Ephemera Beyond Evidence

Sister (2019) and the "Self-Destructive" Potential of Digital Queer Storytelling

LINH-NGOC BUI

> To accept loss is to accept queerness—or more accurately, to accept the loss of heteronormativity, authorization, and entitlement. To be lost is not to hide in a closet or to perform a simple (ontological) disappearing act; it is to veer away from heterosexuality's path.
>
> —José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*[1]

Abstract

Although scholarship on queer narrative and new media has critically raised concerns over the instability of digital queer storytelling, I close-read *Sister* (2019) as a digital queer storytelling form that invites fragility and imperfection as part of its performance and care in the cyberspace of YouTube. Engaging with José Muñoz's queer ephemera as evidence, I argue that *Sister*'s "unstable" treatment of its source materials, its precarious housing on YouTube, and its amateurish visual and audio quality critically suggest a radical queerness of color that exists beyond evidence. I suggest the film as an analogy of a queer archive that resists a paranoid reading: Its very analog-like imperfection (that borders on erasing the same materials it tries to present) embraces self-destructivity and ephemerality that embody a trans* ontology of becoming. By integrating documentary, narrative, and archival forms with opacity as central to

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1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th ann. ed. (New York University Press, 2020), 73.

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its storytelling, the film exemplifies a reparative turn that goes beyond the expectations of pain, permanence, and clarity in a Vietnamese trans* story. I argue that the film's digital circulation amplifies ephemera beyond evidence by embracing disjuncture across platforms, resonating with Eliza Steinbock's "shimmering images" of trans* cinema. Overall, my reading challenges seeing *Sister* as an autonomous film that exists in a vacuum: Its digital travel across (plat)forms and its formal opacity craft a subversive strategy of community building based on collaboration and affect across digital/physical space and time.

Keywords: new media, documentary, queer theories, ephemera, digital archive

Introduction: Queer Storytelling in the Digital Space

The development of new media, especially YouTube, has been pivotal for queer narrative within the digital space. From more mainstream outlets such as the It Gets Better Campaign video project to more personal video blogs (vlogs) by LGBTQ+ creators, YouTube in particular and social media in general have helped foster communities where queer folks struggle to meet and help one another navigate the world as minoritarian subjects. However, a persistent concern with queer storytelling and new media is the instability resulting from not only the structure of capitalist, heavily monetized platforms but also the disposability of queerness in otherwise cis-heteronormative narratives. Videos on YouTube and other social media are at the mercy of constantly changing algorithms that serve the interests of advertisers who systematically avoid "controversial" topics, biasing against marginalized communities in favor of more "family-friendly" content.[2]

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2. Aja Romano, "A Group of YouTubers Is Claiming the Site Systematically Demonetizes Queer Content," Vox, October 10, 2019, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/10/10/20893258/youtube-lgbtq-censorship-demonetization-nerd-city-algorithm-report.

My research stands in this intersection among queerness, narrative, and new media to propose a different queer narrative that, while acknowledging the much-justified concern with fluctuation and instability in the digital space, asks: What if we can move beyond "ephemera as evidence" to engage with José Muñoz's theory? In other words, if Muñoz argues that queer ephemera reveals how queerness does not conform to the expectation of fixed and easily "graspable" evidence, what would digital queer storytelling look like when it actively embraces messiness and recognizes that "proof" doesn't need to be legible or even be the main concern at all? If digital queer storytelling actively *welcomes* destruction and incomprehensibility, how can it uproot the entire question of what "counts" as evidence of queerness? What would it look like if we put aside the question of evidence for a moment—not to invalidate queer identity and representation—but to see what opacity and self-destruction can offer for digital queer storytelling?

Therefore, I reframe this concern as hopeful and reparative. Echoing Muñoz's call for queer utopia and hope as a method,[3] I close-read Ha Tuan Hung's *Sister* (2019) as exemplifying queer amateurish documentary to argue that the film envisions a different kind of digital queer storytelling: one that invites opacity, fragility, and imperfection as part of its performance and care in the cyberspace of YouTube. *Sister*'s "unstable" treatment of its source materials, its precarious housing on YouTube, and its amateurish visual and audio quality refuse the clarity and linearity of traditional, more mainstream queer documentaries and YouTube videos in favor of an affective mode. The film analogizes a queer narrative that resists a paranoid reading:

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3. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz challenges Lee Edelman's argument in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), in which Edelman centers the figure of the child and the failure to reproduce as the focal reason why queerness has to embrace the death drive as its future. Muñoz, however, engages with Ernst Bloch's writings on utopia and hopes to argue that queerness is not rooted in the present and is always out of reach yet pervasive in the future, and we can feel its warmth to always desire for a different and *more* queer future. In this essay, I am engaging with Muñoz's queer utopianism as a method to envision a queer storytelling form that invites instability, inscrutability, and opacity as its own embrace and imagination of a future beyond evidence.

Its very analog-like imperfection borders on erasing the same materials it tries to present, which embraces self-destructivity instead of an obsession with the positivist demand for evidence. I argue that the film offers digital instability and erasure not with fear but with its narrative potential of being a tool for curiosity, where its dissemination across (plat)forms constitutes a filmic body that is constantly in *trans*ition and becoming. Additionally, the film's queer utopia envisions a future where queerness is so abundant and multifaceted (without the pressure to conform to a clear-cut story) that even self-destruction, disassembly, and reassembly are welcomed in a digital queer narrative. Therefore, I argue that the film exemplifies an emerging multimedia storytelling form that embraces disjuncture and ephemera as its core vision of queerness. Queer digital storytelling can fully exploit multimedia to challenge the boundaries among genres, (plat)forms, and (p)reservation/destruction. Thus, accompanying my reading of the film is an analysis of the different (plat)forms it travels through. While the ephemerality of these (plat)forms harbors the risk of instability, this instability also invites the transness of *Sister* as a piece of media that travels and embraces queer orientations of opacity. The interactiveness and community-building potential embedded in the digital path that *Sister* travels through resonate with the potential of queer digital storytelling as constantly emergent and in *trans*ition.

With that being said, Ha Tuan Hung's *Sister* (2019) is a curious film. Beginning as a student film project, the film is currently hosted on YouTube as part of its preservation following its entry into a youth filmmaker's competition called Búp Sen Vàng (Young Lotus) in 2019. *Sister*, then, belongs to the multitude of films hosted on websites like YouTube, where it is not commercial enough to be copyrighted yet lacks the video-blog-like quality of typical vlogs. It occupies a gray area of being simultaneously a film, a vlog, and a family/personal archive. While hosted on a platform well-known for its extensive video archive, it remains vulnerable to YouTube's unstable storage of materials. This makes *Sister* an ideal example for examining how queer multimedia storytelling can blur the boundaries between artifacts

and archives, as well as those between public and private storytelling. *Sister*'s interesting circulation—from a student film, to a competition entry, to YouTube hosting, to inclusion in an underground collection of queer films[4]—epitomizes digital queer storytelling: Crossing multiple borders and disjunctions of (plat)forms and themes, the film reveals the queer potential of theorizing within/as ephemera and remaining constantly emergent.

Sister offers an intimate portrayal of the director's sister Ha Minh, a trans woman. Incorporating family photos, selfies, Facebook photos, and interviews, the film documents Ha Minh's transition while portraying the tension between Ha Minh and her mother. Inserting himself into the film rather than positioning himself as a detached observer, Ha Tuan Hung's questions and opinions are voiced through subtitles, non-diegetic voice, and on-screen appearances throughout the interviews. The film is a documentary with a lot of personal twists: The care of the amateur filmmaker imbues the very intimate questioning and editing that show the multifaceted Ha Minh. Unlike the "perfect" transition story that dominates mainstream media where transition is treated as a "magical" solution, *Sister* portrays a trans woman's journey through the eyes of her brother (the director), her mother, and her rarely appearing father. Her story is full of tension, emotional trauma (including childhood trauma), reluctant acceptance of her mother, but also happiness and community.

Beyond Evidence: Ephemera, Archive, and Digital Queer Imagination

This article enters the conversation of new media queer storytelling through José Muñoz's discussion of "ephemera," a helpful theoretical lens to look at

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4. By this I mean Nguyen Quoc Thanh's anthology of Vietnamese queer films called *cái này* (*this*) that is circulated "underground." I got the fortunate opportunity to access this important work during my research residency at art collective BaBau Air in Hanoi, Vietnam, during the summer of 2022.

the productive potential of instability in the digital space. Muñoz's import-ant work *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) and his earlier essay "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts" (1996) have spearheaded the conversation on challenging what is considered "proper" proof of queerness:

> Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. Tony Just's images are emblematic of the kind of invisible evidence which I will proceed to unpack as "ephemera." Queer acts, like queer performances, and various performances of queerness, stand as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities.[5]

Muñoz's work on disidentification and ephemera paints a picture of a sur-vival strategy for the queer subject that maintains a push-and-pull relationship with the dominant archive. Specifically, Muñoz challenges evidence's visual-ity and stability by positioning queer acts (such as performance and dance) as leaving behind ephemera that resists easy capture. Muñoz's intervention is crucial in highlighting the need for a different approach to studying queer history: Ephemera suggests that to trace queerness is to attend to "fleeting moments" that can stand as "evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities."

Muñoz's challenge to equating queerness with graspable evidence is important as it moves queerness beyond the pragmatist concern with the present: As the archive hyper fixates on discerning what evidence is queer and what is not, it enforces the policing of deviant and queer bodies by

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5. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (January 1996): 6.

(re)producing a singular vision of what queerness and queer time look like. Ephemera challenges this fixation on evidence as unchanging and knowable: It refuses the probing gaze of the archive and its insatiable need for concrete "evidence" of queerness. Nevertheless, by framing ephemera as evidence, I argue that we risk assimilating queer digital storytelling into the regime of knowing. Looking at ephemera as beyond evidence offers a different queer narrative that privileges speculation over knowledge—uncertainty and instability over a policing certainty that forecloses potential queer orientations.

Therefore, even though Muñoz focuses primarily on performance and the ephemera left behind as evidence of queerness, I extend his argument to posit *Sister*'s queer digital storytelling as refuting the logics of evidence altogether. Particularly, while extending the field of what counts as "evidence" is important in *seeing* or *feeling* evidence of queerness, *Sister* questions the whole need to "see" queerness altogether. In other words, I argue that the film actively embraces digital erasure and instability to put aside the question of evidence in favor of a queer ontology of *becoming*. Specifically, while Muñoz's framework helpfully points out traces of ephemera through visual arts or performance, *Sister* pushes this framework further by embodying this *becoming* through its constant deletion and reemergence across digital (plat)forms. This dynamic process highlights the embrace of disjuncture and of constantly being in *trans*ition: Through digital erasure, re-uploading, re-sharing, scratched filmic grains, or embracing digital white noises, *Sister* challenges the illusion of a unified filmic body. Each reiteration of the film across different (plat)forms carries with it digital instability and erasure but also the resulting immense pleasure and warmth of community. *Sister*, then, invites the possibility of looking at ephemera as beyond "evidence" or proof of queerness: The film is critically utopian in that it envisions an overflowing of affect and queerness that reveals the multimedia and *trans*gressive potential of digital queer storytelling. Therefore, rather than being an unfortunate consequence of existing in a queerphobic public, erasure and opacity become a tool for digital ephemera to constantly renew and transform itself across different digital space and time.

The positivist need for knowable and concrete evidence of queerness is further complicated by recent scholarship on queer storytelling and new media: On the one hand, digital platforms and storytelling have facilitated community building based on common identity and narrative. On the other hand, concerns have also been raised as to the ethics of telling stories about identifiable suffering and coming out as reinforcing the violence and policing of what counts as "acceptable" stories for the queerphobic majoritarian public. Recent scholarship has proffered insight into how new media, particularly social media, play crucial roles in identity and community forming for queer folks. From YouTube coming out videos helping trans* youths find a voice through identifiable trans* narratives[6] to social media hosting a safer space for LGBTQ youth to explore and connect,[7] YouTube in particular becomes an accessible platform where young queer people can "match their own experiences to those of others" that constitutes a shared identity and resists "both internal and external negativity about their otherness."[8] The collection of queer stories shared on YouTube and other social media creates an online community where LGBTQ+ folks can safely explore and navigate worlds otherwise unavailable.

Nevertheless, other scholars caution against the assimilation of queer online stories into the liberal-humanist lack of imagination that may reproduce queerphobic violence and police queer bodies. For example, Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser's important work *Queer Memory and Storytelling: Gender and Sexually-Diverse Identities and Trans Media Narrative* (2023) makes a crucial intervention in narrative psychology and memory, illustrating how storytelling facilitates memory, reflection, and identity forming for the LGBTQ+ community while also critiquing how "present regimes of

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6. Matthew G O'Neill, "Transgender Youth and YouTube Videos: Self-Representation and Five Identifiable Trans Youth Narratives," in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, ed. Christopher Pullen (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 34–45.

7. Stephen Tropiano, "'A Safe and Supportive Environment': LGBTQ Youth and Social Media," in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, 46–62.

8. Bryan Wuest, "Stories like Mine: Coming Out Videos and Queer Identities on YouTube," in *Queer Youth and Media Cultures*, 25.

memory and storytelling [that] are equipped merely for survival" can provide unequal protection to marginalized subjects. Specifically, this regime of "liberal-humanist" storytelling relies on the obligation of telling lived-experience stories about queer violence just to satisfy the public's curiosity about queer people's persistence.[9] Cover and Prosser instead argue for critical hope within the ethics of a queer storytelling future that shifts away from individualistic stories of personal triumph and instead toward a future of ethical coinhabitation.[10] I find this intervention especially useful for conceptualizing ephemera beyond evidence. As I will illustrate further, I shift away from the insistence on what is left behind after a queer gesture and what evidentiary value we can extract from these remains. Regarding that queer storytelling centers on overcoming violence as "lived experience": What if the future of queer archiving and storytelling could be actively alive, queer, messy, constantly moving, crossing multimedia borders and (plat)forms while refusing to be pinned down by positivist demands? Freeing queer artifacts from the obligation of testimony as lived experience opens the possibility of tracing ephemera not with disappearance or only identification in mind but rather with the possibility of constant renewal: Instability and destruction welcome new paths and imaginations that are not yet here.

Sister: Ephemera Beyond Evidence

The Queered Family Album

Sister refutes this obligation of lived-experience testimony and invites instability/erasure by disrupting the normative family album. Specifically, *Sister*'s form directly questions the stability of the family album and its power

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9. Rob Cover and Rosslyn Prosser, *Queer Memory and Storytelling: Gender and Sexually Diverse Identities and Trans-Media Narrative* (Routledge, 2024), 167.
10. Cover and Prosser, 169.

Figure 6.1: A screenshot of *Sister* (2019).
Source: Screenshots by the author

to "reveal" the truth about the family and about the sister's transition. As an artifact but also as an archive, the film envisions ephemera as beyond evidence by insisting that the unknown centers its queer storytelling. For example, the opening scene of *Sister* presents a heartbreaking sequence of family photographs juxtaposed against the agonizing cry of the main characters' mother. Against the non-diegetic cry of the mom regretting how she "couldn't bring happiness to [her children],"[11] the family photo album with its corners all creased by time is presented in dim light over a surface that looks like a mattress (figure 1). The photo album is covered with crayon marks, chaotic write-overs, and laminated photos of smiling children at the beach. The mother's cry is heart-wrenching, with short intervals of silence and heavy sobbing. The film then cuts to a series of photographs featuring the filmmaker's trans-femme sister before her transition and the director himself: young boys who conform to traditional boyhood imagery (figure 2).

11. Trung tâm TPD, "Phim ngắn - Chị tôi (Sister)," YouTube, March 6, 2021, 20:55, https://youtu.be/XM07G1RK5tE?si=hxT1HLSc6oPM_RRJ.

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Figure 6.2: A screenshot of *Sister* (2019).
Source: Screenshots by the author

The film, thus, opens with an uncomfortably close-up scene of intimacy that evokes a familial, sensual touch, which already betrays the anthropological documentary impulse to gather evidence. Specifically, these photographs provide very little context, and the non-diegetic cry and the out-of-context and out-of-focus photographs provoke a strong sense of affect without providing context or additional information. The film immediately throws one into an intense soundscape of familial depression and desperation without satisfying the need for explanation: The mother's cry is eerily disjointed from the photos of happy family gathering and warmth.

Through this push-and-pull play of intense affect and little explanation, the film juggles its artifice and reality: The photographs, whose indexicality has long been taken for granted, are juxtaposed with cry and affect through editing. The editing, instead of creating a seamless transition, does the opposite by highlighting the conflict between image and sound. The non-diegetic cry demands embodiment: the photographs are not enough to provide context, raising the questions of *who* is crying and *where*? By refusing neat answers and bombarding viewers with affect right from the beginning, the

film already moves in and out of what is expected from its documentary form: It immerses viewers in emotional and intimate moments yet keeps them from information. Photographs' indexicality and disembodied affect creates anxiety instead of clarity from the "scientific" anthropological documentary, which resounds the feminist tradition of documentary critique by Trinh T. Minh Ha or Fatimah Tobing Rony.[12] The introduction of *Sister* thus presents itself as a different kind of archive: family photographs laden with affects, minimal explanation, and a deterrent to the need to know.

This unknowability, bordering on invisibility, although resonating with Muñoz's queer ephemera, can be separated from the need for knowability. Creating such an unease with certainty itself through overflowing affects and a "betrayal" against the indexicality of photographs becomes a subversive strategy to resist knowability in digital queer storytelling. Additionally, queer narratives on social media form an archive of ephemera and "instability" that, I would argue, can be read as multiple unstable collective queer acts.

Specifically, the practice of collecting and posting queer story videos on YouTube cultivates a queer act that works with YouTube's unstable archive. For example, through the YouTube archive of Nelson Sullivan that was compiled by Sullivan's friend Dick Richards, Joseph DeLeon illustrates how Richards's collecting, editing, and uploading produces a "queer archive effect," which means "both a remediation of past media chronicling queer lives and a queer practice of collecting."[13] In other words, Richards's YouTube videos produce this queer effect by combining and re-formatting Sullivan's footage alongside Richards's meticulous and obsessive video collection.[14] Digital queer storytelling, then, hinges upon multiple queer acts:

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12. Trinh T. Minh-ha's pioneering critique of the anthropological *He* in her body of works and Fatimah Rony's concept of the "third eye" challenge the claim of the anthropological documentary to reveal the "truth" about its represented subjects while underlining the imbalance of power in the traditional documentary form.
13. Joseph DeLeon, "Nelson Sullivan's Video Memories: YouTube Nostalgia and the Queer Archive Effect," *Velvet Light Trap* 86 (September 2020): 3.
14. DeLeon, "Nelson Sullivan's Video Memories," 3.

Collecting, losing, preserving, performing, gathering, editing, and acting all produces an archival effect that marks "a queer inhabitation of history" and leads to "a queer community across distance and time."[15] By stitching together Sullivan's videos after Sullivan's passing, Richards creates a queer coinhabitation that resists normative time: Sullivan's memory and Richards's collection coexist queerly through a labor of love.

Loss also matters. Similar to Richards preserving Sullivan's footage despite loss by Sullivan's family, *Sister* makes it apparent that even in presenting these intimate family fragments, something remains lost/invisible from recordings and albums that do not need explanation or being "unveiled." *Sister*'s presentation of the family album with the disjointing cry presents a queer archival effect of coinhabitation. Specifically, multiple times and spaces coexist in this introduction to the family album: the family's meticulous collection of normative pre-transition photographs of Ha Minh, the crack in the family's "happiness" that shows through distressing sobs, the mom's increasingly painful recollection, the director/brother's zooming in on familial intimacy, and Ha Minh's quiet but impactful presence that foreshadows her queering the family album itself. *Sister*'s queer archival effect incorporates loss, joy, and opacity to welcome contradiction and the refusal to explain.

Collaborative Archives and Queer Coinhabitation

These multiple queer acts of collecting and making (in)visible culminates in queer(ed) archives within an archive in *Sister*. Specifically, as the film moves onto introducing the main character, the filmmaker's sister Ha Minh, the family photo album at the beginning is juxtaposed against a new one—the queer(ed) digital family album. The juxtaposition of the physical and digital albums hinges upon Ha Minh's own agency of constructing and interacting
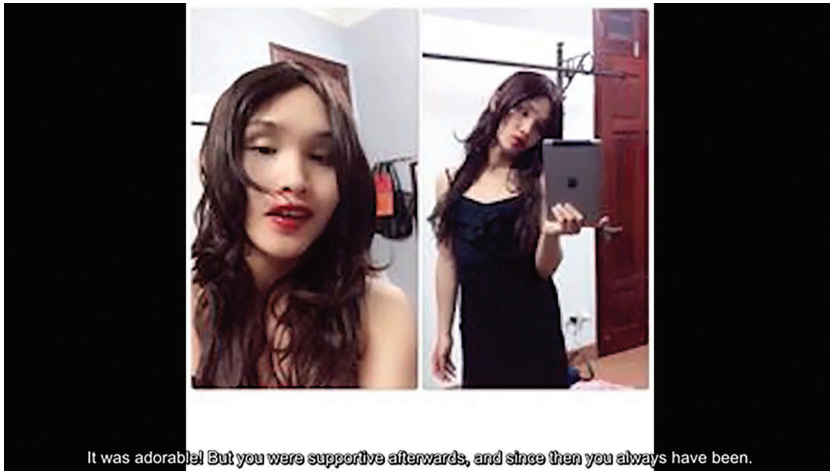
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15. DeLeon, 5.

It was adorable! But you were supportive afterwards, and since then you always have been.

Figure 6.3: A screenshot of *Sister* (2019).
Source: Screenshots by the author

with these photographs, which challenges the rigidity of the normative family album and opens up a collaborative archive with her queer friends and her brother/the director. This collaborative sequence opens with Ha Minh looking at these same childhood family photos, where she was masculine presenting as a child. Ha Minh's comment on these photos is laden with sadness, tiredness, and hesitation. Then, unlike the physical album with its laminated photos and creased corners, the film introduces the digital photos of Ha Minh in makeup and dresses with her friends, and especially a selfie that records her gradual transition (figure 3). The physical photos, digital images, and Ha Minh's confessional voices become disjointed: While the family photo portrays happy and shiny images of the gender-conforming Ha Minh, her agonizing voice-over deters full identification with the happy images. This disjuncture creates a contradictory field of disidentification, where Ha Minh navigates her pain against the pressure to conform from the family album. As Ha Minh challenges the family album through her affect-laden voice-over, she invites her brother/the director in by bringing together the physical/digital album and her story of coming out to him.

Multiple stories of coming out and transitioning are layered on top of and besides one another, highlighting the brother and sister's warm and loving queer coinhabitation of history.

Not only do these contradictory timelines and affects echo the queer archive effect mentioned earlier, I juxtapose these two different forms of albums (physical and digital) to highlight the challenge to the normative family album by the sister-brother collaboration. Family photos and albums "have routinely been a site of anxious disidentification for queer and trans* family members" while at the same time their "instrumental, affective capacity can also be harnessed to produce connection and belonging—feelings that can be considered queer in relationship to normative family formations."[16] The family photos, with its normative functions, provoke a certain sense of dissociation and inherent anxiety for Ha Minh. And yet, it is at this site of anxiety and strong affect that envisions a different kind of queer(ed) family album: the one where Ha Minh creates her own queer family of friends and acquaintances. I would argue that this juxtaposition between an otherwise "traditional" family photo album and an online collection of Facebook photos highlights the imagination of digital multimedia queer storytelling as beyond evidence. The queered archives featured in this film are not interested in "making a case" about Ha Minh. It is interested in change, instability, affect, and ephemera. As much as Ha Minh is adding onto and queering the physical family album by collecting digital photos of her queer family, her brother/the director collaboratively recollects these photos and builds onto her story by talking to her and revealing stories that cannot be told by the physical album per se (i.e., her coming out to him). As powerful as the physical family album is, the queer coinhabitation of the brother and sister invites instability, incompletion, and change to an otherwise fixated family narrative. The conformist and gender-policing effect

16. Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, "'Queering the Trans* Family Album': Elspeth H. Brown and Sara Davidmann, in Conversation," *Radical History Review*, no. 122 (May 2015): 190.
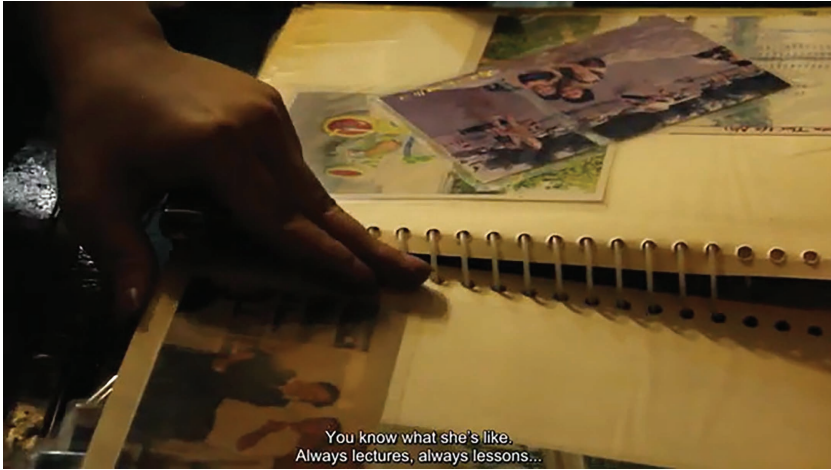
You know what she's like.
Always lectures, always lessons...

Figure 6.4: A screenshot of *Sister* (2019).
Source: Screenshots by the author

of the family photo album is re-envisioned as a site of potential rebellion, where a different vision of queer family, friendship, and relations opens the gate for coming out and safety.

This act of opening up the family album to instability reaches its pinnacle when Ha Minh physically takes out one of the laminated photos from the album, pushes it around almost as if to rearrange it, and continues to turn over the pages of the album (figure 4). This physical manipulation of the album points to the queer archival effect envisioned by DeLeon. Ha Minh's own practice of collecting photos of her transition journey, queering the traditional family album by moving it around, and asserting her own story of coming out in the voice-over create a certain "remediation of past media chronicling queer lives and a queer practice of collecting."[17] Her performance in the film is a queer act, a queer gesture that observes the malleability of queer lives and narratives. The effect goes beyond evidence of queerness. It points to a future where "evidence" of family photos matters

17. DeLeon, "Nelson Sullivan's Video Memories," 3.

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less than her own act of reorganizing, shifting things around, and telling an unpredictable story.

This unpredictable story told/enacted through physical manipulation reveals how *Sister* blurs the line of being both an artifact and an archive. In other words, I posit that *Sister* is an archive *within* the YouTube archive. I thus take on Elspeth Brown and Sara Davidmann's call of "see[ing] our artifacts as queer as well."[18] By presenting multiple archives in its story (the physical/digital albums or the voice-over), *Sister* becomes an artifact/archive that not only records Ha Minh's story but also opens itself up to constant collaboration and change (especially through its circulation, as I will argue in the sections further). As a documentary film, *Sister*'s genre acts as a great bridge between narrative and archive. As Wendy Moffat has suggested, what is queer about narrative biography, even with its "predictable" narrative form, is the ability to envision and imagine differently, without the need to know the end.[19] Similarly, as a multimedia archive and a documentary film on YouTube, *Sister* invites us to the realm of queer affect without needing to know the end of the story.

As an important distinction, my argument is not that Ha Minh and Ha Tuan Hung are "rewriting" the history of the family album through their embodied performance of playing around with the family album. On the contrary, reading this performance through what it *allows* and *encourages* to be unknown reveals less about genealogy or knowledge but more about the collective process of the brother and sister in coinhabiting and collaborating to open new possibilities beyond looking back on and rearranging old memories. While the family album demands readability (i.e., Ha Minh is read as a happy boy in a outwardly "happy" heterosexual family) and a singular recollection of the past (i.e., the family was happy and Ha Minh was read as a boy), I read the act of physically moving the family photos around as similar

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18. Brown and Davidmann, "Queering the Trans* Family Album," 190.
19. Wendy Moffat, "The Narrative Case for Queer Biography," in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (Ohio State University Press, 2016), 224.

to what Alexandra Juhasz terms "queer archive activism," where "nostalgia plus video allows for a refiguring of time and feeling in response to personal losses that in so doing become collective and also potentially productive of new feelings and knowledge that might lead to action."[20] Similarly, by "opening up" the family album to instability and unknowability, the film invites collaboration and malleability in its vision of a queer(ed) album. The brother and sister's collaboration of "playing around" with time and photos is not about (re)producing a new, certain view of a singular history. Rather, by juxtaposing multiple photos from different timelines and albums together while respecting that not every context needs to be explained, *Sister* illustrates the potential of multimedia storytelling in opening up rather than closing off. In the process of opening up the supposedly "evidential," "stable," and "structured" family album, the film invites contradiction, unknowability, ephemera, and affect that sets the stage for collaboration and collectivity. By putting together the physical album, the digital images, and the film's own editing and voice-over, the film "stacks" materials on top of and alongside each other not to (re)produce history but rather to introduce the communal affect/effect from the director, his sister, and the audience themselves. The film's digital ephemera and queer acts, thus, destabilize the regime of evidence and knowability.

I want to make it clear that my contribution does not invalidate the need for evidence or serve as an apologist excuse for the violence of the archive: because our history has so often been marginalized and erased and also because of the direct relationship between queerphobic violence and evidence/archiving, ephemera as evidence is one of the many survival strategies that build and sustain communities against the queerphobic majoritarian public space, especially when hope seems impossible. I myself have always found great solace in finding traces and ephemera of queerness within my own family and my community, which fills me with tremendous

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20. Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ* 12, no. 2 (2006): 321–22.

gratitude and optimism that there have always been queer orientations of "emotional intentionality together with a model of affect as contact,"[21] to refer to Sara Ahmed's important work. Traces of ephemera make it possible to imagine a future differently: to see that despite all the violence and erasure that have continued to take place, queerness is inevitable. Likewise, by imagining ephemera as beyond evidence, I want to suggest that queerness can be so plentiful and utopian that ephemera challenges the structure of archiving and the probing violence of the archive. Ephemera, in addition to being a survival strategy of the minoritarian subject, can enrich queerness in challenging our normative, evidence-burdened assumption about archiving and documentary.

Formal Erasure and Destruction as Method

As I have argued so far, when instability and ephemera are at the core of *Sister*'s multiple archives, they open the possibility of a queer archive that isn't burdened with evidence and the need to know. This inconclusiveness and opacity of queer storytelling all point to a utopian future of queerness so abundant and full of curiosity that it frees queer storytelling from the burden to record and evidence. This is why discussion on queer ephemera can benefit from studying queer storytelling in the digital space. The multimedia and highly interactive nature of digital storytelling blurs the line between an artifact within an archive and the archive itself while constantly inviting collaboration in its process of becoming. The digital space of queer storytelling facilitates a multimedia discourse where films like *Sister* can be both archive-like and artifact-like while holding onto the accessibility potential of YouTube as a platform.

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21. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

This is also where I argue that the film takes a step further. Not only does it utilize ephemerality to envision its own queer(ed) archive but it also actively embraces formal (self)destruction and disorientation as part of the archive's praxis. As Tory Young has called for "feminism and queer narratology [to] reattach the invisible to power, in the form of possibility,"[22] I also want to examine the possibilities of the narrative of invisibility and aesthetic self-destruction in *Sister* as a core utopian vision of a queer(ed) archive. Specifically, the possibility that opens up from what is incomprehensible and invisible makes the archive fall into the realm of the speculative and possibility, rather than knowability. By self-destruction, I want to specifically focus on the formal element of the film. The technical statics, the inaudibility and irrecoverability of the dialogues, and the halting and self-deletion of context and information challenge the need to know or the need for clarity in the film. Rather than focusing on the intentionality of the director, I want to examine how these formal elements of self-deletion unfolding in the film function as a collection of ephemera rather than simplistically dismissing these as amateur filmmaking "mistakes."

Specifically, after Ha Minh recounts the emotionally disheartening story from her childhood, *Sister*'s form becomes increasingly unstable: the sounds are distorted while the images at some points are wobbly to the point of being nausea-inducing. As Ha Minh's mom half-heartedly admits that she cannot control her emotions and anger sometimes, the soundscape becomes so full of static that viewers have to rely on the English (not even Vietnamese) subtitles to make sense of what she is saying. The only thing discernible is the mom's remark of how "love doesn't always have to be spoken out loud, does it?"[23] The image tries to match or "catch up with" the mom's claims by showing her cooking and placing food on the counter, which resembles an act of service that exemplifies what she means by "love doesn't always have

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22. Tory Young, "Invisibility and Power in the Digital Age: Issues for Feminist and Queer Narratology," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 6 (2018): 1005.
23. Trung tâm TPD, "Phim ngắn - Chị tôi (Sister)," 16:23.

to be spoken out loud." However, the handheld framing brings to mind the instability of such an act of service when it comes to expressing affection and love. When we see Ha Minh and her mom again in the frame, the mom is packing Ha Minh's bag as Ha Minh walks away, while no word is exchanged between the two. Sound, image, and framing all come together in dissonance and collision, which generates an uncomfortable position of watching *Sister*.

I read this white noise as the film's formal self-destruction/erasure. The mom's voice becomes muffled to the point of being unrecognizable: Her spoken words are buried by the leftover traces of the soundscape's self-erasure and written over by English subtitles that harbor a loss in translation. Whether intentional or not, the soundscape betrays the expectation of clarity, both promising and failing to deliver the mother's emotional conflicts while also forsaking the promise of completion when it comes to the film's digital archive. Despite the filmmaker's effort of "recording" or archiving, the ephemerality of amateur filmmaking and the risk of distortion/loss inevitably slip through each frame.

Similar to how Richards's editing of Sullivan's videos means leaving out hours of original footage for the sake of the YouTube vlog format, Ha Tuan Hung's editing and making of *Sister* will also leave out materials, contexts, or sources that remain within the family. We will never get a context to the mother's cry at the beginning. We will also not get context to the family photos or get to hear the mother's own voice in these sections of the film. The "conversation" between Ha Minh and her mother stitched together by cinematography and editing will never be complete, and maybe it doesn't need to be. In this way, the film invites viewers to share this ephemerality in its affective context. Whether we feel frustrated by the obscurity, or get overwhelmed by the soundscape, or embrace a sense of nostalgia, regret, or wishful thinking of the disconnection between the mother and her trans daughter, the film welcomes its messiness and instability to create a space of possibility. Specifically, this possibility is the film's contribution to the queer archival effect where the emphasis on affective community building

takes center stage instead of the concern with what is "real" or what is the "definitive" conclusion to the mother-daughter dialogue.

This queer possibility generated from ephemera and the courageous queer digital storytelling exemplified by *Sister* thus participates to and elaborates on the tradition of queer critique of narrative as aforementioned. Particularly, while queer studies have poignantly highlighted the violence of coming-out narratives as "wedded to essentialist beliefs about the transparency and knowability of identity and, therefore, vested in a fixity and sameness,"[24] *Sister* suggests the role formal self-destruction and opacity plays in countering this regime of knowability in queer narratives. The formal strategy that *Sister* offers through ephemera as beyond evidence hinges upon instability and self-destruction, which both critically reflect on this queer politics of needing to know and offer the subversive potential of "decenter[ing] our sense of the given."[25]

Self-destruction and obscuring the need to know thus challenges the dominance of visuality as a structure of surveilling queer bodies: Instead of offering every aspect of Ha Minh's story to the scrutiny of the archive as to what is queer and what is not, *Sister* is envisioning more in line with what Sara Ahmed called "mixed orientation," which would not only resist the policing of deviant bodies but also "preserve the secrecy of the other side" even as we look at that side.[26] Ahmed therefore calls for the right to opacity even when being looked at: *Sister* offers a bubbling self-destruction of its image and sound underneath its surface to preserve the secrecy of Ha Minh's story through the static and lack of clarity in its form. Unlike the clearly delineated story of identification for the politics of queer narratives, *Sister* challenges the regime of visuality by introducing formal distortion that questions the insatiable *need* to know or clarity.

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24. Anne Mulhall, "Queer Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to Queer Studies*, ed. Siobhan Somerville (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 147.
25. Mulhall, "Queer Narrative," 152.
26. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 153.

As a final emphasis on its commitment to intersect powerful affects, opacity, and formal distortion, the final shot of *Sister* emphasizes the preservation of secrecy for Ha Minh's emotional journey. After the credits roll, the film shows a blurry, dimly lit shot of Ha Minh crying uncontrollably to the camera in contrast to her otherwise calmer appearance throughout the film. The disruption to the film's story is unexpected: There is not any context as to what Ha Minh is reacting to. The film is not afraid of showing raw, no-context, unexpected affects that may even betray its earlier portrayal of Ha Minh. The film confronts the viewers who expect a "smooth" spoon feeding of lived experience by foregrounding the fear, sadness, and distress in a queer story, refusing to provide context and refusing to pretend that any aspect of the film is conducive to lasting evidence of queerness. *Sister* highlights fear without shame, excuses, or even context. It's a collage of affects, some fleeting, some deep-rooted, some explained, some unexplained. The audience is made to sit with the feelings rather than looking for explanation or evidence.

(Plat)form Ephemerality as Beyond Evidence

Sister's ephemera beyond evidence is also amplified through its dissemination across digital platforms, highlighting the potential of digital queer storytelling as multi/cross media and hyper interactive. Tracing *Sister*'s travel (and erasure) across platforms reveals how this digital and aesthetic path produces new ephemeras that embrace change, instability, and opacity. To frame this analysis, I turn to Eliza Steinbock's concept of the "shimmering image" to articulate a trans* digital storytelling that hinges upon affect to encourage a constantly evolving, unstable, yet full-of-potential narrative form. Specifically, Steinbock's *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and Aesthetics of Change* (2019) moves transgender studies conversation toward the form and aesthetics of cinema and away from anthropocentric concerns with identity. Specifically, Steinbock looks at the differences and flickering between/within frames to draw a trans* ontology

of becoming through technological disjunction.[27] The shimmer, a concept Steinbock develops from Giles Deleuze, helps trace cinematic "disjunctions, glitches, degradations" not as besides the history of cinema but as its core. This cinematic disjuncture then can open new and unexpected paths, resembling "the ticking time bomb that might explode the past clichés."[28] Arguing against the illusion of a unified, singular, coherent filmic body, Steinbock's argument draws a parallel between cinematic fragmentation and trans* phenomenology as constantly being disassembled, reassembled, embodied, and constantly changing.

Similarly, I argue that *Sister*'s "fragmentation" through being uploaded, shared, and even deleted across sites extends Steinbock's argument: Trans* digital storytelling has disjunctions at its core especially through (plat) forms. The film's travel across platforms with its own ephemera illuminates a trans-media storytelling that is highly affective and responsive. The instantaneity of reactions and conversations on each platform transforms ephemera and disjuncture into sites of community building rather than archival constriction. The film embraces an unpredictable future across platforms, leaving traces that "spiral" beyond control.

On Facebook, director Ha Tuan Hung cheekily notes how he "ha[s] been forced to talk and write about [the film] too much for college applications,"[29] revealing the circulation of the film across media. When Ha Tuan Hung apologizes for "the poor editing and filming skills/quality," one might read the film's technical instability as a "mistake." However, I read Hung's film as a potential site of resistance in line with an "imperfect cinema"[30]

27. Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019), 6–12.

28. Steinbock, 144.

29. Hà Tuấn Hùng, "[Chị tôi/Sister]," Facebook, March 11, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/tuanhung.ha.311/posts/pfbid0gx2U6E5pHKH2jYUe9saqatGw9PtW9oBB9nhYFBA9DtiVmPk8gF7F2Fb2NdmBFqbbl.

30. Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 20 (1979): 24–26, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html.

Figure 6.5: A screenshot of Hà Tuấn Hùng's Facebook Post.
Source: Screenshot by the author

(per Julio García Espinosa's provocative manifesto) where we can productively read such dissonances. And now as Hung's film circulates once again in this essay, it testifies to queer digital storytelling's multimedia essence, where each re-articulation generates new gestures and feelings.

Sister's embrace of disjuncture pervades its travel across platforms that are inundated with instability. Presumably starting with the TPD website, the film has been erased from the website likely due to the lack of storage infrastructure (figure 6). Reuploaded to YouTube, it gathers around 1,120 views at the time of writing before its resharing on Facebook. The description on YouTube only mentions Ha Tuan Hung and the Young Lotus

Figure 6.6: A screenshot of the TPD website with the film unavailable.
Source: Screenshots by the author

competition.[31] Facebook reposts, set to friends-only or private, presumably host more invisible conversations. The comments on Ha Tuan Hung's post are mostly from friends, some of whom express joy at the film's eventual public access or watching it with family.[32] The film then is featured in Nguyen Quoc Thanh's limited-edition collection of queer Vietnamese films called *cái này* (*this*), where he observes how the film "lies outside the focal point of LGBT activism by local groups and NGOs."[33]

Sister's platform migrations parallel Steinbock's observation of *103 Shots* as a digital video that illustrates a reassembly practice that "undulates over a lifetime, at times seeming to cohere into matching seen/spoken forms, only to break off again."[34] The rhythm of the rising and falling, the shimmering, as well as the slipping and resurfacing through disjuncture exemplifies a queer storytelling across the digital space that reflects the trans* ontology: "process-oriented rather than object-oriented."[35] Similar to Steinbock's reading of *103 Shots*, *Sister* refuses separation and autonomy from its social contexts. Instead, I argue that *Sister*'s different reiterations, formal

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31. Trung tâm TPD, "Phim ngắn - Chị tôi (Sister)."
32. Hà, "[Chị tôi/Sister]."
33. Nguyen Quoc Thanh, *cái này* (*this*).
34. Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 147.
35. Steinbock, 149.

disjuncture, and the conversations surrounding the film across multiple platforms reveal how platforms also participate in the film being ephemera beyond evidence. Specifically, through the film's deletion from websites, the privatized conversations across Facebook posts, the personal college application, Nguyen Quoc Thanh's analysis in a limited collection, or the YouTube description that contains very little information about the film, *Sister* embraces instability and ephemera in its articulation of a film constantly in *trans*ition and *trans*formation, where it echoes a queer coinhabitation across space and time.

The community and affect generated from this film as *Sister* travels across media goes beyond the fixation on conclusiveness or transparency. In a way, *Sister* betrays the traditional archival tradition, the normative family album, the coming-out documentary demand for transparency and coherence while embracing the ephemerality of digital spaces to articulate a different vision of community building where affect takes center stage. Even though nothing guarantees that the video will remain on YouTube or that the comments on the film will remain available, the film's journey generates new conversations and strong emotional and communal responses. Therefore, leaning on and against the unstable structure and form of YouTube, Facebook, and its own family archival materials, *Sister* opens possibilities for queer community and an imagination of belonging beyond oneself. My reading thus refuses to see the film as a singular, isolated object. Rather, the film's deletion and travel across different platforms doesn't equate ephemerality to oblivion. Instead, by examining the generative dimension of this (self-)destruction and the subsequent discussion of the film across media, I want to highlight how the film's form and the YouTube/digital space archive offers a different vision of queer community building: cross-media and affective-laden.

Although critics have rightfully pointed out how relying on digital platforms like YouTube or Facebook for archiving harbors particular concern

about stability and marginalization,[36] I would add my analysis of (plat)form ephemerality in line with Mel Chen's suggestion of a trans* narrative/archive not as a static archive of the past but as a productive source of identity and community-making.[37] By framing trans* narratives as active and constantly in flux, Chen highlights the "ghosts" left behind by stable categories that "[hint] at certain contained pasts, presents, and futures, while being absolutely unfaithful to any of these historical imaginaries."[38] Similarly, by looking at the disjuncture or the "ghosts" between these unstable gaps in *Sister*'s dissemination, I underline Chen's trans* narrative/archive as a resource of becoming. The deletion/reupload/reshare of the film, therefore, resounds the trans* ontology of becoming, process, and even loss while participants contribute to and derive insight from the film.

Conclusion: Toward (Plat)form Becoming as Digital Queer Storytelling

Sister's migration across (plat)forms crystallizes into a unique queer storytelling by emphasizing how its digital travel matters as much as what it has to say. In addition to and alongside the formal analysis of *Sister*, tracing the digital circulation of the film across (plat)forms with its constant deletion and reemergence highlights how much loss matters as much as presence and how ephemera challenges seeing the film as an autonomous work existing in a vacuum. The active cycle of deletion and reappearance transforms the film from being an artifact into an active artifact/archive by expanding itself beyond the

36. Rick Prelinger, "The Disappearance of Archives," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Chun, Anna Fisher, and Thomas Keenan (Routledge, 2016), 201.

37. Mel Y. Chen, "Everywhere Archives: Transgendering, Trans Asians, and the Internet," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (MIT Press, 2017), 152.

38. Chen, "Everywhere Archives," 154.

represented subjects of Ha Minh or of the director themselves. With each of its reiterations, the film gathers new community and affect to engage in conversations that go beyond identities. The film's travel away from its digital "home," in turn, not only gathers community but also turns the film into a *becoming* resource. Whether the viewer sees themselves in Ha Minh or the bittersweet daughter-mother relationship, the film suggests a way of being together that honors presence, loss, collaboration, and agency. The plasticity of the film as a resource for becoming provides some comfort and hope for the resilience of queer storytelling in a digital space. Despite the violence that is actively being inflicted upon us by a queerphobic majoritarian space, *Sister* and its courageous digital queer storytelling suggest how ambiguity, opacity, self-destruction, and reemergence smolder underneath the surface to provide refuge where the warmth of queerness outweighs paranoia and fear.

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