

Book Review

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Vinzenz Hediger, eds.
*Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with
 Remnants of the Past*. Meson Press, 2023.

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Louis Lumière famously declared in 1895 that “cinema was an invention without any future” (13). Yet, as time passed, Chris Darke astutely remarked that if cinema were deemed a medium “without a future,” then video art would find itself as one “without a history,” specifically with the incorporation of cinema into the realm of the art museum and audiovisual archive (2001, 172). Another twenty years passed, Stefanie Schulte Strathaus and Vinzenz Hediger continue to challenge the concept of cinema by asserting the ongoing change of the archive. Despite various shifts, including the resurgence of artist films, amateur filmmaking, personal footage within traditional cinema spaces, and the emergence of personal cinema fuelling an archive fever, the fundamental question persists: How does the future of cinema take form through accidental archiving?

On this note, the boundaries of cinema have been continually challenged and expanded, evolving from short clips into entire film studio systems and entertainment consumption and further transforming into a medium for artistic creation, shifting from the black box into the white cube, or other screening sites and internet platforms. Similarly, film archives have been thought of as repositories of film history and the past of cinema research. Our imaginations and conceptualizations of archives are constantly being renewed and challenged, particularly as both film and archives gradually “institutionalize” over time. In the past, we asked, “What is cinema?” Now, we ask, “Where is cinema?” Such questions also arise about the archive: What is archive, and where is archive?

Accidental Archivism: Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past aims to explore the aspects of archiving in film practice that have been overlooked in mainstream historical contexts, probing forgotten footage and interpretations to facilitate

curation as an archival practice. It features insights from more than 40 filmmakers, curators, and film theorists who explore the expansion and ontology of film and archive, covering topics such as nationality, transnationality, decolonization, digitality, the spatial and gender politics of film, and activism. Through this multifaceted exploration, the aim is to reconstruct a fragmented and accidental film culture. The unpredictability of the archive prompts us to reconsider archival practices and encourages the development of new archival models.

With the expansion of contemporary film practices, cinema no longer possesses a singular fixed meaning, though it never did. The transformation of film indicates a change in today's audiovisual archive; cinema's diversification encourages us to consider that the archive may have changed from what it was. *Accidental Archivism* takes on a constellation-like form, bringing together writings on the accidental nature of archives, interviews, essays, and even manifestos that encourage a reflective, penitential approach to archiving. The expansion of archives, documents, and remnants of the past helps us understand contemporary practices and serves as a gateway to a new constellation, where archives coexist with elements that were once foreign to them. This constellation is emblematic of a significant shift in the concept of archives. Like the branching nodes of memory, the history buried underground sprouts anew under the sunlight, encouraging its readers to ponder how accidental archiving has been mobilized into contemporary film culture and history.

The book unequivocally explores the concept of accidental archiving through five diverse themes. The first, "Archival Accidents," rigorously examines the unplanned deviations that fundamentally shape artistic practices and film historiography, asserting that the archive has transcended its traditional role as mere institution of heritage. The subsequent sections, "New Archive Spaces and Places," "New Cinephiles: Beyond the Manspreading Machine," and "New Cinekinship," provide a powerful re-evaluation of cinephiles from the uncompromising perspective of accidental archivists. Finally, "The Vast Domain of Unseen Films: Mapping the Cinema We Never Knew" robustly focuses on envisioning potential archives and the future for films that are not yet secured.

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, curator of the Arsenal Film Institute and Video Art, revisits the history of art and film, examining the distinction between art and film as well as the divide between commercial and independent cinema. In an earlier essay, she refers to this as an "in-between" space, exploring this space by emphasizing the interplay between film programming, curating, and montage, asserting that a program inherently requires at least two films to embody this "in-betweenness" (2004, 8). Furthermore, she posits that the cinematic experience extends well beyond the confines of the traditional movie theatre. The concept of montage, often employed by theorists of urban modernity to capture the fragmented nature of everyday life, also informs her reflections on film and can be expanded to include her thoughts on the archive. She argues that film memory and experience are not restricted to the cinema. In her chapter in *Accidental Archivism*, she further explores the notion of accidental archiving, which creates an in-between state between image and archive, as well as between institutions and collections, highlighting the role of human agen-

cy and memory. The artists Gaby Babić, Karola Gramann, and Heide Schlüpmann, interviewed in the book, support this idea by asserting that “the audience is the archive” (188). In this way, this notion of contingency and the supplementation of history and memory enriches our understanding of film and its future potential.

Film scholar and co-editor Vinzenz Hediger argues that YouTube represents today’s archive. He refers to Okwui Enwezor’s argument on post-coloniality and the representation of the “visible others” under an empire’s rule. Hediger points out that the limitation of an archive can be seen in how the colonizers and subsequent elite segments portray visible others during the pursuit of decolonization. He questions how the true multitude can manifest in such a complex relationship and suggests that the archival mode is a border that needs to be crossed. Hediger also states that, unlike traditional archives, YouTube acts as a “window-shopping platform” and disperses the curatorial authority of archivists to allow for multitudes of different stories to be showcased.¹ Similarly, Erika Balsom’s chapter, “From Singular to Plural,” also maintains the importance of encountering archival materials online. She asks, “How many excellent repertory series of recent years would never have taken place were it not for encounters that first occurred online? Things have changed. With the flood of files, a changed notion of ‘the archive’ comes into being—a *cinéma imaginaire*, to revise André Malraux’s formulation” (192). She advocates for the collaboration between archivists and scholars to explore the evolution and expansion of archives, promoting diverse meanings and an inclusive approach to archival studies.

Intriguingly, the idea that an archive serves as an arbitrary, petrified, or colonial institution can also be glimpsed in Nigerian filmmaker and archivist Didi Cheeka’s interview in the book. His statement revolves around one question: How do we challenge and broaden the practice of working with institutional archives—especially regarding access? He thinks archival institutions are stymied by official funding and state apparatus that “lack the political will to confront the challenges of contemporary practices of memory” (68), while memory has become a booming topic in filmmaking. He notes that history was recently banned as a standalone subject in Nigerian classrooms, necessitating a parallel mode of accidental archivism in order to access Nigerian history. Film archivists often uncover forgotten pieces of history through fieldwork, research, and curation. For instance, in a later discussion, Cheeka reflects on the way the Angolan Civil War was reframed from the colonizers’ perspective within Portuguese archives (419). These overlooked or under-described pieces of history, often casualties of national conflicts or remnants of totalitarianism, seem to exist like ghost states. Discovering these forgotten memories is often a matter of chance, which is why accidental archiving is so important.

Hieyoon Kim’s essay on South Korean artists Jang Minseung and Jung Jae Il’s video art installation *Round and Around*, commissioned by the Korean Film Archive to commemorate the Gwangju Uprising, is another interesting example.² After South Korea democratized in the 1990s, although many archives have been opened to the public in the past decade and the Gwangju Uprising is extensively reported and commemorated in the media every May, this assembled democratization narrative has neutralized the suffering of the victims. Therefore, these two artists went over

the dusty footage from the state and public archives, looking for what they refer to as off-the-mainstream, the minor histories outside the cinematic frame that are not presented. The artists' use of the alterity of cinema and archive prompts us to inspect the historical fissure of one traumatic event, paving the way for lost memory.

To reflect on Stefanie Schulte Strathaus' initial concept for the book, "the audience is archive" (188), once again, memory itself is a kind of politics. Both film and archive serve as public spheres. The significance of memory and that of cinema intertwine and merge in the archive, randomly generating various possibilities—those not yet unearthed, rejected by the hegemony of the film machine and national narratives, decayed by time, restored and reborn, or still existing in the darkness waiting for a gaze. It is about the infinite accidents of moving images, from being filmed to being forgotten, found, and even stored in the audience's memory.

In retrospect, how can we reconsider the remnants of the past and the future envisioned ahead? The archivist Laura Millar reminds us to look to "the creators of those tools—the holders of those memories—for guidance in their interpretation, mediation, and articulation, so that we may bring those individual memories into the light and share them for the benefit of all members of society" (2006, 104). *Accidental Archivism*, to some extent, is more about the forgotten multitude, and it raises the important point that archives are not necessarily neutral. By systematically collecting, studying, restoring, and discovering materials, it explores how archives continue to exist today and how these practices can alter our perspective and experience of film.

The otherness of film and archive, and the trajectory of history, as the central cores of this book, inspire the reader to contemplate fragments of history, within which we see the shared traumas of humanity—the dispersals, the endurance, the torments, and the inequalities that exist in the world. It helps expand the possibilities of memory, soothing the restless souls burdened by suffering. In this regard, the archival turn helps us speculate about the future of cinema. In the act of watching, the observer traverses an imagined path, crossing through different times and places. This notion is related to the illusions created by cinema, but unlike the window imposed by cinematic realism, this experience involves encounters that are more disjointed. The discourse surrounding cinema is an ongoing dialectic, much like the evolving nature of archiving and forgetting. The future of cinema is intricately linked with incidental archival practices, especially in light of the fluid global political and economic landscape influenced by geopolitics and the post-pandemic era.

This book compiles various current approaches and discussions on the experience of image databases. Rather than providing a single definition or a methodology in archival studies, it examines the politics of the archive, focusing on the histories excluded from the database. In this digital age, images are widely distributed across various online platforms and spaces. Public spheres such as art galleries, museums, film festivals, site-specific screenings, and archives further underscore the democratic and activist essence inherent in cinema and archiving, rendering them increasingly significant. These intersections serve as pivotal points in broadening the scope of cinematic and archival discourse, enhancing individual and collective memory, and navigating the complexities of cinema and archive identity. *Accidental archivism* in-

volves rediscovering those that are present yet do not appear in the form of present things; it serves as a new possibility of researching cinema or producing cinema with the uncertainty of the past and future, even the unidirectional nature of memory.

Notes

¹ In the original text, Vinzenz Hediger refers to YouTube as “the shop window mode” (59).

² The Gwangju Uprising was a democratization event in South Korea in 1980. The government at the time used police forces to massacre the people to suppress their protests. The South Korean film industry has since recreated this event into many films, such as *26 Years* (2012), *Fork Lane* (2017), *A Taxi Driver* (2017), and many others.

References

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