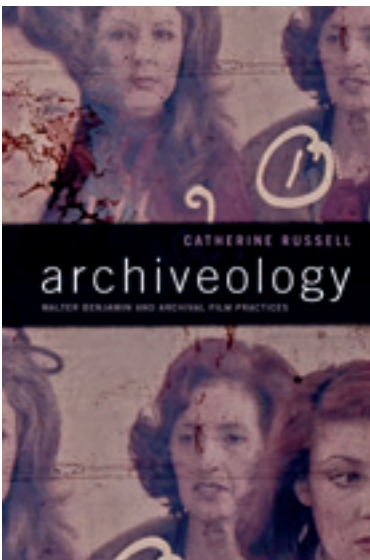


BOOK REVIEWS



Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and archival film practices

Catherine Russell

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In the final decades of the twentieth century, in what amounted to a heretical development with regard to historicism

as previously elaborated by the Annales School and the School of Frankfurt, Walter Benjamin's work came to be favorably reassessed within cultural studies due to his vision of cultural heritage as an archival source on which to build new expressive realities. Advocating for an intertextual type of dialectics in which past and present come together within a texture of quotations, Benjamin propounded establishing different narrative dimensions through which to acquire awareness of time and collective memory. These dimensions were to be plural in nature, enabling an outlook on the future, proceeding through the interstices and traumas of the past. By following these principles, it seemed possible to redress

injustices by means of a dialectic image whose allegorical decoding would help to clear up (and redraw) what Jürgen Habermas called a "horizon of unfulfilled expectations". In order to set out in search of this new vision of our cultural heritage, it was imperative to leave behind some of the main philosophic traditions that prevailed in nineteenth-century thought. Nietzsche had already initiated this process of decentralization with his criticism of the totalizing character of continuous history by means of a destructive tearing apart of ideologies and myths—in effect, of the history of thought. For Benjamin, the irrefutable nature of Von Ranke's historicism did not allow for tolerance of dissidence, since, as he described, it empathized with the winners, turning its back on the subaltern classes in a triumphalist attitude. Similarly, analytical philosophy had not managed to free itself from the methodological reductionism to which positivism seemed doomed, because in its search for rigor and certainty, in its purported intent to carry out an exact description of historical fact, it ended up by anathematizing difference.

In general terms, it can be claimed that Benjamin sets the foundations for new philosophical and aesthetic judgments in the era of advanced capitalism, especially in relation to artistic practices framed within what is known as *postmodernity*.

It is characteristic of many of these that they promote precisely a critical re-reading of cultural memory and its material sources. The sway held by this epistemological tide has not ceased to cause fascination in spite of having become familiar in the halls of academe. Its burgeoning and seductive rhythms belong to a sea of knowledge that continues to inspire noteworthy research; a case in point is the study offered by Catherine Russell in *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and archival film practices*. Cultural heritage, the sum of tangible and intangible inherited assets passed on to future generations, is seen by Benjamin as a vast archive to be scrutinized and reinterpreted. This must be done from the point of view of the appropriation of knowledge, from an *anamnestic inebriation* that takes into account a complete framework, thus enabling the interruption of the discursive centrality imposed by a hegemonic culture.

Whether as an extension of the modernist body of work or embedded in a new periodicity within postmodernity, from the 1950s onwards it is possible to perceive an impressive blossoming of artistic activities that foster a multitude of heterogeneous discourses based on the appropriation and critical reinterpretation of pre-existing cultural manifestations. To come to the point, the audiovisual heritage too becomes an archival source requiring interpretation, liable to transference. As a result, from quite some time back, we have been witnessing audiovisual practices that do not present much novelty in their principles of action, but whose scope for deontological expansion is far from exhausted. Since the resources that the archive holds are unlimited, an equally endless diversity of uses can be drawn from them; Papini characterized these borrowings in *Gog* as an inherent part of human nature: “Each idea is an echo, each act a plagiarism”. And Russell summarizes most adequately the ethics of these principles in the epilogue to her book, since “appropriation is, in fact, a matter of translating from one medium to another, whether from film to video, analog to digital, narrative to nonnarrative, fiction to documentary, archival file to collage form, video to installation, and so on (Russell, 2018:219)”.

The scope of action of these practices has changed with the coming of digitalization, and in fact, the self-interested debate is ongoing, especially when these activities are considered mere acts of plunder against intellectual property—as if the recycling or transformative use of images and sounds could harm the investments of the cultural industries. But found footage filmmakers know what they are facing: a speculative stigma that Russell also finds helpful to confront. As if that were not enough, these collectors/ producers of recycled images have little need of heavy utensils and costly technical devices in order to create a living language while *destroying* the pre-existing one. This is the same destructive attitude that Russell uses—borrowed from Nietzsche—in order to describe some found-footage works constructed out of pure cinephilia (2018:182): antithetical gestures that would not be alien to Heidegger. Similarly, found-footage filmmakers do not require substantial financial backing. The devotion that drives them to rethink the media scene leaves them inevitably *outside* a mass culture whose production costs require far more than favors and sponsoring. The point is that

in order to rewrite the archive there is no need to take part in such political and economic synergies; all that is necessary is to maintain the filmmaker’s essence intact or, what amounts to the same, to carry out the act of rewriting. In the hands of these creators, the images acquire a dialectic sense through editing; they become tools for textual analysis that transcend the boundaries of time, because their critical interpretation allows us to tear the curtain of dogmatic representations and discover the tensions that survive the subjective bent in every nook and cranny of our memory.

It is within this context that Russell’s *Archiveology* is inscribed. It offers insightful analyses enlightened by Benjamin’s legacy, providing us with an additional tool to substantiate research on the re-utilization of audiovisual sources from a reflexive approach, within any field or discursive practice. The book is in tune with the fertile theoretical and popularizing line that over a number of decades has sought to widen the scope of our knowledge of found footage cinema in all its traditional and renovated varieties. This legacy is preserved and renewed in *Archiveology*. Russell has fruitfully understood the generous grounding that Benjamin’s works and spirit have to offer when it comes to establishing a dialogue with the cultural past, when the aim is to *awaken* the archive “from the twentieth-century dream” (2018:51) through an *archaeology of the media*, as she suggests in her analysis of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988-1998).

In a dialectical echo that resounds with Benjamin’s philosophical passages, Russell proves, through several examples, that it is possible to revitalize extant work. This can be achieved by conjugating the meanings of different media sources, introducing an analytical vision in conversation with other texts and carrying out interventionist maneuvers such as appropriation, collection, decontextualization, re-editing and rewriting. All of these help to find, within the aura of classical cinema, in its linguistic gestures, the denial of oppressed identities that emanates from their phantasmagoric character.

Perhaps the book does not define quite clearly the various ontological vestures used in aiming to cover the concepts of *Archiveology*, *found footage cinema* and *compilation cinema*. In any case, this is but a minor shortcoming, and does not blur the transcendence of the author’s watchword, which reveals a substantial, frank and insightful reflection: that “the archive becomes a means of revelation” (2018:101). Russell’s decision not to insist on setting up hierarchies, proposing rather than prescribing, is a welcome attitude. Moreover, in it we find a wonderful confluence with Benjamin’s discourse, which, without being imperative, comes through loud and clear today in *Archiveology*. In this way, it adds authority to a new model of cultural intelligibility that we can use to rescue voices relegated to oblivion, remembering and reconstructing by means of references and allusions; expanding, through a process of borrowing, the horizons of *Arche*.

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