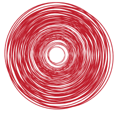
SYNOPTIQUE

Experiences of “Pastness”: Locating the Archive Effect

Jaimie Baron. *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history.* London and New York: Routledge, 2014. 200 pages.

Book review by Rachel Webb Jekanowski

Of the various formal strategies filmmakers use to represent the past, or to signal a film’s status as an historical document, using ‘found’ or archival images is probably the most recognizable. The reliance on grainy, black and white footage of a long distant past, or alternatively, on sun-bleached home movie footage that recalls one’s youth, has ascended from a mainstay of documentary cinema to the level of pop culture cliché. As this appropriation of archival and recognizably “old” footage to signify history can be found across filmmaking modes and media—including avant-garde cinema, Ken Burns documentaries, videogames like *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), and commercial television dramas such as ABC’s *The Astronaut Wives Club* (2015)[1]—our fascination with such visual traces of the past continues unabated.

Jaimie Baron, an assistant professor at the University of Alberta, seizes upon this thriving interest in archives and the audiovisual records held within them in her recent book *The Archive Effect* (2014). In it, Baron interrogates the ways in which found (or what she calls ‘appropriated’) film and video footage are used for historical and narrative purposes across an array of media, and the questions of documentary representation and historical meaning-making that theses practices raise. The linchpin of her inquiry is what Baron defines as the “archive effect.”[2] The archive effect, Baron argues, enables

[1] *The Astronaut Wives Club* is an historical television drama about the wives of the first American astronauts, nicknamed the Mercury Seven. ABC Studios launched the first season, developed by Stephanie Savage, in June 2015. The show adopts the technique of digitally compositing contemporary characters into archival news footage, popularized by *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994). By creating fictionalized ‘archival’ footage of the protagonists and intercutting it with recognizably archival imagery, and the show establishes itself as fictionalized account of the American-Soviet Space Race, while offering viewers (the majority of which did not witness these events first-hand) the experience of being ‘inserted’ into American history.
[2] Baron in fact borrows the phrase “archive effect” from Roger Hallas, who first suggested it to her at the 2007 Visible Evidence Conference in Bochum, Germany.

us to theorize how sounds and images from one time and context are appropriated by films, videos, games, and television programs from a later period in order to convey an experience of history for the viewer (Baron 11). A spectator may experience an archive effect when watching a found footage or appropriation film when she senses both a “temporal disparity” between the film’s sounds and/or images (the evident gap between the “then” of the document’s production and the “now” of the film’s production) and an “intentional disparity,” that is, the “disparity based on our perception of a previous intention ascribed to and (seemingly) inscribed within the archival document” (20-21). Because both of these experiences can be subjective, since they require the viewer to recognize multiple levels of disparity functioning at once, the archive effect is never guaranteed. Instead, it is determined by a viewer’s reception of a film; it can exist in different forms for different spectators and may change over time. By linking the archive effect to a film’s production *as well as* its reception (and by extension a viewer’s individual affective spectatorial experience), Baron cleverly re-conceptualizes the audiovisual “archival document” as an “*experience of reception,*” rather than as an object ontologically defined by “the authority of place” based on its storage location (7).

Significantly, this shift has implications for the ontology of indexical archival documents as well. The archival film document can only be “archival,” she claims, if it fosters a “*relationship* […] between particular elements of a film and the film’s viewer,” and the viewer invests it with “various evidentiary values” when repurposed into a new film (ibid). The archival document, like the archive, therefore becomes a conduit for a spectatorial “experience of pastness” (1). By shifting the archival value of an appropriated moving image or audio recording away from its point of origin (archive, attic, museum, the web) to its subjective link to the past, we are encouraged to think more critically about how appropriation films may be used to experience history.

After introducing the concept of the archive effect in her introduction and Chapter 1, “The Archive Effect,” Baron dedicates the following chapters to the ways in which filmmakers have mobilized appropriated footage from the 1990s to the early 2000s to narrativize alternative histories and even, occasionally, to fabricate them. She seeks to

theorize this titular phenomenon through a variety of different media, each of which she locates under the umbrella category of "appropriation film." Deeming "archival images" and "found footage" to be ontologically unstable categories, Baron prefers this term which, like the archive effect, depends on the viewer's recognition that a film includes images repurposed from a prior context or intended use (9). In Chapter 2, "Archival Fabrications," Baron analyzes several "mockumentaries," including *Forgotten Silver* (Peter Jackson and Costa Botes, 1995) and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), arguing that they simulate the archive effect by falsifying documentary footage. In Chapter 3, "Archival Voyeurism," Baron next examines documentaries that appropriate home movies in order to narrate highly personal historical experiences, proposing that these films further expand the definition of an archival document by transforming originally private images into public documentary evidence. Two documentaries that Baron discusses at length in this chapter are *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) and *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008), which she uses to demonstrate how the act of drawing private stories into the public eye by appropriating home movie footage can contest or complicate official histories, while also revealing a voyeuristic desire to watch these "hidden" histories.

In Chapter 4, "The Archive Affect," Baron switches her attention from appropriated images' evidentiary value to an analysis of how filmmakers use archival fragments to convey affective responses to the passing of time and the material traces of it that remain. Addressing experimental films such as *Decasia: The State of Decay* (Bill Morrison, 2002) and *okay bye-bye* (Rebecca Baron, 1998) which self-consciously explore the archive, Baron describes the affective experience of viewing these films, which seek a feeling of history over its meaning, as the archive *affect.* Her terminology becomes somewhat slippery in this chapter, as the archive *affect*—which she aligns with a feeling of nostalgia for the unreachable past—is in fact a type of archive *effect*. In her last chapter, Baron turns to what could be described as the elephant in the room in any contemporary study of archives: the digital archive. Addressing the shift from analog methods of archival storage and record keeping to digital databases—and the

parallel movement from celluloid to digital cinema—she proposes that digital archives offer a very different type of archive effect. This digital archive effect encourages the spectator to reflect upon the ways in which digital platforms (including video games and web-based interactive films) mediate our experience of history in the present.

The most significant contribution of *The Archive Effect* is the link between archive studies and reception studies that Baron establishes through her study of the affective experiences of viewing archival, found, and appropriated audiovisual documents. In doing so, this book aims to fuse these fields to scholarship on affect and phenomenology, all within the larger context of film and media studies. *The Archive Effect* therefore sits comfortably next to preexisting found footage and experimental film scholarship, including Jay Leyda's *Films Beget Films* (1964), William Wees's *Recycled Images* (1993), Catherine Russell's *Experimental Ethnography* (1999), and Jeffrey Skoller's *Shadows, Specters, Shards* (2005), as well as documentary film scholarship (including that of Stella Bruzzi, Michael Renov, and Bill Nichols). Furthermore, by drawing heavily upon Vivian Sobchack's work on phenomenology and history and Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Baron engages with subjective experiences of film viewing to connect affect to memory studies and historiography.

Despite the important contributions *The Archive Effect* makes to the study of historical film and historiography within popular culture, the book succumbs to a level of generality in its theoretical framing that at times weakens Baron's arguments. One troubling concern that Baron never successfully resolves, for instance, is whether the concept of the archive has become evacuated of meaning following the "repositioning of the archival from the authority of place to the authority of experience" (10). The archive, Baron states in her introduction, "is the point of access to what counts as evidence of past events" (ibid). Her theorization of the archive purposefully expands upon more stringent definitions of archives as institutional repositories so as to include non-official or personal storage sites (such as a family's home movie collection) as equal reservoirs for historical experience. As YouTube mash-ups, digital databases, pop culture imagery, and other not-strictly "archival" documents become increasingly recognized within

academia and North American culture as documentary traces, Baron’s commitment tore-articulating what constitutes an archival document is clearly germane. At the same time, however, *The Archive Effect* does not always attend to the historical, material, and cultural specificities of these disparate archival entities. In Chapter 5, “The Digital Archive Effect,” for example, she gestures towards examples of the digital archive—suggesting YouTube, web-based database films, even the whole of the Internet—yet she avoids concretely defining this term. This becomes problematic because in order to theorize a distinction between the archive effects produced by “the material archive and the digital archive” (141), one must first understand what the digital archive actually *is*. If we are to stretch the definition of the digital archive as wide as to include any and all digital structures that may collect or categorize data, what types of specific claims about the digital archive effect can we even make once specificities between digital organizational structures are removed? Expanding the digital archive as broadly as to include all digital databases provides very little traction to theorize particular digital structures or digital archive effects.

Finally, by implying that the digital archive is in fact distinct from the “material archive” (that is to say, pre-digital, analog forms of archival storage), Baron erroneously casts the digital archive as being immaterial. Although she acknowledges the structural and ontological importance of digital archives’ code, she neglects to seriously theorize digital archives’ materiality: the hardware that supports this code, servers’ energy consumption and carbon footprint, computer technologies’ commercially-motivated planned obsolescence, the human labor and social infrastructure that sustains these systems, etc. Given the parallel proliferation of digital databases and born-digital audiovisual documents *and* massive funding cuts to public-sector archives across Canada (where Baron works) and the United States, the material differences between archival structures and political economy that governs them cannot in good faith be ignored. The final chapter, as well as *The Archive Effect* as a whole, could have benefited greatly from a sustained discussion of these material concerns and their potential influences on the production and longevity of digitized and born-digital records. In order to understand digital appropriation films’ potential effects on our experiences of history, it is necessary

to paint a more complex picture of the interactions between commerce, politics, and culture that enables the creation, circulation and reception of these films, in addition to the archival effects that arise from them.

A second serious limitation of *The Archive Effect* is Baron’s reliance on American films from the 1990s and early 2000s as her case studies for the book. Although she seeks to establish a broad theoretical framework for thinking through spectators’ reception and affective responses to archival documents, by limiting the geographical and historical focus of her study to contemporary Western culture she does not offer any evidence to support her claim that the archive effect operates “across national and linguistic boundaries” (174). Baron is quite transparent about the subjective nature of the archive effect, pointing out that it is not universally experienced when viewing appropriation films. Nevertheless, by frequently skirting around the national, racial, and gender distinctions within audiences that help shape our experiences as spectators, Baron presumes a universal philosophy of history in her readings of these films.[3] Fortunately, Baron recognizes this concern in her conclusion, pointing out that the historical and local specificity of the archive effect does remain to be theorized (175). Given the relatively truncated nature of this study—spanning a quick two hundred pages—the reader is nevertheless left with a sense that Baron’s theorization of the archive effect does not go far enough. Even with these shortcomings, however, Jaimie Baron’s study offers scholars and graduate students alike a productive tool for theorizing how we experience both history and the archive through appropriation films in the twenty-first century.

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[3]In Chapter 4, Baron offers an important reading of Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), and the ways in which her film visualizes lesbians’ and African Americans’ absences from most official archives. However, Baron does not extend her analysis of racial and gender politics within the film to an analysis of its potential audiences.

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