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ARCHIVAL CINEMA

Paolo Cherchi Usai

Introduction

Michelangelo's frescoes at the Sistine Chapel in Rome are not called "archival paintings", and the Ishtar gate at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin is not "museum architecture", but Georges Méliès *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (A Trip to the Moon, 1902, France) is generally regarded as an "archival film". The roots of this blatant disparity are to be found in the cultural dictionary of the moving image, characterised by an inherent tension between professional and non-specialised language. The occurrence is all the more remarkable in that film professionals do not have control over the terminology pertaining to their own field of expertise once their work is translated into mainstream jargon. This gap between conceptual accuracy and convention is particularly manifest in the discussions about the reuse of cinematic images. "When I fixed upon this subject I was somewhat taken aback by the fact that there was no name for it", wrote Jay Leyda in a book that is still regarded as a key reference work on the topic; "the proper term would have to indicate that the work begins on the cutting table, with already existing film shots." By his own admission, the focus of his work could only "be referred to [. . .] in various inconsistent ways" (Leyda 1964: 9).

Not surprisingly, Leyda's unsuccessful attempts to pinpoint an adequate term for his theme include words no longer used in the scholarly idiom, such as "library films"; some of them are a blend of timelessness and obsolescence ("chronicle montage films"); others, such as "stock shot films" and "documentary archive films", still resonate in both connoisseur and journalistic lingo. Leyda was particularly unhappy with "compilation film" ("what an awkward, incomprehensible and unacceptable term for this form!"), but could not suggest better alternatives. In its clumsy combination of adjective and noun, "Archival film" (Leyda preferred to use a dual noun, "archive film") is the outcome of the same schizophrenic pattern lamented by the eminent film historian in the mid-1960s. "Archival cinema" signifies different things to different constituencies; to further complicate matters, its purported meaning is also dependent upon the geographic and idiomatic context where the definition is conveyed. In chronological terms, the emergence of "archival cinema" as a descriptive formula coincides with the rise of "digital cinema", but its semantic roots are much deeper, and deserve to be explained. As we shall see, each translation reveals a set of conflicting views on how moving images created in the past should be summoned to a contemporary viewer.

Idiomatic definitions

Film scholarship has produced a plethora of studies about specific “archival films” and their makers, but no authoritative synthesis since Leyda paved the way to the entrance of this taxonomic labyrinth; one of the few exceptions is Roland Cosandey’s provocatively forthright solution to Leyda’s dilemma through the adoption of the term “images antérieures” (“former images”) as the most impartial way to indicate the subject (Cosandey 2016). This seemingly drastic approach is justified on the grounds of some basic empirical considerations. At face value, the most prevalent definition of “archival cinema” embraces all the cinematic images of the past utilised as building materials for another object, not necessarily cinematic in nature. In its apparent neutrality, the coupling of the two words is riddled with value judgements and opacities. To begin with, “cinema” is presented here both as a tool and its outcome: it is tacitly assumed that the source images have been transmitted to us in analogue form, that is, as motion picture stock of various formats (8mm, Super8, 16mm, 35mm, and so on), but the entity resulting from their use may well be non-cinematic and yet be characterised as an “archival film”. In other words, the “archival film” may or may not exist on celluloid, but necessitates the borrowing of film stock in order to be defined as such. Should the source material be in electronic or digital form, the newly created work would then have to be called otherwise. Still, the question remains of when does cinema (or the post-analogue moving image in general) become “archival” in order to be treated as a distinct category of scholarly inquiry.

It should be noted that the above definition makes no mention of originality, let alone novelty. A copy of a 1918 newsreel projected in its entirety, regardless of the medium in which it is exhibited, is indicated as an “archival film”; an assemblage of excerpts from the same newsreel, whether or not combined with other cinematic images, is an “archival film” as well. Together, they rightly belong to the family of “archival cinema.” The same label can be therefore attached to what is totally new and what isn’t, as long as its content is drawn from the cinema heritage. The corollaries to this axiom are not as obvious as they may appear at first sight. The first is that the carrier that makes “archival cinema” possible ought to bear a relationship of some sort with the photochemical process. So far, there is no significant evidence of a public perception that moving images made in electronic or digital form should be included in this realm.

Moreover, it is taken for granted that the images of an “archival film” should be easily recognised by the viewer as being chronologically remote, both because of the way they look and in light of the events they depict; hence the word “archival”, referred to something that was retrieved from a collecting entity, either individual or institutional. The relative indifference to the physical location of the source is embedded in the choice of this term as opposed to other plausible options: in the common parlance, there is no such thing as a “museum film”. The source material is deemed relevant because it was preserved per se, rather than by virtue of its cultural status. The value attached to it derives from the fact that it is available for viewing and that it can be used for this purpose, irrespective of the rationale behind its survival. In its raw state, the “archival film” is seen as a mute, pliable witness of history; it is primarily a document rather than a conveyor of meaning. Its equivalent in the lexicon of digital culture is “content”, a fashionable term in the early twenty-first century.

The contradictions embedded in the term “archival cinema” are revealed in all their depth through a cursory survey of its correspondent in other languages. The most common French equivalent, “images d’archives”, alludes to the practice of recycling the institutional relics of cinema’s past into a new entity called “film de montage”: this is the “compilation film” that Jay Leyda refers to in his discussion of Esfir Shub’s *Padenie dinastii Romanovyh* (The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty, 1927, USSR), celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution

through an assemblage of previously made newsreels. A parallel variation in French, “film de compilation”, is derived from music, where a “compilation” or “compile” indicates the juxtaposition of excerpts from existing scores. A trendy alternative—“film de found footage”—emerging at the dawn of the twenty-first century highlights the difference between a museum’s collection and all moving images retrieved from unofficial sources, from flea markets to the dumpsters of film laboratories, or from the wholesale of 16mm reels disposed by television networks and primary schools.

Similarly, the German language draws a distinction between “Kompilationsfilm” (bits and pieces of archival footage) and “Archivfilm” (the “archival film” as a self-contained entity). The latter seems to be used with increasing frequency, with the occasional appearance of the all-encompassing “Archiv-Kompilationsfilm”. “Archival footage” is most commonly translated as “Archivmaterial”, as seen in the end credits of films or television programs where films from archives are featured, but also in the informal talk among filmmakers and editors. By and large, however, scholarly German language adapts to English, with “Found-Footage-Film” as the most widely used label for works made by authors with an avant-garde background (Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Ken Jacobs, Gustav Deutsch, Peter Forgacs, Bill Morrison, Peter Tscherkassky). The habit finds its origins in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when operations of this type constituted a self-contained strand in the experimental and independent film world.

The English influence is even more strongly felt in other languages. As a film genre, ファウンド・フットページ (faundo futtēji) is the phonetic transliteration in katakana of “found footage.” There is no proper Japanese term for “archival footage”, thus leaving another transliteration, アーカイバル・フットページ (aakaibaru futtēji), as the preferred option. An accurate but rather inelegant alternative is offered by 挿入映像 (sonyu eizo), which could be rendered as “inserted moving image” or “inserted film footage.” There is no Swedish term for “archival film” as a genre; “archival footage” is most often labelled as “arkivbilder.” Nor is there one in Russian, where монтажный фильм (montazhnyi film) is the only widely known descriptive term, pioneered by Lilia and Otsep Brik during the golden age of Soviet constructivism. Esfir Shub’s 1927 tribute to the Bolshevik revolution, referred to earlier, is broadly indicated as “montazhnyi film”; students and filmmakers were also familiar with учебный фильм (uchebnye filmy), “study films”, made for educational purposes under the aegis of the Soviet Union filmmakers’ school, VGIK.

Other variations to the theme are to be found in Latin languages. In Italian, alongside “film di repertorio” (archival footage) and “film d’archivio”, two other terms—“film di famiglia” and “film amatoriale”—are employed as synonyms, a virtual merger of “home movie” with “amateur film”. In Spanish, “material de archivo” stands for “archival footage”, but “archival film” and “found footage films” as a genre are generally indicated as “cine de apropiación”. The poignancy of “appropriation” as a qualifier for images retrieved from the past for the benefit of present-time viewers brings the lexicon of archival cinema to a startling watershed: it is an “amateur” product, thus implying a superiority of the viewer over images made by nameless predecessors; it is also a statement of possessiveness, as it endorses the viewer’s right to manipulate and redefine the meaning of images created by someone else by simply calling them “home movies”. Belittling the ancestors of the moving image while taking ownership of their creativity is a troubling and yet crucial ingredient of the derivative body of work currently known as “archival cinema”.

Provenance, authentication, falsification

The only common denominator of “archival films” in the above mentioned languages is their perceived status as photochemical images belonging to an abstract “yesterday”, which puts the burden of proof on the eye of the beholder and, to a lesser extent, on the attitude of

the presenter. The relevance of both criteria is illustrated by one of the earliest known examples of archival film, in which the creator and the viewer are involved, respectively, in the presentation and consumption of cinematic images created in the past but displayed as if they were new. Evidence drawn from the comparative analysis of extant prints has revealed that in the mid-1910s the Triangle Film Corporation was recycling elements from its own productions in order to create entirely different films. *The Trouble Hunter* (1920, USA, Jess Robbins) cannibalised an earlier Triangle feature, *The Americano* (1916, USA, John Emerson), whose images had been reshuffled—with the aid of new intertitles—as building blocks of a separate narrative; a similar fate was bestowed upon *The Matrimaniac* (1916, USA, Paul Powell), reissued in 1917 as *The Missing Millionaire* with a radically altered storyline.

Another film by Triangle, *The Iced Bullet* (1917, USA, Reginald Barker), is an extreme instance of the same practice. Its prologue shows a struggling writer (William Desmond) haplessly trying to sell a scenario to the Thomas H. Ince studios in Culver City; having fallen asleep on a couch in the office of an executive, he dreams a plot—also shown in the pages of an actual script—of a murdered banker and a detective (Desmond himself) solving the case. The flagrant disconnect between the frame story and the main body of the film suggests either the borrowing of material from of a previous production, or the outright reprocessing of an aborted project, whose footage was salvaged with the creation of a completely new film. If this is indeed the case—as it certainly is with *The Trouble Hunter* and *The Missing Millionaire*—the audience of 1917 was the witness of an “archival film” without knowing it. The same applies to *Trail of the Pink Panther* (1982, USA, Blake Edwards), made with unused footage from *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* (1976, USA, Blake Edwards), together with scenes from other instalments of the Pink Panther series.

The case of the Blake Edwards film adds a further twist to our story. The audience of *Trail of the Pink Panther* may have been aware that its protagonist, Peter Sellers, had passed away two years before the film’s release, but pretended to ignore this, which amounts to saying that an “archival film” had been publicly released as an act of overt complicity between the producers and their customers. *It Happened Here* (1965, UK, Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo) takes this approach to further ends in a blunt reversal of roles between “archival film” and the present. *It Happened Here* is an imaginary rendition of the final years in World War II, in which the United Kingdom is invaded by Nazi troops (Brownlow 2007). Set around 1945 and shot in grainy black and white, the film presents its vision of a dystopian past with the look and feel of a newsreel, an archival film in dramatised fashion. In an astonishing feat of historical simulation, Brownlow and Mollo present their narrative as a visual time capsule, seamlessly bridging the gap between 1965 and 1945.

No less astounding is the stratagem adopted by Brownlow and Mollo in order to overcome the financial limitations of their project, which was completed on a shoestring budget. A few images of the film—notably, the shot of a steam engine train—were taken from an actual newsreel from the period, and mixed with the new footage in such a way that it is virtually impossible to distinguish them from the rest. The same goal was attempted by D. W. Griffith during the production of *Hearts of the World* (1918, USA), when the director recruited the film unit of the French army for some location shooting on the European front, a landmark instance of “archival cinema” on demand. Since then, archival film has been a staple of narrative cinema to such an extent that its exploitation is barely noticed by the casual viewer. There is “archival cinema” in Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941, USA), presented as complement to the biography of an imaginary character, and in *Casablanca* (1942, USA, Michael Curtiz), as background information to the film’s dramatic framework. Countless examples of the same treatment are to be found in commercial cinema, mostly unacknowledged and unidentifiable by default.

The anonymity of archival cinema was not only thought of as unavoidable; it was also desirable, inasmuch as its nameless truth would serve the purpose of blending the objectivity of History with the imaginary story portrayed in the film.

The 8mm Kodachrome II roll of safety stock used by Abraham Zapruder on a Bell & Howell camera for the amateur reel showing the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 has been the object of the fiercest debate ever bestowed upon an archival film (Wrone 2003), but also of the most audacious manipulation of archival images ever attempted in a commercial feature. The strategy adopted in Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991, USA) is to some extent the opposite of what Brownlow and Mollo applied to *It Happened Here*. In addition to images from the actual Zapruder film, *JFK* displays a plethora of original, imitative, or plainly fictional images, all presented as "archival footage". As a result, the viewer becomes immersed in a visual hall of mirrors where it eventually becomes impossible to clearly distinguish the historic document from its recreation. By achieving this vertigo effect, Oliver Stone's film highlights the duality of the "archival film" as a material object requiring the voice of an interpreter in order to be confirmed as such.

So far, our attention has been focused on "archival cinema" as a relic, either treated as an autonomous entity or as a component of a separate creative work. Before examining its other incarnations, it is important to tackle the question of how the viewer is made aware of the film's "archival" identity, that is, its status of material evidence, a question pertinently addressed by Laurent Véray (2011) as a polemical response to Claude Lanzmann's refusal to utilise archival footage in his monumental documentary on the Holocaust, *Shoah* (1985, France/UK). The answer is as predictable as it is deceptively simple: one recognises archival cinema by the fact that its images look "old". What "old" stands for in this context is the product of a two-layered belief. First, it is assumed that the viewer will easily perceive the temporal remoteness of its subject matter; from this standpoint, the degree of authenticity of archival cinema is directly proportional to the shared perception that the events portrayed in the film occurred a long time ago. Second, it is expected that the spectator will easily recognise the older footage by the way it looks, as opposed to newly-made moving images.

The latter axiom, largely undisputed until the dawn of the post-analogue era, was supported by expressive codes presented in the form of visual indicators that referred to the material condition of the carrier: scratches, speckles of dirt, and other blemishes on the film stock. At a deeper level, the archival status of the film was—and, to a large extent, still is—confirmed by the inferior photographic quality of the image, resulting either from a flawed reproduction process of the original into a copy, or from the conviction that the original photographic image had always been of inferior quality because of the unrefined technology that made it exist. Translated into the crude honesty of non-specialist language, this means that archival film must have a "primitive" aura, enhanced by the precarious state of its physical carrier. These two variables, combined with the "vintage" look of the people and the places observed in the film, determine a cumulative feeling of psychological distance between archival cinema and the public of the present time.

The effect is notoriously compounded by projecting films from the silent era at a higher speed than normal, but this is only one of the many ways in which the identity of archival cinema is artificially 'improved' through deliberate or involuntary falsification. As the video compilation *Guidelines dealing with Misuse and Use of Film and Archive Material* (1998, International Federation of Television Archives) amply demonstrates, manipulation is a favourite instrument in the harvesting of archival films for public consumption, a practice inaugurated in the early 1930s when silent films were reissued with a synchronised soundtrack consisting of music, sound effects, and a voiceover commentary (a common practice in Europe during the transition

from silent to sound cinema). These cinematic hybrids represent a watershed between “archival cinema” and modernity; they are recognised as historic artefacts in their own right insofar as the circumstances of their creation and dissemination are clearly explained to a contemporary audience. An “archival film” that looks too new to be true is allegedly a contradiction in terms, as it would defy the purpose of deploying archival film as a messenger of things past.

In defiance of this logic, those who use archival film as part of contemporary fictional or documentary works are often inclined to work in the opposite direction by adjusting vintage cinema to the expectations of the modern viewer. A typical expression of this attitude is the insertion of diegetic sound to an otherwise silent film, such as the whistle of a locomotive or the noise of marching troops in a programme on World War I. With the introduction of digital technology, the ideology of archival cinema takes an even more aggressive stance by embracing image enhancement as an expressive tool: a documentary produced by the BBC, *Psychedelic Britannia* (2015, UK, Sam Bridger), exhibits archival footage of live rock concerts showing a crisp contrast and polished, saturated colour, smoothly integrated to the grading of present-time interviews. Scratches and dust are thereby matched by their exact opposite, with the extra option of using dedicated software in order to apply scratches and speckles where there are none. Colour and sound are the key additives in the trade of archival cinema as a commodity in the digital marketplace.

Film history on celluloid

Archive cinema became an independent form of expression at the end of the silent era. One of its earliest manifestations as a self-contained creative endeavour—that is, without any ancillary purpose—is a feature-length “autobiography of motion pictures” in fourteen reels, first called *Early History and Growth of the Motion Picture Industry* (1925), then *Thirty Years of Motion Pictures* (1927), and eventually *The March of the Movies*. It was made exclusively of excerpts from notable films, mainly produced in the United States, assembled from actual clips of 35mm release prints (Case 2015); a re-edited version in ten reels was curated by a film historian, Terry Ramsaye, who had recently published his landmark book *A Million and One Nights* (Ramsaye 1926). Despite its very limited circulation (mainly in trade conventions and educational institutions), the film’s influence spread like wildfire, prompting the creation of a vast repertory of archival films produced with the same purpose of documenting the cinematic legacy. Anthony Slide’s book *Films on Film History* (Slide 1979) lists over six hundred features, shorts, documentaries and compilations. Despite its claim, it is far from being complete, and it is almost exclusively focused on films distributed in North America; nevertheless, the breadth and scope of this filmography highlights the vast influence of this genre in public culture, soon extended to television productions.

At the end of his overview, Slide pays tribute to the figure of Robert Youngson (1917–1974), presented as the “father of the compilation film on the history of cinema” (Slide 1979: 199) and credited for a number of anthologies, mostly on the golden age of silent cinema. Youngson is also remembered as the author of the first archival films produced on a significant budget, released through Twentieth Century-Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. *When Comedy Was King* (1960) was reportedly completed with a US\$100,000 budget and grossed more than twice at the box office in the first months of its release. Youngson’s feature compilation for MGM, *Big Parade of Comedy* (1964, USA, Robert Youngson), is considered the direct ancestor of the most profitable archival film ever made, *That’s Entertainment!* (1974, USA, Jack Haley, Jr). Produced to celebrate the fifty years of MGM with a budget of a little over 3 million dollars, it earned over 19 million on the first year of distribution, thus spurring two sequels and a third

film of related nature, *That's Entertainment, Part II* (1976, USA, Gene Kelly), *That's Dancing!* (1985, USA, Jack Haley, Jr.), and *That's Entertainment! III* (1994, USA, Bud Friedgen and Michael J. Sheridan), all from MGM.

In the meanwhile, archives and museums had begun creating archival films of their own. Their main goal was to provide audiences with a digest of their most treasured holdings, mostly presented in the form of a compendium of national cinema in their respective countries. No comprehensive filmography of these films is known to exist, but the example of *Antologia del cinema italiano. Capitolo I: Il film muto* (1956, Italy, Antonio Petrucci) serves as an emblematic example of their structure and purpose. The film is a chronological survey of Italian cinema during the silent period, with early and short films presented in their entirety, and key sequences from canonical feature films. When this and similar films were produced, well before the age of electronic media, access to collecting institutions was often difficult, and projection prints hard to obtain. The “archival compilation film” was a relatively simple and practical way to provide students, teachers, and the audiences of film societies with a manageable and authoritative summary of the history of cinema. For this reason, copies of films such as Petrucci’s would be exchanged with other archives and museums, or deposited with embassies and cultural missions outside the films’ country of origin.

Archival film as artwork

One of these films, *Lyrish nitraat* (Lyrical Nitrate, 1991, Netherlands, Peter Delpout), was the catalyst of a turning point in the evolution of archival cinema. It was, albeit indirectly, the tangible expression of the work of a film archive: at the time, Delpout was an employee of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (re-baptised as Eye Nederlands Filminstituut in 2011). *Lyrical Nitrate* was, by all means, an “archival film”, as it was presented as a collage of excerpts from films held by the Dutch institution, notably from the collection of Jean Desmet, a film distributor in the early years of cinema. It was not, however, a compendium of film history in the conventional sense of the term. Its content could be labelled as “early cinema”, but it was drawn from films of various countries, and presented with an intention that was markedly different from whatever the pioneers of cinema had in mind. To the extent of their abilities, collecting institutions were attempting to showcase archival films without any intervention other than the excision of parts of the original works; Delpout tried instead to present them through the lens of his personal interpretation of the past.

Delpout juxtaposed fragments and sequences from films unrelated to each other, slowing down their projection speed, and emphasising image details—a far cry from the orderly string of clips presented so far by archives in their compilation films. His strategy was not new: *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969, USA, Ken Jacobs) had taken the same approach in a more uncompromising manner by expanding a brief segment from a 1905 film with the same title (shot by G. W. “Billy” Bitzer for the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company) into a 115-minute experimental film. Contrary to Jacobs’ meditation on the deconstruction of the moving image, however, Delpout’s *Lyrical Nitrate* is firmly rooted in the archival nature of the films borrowed for his work, to the point that the fragility of the medium and the decay of the image carrier is displayed with poetic intentions, not without a hint of nostalgia. The “archival film” emerges here as an auteurist statement, the conscious expression of a viewpoint on the identity of the cinematic artefact as a museum object.

By the time Delpout completed a second film of the same kind (*Diva Dolorosa*, 1999, Netherlands), the very definition of “archival film” had dramatically changed, as seen in other experiments at the borderline between documentary and “art cinema” such as *Moeder*

Dao—de schildpadgelijkende (Mother Dao, the Turtlelike, 1995, Netherlands, Vincent Monnikenda). Ken Jacobs had not been alone in the use of archival footage for the creation of entirely new works of fiction: Standish Lawder's *Intolerance (Abridged)* (1972, USA) double printed every twenty-six frames of the three-hour silent epic *Intolerance* (1916, USA, D.W. Griffith), turning it into an impressive 12-minute synthesis between structuralism and psychedelic cinema. With *Lyrical Nitrate*, though, the archival identity of the moving image was firmly set at the centre of the artist's preoccupations. Others followed Delpeut's path, from Gustav Deutsch in the *Film ist* (Film is) series (*Film is. 1–6*, 1998, Austria; *Film is. 7–12*, 2002, Austria; *Film is. A Girl & a Gun*, 2009, Austria/Germany) to Bill Morrison, whose *Decasia* (2002, USA) amplifies the intuition of the finale in Delpeut's film into a visual leitmotiv of chemically decomposed and undecipherable images. What these directors have in common is a two-tiered relationship with the archival image; the provenance of their expressive tool is declared with the utmost transparency; by the same token, the borrower redefines and reshapes its meaning well beyond the intentions of their makers.

The artists involved in this kind of creative work are inspired by archival cinema in general (Flaig and Groo 2016); they also find their inspiration by copying archival films in the public domain, or by ignoring (either blissfully or provocatively) that their legal or intellectual ownership belongs to someone else. Cinematic images of the past were a favourite playground of experimental filmmakers (Bordwell 1997: 102–105): Hollis Frampton (*Public Domain*, 1972, USA), Malcolm LeGrice (*After Lumière—L'arroseur arrosé*, 1974, UK), Al Razutis (*Méliès Catalog*, 1973, Canada), Ernie Gehr (*Eureka*, 1974, USA), and many others, ranging from the avowedly academic (Noël Burch, *Correction, Please or How We Got Into Pictures*, 1979, UK) to the realm of visual poetry (in the works of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, from *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, 1997, Italy, to *Oh! uomo*, 2004, Italy). Despite the profound differences in their respective approaches, the *modus operandi* of these filmmakers highlights a fundamental question, so far unanswered. When does a film become an archival film? *Rose Hobart* (1939, USA, Joseph Cornell) makes extensive use of footage from *East of Borneo* (1931, USA, George Melford), a Universal Pictures production. It is a landmark experimental work by a famous artist, represented in the collections of major fine arts museums; in this sense, *Rose Hobart* is in itself an archival film that makes use of archival footage. Should a 35mm reel of *Avatar* (2009, USA, James Cameron) become the object of a similar operation, how and when would this qualify as an archival film, and isn't *Avatar* itself an archival film, to the extent that a collecting institution has it in its custody?

It may be argued that Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010, UK), a 24-long assemblage of clips from hundreds of narrative films, is not an example of archival cinema: first, because it is not cinema, despite the fact that its components were taken from extant cinematic works; second, because it is not archival, in the sense that there is no obvious connection between the images shown in the film and their origin as collection artefacts. The dividing line between what is or isn't "archival" undeniably stems from a qualitative judgement, and is not immune from subjectivity. Any print of a film, however, is bound to acquire an archival citizenship of sorts whenever it becomes part of an institution. Our 35mm reel of *Avatar* saved from the dumpster hardly qualifies as "found footage" if the rescuer has identified it and wishes to give it a home. The requisites for comparing the reel to a foundling include the material status of the object as abandoned property and the legal vacuum surrounding it as an orphan of intellectual ownership, but also the absence of an orphanage protecting it. The reel is no longer "found footage" when a collecting body decides it should be preserved for posterity.

Panorama Ephemera (2004, USA, Rick Prelinger) provides the most straightforward discussion of this point with the admirable clarity of its treatment. The work includes dozens

of excerpts from educational, industrial, amateur and advertising films, and doesn't make any explicit claim about aesthetic or cultural value. The sequences are assembled in a coherent fashion, but the author's intentions do not overshadow the fact that each segment had a life of its own; in the absence of an off-screen narrator, the compiled images are allowed to speak for themselves, enabling the viewer to establish meaningful and often surprising connections between them. Jan Šikl's film cycle *Soukromé Století* (Private Century, 2006, Czech Republic) emphasises the ethical implications of the same approach by presenting family films with the direct contribution of their owners, their descendants, or with the accompanying evidence of written documents. The voiceover of *Private Century* recites the text of letters, diaries and transcripts of oral history interviews with members of the families in which the home movies were made, often to poignant effect. In the same vein, Czech filmmaker Petr Skala brings to the sublime the archival nature of "found footage" with his cinema as an object of purely visual expression based on light, colour, and the materiality of film stock. In the early 1970s, at a time when Czechoslovakia was plagued by political and intellectual repression, Skala created abstract films at home with discarded blank or exposed 16mm and 35mm footage, a magnifying glass, crude engraving tools such as needles and manicure sets, and basic materials such as dishwashing liquid, sand, egg white, cigarette lighter fluid, acetone, sugar and honey. This looks like making art from the relics of a post-apocalyptic world; it is, in fact, the product of a vision that found its shape in a society where vision itself was a forbidden word. Petr Skala's films are tiny miracles of "archival film" as craftsmanship achieving visual ecstasy, like sunlight coming through stained glass of an imaginary church.

Is there a "digital archival film"?

In a very brief but highly influential essay, Eileen Bowser formulated the most compelling answer to the ultimate question surrounding the multifaceted identity of archival cinema. In describing the objectives of film preservation, she pointed out that archives and museum do so, among other things, in order to foster creativity and encourage the creation of new works (Bowser 1990: 173). Bowser's visionary assessment of the rationale behind the safeguard of the cinematic image brings us to the yet uncharted territory of digital-born moving images as part of archival collections. Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* (Night and Fog, 1955, France), a short film about Nazi concentration camps, has long been regarded as the quintessential case study of "archival cinema" where historic footage becomes part of a new artwork (Raskin 1987). Both the film and its sources originated on photochemical stock. Another short film, *Steps* (1987, USA/UK, Zbigniew Rybczyński), is an avant-garde exercise in electronic manipulation of footage from a silent film by Sergei Eisenstein. If there is no reason not to include this in the realm of archival cinema, the same argument could be made for *Der Riese* (The Giant, 1983, West Germany, Michael Klier), entirely made with images captured by video surveillance cameras but pervaded by an exquisite cinematic sensibility. So far, archival cinema has been treated within the parameters of analogue technology and aesthetics. Its digital avatar—both as a collection item and as an artwork—awaits proper consideration.

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