

Book Review

Nezih Erdoğan and Ebru Kayaalp, eds. *Exploring Past Images in a Digital Age: Reinventing the Archive*. Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

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In November 2018, İstanbul Şehir University hosted an international event called “Forgetting the Archive” to celebrate the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism’s launch of a digital film archive featuring mostly early silent films. Presentations at this event formed the basis for a collection of articles titled *Exploring Past Images in a Digital Age: Reinventing the Archive*. As stated by the editors, the book was “submitted to the publisher during the toughest days of the COVID-19 pandemic” (Erdoğan and Kayaalp, 17). Two contributors, Gustav Deutsch and Thomas Elsaesser, unexpectedly passed away before the completion of the book; they are represented by an interview with Deutsch and a reprint of a previous article by Elsaesser. Despite these considerable challenges, the edited collection presents useful additions to scholarship on early film and film archives. It is the latest publication in the “Framing Film” series by Eye Filmmuseum and the University of Amsterdam Press. This series, which has promoted discussions about archival theory and practice since 2009, is aimed towards both the academic research community and archival practitioners.¹ The book itself is written primarily from the perspective of film scholars and filmmakers. *Exploring Past Images in a Digital Age* is fundamentally about the challenges facing film archives in the late 2010s and early 2020s. As the editors state in the Introduction: “It is a call, in other words, to ‘forget’ the conventional ways of approaching film archives and to embrace new frontiers in film studies, hence ‘reinventing’ in the book’s title” (11).

The collection is organized into three parts. The first section, “New Frontiers? Between Absence and Presence in Archives,” delves into questions of copyright, representation, and early films. Ian Christie raises timely questions about copyright and film archives, effectively outlining how the politics of copyright have shaped the development of film archives in Europe and North America and how it continues to

impact the accessibility of films. Peyami Çelikan shifts the geographic focus to analyze Orientalist tropes in early travel films through their depictions of women and cityscapes within the Ottoman Empire. Making the argument that “YouTube is not a film archive, and it will never become one” (58), Serkan Şavk discusses the history of Yeşilçam and its current presentation on YouTube. Nurçin İleri draws on her experience as a historian working in the role of an archivist for Boğaziçi University; her article explores how personal archives can speak to broader histories, using as an example the private collections of two intellectuals associated with the University.

The second section, “The God of Small Films, Or What You Have Found is Not What You Have Lost,” centers primarily on the topic of found footage. The section begins with a reprint of an essay by Thomas Elsaesser where he explores the ethical implications of appropriating found footage. Ege Berensel expertly weaves academic theory with personal anecdotes to explain the specific cultural context of salvaging Turkish 8 mm home movies. In memory of Gustav Deutsch, Claudy Op den Kamp publishes a 2010 interview with Deutsch where he discussed his personal experience as a filmmaker using archives, including copyright issues and the sometimes conflicting needs of archives and filmmakers. Through a close study of *The Atomic Cafe*, Sibley Labandeira reflects on the reuse and reappropriation of historical footage well before the internet.

The third section, “What the Prints (Don’t) Tell,” provides more holistic discussions of film archives as institutions. Drawing from her experience as an archivist, Fumiko Tsuneishi provides a comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of the challenges of digitization and choosing what to preserve—as well as what to lose. Nico de Klerk argues for the importance of heritage institutions and archives providing key context and secondary provenance for early films as a matter of public accountability and accessibility. Rashmi Devi Sawhney proposes the concept of the “uncontained archive” to account for incomplete, dispersed archives, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

The following topics are woven throughout the collection: colonialism and Orientalism; ‘non-traditional’ and ‘non-Western’ histories of film and film archives; preservation, restoration, and digitization; copyright, ownership, and legal issues; personal and private collections, ranging from fonds about individuals to home movies on 8mm film; filmmakers’ use of found footage; film formats (nitrate, 35 mm, 8 mm); and academic analyses of individual films. As might be expected from the intellectual origins of the book, the subject of early films and the history of early cinema is the most prevalent and recurring theme; on this front, it provides many important and useful additions to scholarship. One of the best contributions of this volume is its varied geographic scope, spanning the Ottoman Empire, India, Japan, Austria, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and more.

The chapters are primarily in discussion with a classic canon of scholars—for example, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Walter Benjamin—though there is also some good engagement with recent work by Jaimie Baron.² At times, the volume reflects a disconnect between film studies and archival scholarship, the latter of which has provided extensive discussions about the chal-

lenges of digitization, accessibility, and social media.³ It would be helpful to read this work alongside recent work on platforms and political economy; for example, when considering the presence of historical films on platforms like YouTube.⁴

Despite featuring as one of the title's keywords, "digital" sometimes feels like an afterthought in the volume, often appearing in the introduction and final thoughts of chapters but not centrally featured in the main argument. Some authors also express significant pessimism and antagonism towards the digital: Christie expresses concerns about archival relevance "amid digital superabundance and excess" (33); Elsaesser regrets the "de-professionalization" of film editing through the increased accessibility of video editing software and characterizes video sharing sites such as YouTube as "narcissistic self-exposure" (109); and Berensel memorably declared, "I am horrified by the digitized future" (133).

This collection is at its best when examining specific contexts through a narrow scope, using the personal anecdotes and experiences of the author. Two particular standouts are "The Infra-ordinary Archive: On Turkish 8mm Home Movies" by Ege Berensel and "Preservation and Resignation: A Study of Survival" by Fumiko Tsuneishi. Berensel provides a vivid cultural context for the salvaging of 8mm home movies in Turkey, providing details like the various groups that sort through refuse, the networks of trade and purchasing in 8mm film, and regional variation in home movies (e.g. the tendency toward outdoor shots in Istanbul and interior shots in Ankara). These personal anecdotes are threaded with academic theory, providing compelling analysis of the capitalist constructions of "amateur" and "professional" as well as patriarchal structures in home videos. His exemplary culturally specific analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of film preservation and the study of home movies more broadly. Likewise, Tsuneishi draws upon her personal experiences with film digitization and preservation to provide a comprehensive, eloquent, and thoughtful analysis. She provides a nuanced critique of digitization workflows using specific examples from her own career as an archivist, arguing that "a digital restoration is nothing more than an accidental outcome that relies on the technology that happened to be available at the time" (193). Her theoretical discussion of loss and preservation is perfectly balanced with practical suggestions for workflow.

Overall, the book's contributions are framed through the perspectives of film scholars and filmmakers. It may be usefully incorporated into a curriculum with other publications from archive studies, digital humanities, contemporary media theory, and platform studies to help build interdisciplinary bridges and address the key challenges facing film archives in the modern age.

Notes:

¹ "Framing Film," n.d.

² Baron, 2014; Baron 2020; Benjamin, 1988a; Benjamin 1988b; Deleuze, 1993; Derrida, 1996; Hall, 2001; Said, 1978; Said, 1983.

³ See: Benardou, Champion, Dallas, and Hughes (eds), 2018; Cameron and Kenderdine (eds), 2007; Cowan and Rault, 2018; McKinney, 2020; Sherratt, 2020; Sherratt, 2019.

⁴ For example: Burgess and Green, 2018; Cifor, 2021; Gillespie, 2018; Hoffmann, 2017; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2022.

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