Archive Trouble

International symposium, University of Zurich

6 to 8 June 2024

Implicitly or explicitly, archives structure most of our research. We deal with film prints, DVD or BluRay collections, streaming services; with paper documents in different forms, and data of varying formats. All this material needs to be stored and preserved – sometimes it is easily accessible, sometimes hidden behind real or virtual walls. The majority of films, texts, and other media that we encounter either stem from archives of diverse nature or will one day enter an archive. The long tradition of compilation film and found footage shows that films themselves can adopt archival functions by organizing, reconfiguring, and passing on historical material into the future.

The character of archives is manifold and heterogeneous. On the one hand, we are faced with traditional archives with long histories, often established with a national focus (like the Cinémathèque Française, the Deutsche Kinemathek, the Cinémathèque Suisse, or the British Film Institute). On the other hand, there are collections of para-national disposition that follow other criteria to select and preserve (like Anthology Film Archives, or Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art). The advent of digital repositories and the circulation of images and texts on the internet has also seen the emergence of vast online collections in the form of shadow libraries or informal film collections (ubuweb, karagarga etc.). This begs the question of whether the term "archive" is still the right term to characterize their structure and function or whether the situation is too troubled for the archive to stick to its conceptual definitions.

In terms of methodology, digital tools to organize, sort, and address text and image have also put traditional forms of archival work to the test. Historically, the archive is a European invention, much in line with imperial notions of power and administration. However, attention has recently shifted to "other archives" in the Global South with very different affordances and requirements. Often entangled in colonial histories and economically working under precarious conditions, these archives challenge our

notions of archival security and persistence, asking us to rethink the eurocentric limitations of our perspectives.

In this complex and volatile situation, the two-day symposium hopes to bring together specific case studies, inviting reflections on concrete archival research as well as contributions from the realm of archive theory. It is aimed specifically at researchers pursuing PhD projects but also welcomes more established researchers and experts in the field to foster a productive discourse.

Some of the questions that could be considered are:

- What are the current challenges of working with archives? Where does "Archive trouble" start? Who troubles whom?
- How does the dynamic between preserving, providing access, and curating change, and how can the insecurities be made productive?
- Which critical histories do official and unofficial archives accommodate, and how can these counter-histories be activated?
- How do non-human actors participate in archiving processes and in working with archives?
- How do archives participate in and intervene in today's circulation of images?

Some of the dichotomies evoked by archives and their specificities are: order vs. messiness, informality vs. formality, digital vs. analog, searching vs. finding, structure vs. contingency, professional vs. "accidental archivism" (Didi Cheeka), official historiography vs. "potential histories" (Ariella Aïsha Azoulay).

Please submit proposals (approximately 500 words) for approximately 20-minute presentations and a brief biographical note to volker.pantenburg@uzh.ch by December 31, 2023. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered. Conference languages are English, French, and German.

The symposium is organized by Prof. Dr. Volker Pantenburg (UZH). It is part of the interuniversity doctoral program Visual Dispositifs: Film, Photography, and Other Media, University of Zurich and University of Lausanne. It is funded by the Graduate School of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UZH.