*. Noise is added uncertainty in a message, which can also be a measure of increased information. “Noise” on copies of the film discussed here can become information regarding its material history. This might be information relating to production and manufacturing conditions, the specific nature of compression during digitisation, as well as material degradation that indexes the material afterlife of objects. It is the last of these that most concerns this statement and audiovisual essay.
- 2) Sondra Hale, “The Making of the ‘Dislocation of Amber’ — Sudan's First Art Film,” *Sudan Studies Association Newsletter* 20, no. 2 (2001), 16.
- 3) This conception of archival practice is indebted to the work of the Arsenal — Institute for Film and Video Art and their archive projects, including *Living Archive*, focusing on the their own collection (2011–2013), *Visionary Archive* on African film history and practices (2013–2015), and the transnational cultural heritage project, *Archive außer sich* (Archives beyond/beside themselves, 2017–2021). Arsenal has been instrumental in keeping, preserving, and expanding Shariffe's archive.
- 4) You can find further information and an explanatory video essay I made here: “Activating the Exile Archive: Hussein Shariffe between London, Cairo and Khartoum,” *King's College London*, September 3, 2024, accessed October 8, 2025, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/spotlight/activating-the-exile-archive>.
- 5) Amalia G. Sabiescu, “Living Archives and The Social Transmission of Memory,” *Curator* 63, no. 4 (2020), 497.

I hope this audiovisual essay can play a part in gaining audiences for Shariffe's brilliant artistic innovations, as well as in revealing, through attention to archival writings and plans, his working methods and practices. There has been a recent influx of Sudanese films recognised in major film festivals from Cannes to Sundance in the last few years, as well as growing international communities, including the Sudanese diaspora and political exiles, committed to developing cultural expertise and archival capacities.⁶⁾ These projects are based on the imperative to amplify the history of Sudanese cinema, one so often neglected outside of the region; a task now taking place in the shadow of current atrocities and conflict in the country since war broke out in 2023.

This audiovisual essay is, ultimately, an experiment with and reflection on my own archival encounter, but one that I hope to use to inform my continuing involvement with projects around Shariffe's archives. This is what Jiří Anger has called "theory as archival experience," which takes seriously the specificities of the object — its imperfections and material traces of historical neglect and oppression — in an understanding of its status and the spectatorial experience it garners.⁷⁾ It is a way to learn and to communicate the stakes involved in collecting and preserving artefacts in digital forms.

The video aims to use poetic form to negate a simple opposition between loss and flawless archival retrieval, where presentation of and experimentation with a noisy and fragmented archive allow us to think before, after, and with the filmic objects, and archival deterioration can thus be recognised as an index of political realities and material contingencies. This is influenced by Katherine Groo's encouragement to "stutter or wander" in approaches to the history of film, where "a broad spectrum of faithless, errant, polyphonic, experimental methods" might "engage with the specificities of our artifacts as they are, in the present of our encounters."⁸⁾ Such a poetic encounter with Shariffe's archival objects — one that takes a kind of aesthetic delight in its noisiness — can only gesture towards the specificities of the film's material history, though it raises questions and issues that further investigative archival work might take on.⁹⁾

The context of this work is my contact with Shariffe's archives during the last 5 years, as well as the existence of an ongoing project to restore *The Dislocation of Amber*. This will be part of a larger ongoing initiative around restoring archival works, currently being run by a recently launched film restoration unit at Cimatheque — Alternative Film Centre in Cairo, in partnership with Sudan Film Factory. Their project, "Remastered," is "born out of the pressing need to preserve and safeguard the rich Egyptian and Arab film heritage, bridging the gap in infrastructure and expertise to ensure that these cinematic treasures

6) For more details see: Editor, "From Ruin to Resilience: Sudan's Archival Restoration," *Andariya*, September 12, 2025, accessed October 8, 2025, <https://www.andariya.com/post/from-ruin-to-resilience-sudan-s-archival-restoration>.

7) Jiří Anger, *Towards a Film Theory from Below: Archival Film and the Aesthetics of the Crack-Up* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2024), 6.

8) Katherine Groo, "Let It Burn: Film Historiography in Flames," *Discourse* 41, no. 1 (2019), 31.

9) This could take the form of what Marek Jancovic has called a "media epigraphy:" "a way of looking at errors, failures and decay in images as traces of subdued histories" that would delve into the technical realities of material degradation and digital compression to begin a forensic examination of how these images have travelled. Marek Jancovic, *A Media Epigraphy of Video Compression: Reading Traces of Decay* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 22.

are revitalized for future generations.”¹⁰) This is done through extensive training on image and sound restoration, colour grading, digitising tools, as well as restoration ethics.

This work is absolutely vital, and my audiovisual essay aims to reflect on such undertakings through a poetic reckoning with the existing state of the archive. Jurij Meden writes that the “history of cinema is a history of scratches, tears, burns, blurry images,” placing an emphasis on the material lives of film objects to tell stories of their contingent paths through the world.¹¹) My video ultimately asks what Shariffe's film — itself a poetic rumination on ruins — might have to say about its own ruination, prompting us to then ask wider questions about the history of Sudanese cinema, including surrounding the presence of Shariffe's work in international film festivals and the transnational dispersal of materials after artists like Shariffe went into political exile in 1989.

This is how the film is described by the website set up for the project “Hussein Shariffe — a living memory:”

The “Dislocation of Amber” was filmed in the city of Suakin, a formerly flourishing port in Sudan. All those who have previously written on Suakin admitted to the complexity of the town as a subject. So intriguing is Suakin that not even the origin of its name is agreed upon. Its history is one of famine & opulence, devastation and progress, rich trade and damage, involving colonialism. What makes Suakin so abidingly memorable is its resilience, built through war and conquests, the historical town is a product of determination and competitiveness.¹²)

In the film, Shariffe puts forward his perspective on the ruins of Suakin in his idiosyncratic, enigmatic, and poetic style,¹³) with Sondra Hale describing it as “a surreal and symbolic film set in the deserted and dying eastern medieval seaport of Suakin to portray the death/suicide of society as a result of colonialism.”¹⁴) Elsewhere, Hale described the plot as “a woman's death by drowning (and a series of suicides and violence), rape, human degradation and humiliation,” which “mixes images of Victorian ladies, British generals, with dervishes and Hadendowa/Beja lore, [making] no attempt at realism nor the presentation of ethnographic ‘fact,’ as we know it (although there are ethnographic elements in it). It is very slow moving, with the camera languishing over the ruins;” Hale analyses how the “eerie buildings” are “characters themselves,” interspersed by visual motifs “with mysteri-

10) “Cimatheque, Remastered Open Call,” accessed April 30, 2025, <https://cimatheque.org/remastered>.

11) Jurij Meden, *Scratches and Glitches: Observations on Preserving and Exhibiting Cinema in the Early 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 25.

12) “Hussein Shariffe: a living memory: films,” shariffe.org, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.shariffe.org/04films.html#amber>.

13) For more information on Suakin, see: David Roden, “The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin,” *Sudan Notes and Records* 51, (1970), 1–22. Interestingly, Shariffe's film stands out in the context of other African films of the preceding decade interested in “transformations of African landscapes, from rural to urbanized spaces” in its focus on a previously urbanised space that has lost relevance in the supply chain and left to go to ruin. Marie-Paule Macdonald, *African Cinema and Urbanism* (London: Anthem Press, 2024), 11.

14) Sondra Hale, “More than a Grain of Sand: Opening Outward — Sudanese Thought in a Globalized Milieu,” in *Sudanese Intellectuals in the Global Milieu: Capturing Cultural Capital*, eds. Gada Kadoda and Sondra Hale (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 16.

ous links between them.”¹⁵) It is the haptic nature of the film that Hale focuses on: the way the camera “touches the crumbling facades of the buildings” with the sound of Red Sea waves and wind in the background.¹⁶) There are poems, including by the Sufi Mystic, Ibn al-Farid (1181–1234), heard being sung by the late Sudanese singer Abdel-Aziz Dawoud, as well as Sudanese song and Quran recitation.¹⁷)

My audiovisual essay was constructed using two different versions of Shariffe’s film circulating online. These two digital copies were located in an online open archive, without easily traceable file histories or sources. As it stands, the Arsenal — Institute for Film and Video Art archive contains a 16mm print and a Betacam copy of *The Dislocation of Amber*. The version of the film presented at the beginning on the left of the video is a copy digitised from the Arsenal’s 16mm print.¹⁸) A different 16mm print is also part of the Cinematheque Suisse archive. A report for digitisation exists for this from 2019, detailing its condition as well as its origin as a deposit from the Fribourg International Film Festival (FIFF). Although no date is given for this, we can perhaps conjecture that this corresponds to a brief homage that the festival did to Shariffe in 2006 shortly after his death, where a posthumous completion of Shariffe’s unfinished *Of Dust and Rubies* had been scheduled but did not take place.¹⁹) However, the quality of this print, as seen in the Cinematheque Suisse report, is superior to the copy used in this audiovisual essay. Judging from the fact that many of the images of the film that circulate online, such as on IMDB and Letterboxd, seem to come from the copy of the film placed on the right at the beginning of my video, it suggests that this digitised version has been the most accessible one, and perhaps has been available online for a while.

Whilst the precise origins of this digitised copy of the film might remain somewhat of a mystery for now, placing the two digital copies side-by-side nonetheless reveals the divergent histories of the film as an object vulnerable to material degradation. Through my editing, the image is slowed down, and details of the frame are blown up, foregrounding the dance of scratches and lesions on the reel. Sound from the film is present, the noisy background emphasised in the edit, and the film is slowed down at times to allow deeper examination and experience of the static intrusions on the soundtrack. Such an approach mirrors Anger’s theorisation of videographic practice as a speculative and concrete way of thinking about images *through images* that “inherently depends on the material qualities of the digitised objects, the traces and gestures embedded in the individual frames and between them.”²⁰) But moving beyond the film itself, the images are accompanied by text

15) Hale, “The Making of the ‘Dislocation of Amber,’” 19.

16) Ibid.

17) Eiman Hussein has pointed out to me that, in the copy on the left at the beginning of the audiovisual essay, the translated words in the subtitles do not exactly match the words of the song.

18) It is specifically a copy that includes subtitles by Shah Noor Hussein and Hatim Eujayl, produced for Canyon Cinema Discovered in 2022 in a programme titled “Playing in the Dark: Watery Experiments” curated by Chrystel Oloukoï. The program can be found here: “Canyon Cinema Discovered,” *canyoncinema*, accessed October 8, 2025, <https://canyoncinema.com/wp-content/uploads/ccd-final-web.pdf>.

19) Erica Carter and Laurence Kent, “An Infinity of Tactics: Hussein Shariffe’s archive in motion,” *L’Atalante: Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, no. 28 (2022), 124. For further information and discussion of this unfinished film see Tamer El Said’s film *Of Dust and Rubies, a Film on Suspension* (2020).

20) Anger, *Towards a Film Theory from Below*, 9.

from Shariffe's preliminary notes for the film, a document itself bearing the scars of time, with tears and unreadable sections. It is part of the ever-expanding digital archives linked to the director and artist, dated to 1974, and its placement here produces their own interpretations of the image. Forging new connections with what is seen and heard, the written treatment is allowed to resonate with the film. At times, the link between the text and the images is clear, but elsewhere seemingly incongruous relationships prime the watcher for making obscure connections, such as the poetic evocation of "ciphers," "enigmas," and the description of shapes in the script being placed alongside visuals of dust and scratches on the surface of the image.

The purpose of using this juxtaposition to think through the film's images is to try to approach the "ruined" film stock itself through how Shariffe approaches the ruins of Suakin, and to use his poetic writing to make new links with the contingent material traces that have arisen on the surface of the image and the grain of the sound. This then complicates the meaning of "ruin." Just as noise becomes new information and imperfections forge unexpected aesthetic interest, the film is not "ruined" but, in our appreciation of material ruination, finds new purposes for the film as a marker of historical processes. The film thus doubles as a "material witness," both documenting the fate of Suakin and, in its very material state, bearing witness to a subsequent history of Sudan, of exile and forced transnational dispersal of cultural objects.²¹⁾

This then serves to problematise the concept of completeness regarding film texts.²²⁾ Films have material afterlives, and they also have lost futures buried in their depths: ideas that were abandoned or changed in the stages of turning concepts and plans into finished form. It is Bill Reid who thinks through the art object that we receive as its "afterlife," and he asserts that this also "obscures" something:

When we look at a particular work
of Northwest Coast art
and see the shape of it,
we are only looking at its afterlife.
Its real life is the movement
by which it got to be that shape.²³⁾

So, alongside the ongoing ruination and afterlives that define the open archival object, a *before* of an object can be sought. I contend that Shariffe's written treatment marks the "life" of the film and his contingent processes of filmmaking. Finding Shariffe's notes and matching up the plans to the film's existing images is a process of retracing lines of creative flow, constituting a form of archival detective work. By replicating this process, the audio-

21) Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020).

22) There has been growing interest in unfinished films within screen studies, such as James Fenwick, Kieran Foster, and David Eldridge's 2020 *Shadow Cinema: The Historical and Production Contexts of Unmade Films* and the 2023 collection, *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, edited by Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon.

23) Bill Reid, "Out of the Silence," in *Solitary Raven: The Selected Writings of Bill Reid*, ed. Robert Bringhurst (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000), 71.

visual essay places Shariffe's film in the wider orbit of his archive, where watching the images combined with Shariffe's notes — themselves an archival object subject to the ravages of time — then mirrors an encounter with the materials. The *before* of the film (its preliminary materials, its Reidian "life") is put in contact with its *after* (its material noise and decay, its afterlives) to think *with* the film and its archive, producing a specific *now* of the object.

This is what Erica Carter and I have discussed, regarding Shariffe's archive, as a process of deixis: the articulation of positionality in relation to an archival object, and "the performative strategies of archival screenings that resituate [the] neglected film in new spatiotemporal constellations."²⁴) Constructing an audiovisual essay is a modality of this performative form of screening, and an attempt to answer what Carter elsewhere describes as Shariffe's films' call for "a poetry of the archive that works associatively and intuitively across archival objects and their human interlocutors."²⁵)

My audiovisual essay ends by delving into the public archives of Sudan Memory, an initiative that began in 2018 and that "seeks to conserve and promote valuable cultural materials from and about Sudan through digitisation and via an online platform."²⁶) One part of this project entailed constructing a 3D model of the city of Suakin available for exploration virtually on its website. This was made possible thanks to local historian Mohamed Nour and his family, who built a museum of the island's history. Such work is vital to historical and cultural inquiry, as are the current efforts to restore *The Dislocation of Amber*. The closing moments of the video emphasise the paradoxical materiality of this online model; the waves lapping against Suakin's shores, heard by Shariffe in the early 1970s, now accompany the animated sea surrounding the virtual restoration of the ruined city, navigated digitally 50 years later. Words from Shariffe's poetic script for *The Dislocation of Amber* then seem to comment on these images. My audiovisual essay does not attempt to tie down the meaning of the words and indeed produces new ambiguities in their connections with the accompanying images of a virtual Suakin. Alongside the incredible work that has gone into recreating the city by Sudan Memory, the words seem to call for a supplementary form of communication attuned to a consciousness of time, a speaking that I believe Shariffe's works themselves achieve as material witnesses to history. Indeed, Sudan Memory's project calls for such deictic encounters as it "not only preserves tangible heritage but also fosters community participation and digital literacy."²⁷) As Susan Schuppli states, it is "within these institutional forums that 'witnessing' itself can be witnessed."²⁸) These initiatives provide platforms where archival objects can be recognised as material storytellers of Sudan's past.

Behind all forms of completion are ruins haunting — markings of material history and contingent realities. These ruins speak to histories of colonial and neocolonial violence

24) Carter and Kent, "An Infinity of Tactics," 123.

25) Erica Carter, "The Eloquence of Odradek: Hussein Shariffe's Exilic Film Objects," in *Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past*, eds. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Vinzenz Hediger (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2023), 250.

26) "Sudan Memory's Story," *sudanmemory*, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://www.sudanmemory.org/about/>.

27) Marilyn Deegan, "Cultural Destruction and Rescue in Sudan: The Sudan Memory Project," *Journal of Art Crime*, no. 33 (2025), 43.

28) Schuppli, *Material Witness*, 4.

and neglect, as well as political repression: the destruction of the film industry and its lineage of avant-garde experimentation in Sudan after the 1989 coup d'état that put Omar al-Bashir in power for 30 years. Shariffe went into exile after this and his archive is now dispersed across the world, including in London, Cairo, and Berlin. This is the politics buried within any act of restoration. As Paolo Cherchi Usai writes in their provocative manifesto, "If film had been treated properly from the very beginning, there would be less of a need for film preservation today and citizens would have had access to a history of cinema of their choice."²⁹ Current projects of restoration thus reveal the global asymmetries involved in letting the object-to-be-restored enter a state of ruin in the first place.

It is this hidden index of filmic objects that many archival and curatorial projects reckon with. Filipa César's work on Guinean cinema, for example, explicitly resists restoration practices that erase decay or material traces of neglect: "In the purposeful absence of any attempt at restoration, along with the images are transferred the inscriptions of time, neglect, war, decomposition, corrosion, mold, vinegar syndrome and projection scratches on the animal gelatin of the celluloid," such that a "posthumous state of decay makes film an agent capable of different understandings of time and presence."³⁰ Resisting the total replacement of the noisy archival object by its digitised completion through disseminating images of its ruined state is a way of remembering neglect. Indeed, Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Pepita Hesselberth discuss "the risk of losing the noise of the archive," and opt instead to "attune" to noise in order "to nourish a relationship to time where the past keeps enfolding on itself in the present."³¹ If the future of Shariffe's film is one where restoration can help gain a larger audience for this extraordinary work, it is also vital to mark this moment of its material history, to stay with the noise and retain its loss as an index of political contingencies.

This helps in raising important questions that future archival work might pursue. How did Shariffe's film travel transnationally, and where was it stored during these times? How have digital copies circulated online? Sondra Hale emphasises the censorship that Shariffe's film was subjected to on its completion — how might this have affected where the physical print was stored?³² And of course, what might all this mean for the archives today?

The current war in Sudan has wreaked untold horrors upon its population. It has also left existing artistic materials housed in the country at severe risk of destruction. The Sudan Radio and Television Corporation (SRTC), for example, contains one of the largest

29) Paolo Cherchi Usai, "The Lindgren Manifesto: The Film Curator of the Future (Italy, 2010)," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, ed. Scott Mackenzie (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 558.

30) Filipa César, "Cine-animism: *The Return of Amílcar Cabral* and Many Returns," in *Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past*, eds. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Vinzenz Hediger (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2023), 463–464.

31) Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Pepita Hesselberth, "Ledgers and Legibility: A Conversation on the Significance of Noise within Digital Colonial Archives," in *Legibility in the Age of Signs and Machines*, eds. Pepita Hesselberth, Janna Houwen, Esther Peeren, and Ruby de Vos (Leiden: BRILL, 2018), 251, 259.

32) Sondra Hale, "Hussein Shariffe (1934–2005): Exile and homecoming between London, Cairo and Khartoum. Panel 2 — The City as Metaphor: The Dislocation of Amber" (online presentation), December 19, 2020, accessed October 8, 2025, <https://germanscreenstudies.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2020/12/19/hussein-shariffe/>.

film archives in Africa, with around 13,000 film reels dating back to the 1940s, the digitisation of which has been started by Sudan Memory. Artists and filmmakers have been fleeing the country since 2023, and many are now part of diaspora communities in Cairo and elsewhere. I am part of a project around Shariffe's work that aims to develop models for workshops examining how to approach the existing archives creatively. As a potential impact for my audiovisual essay, I hope it could be a modest contribution to this work — an amateur attempt to capture the archival experience, proving all archives to be living, capable of producing new communities and experiences in their encounters.

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Filmography

- Of Dust and Rubies, a Film on Suspension* (Tamer El Said, 2020)
- The Dislocation of Amber* (Hussein Shariffe, 1975)

Biography

Laurence Kent is Lecturer in Digital Film & Television at the University of Bristol. He has published and presented on various topics within film theory and philosophy, from Deleuzian ethics, Sudanese cinema, experimental filmmaking, Hollywood action film, archiving practices, and anticolonial aesthetics. His articles and book reviews have appeared in *Film-Philosophy*, *Alphaville*, *Studies in World Cinema*, *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, *Frames Cinema Journal*, and *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, amongst others. His current research explores forms of contingency, noise, and blurring within screen media.

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