Microfilm Fragmentation
by Dylan Halpern

Fragmentations that manifest during the translation from analog media to digital are often inexplicable and distinctly intriguing. In this study, I delved into the expansive collection of microfilm in the VCU library in an attempt to discover the fractures and errors of the material and aesthetically catalog them. Using a (now arcane) microfilm reader, I documented errors on the films themselves (likely present since the film’s creation and/or as a result of decay), technological flickers resulting from an imperfect scanning technology, and artificially introduced human errors that resulted from improper machine use for effect. The original content of the microfiche used in the exploration includes NASA documents, medieval texts, The New York Times, and other archived media.

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The results of the study are compelling. Through the value gradient composition in the poster, trends of errors begin to emerge. The series of images that contain a distinct tear resembling a mountain range resulted from the scanner’s attempt to find a separating line between two dark values. The images that contain a perspective warp are the result of manipulated zoom during long scans. For some images, I layered microfilm two or three high to create a depth of field and overlapping visual. Images that appear fragmented, with a single part of the image repeating in the frame, resulted from a combination of actions that tricked the machine into rescanning part way through and producing a composite scan.

As with most artistic projects, this poster was not intended to diagnose issues with an obsolete technology, but was created in the spirit of enjoying a more nuanced exploration of fading objects. Microfiche are thus fertile subject matter for visual appreciation. The transfer between analog to digital represents not only a technological translation but a shift from a utilitarian item to an aesthetic one.

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This poster was developed as part of Art Foundation’s Surface Research Studio under the instruction of Brooke Chornyak, Assistant Professor of Graphic Design and Art Foundation at VCU. Click here to see her work.

Click here to explore the interactive display.