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# Migrating Archives of Reality

## *Programming, Curating, and Appropriation of Non-Fiction Film*

The digital turn, which has created new modes of access and circulation for films, underscores and amplifies what has been the fate of non-fiction film since the beginning of its existence — it has always been, and continues to be, a migrating archive of reality. While non-fiction films featured prominently in early cinema programs, the ascendancy of the feature-length fiction film as the dominant format of distribution and exhibition since the 1910s has rendered the position of non-fiction film in mainstream movie theatres contested and malleable, both restricted and supported by various legislative measures. At the same time, an intensive international circulation of non-fiction films developed beyond the cinema, through the exchange of newsreel shots, the exhibition of non-fiction films in circuits of alternative/nontheatrical distribution (notably educational, etc.), and later at festivals. Non-fiction footage also found its place in both documentaries and fiction films, etc. Driven by the massive digitization of cultural heritage and possibilities of content sharing platforms and new streaming services, which enable non-fiction film content to constantly migrate across venues, platforms, but also cultures, geopolitical barriers, artworks etc., these movements intensified in the digital media ecology.

The digitization of cultural heritage not only means new and more widely available possibilities of sharing of the knowledge, but also sets new power hierarchies of memory regarding the chosen strategies.<sup>1)</sup> As the digital environment has become the primary arena for the production, distribution and consumption of audiovisual content, the policy of digitisation and access to digitised cultural heritage has become, among other things, a key tool for contemporary engagement with the past.<sup>2)</sup> At the same time, both archiving methods and filmmaking, especially the practice of found footage, have adapted and met

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1) Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, *The Politics of Mass Digitization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019).

2) Andrew Hoskins, ed., *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition* (Routledge: New York, 2018).

these new challenges.<sup>3)</sup> Along with these developments, it has become crucial to reopen questions that documentary film theorists had already asked,<sup>4)</sup> namely, what does it mean to appropriate images of the past in new works, what new meanings do new interpretive frameworks of remixes, compilation documentaries or found footage films give to the original footage? Jaimie Barone refers to such films collectively as appropriation films, which, according to her, are “those films that, by appropriating previously recorded textual material, give the viewer the experience of an ‘archival effect’ — the feeling that certain sounds and/or images in these films come from a different time and served a different function.”<sup>5)</sup> As in Baron’s definition, the terms “recycled images,”<sup>6)</sup> “travelling images,”<sup>7)</sup> “remix,”<sup>8)</sup> and the name of our issue (“migrating archives”) are related linguistically to movement, to change, which must be taken into account if we want to understand the new conditions of communication, new political and ethical challenges,<sup>9)</sup> and the new relationships that arise between the present and the past, between the text and its viewer.

As they increasingly appear in (but also often disappear again from) online archives, channels, virtual exhibitions, social media, YouTube etc., non-fiction films can be easily appropriated by artists, fans, and memory communities. Similarly, as the established power differentials between official and private collections change, works and topics which were hitherto barred from view or even forbidden can now become visible. The push towards mass digitization and public access to historical materials thus also offers new avenues for decanonization and decolonization. However, practices of digitization, online programming, digital curation, appropriation (including colorization of black and white archival footage), and sharing, open up new spaces and layers of meaning. Moreover, they also alter and sometimes overwrite the original or historical meaning of non-fiction films, with significant epistemic, political, and ethical consequences. In particular, the new modes of digital access carry the danger of misuses or misunderstandings of the historical content (and in some cases also of the form, aesthetics, and the materiality) of non-fiction film. Thus, the digital circulation of non-fiction films contributes to both the consolidation and the disintegration of public spaces for debate, and as such, it calls for responsible and sustainable curatorial practices based on thorough contextualization.

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- 3) Giovanna Fossati, “Found Footage Filmmaking, Film Archiving and New Participatory Platforms,” in *Found Footage: Cinema Exposed*, eds. Marente Bloemheuvel, Giovanna Fossati, and Jaap Guldmond (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 177–184.
  - 4) Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 12; Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 29.
  - 5) Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2014).
  - 6) William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993).
  - 7) Anna Dahlgren, *Travelling Images: Looking across the Borderlands of Art, Media and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
  - 8) Ioana Literat, “Make, Share, Review, Remix: Unpacking the Impact of the Internet on Contemporary Creativity,” *Convergence* 25, no. 5–6 (2019), 1168–1184.
  - 9) Jaimie Baron, *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

This special issue is based on an online conference of the same name, organized in 2021 as part of the international research project ViCTOR-E (Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration, and Reconstruction in Post WWII Europe, [www.victor-e.eu](http://www.victor-e.eu)).<sup>10)</sup> Since the issue of migrating archives is related to the issues of digitization, accessibility and valorization of archive collections of non-fiction films, and since the aforementioned project contributes to the migration of films by creating an online exhibition and making (newly) digitized films available on the European Film Gateway, we also include in this issue a roundtable led by Rossella Catanese with representatives of several European film archives, who collaborated with the researchers and in the discussion assess the situation of accessing non-fiction films and the possibilities that academic research brings for cataloguing or contextualization of archive collections.

The essays included in this issue approach the idea of migrating archives of reality from two key perspectives. The first emphasizes the role of technological conditionality of image circulation, the second asks about the reasons and consequences of the appropriation of found footage in both historical and contemporary audiovisual culture. Jiří Anger takes the digitalisation of the films of the pioneer of Czech cinema, Jan Křiženecký, as the starting point of his analysis and in the text, which also includes a videographic essay entitled *The First Frames of Czech Cinema* (Jiří Anger and Adéla Kudlová, 2021), he reflects on the challenges of curation of ephemeral film artefacts in the digital era. In a historical study of a particular cultural-political movement, Amrita Biswas foregrounds the role of the film format (specifically Super 8 in her case) as a technological condition for the development of alternative audiovisual culture in India in the 1980s. The following three essays focus on the issue of found footage. Karol Jozwiak examines the films of Michał Waszynski from the period just after World War II and discusses their use of wartime found footage. Through production and distribution analysis, he seeks to highlight the broader cultural and political background of the films' production and reception between Poland and Italy and their role in the diplomatic tactics of the end of the Second and the beginning of the Cold War. For Zachariah Anderson, a key topic of interest is *The Future Is Behind You* (2004), in which Abigail Child uses family film footage from the 1930s to reflect in an experimental way on private history or constructing gender identities. Characterizing Child's practice as that of a historian on the one hand, and as one of fictionalization and intrusive editing on the other, Anderson is primarily interested in the signifying dimension of the various techniques of intervening in the source material. Like Anderson, Vladimir Rosas-Salazar uses the comparison of a filmmaker to a historian to analyse contemporary Chilean documentaries based on a footage of home videos from the 1980s and 1990s. He adopts and develops the concepts of historians Carl Ginzburg (microhistory) and Rudolf Dekker (ego-documents) to understand the meaning of personal videos in the memory of Chilean society. The special issue of *Iluminace*, linked to the theme Migrating Archives of Reality, thus seeks to highlight and historicize a broader register of practices that, alongside the production of found footage films, can be understood as key parameters of the circulation of non-fiction film images. Taking the example of the 1980s India, it reminds

10) The conference archive, including videos of individual contributions as well as a recording of debates is available at: Migrating Archives, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://migrating-archives.com/en>.

us that the movement of images is materially and technologically determined and can lead to the birth of alternative cultural-political networks; similarly, through the example of digitization of Jan Křídenecký's films, it does not neglect the crucial role played in contemporary culture by the politics of programming and strategies of curating (archival) digital content.

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