

Introduction to the Issue: *Sensing the Archive*

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The seemingly endless pandemic lockdown has generated a flourishing cultural economy of media archives brought to life. Feature-length (or more) essay films on Timothy Leary (*My Psychedelic Love Story*, Errol Morris 2020), The Beegees, (*The Beegees: How Can you Mend a Broken Heart*, Frank Marshall, 2020) The Beatles (*Get Back*, Peter Jackson 2022), Tina Turner (*Tina*, Daniel Lindsay and T.J. Martin, 2021) and the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969 (*Summer of Soul [or when the Revolution could not be Televised...]*), Questlove, 2021) and many more, have taken archival film practices mainstream, using digital tools to remake histories of popular culture that are affective, sensorial, and experiential. Media artists and scholars have likewise been drawn to the vast archives of 20th century culture for encounters with the images and sounds of the past. This work enables us to redefine our place in a historical nexus of imagination and memory where trauma, struggle and injustice can be confronted along with new ways of plotting the future. Beyond the glitter of celebrity culture thousands of artists are excavating and recycling to create new modes of being in the world, and they do so with one eye on the revived sounds and images, and another focused on the sources, the labour, the technologies, and the desires of media archives and archivists as progenitors of history.

The articles, video essays, and short pieces collected in this issue of *Frames Cinema Journal* are not only about archival materials, but offer valuable insight into the media archive itself. I am pleased to see that my open-ended neologism of archiveology has been adapted and bent into so many creative and critical shapes.¹ Media archives emerge from this dossier as fluid and shape-shifting media in themselves that not only collect store, catalogue and save, but have the capacity for time-travel, regeneration, and renewal – sometimes within the very context of ruin,

degeneration, and loss. The various essays, artists' statements and discussions, along with video essays and discussions of single films in this dossier, tease out the complex historiographies embedded in archiveological media.

The fluidity and instability of the digital media archive is addressed most directly by Holly Willis in her discussion of large-scale and small-scale artworks that blend images with data-sets produced by algorithms. She argues that the wide ranging "post-image" or "soft-image" projects she discusses create sensorial and experiential effects that push beyond the "cinematic", precisely by rendering the archive a site of computation and transformation. At the more cinematic end of such archival fluidity, Stephen Broomer has remixed Joseph Cornell's canonical remix film, *Rose Hobart* (1936) in his video essay *Borrowed Dreams*. Broomer cuts *Rose Hobart* up, and mixes it with fragments of films by Esther Shub and Maya Deren, as well as some of Cornell's own lesser-known oneiric compilations from the 1960s. The video essay highlights Cornell's "subconscious authorship," accessing the film archive with an intimacy akin to dreaming. The archive as "psychic imprint" may be the antithesis of the machine-made archives of the "soft-image", and yet both render the image archive fluid and unstable.

Home movies are likewise a space of instability in the essays by May Chew and Lauren Berliner. Chew explores participatory diasporic archives that have been created and exhibited by Canadian artists to document quotidian family histories of BIPOC immigrants from a geographical spectrum of origins. These visual archives, in which some families must "stand in" for thousands of others, are haunted not only by their own missing pieces, but by the many spectral memories that they offer to a public imaginary. Chew proposes a "hauntological thickening" of the counter-archive of "occluded histories," in which the disruptions and traumas of migration are refracted. The diasporic archive is yet another variation of the unfixed archive, in this case mapping migration

and homelessness against the framework of national “multiculturalism.” Berliner’s inquiry into the “home mode” or the life of home video as it is transformed by and through social media illuminates yet another form of archival process. The privacy and intimacy of the home mode is inevitably commodified when it circulates in capitalised platform culture, as the archive of the internet is a space of continuous appropriation and inscription of the domestic sphere into consumer culture.

Archival process, fluidity, and flexibility is frequently implicated in historical loss and the arts of forgetting as we are reminded in Giulia Rho’s passionate essay on Barbara Rubin’s experimental film *Christmas on Earth* (1963). Rho’s analysis of this orgiastic, overlooked, and radically sensuous experimental film considers it to be “anarchival” in its online survival as a digital remnant of performance. Rubin has become an archival filmmaker whose work was committed to the presence and participation of a long-gone community that has itself been rendered archival in Todd Haynes’ *The Velvet Underground* (2021), another pandemic-era music essay extracted from the archives – one which depends greatly on Rubin’s footage. Archival filmmakers, like archival stars, are those who come into legibility long after they have passed, to become celebrated artists in archival form.

Rubin’s ghostly bodies in the archive are not alone. Barbara Hammer’s film *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) creates a critical space where sexuality explodes the archival cuts between now and then. Rachel Lallouz’s essay on this film argues for the sense of touch, evoked by erotics as well as pointing fingers, as an aesthetic strategy for engendering new modes of archival knowledge. For Hammer and for Lallouz, this queer-archival practice is specifically pitched against the memories of trauma, struggle, and disappearance that have long attended the queer archive. The heterosexual archive is likewise reconceived in the feminist awakening provoked by Sari Braithwaite’s archival film

[CENSORED] (2018) as discussed by Claire Henry. This compilation of outtakes that were excised from feature films of the 1950s, 60s and 70s by Australian censors reveals an archive of the “destructive patriarchal imaginary,” in the form of a compilation of multiple and repetitive scenes of forms of disturbing violence against women. Such an excavation of bodies cannot but create new knowledge when it is appropriated and liberated for a feminist viewer. Archiveology becomes an ethical investigation into the past, which in Braithwaite’s film, as in Hammer’s and Rubin’s, situates the body on the cusp of historical transformation, a breaking point of future and past.

As May Chew underlines in her essay on the diasporic counter-archive, media archives are about absence, a theme that runs through many of these pieces. Lennaart van Oldenborgh addresses the issue of “haunted archives” by way of the outtakes of news footage shot in southern Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s. While a volatile front-line city appeared on television framed within the humanitarian objectives of the UN and aid-supplying NGOs, research into the archived footage reveals some very different imagery. Van Oldenborgh not only describes in detail the logistics behind the capturing of combat footage and disturbing shots of journalists joking around on the sidelines, he advocates for better preservation and accessibility of news teams’ unused footage. That which does not appear on the nightly news may, in time, serve historians with visceral, sensory, and experiential accounts of global conflict zones.

Van Oldenborgh’s contribution makes his own research process transparent, exposing the institutional and commercial priorities of news archives, and several other authors also foreground the labour of archivists and other media workers. In Lola Rémy’s analysis of Sabrina Gschwardtner’s film quilts, the film archive is unravelled and sawn into quilts that evoke the craft of film editing, a job historically assigned to women. In this carefully reassembled archive of films

about quiltmakers, the sawn film strips represent and even name the quilters and editors whose labour has so often been concealed. In another approach to the labour embedded in film archives, Fabiola Hanna and Irene Lusztig probe the layers of selection, translation, and re-representation that lie between boxes of letters to *Ms. Magazine* stored in an archive, and a film by Irene Lusztig in which the letters are read out loud. The trajectory from messy, dusty, boxes, to an essay film (*Yours in Sisterhood*, 2018) involves the work of collecting, selecting, and organising the materials that others had done many years ago. The next step, to create an accessible, digital archive of these letters from the 1970s involves yet another workflow involving cataloguing, selection, and translation to digital files as this invaluable media archive is remade again and again by women invested in an epistolary record of women's (and children's) concerns and opinions shared with the first American mainstream feminist magazine.

The film quilts described by Rémy render the celluloid materiality of film tangible, a quality evoked by other essays that explore the sensorial qualities of archiveology. Rachel Lallouz says of the touching hands in *Nitrate Kisses* that "To look is not enough. The hand, the archivist's body, must get closer." The intimacy of Hammer's camera is a strategy of reaching back, into a queer historiography of desire and loss. At another extreme end of archiveology, Petra Löffler turns to early ethnographic films made by German expeditions to the Pacific Islands at the beginning of the 20th century. She outlines the conditions of production of the films as physical objects, and their transformation into decontextualised digital files. Her history notes the technological incompetence of early field cinematography, the failure of the films to represent anything remotely authentic about the indigenous subjects, and the century of neglect suffered by the celluloid. This cycle of failure ends with the digital display of the ruined films alongside museum artifacts in glass cases. The colonised subjects who appear in the films have been rendered as objects under the

signs of a troubled process of capture in the unrestored films, stripped of all indices of lives actually lived. Löffler's critical archiveology pulls apart the many layers of colonialist media praxis.

The contributors to this dossier demonstrate that the "sense" of archival media can lead to many different modes of archiveology. Recycling and re-presenting visual culture remain an ongoing feature of ethnography and museum display, as Löffler indicates. Digitisation is merely one more layer of "capture" and colonial disempowerment. For other contributors, such as Maryam Muliaee, archiveology includes the art of degeneration and ruination, specifically through the practice of copy art. Her own project, referred to as the *Recycled Series* takes photos of ruined cities through serial re-copying in order to renew and recreate the histories as decaying cityscapes within the purview of techno culture. This human-machine collaboration of copy art is also a critical theme of Eleni Palis's video essay "Uploading the Archive". Palis looks at a series of feature films in which excerpts from older Hollywood films are integrated as modes of narrative and character development. In her analysis, this practice tends to obscure the complex, commercial infrastructure of permissions and licencing on the one hand, and consolidates sexist and misogynist tropes on the other. This is accomplished in mainstream filmmaking precisely with a lack of image degeneration that might expose the media archaeology within.

The role of archiveology, image recycling, and the archival sensorium is put to explicitly political use in the works of several Colombian artists examined by María A. Vélez-Serna. The term "extractive archives" is introduced here as a means of capturing the violent histories of Latin America in which resource extraction parallels state-sponsored and industrial image production and elicits a critical response of resistance, in this case through practices of *détournement*. In Colombia, media artists have "extracted" from pre-existing materials in order to challenge the status of the document as historiography. The films that Vélez-Serna discusses are creative anti-

colonial interventions into the visual economy of conflict that offer new strategies of imagination and futurity. She points to an “emancipatory cinema that could offer paths of resistance to the planned obsolescence and extractive drive of capitalist image-making.”

Many of the authors collected here map the strategies of reproduction, collecting, collage, juxtaposition, and remixing that produces different futures and imaginaries. Archiveology as a form of historiography holds enormous potential for remembering history differently, outside the parameters of commodity capitalism, heteronormativity, homogeneous nationalism, and racist, colonialist, and sexist paradigms of power. Moreover, the wide range of media arts that are covered indicate that this potential is much greater than “the cinematic” and is only expanded by the flexibility and accessibility of digital media. These essays, furthermore, engage with the Benjaminian theme of “second technology,” or the point where humans can engage creatively with the tools of industrial modernity to think beyond its driving force of novelty, using technologies of the visual to look backwards in order to think forwards.² The sense of media archives is best extracted from their nonsensical potentials of disruption, and from their exposure of loss, absence, and what several authors refer to as the anarchival, the counter archive, and the “ananarcheological.” These terms, like so many of the artworks and projects discussed in this dossier, help to underscore the creative power of archival media practices and radical historiography.

The popular music documentaries that unreeled and streamed through the pandemic were made from archives that have long been protected and sealed by industrial gatekeepers. Thanks to digital tools and empty theatres and studios, we have been returned to the revolutionary soundscape of the 1960s and 70s. Granted, the cycle began in 2018 with *Amazing Grace* (Alan Elliott and Sydney Pollack), Aretha Franklin’s amazing concert film recorded in a Los Angeles church in 1972.

Failures of production (no clapperboards) rendered the footage useless until sound and image could be synched and edited, but the release version of *Amazing Grace* has all the gaps, jumps and glitches that mark archival film practices. This too is archiveology, and one of the most sensual and moving examples in a feature-length movie. The vastness of the media archive only means that media artists will be excavating its treasures for decades.

The counter-archival and anarchival impulses of the many artist's works discussed here are necessary correctives to the new forms of commodification that the media archive will continue to generate. As historians, we will continue to mine the cruelty and trauma alongside the treasures and pleasures that are generated by an archival culture that is at once flexible and fluid. Thanks to the authors included in this dossier, and to my co-editors, I hope we have come to a better understanding of the potential and scope of archival media as a sensory medium that brings us closer to the textures of the 20th century.

Notes

¹ Catherine Russell *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*, (Duke University Press, 2018).

² *Archiveology* 38. Benjamin introduces the term in *Selected Writings Vol. 2: 1927-1934*, Michael J. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith eds., Jonathan Livingstone and others trans, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 107.

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Author Biography

Catherine Russell is a distinguished professor at Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Her current research interests include archiveology and Indigenous Canadian remix films, experimental film and Hollywood cinema.

The thumbnail image for this introduction is of Aretha Franklin in *Amazing Grace* (Alan Elliott and Sydney Pollack, 1972).