

2019

Review of Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices

Kristen E. Muenz

Indiana University - Bloomington, kemuenz@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas>

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Muenz, Kristen E. (2019) "Review of Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 6, Article 1.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/1>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact elischolar@yale.edu.

Catherine Russell. *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018.

In *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*, Catherine Russell explores the legacy of Walter Benjamin's ideas in film studies through the use of archival film footage in experimental motion pictures. This book serves as a fascinating overview of the artistic interpretation of archival media material, the history it documents, and the power this interpretation has to change our views of the past. Russell's analysis is accompanied by excellent examples of some of the many different ways filmmakers have utilized this approach to archival footage.

Russell explains that "archiveology," a term coined in 1991 by Joel Katz, does not mean the study of archives. Rather, it is "the use of the image archive as a language" (12)—the creation of new meaning by unmooring sections of archival film from their original, sequential context and reassembling them. (A simple example of this would be a montage containing footage from multiple sources.) Its similarity to "archaeology" also suggests connections to the material culture of the past; thus, there is a connotation about the physicality of the film in the archives as well, rather than just the content on the film. Helpfully, Russell dispels potential false expectations the reader might have for the purpose of this book up front: it is not "about archival practices . . . or the missions and mandates of archivists," but rather "focus[ed] on the images themselves, which are actually at stake in the growing discourse around media archives" (4). This distinction is key to the scope of Russell's work. (Since her discussion centers around image archives, the book is naturally most germane to film archivists, though the ideas presented definitely can be expanded to apply to archivists not working with media.)

The exploration of archiveology throughout the book traverses some theory-heavy territory. Readers coming from an archival background will see some familiar figures here, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, but if their education does not also extend to film or media studies, the other theorists and scholars mentioned may be new to them. Thankfully, Russell writes about theory, especially film theory, in a way that makes it accessible to readers who do not share her background in these subjects.

After establishing the concept of archiveology, Russell thoroughly reviews Benjamin's place in the world of film scholarship as a foundation for the rest of the book. For those who have not previously encountered Benjamin and his ideas, this section of the book serves as an excellent introduction. Russell traces how Benjamin's theories of image culture have manifested over time. Her analysis of his incomplete work, *The Arcades Project*, notes the ways in which it "anticipate[s] the archiveology of later decades, foreshadowing the technologies that would render the archive transmissible, accessible, and pliable" (44). Examining Benjamin's theories through the lens of the present, Russell draws out fascinating insights about his philosophies on the practice of collecting, image culture, and other concepts that connect to our modern idea of a film archive.

Russell furthers this connection with the modern day by examining Benjamin's work in conversation with a broad selection of films utilizing archival footage. Her topics in this analysis

range from collections of images around specific subjects to critical cinephilia. The films she selects as examples are equally diverse, ranging from those constructed from footage dating back to the dawn of film, such as *Paris 1900* by Nicole Védres (1947), to the strikingly recent *Hoax Canular* by Dominic Gagnon (2013), a piece assembled from YouTube footage of vloggers discussing a theoretical apocalypse. Here, Russell demonstrates a remarkable talent for describing films in such a way that readers need not be familiar with them to understand and appreciate her points of view. She also conveys the compelling and dynamic nature of each film she explores, something not easily done in writing. A few key stills from each film, used to emphasize particularly striking frames or shots, accompany Russell's strong descriptions.

The author constructs her discussion of Walter Benjamin's ideas and archiveology around these carefully selected examples throughout the rest of the book. She explores the incredible variety of archival materials that can be used in film, from those centered around a certain location, time period, or event, to those focused on specific demographic groups or communities. By separating these materials from their original context and rearranging them into new forms, filmmakers are able to articulate new messages with archival materials, drawing out meanings not foregrounded in the source and skillfully weaving their own—making the archive speak through archiveology. With this in mind, the practice of archiveology is a vivid, extraordinarily creative way of filling some of the silences and gaps within archives. As a form of activism, a means of directly highlighting marginalized voices, it is immensely powerful. It is a tool available both to users of film archives and to film archivists themselves, who have the advantage of intimate knowledge of their collections and of ways in which the diversity in the footage (or the lack thereof) might be emphasized through artistic expression. It is a unique way to use the materials, and Russell demonstrates that it is a valuable use of archival footage well worth consideration.

For film archivist readers, this is a thought-provoking book, challenging in a beneficial way. As Russell states at the beginning, her work is not intended to explore the archival practicalities behind the ideas she discusses; rather, she means to explore instances of this usage of archival material and its philosophical underpinnings in the work of Walter Benjamin. (Given how diverse and varied the expressions of archiveology can be, it is questionable whether a practical archival approach to this topic would be rewarding or even possible.) As such, Russell's work is most useful for film archivists as a shift in awareness about a potential inherent in their materials through archiveology: the possibility of use for creative research, for activism, and for artistic expression. Archivists may not traditionally consider individuals interested in archival film as a creative tool when writing collecting policies or creating description. But by recognizing these users, film archivists can better facilitate unconventional uses of their materials. In this context, for instance, using description to highlight a small flash of diversity in a reel of film—something likely irrelevant to a traditional researcher—could make all the difference. And while the discussion in the book pertains to film and image archives, the idea of the archival remixing involved in archiveology need not be constricted to images and film; it is an empowering concept that can be used across any kind of material.

Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices is a refreshing read for film archivists looking to expand their horizons and better understand potential users. While it can venture into territory far removed from archival studies, Russell's masterful explanations ensure that the book remains accessible to readers from all disciplines. It is certain to raise interesting

questions not just for film archivists but for any archivist open to considering the transformative power of archival material.