Accidental Archivism

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"The serendipitous genesis of the great archives of Arsenal in Berlin is a pure delight to explore. This volume records how a wealth of visual history accumulated as if by accident to form a fascinating whole which is so much more than its parts: a fragmented and recomposed visual archive of memories of the world in the second half of the twentieth century. A feast for any historian, artist and cinephile."
—**Bénédicte Savoy**, Collège de France/TU Berlin

"Accidental archivism, creative spaces and the reaches of technology: the mix is a world of communication and artistic possibilities. Perhaps, equally significant, the mix does transform the cinema's public into that quintessential wayfarer who takes a backward glance o'er travelled roads to better see the road ahead."
—**Hyginus Ekwuazi**, University of Ibadan, founding rector of the National Film Institute, Jos

"A lively, hugely ambitious and generative collection, that is at once both reflective and provocative, offering a state of play and a call to action for those engaging with archives today. From manifestos to interviews, global case studies to personal accounts, this expansive collection of works expertly places in dialogue curators, artists, archivists and scholars (and the many that fall in between)."
—**Tom Rice**, University of St. Andrews

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Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past

Edited by

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

and Vinzenz Hediger

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Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—GRK 2279 and by the German Federal Ministry of Research and Education (as part of www.ceditraa.net). Supported by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. Arsenal—Institute for Film and Video Art is funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

Bibliographical Information of the German National Library
The German National Library lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie (German National Bibliography); detailed bibliographic information is available online at dnb.dnb.de.

Published in 2023 by meson press, Lüneburg, Germany
www.meson.press

Design concept: Torsten Köchlin, Silke Krieg
Cover design: Mathias Bär, Thomas Köchlin
Cover image: The Rafla Collection © Cimatheque—Alternative Film Center, with thanks to Ihab Rafla

The print edition of this book is printed by Lightning Source, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom.

ISBN (print): 978-3-95796-053-5
ISBN (PDF): 978-3-95796-054-2
DOI: 10.14619/0535

The digital editions of this publication can be downloaded freely at www.meson.press.

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Don Quixote in the Archive: Or, Making Sense of Film Heritage in the Age of Overabundance

Francesco Pitassio

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Without cinema, without the close-up, would Kracauer have been able to speak of microhistory?
Carlo Ginzburg

Being Don Quixote

Surfing YouTube a user might come across totally unexpected rediscoveries,[1] which, as a post on Facebook recently announced, resurface after having been believed lost for decades, as is the case of late Weimar film *Gilgi. Eine von uns* (Johannes Meyer, 1932), starring Brigitte Helm.[2] Or, conversely, the internet flaneur could stumble on dubious versions of major historical works, such as the posthumous and highly controversial *Don Quixote* (Orson Welles, unfinished), which producer Patxy Irigoyen and director Jesús Franco released in 1992 (Kiwata 1992; Rosenbaum 2007).

1 A discussion of YouTube as an archive is to be found in the section "Storage" of Snickars and Vonderau 2009.

2 The film is to be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtzLDJ7lrbI (accessed January 14, 2023).

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Beyond the controversies of the posthumous reconstruction, which interpolated the documentary Welles directed for the Italian TV *Nella terra di Don Chisciotte* (1964) with footage he shot from 1955 onwards for the feature film he never concluded, the version uploaded by Irigoyen/Franco is even more objectionable, as the English dubbing is not lip-synchronized and the information the caption conveys is ambiguous, as regards the origin of the edited materials and who is responsible for them.[3]

Rediscoveries and defacements live side by side in the expanded mediasphere produced by the concurrent digital rollout (Fossati 2018) and the explosion of dynamic web. Whereas digitization and dynamic web offer unprecedented opportunities for attracting attention on cultural heritage, engaging audiences, and reaching out to visitors/viewers who could not, otherwise, benefit from it (Economou 2016), their pitfalls are no less relevant (Combi 2016). It obviously exceeds the limits of this contribution and even more my individual ones to pinpoint and discuss all the risks. I would, however, like to briefly linger on what, in my view, is one of the most urgent ones for the same notion of heritage overall: the loss of historical sense and related thinking. In a groundbreaking work, American historian Roy Rosenzweig (2011) indicated two concomitant jeopardies for history in the digital age, that is, the fragility of material sources and the overabundance of the digital ones. In fact, film heritage suffers from the decay of analog formats and, possibly, even more so for native digital; and as much as from the multiplication of digital versions, whose reliability is often questionable. As recently path-breaking reflection has highlighted, if in the early 2000s Rick Prelinger called upon abundance, today this latter "is increasingly considered a problem, which has led to calls for the development of novel strategies for retrieval and curation. But as the range of curation and presentation practices expands, questions are also

3 This version is to be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2RZaalXvhIk (accessed January 14, 2023).

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being asked about the choices they involve" (Paalman, Fossati, and Masson 2021, 3). I would like to address three challenges for the film heritage archives and an opportunity, in the Scylla and Charybdis of vulnerability and plentifulness of our age. The challenges resemble the one Don Quixote takes, when charging against the windmills. But had he not been represented as such, world literature (and Orson Welles) would barely be able to remember the character...

The Film Found in La Mancha

Notoriously, Miguel de Cervantes opens his novel with a metafictional preface, where he avows that the real author of the story is an Arab historian, writing in aljamiado, Cide Hamete Benengeli, whose manuscript Cervantes retrieved. However, the physical manuscript is neither incorporated into the novel, nor shown. In fact, it doesn't exist. So what happens if the materiality of film vanishes, while the impression of total availability of digital versions triumphs? How much can we credit an ever-present digital artifact, while the access to its material source is limited or impossible? Film heritage archival institutions come into play as validation organs, through three subsequent actions.

Firstly, the "authentication" process determines whether the artifact is what it declares and/or appears to be, by surveying its internal and external evidence (Reitz 2017). Whereas the "digital enhancements of heritage materials can make them more convenient to use ... they also pose challenges to maintaining the document/object's authenticity in its traditional meaning" (Manžuch 2017, 9). Analog film heritage requires authentication referring both to completeness and materiality, in terms of the qualities of the image as implied in one format (Canosa 2001; Farinelli and Pozzi 2004). Since "certain digital restoration operations ... intervene on the form as well as the material of the analogue image" and risk erasing its historical dimension (Saba

 2022, 177), accounting for all the interventions provides users with authentication.

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Furthermore, exposing users to the materiality of sources, which archives hold and preserve, enhances the historicity of the heritage and attracts attention to the paramount function archives play in transmitting memory across generations (Lameris 2005; Flückiger 2012; Flückiger and Lameris 2019). Restorations exhibiting not solely the final outcome, but the materiality of different sources and their migration from different copies and formats into a final film, documenting the philological interventions, as is the case with the recent work on the non-fiction film *La battaglia dall'Astico al Piave* (1918) (Bellotti and Venturini 2022), channel the chances of archivism into a historical narrative. Getting to know material sources is an accident archives, artists, and audiences need to keep a sense of history.

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Aldonza or Dulcinea?

Don Quixote, in his attempt at reviving chivalry, designates a peasant celebrated for her skills in salting pork, Aldonza Lorenzo, as his lady love and renames her Dulcinea del Toboso. Therefore, in the name of inherited (although obsolete) cultural values, real persons and practices are deleted and replaced by other ones.

The digitization of film heritage can maintain the canon of national film history/ies, which shaped the work of moving image archives in their early days. Or it can engage viewers and scholars in reading the past and its repositories according to new or never asked questions. In fact, the emergence of "community archives" (Manžuch 2017) and associated issues, together with classification and access policies favoring the engagement of communities in surveying, enhancing, and circulating this heritage (Brunow 2017) is an opportunity hitting two birds with a stone. On the one hand, individual communities can create or support archives, or these latter match their needs for materials; on the other hand, communities can shed light on an array of neglected heritage (useful

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films, small gauge films, amateur films), which demand a whole different set of tools and questions for the media historian, thus expanding the scope of historical reflection and the functions archives perform (Frick 2009). These are the cases of initiatives such as *Cinematic Bologna*, which the association Home Movies organized in the Italian city to give back, through a diffused exhibition within the urban area, the amateur film heritage which citizens donated (Home Movies n.d.).

As an Epitaph…

At the end of Don Quixote, Cide Hamete Benengeli writes an epitaph: "For me alone Don Quixote was born, and I for him. He knew how to act and I how to write." In fact, archives, no matter how accidental or crazy, like the self-deluded Cervantes character, need somebody writing history. For the interest in film heritage and archives, whether these be institutional or less so, is generated when audiences are aware of the existence and function of film heritage and its archives and are therefore willing to economically support them (Lawton, Fujiwara, and Hotopp 2022). Media historians hold here a paramount function in two possible ways to accidental and professional archivists. By intermingling media literacy and public history within digital environments, they provide audiences with a framework for discovering and engaging with film heritage, making sense of a shared past and prompting historical thinking (Seixas 2013; Thorp and Persson 2020), and understanding how film heritage is experienced across times. Such endeavors have a twofold function. They offer viewers the opportunity to accidentally collate materials within a guided pathway, that is, to create their own associations within a designed environment, mitigating the randomness of the association and validating the collated sources; and they train their interest for the past, both cinematic and factual. On the other hand, scholars can operate as both counterparts of prospective archivists, driving their attention to film heritage repositories and negotiating with such institutions

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access policies and educational initiatives, as is the case for a digital toolkit generated as part and parcel of a wider research project named *Victor-E: Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration, and Reconstruction in Post-WW2 Europe*, now embedded in the portal *Historiana* (https://historiana.eu/partners/victor-e-project). In fact, whereas many institutions significantly increased modes of access and film and media literacy endeavors, there is still much work to be done in close cooperation, as recent surveys indicate (Fontaine and Simone 2017). It might be a good way to make the most of the energies and drives of accidental archivism, while not getting lost in the sense of history in La Mancha…

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