For my media archeology research project in CAMS 302, I was interested in exploring the death of the image. Because of its necessary basis in materiality, visual media is subject to processes of degradation over time—even if only as a result of its most fundamental operations of projection, reproduction, and transmission. An image is distorted, corrupted, blurred, glitched; in some cases, the image is rendered unrecognizable, invisible, and forgotten to time and disrepair. The mortality of a material visual media is punctuated by its likely demise in the form of waste destined for landfills. With this project, I aimed to depict the visual manifestations of media degradation, repeated reproduction, and other “lossy” processes. By representing the expired and decayed film image, the degenerated vhs image, the compressed digital image, and the intersections of format that create imperfect reproductions and make others obsolete, I hoped to inspire questions about destruction, authenticity, archives, and loss.

With such a broad idea of my project in mind, I ended up with an equally broad bibliography. Through my collection of about fifty different sources, I was able to map out connections and refine my ideas while exploring related materials in a flexible manner. My sources included scholarly journals on media theory, film industry trade journals, entertainment publications, and experimental artworks. The range of topics spanned from practices of film projection and distribution, to the specificities of media preservation, to personal reflections on the loss of beloved home media. I also aimed to obtain historical sources, especially those that were published during pivotal points in media-technological development during the last century. For example, by observing trade journals from the 1980’s, I gained a better understanding of how
industry professionals viewed emerging media formats as ways to increase the longevity and stability of an image. While some sources provided very concrete information—the algorithms at work behind digital compression or the chemical qualities of early film base—others provided more of a guiding ethos. I was heavily inspired by the work of media theorists like Walter Benjamin, Jonathan Sterne, and Hito Steyerl who prompted me to think more deeply about the relationship between form and content. I also looked toward experimental artists like Rosa Menkman and Thomas Ruff for their art’s focus on imperfect and degraded images. My process began with a number of broad, non-specific ideas. It was through my initial research that I was able to figure out a more concrete concept of my project and my thesis. As my concepts became more specific, I was able to seek out more specific sources in a recursive process of unfolding ideas. This research became the basis for my video project’s text elements.

Because I wanted to create my project in the form of an essay film that uses pre-existing video materials, I needed to conduct another research venture to find usable footage. My goal was to create a kind of experimental appropriation film in the spirit of Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* that would combine text and visual examples of decayed media including decomposed nitrate and acetate film, VHS generation loss, and compressed and corrupted digital video. This proved to be more difficult than anticipated, and I realized that the reason for this difficulty was closely related to the subject of my project itself. I was searching for materials that are not typically preferred for placement in an archive—especially one that is easily accessible. Film, video, or photography that is compromised and no longer legible is not likely to be selected for preservation or circulation, particularly if it does not hold wider cultural significance. In this step of the process, I found Youtube to be the most helpful in my search. There, users uploaded videos of old film they found and projected, of experiments in inducing VHS generation loss
through repeated copying, and of old newscasts on the struggle to make home media last. If I were to continue this project and had the time or resources to do so, I would aim to visit a physical film archive and speak to archivists about the procedures involved in the selection of materials for restoration and preservation. In this way, my project has prompted a multitude of new avenues for questioning and study.