USES OF AUDIOVISUAL HERITAGE

FROM EXPERTISE TO PERSONALIZATION

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1 Introduction

What are people doing with this stuff?

That was the starting question I had when I began with the CADEAH project, and the one that guided me throughout my work over the past several years. As discussed in the Editorial to this special issue, this project was designed to follow various initiatives to digitize and "make accessible" European audio-visual heritage, something that has become a priority for archives and other organizations of late. With this material available, however, comes the question of use. What happens to it once it can be seen?

In an age where repurposing and reuse are so common as to be ubiquitous[1], this is an important question. Accessible doesn't only mean viewable, but appropriatiable - able to be taken and put to use, rearranged and restructured. In the contemporary age, we cannot assume that the traditional and accepted meaning of a particular piece of material will be maintained. The public, in all its creativity and variation, will have their own take.

This was the starting point of my research. While surveying all of contemporary archival use by the public was far beyond the scope of something I could do, I managed to hit on two varied examples of archival appropriation – "vaporwar" military remix videos and the archival practices of Eurovision fandom. Both groups are heavily reliant on archives for their practices and sense of self. Both use these materials in ways that might seem strange or confusing. In this, they present challenges to the idea of what audiovisual heritage, and its storage and accessibility, is for.

And yet, they are perhaps not quite as strange as thought. These are cultures of archival appropriation, but what I will discuss here is how that also makes them cultures of expertise – where understanding this material and showing this understanding are crucial to its appropriation. In this, the way that archives are used in these cultures is thus not necessarily so different than archives have long been used. The new users of this archival material are just as interested in knowledge as any other. What my research has shown me is that archival use and reuse encourages a culture of expertise, but in a way that cannot always be controlled or anticipated. That is the challenge for archives, but also an indication that what they do is more valued – and valuable – than ever.

2 Archives in the Age of Remix

As Terry Cook argues, archival practice has traditionally been built around a concept of evidence. Archives from the first idea of them being archives "have traditionally been about acquiring, describing, and preserving documents as evidence, protecting their impartiality through the archivists' self-conscious stance of neutrality and objectivity."[2] Their purpose was to maintain this evidence, to make sure that it could be traced and confirmed, and that it would be named and labelled in a way that could validate it. While archives and archivists have continually questioned what, precisely, this means, and whether this stance of "impartiality" could or should be achieved, this idea of "evidence" maintains. The archive therefore can, and should, be consulted to see what actually happened in a situation, to prove provenance and accuracy of information. This evidence can then be a source of knowledge for scholars, creating a culture of expertise around archives and what is contained in them.

The contemporary era has brought challenges to this evidence-based model of archives, not only in terms of discussions around what should and can be stored in them[3] but in terms of what this material is really for. This is particularly true for audiovisual archives, as the articles in this special issue discuss. As Abigail De Kosnik discusses, "[a]t present, each media commodity becomes, at the instant of its release, an archive to be plundered, an original to be memorized, copied, and manipulated – a starting point or springboard for receiver's creativity, rather than an end unto itself."[4] The idea that archives are as much about using material as they are about storing material has come to the fore in recent years. Advances in consumer technology that allow private individuals to download, manipulate, and transform media mean that, as De Kosnik suggests, consulting it is only the starting point. Archival material, and audiovisual material specifically, is something to be used, manipulated, even plundered – rather than just used as evidence.

De Kosnik refers to this as "archontic production"[5] and sees it as one of the major forces shaping the past decade or so of media. It is not only possible but encouraged for many to make their own media out of existing media. This raises questions for the evidence-based, expertise model of archives. If this material is used as the starting point of new productions, what does that mean for the traditional archival focus on accuracy and accountability? How will this material be interpreted when taken out of its context within the archive and distributed elsewhere, particularly the ad-hoc commercial structures of YouTube and other video streaming sites.[6]? And, perhaps just as worrying, do those that appropriate this material for their own works care even care about what they're using?

It is in this environment that CADEAH was developed. Remix and its potentials were a big part of what I as the ethnographic, user-focused researcher was meant to focus on, and the first aspect of the work that I focused on was an exploration of contemporary remix as a term.[7] The public element of "accessibility," like all situations involving audiences and, indeed, people, adds a level of unpredictability for audiovisual archives. On the one hand, there is a great deal of excitement around what audiences can do and how they might reinvigorate and add new context to archives. On the other, remix as both a concept and the actual works produced means a (potential) loss of control for archivists over what this material is and means. It was from this understanding of the stakes that I started to investigate.

3 War and Pyrotechnics

My first case came from a friend – he told me about these "tank synth" videos he liked to watch, where footage of military exercises was set to electronic music. This led me to discover "vaporwar," a YouTube micro-genre where creators give military footage a vaporwave[8] makeover, changing it from straightforward documentary to music video. Fascinated, I spent time exploring the works and the subculture that made them, discovering that they were made, essentially, as fanvids: for military enthusiasts by military enthusiasts, much as more traditional fanvids are made by

fans of television shows for other fans.[9] Creators recut and edit the footage they find to enhance the visual appeal of these militaries – usually Cold War-era, which they seem to agree looks better – and share them with others, showcasing the militaries as well as the electronic music they find and their own video-editing skills. I discuss it as a form of participatory militainment, one that makes the subtext of commercial militainment text – that militaries, all militaries, are worth it for the spectacle they provide. My colleagues on the historical side of the project always found this understandably odd[10], but it does highlight what can happen to archival material as it becomes publicly accessible. Those that seek it out have their own interests in why they do so, and it isn't always as positive as archivists imagine.

From this point, I wanted contrast, and I turned to an interest of mine – The Eurovision Song Contest. With nearly 70 years of performances, there is a considerable amount of archival footage, most of which is generally available. This availability came to the fore as I was beginning to plan this case study, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world and, for the first time since it started, canceled Eurovision. Unsurprisingly, this provoked a crisis among Eurovision fans, used to the contest's temporal structure (which had already begun for the 2020 edition). In this time, fans turned even more towards archives and rewatches of old contests. The Eurovision Again series emerged as a prominent example of this. Organized by fans (and, as it went on, with the help of Eurovision), Eurovision Again had fans rewatch a particular contest at the same time via YouTube and comment on Twitter, much as fans do during a live contest. Archives became a way to keep the fandom in contact and intact during a time of unprecedented upheaval, enforcing the fandom identity while keeping the pandemic anxiety at bay for at least a few hours on a Saturday night.[11]

Later interviews with Eurovision fans, which I am still working on fully analyzing, have shown that while pandemic-era rewatches are a special case, they are not necessarily an outlying practice for Eurovision fans. Eurovision fandom is an example of what I am terming "archontic fandom," a fandom where use of archives plays a significant role in how fans think about their object of fandom and what they do with and around it. Eurovision fans could come together in this way because archives already played a role in how fans saw themselves – as engaged, regular viewers of the Contest, for whom an interest in its past sets them apart from the casual viewer. From individual rewatches to logging every use of pyrotechnics for other fans to consult, archives play a significant role in the lives of Eurovision fans – something that a pandemic brings to the fore.

While these cases are as disparate as I hoped they would be when developing them for CADEAH, in contemplating them together for this issue, I was struck by the similarities when it comes to the concept of expertise. Fans seeing themselves as experts, and exploring the expertise of fans, is not a new concept[12], but what is striking about these cases is how archives are used to enable this expertise. The role of archives as evidence is alive and well in this sector, where being able to consult what actually happened is an integral part of how fans manage and navigate their own expertise. Yet this is also a very personal kind of expertise, based around knowing your favorites within this corpus and being able to articulate what is important about them.

This is visible in both case studies. For the vaporwar viewers and creators, being able to understand and appreciate the videos begins with a level of expertise that has been facilitated through archives. Knowing what the original footage is, being able to identify elements of the attire or equipment of each military, and other such signs and markers of expertise are part of what makes watching the videos enjoyable. These are for people who already spend time with military archival material. The idea of these being by and for other enthusiasts makes showing off the expertise gained by looking through archives part of the creative process. Creators want to show other enthusiasts something special about this particular army or plane or camouflage pattern. Having a base level of knowledge means that this can be appreciated. While those who just stumble upon them through YouTube's algorithm can appreciate them on some level, they are really made for those who have a level of expertise developed through time spent with archives and archival material. Making and viewing these videos are a way of showing off, and sharing, this expertise.

For the Eurovision fans, expertise through and with archives is perhaps more traditional. The temporal structure of Eurovision means that it's important to get the timeline straight – who did what when, which entrant was which year, that sort of thing. This can be quite detailed, such as knowing and cataloging when pyrotechnics have been used on stage or the configurations of the orchestra. However, the personal understanding of this knowledge is also vital. It is

one thing to know exactly what went on. It is another thing to know what it means to you as a person and as a Eurovision fan. Eurovision has a long and varied history, and determining your own favorites, and thus areas of expertise, is an integral part of finding your own way in it. As with the vaporwar fans and creators, spending time with archival material is the way to build it. Without having archival knowledge, it is hard to find your place.

Combined, these cases suggest that expertise is as much a function of archives in the age of archontic production as it has always been.

4 Conclusion

So, what are people doing with this stuff?

They're using it – whether it be for new work or to understand a subject, or some combination of the two. For the communities I looked at, archival material is all about use, much in the same way that archives have been used throughout history. They are materials to draw on and manipulate, but they are also sources to consult and categorize, to use to figure out what this subject is and how they can understand it. There is little sense, at least here, that there is no interest in what these materials are as long as they can be used. Rather, what they are is inherent to how they can be used and what those in these communities want to do with them.

As with other archival use, expertise is important. Those in these communities use this material to both gain and show off expertise. The idea of archives as provides of evidence and thus sources of knowledge is still very much alive and well. Knowing what certain things are through the ability to view and understand them is a crucial use of archives, and what makes them continually interesting to the varied subcultures I looked at as part of my time with CADEAH. Expertise through spending time with archival material was valued. It meant that you could understand the Eurovision Song Contest on a deeper level or make a more interesting military remix video. More accessible material was celebrated as a way to further develop this expertise.

This expertise, though, is strongly personal. It is not just that those coming to this material were looking for knowledge, but that this knowledge is used to develop a personal sense of this subject. This time spent with archival material is about discovering what those are and how to situate yourself within these larger subjects. It is this that I think is an important takeaway as archives are "made accessible." Accessibility gives space for personalization – for not only seeing what has been considered important throughout the years, but for the user to develop favorites in it, and expect this to develop. This is not disconnected from expertise but an important part of it. To have favorites, you have to know what you're dealing with.

However, as suggested by my colleague's reflection from this issue[13], this personalization has drawbacks. In focusing on what the user wants and is most interested in, the broader context can be lost - narrowed into just the weapons without why they are used, drawn on to advance a personal argument without considering other options or the fuller narrative. Creators may be experts, but it can also be a limited sort of expertise. The desire to personalize, and thus exclude what isn't personally interesting, means that the complexities can be lost within this focus. It all becomes (personal) entertainment.

This is a potential outcome of accessibility for archives, just as much as recontextualization. Expertise and knowledge will be combined with the personal and the individual. As with other kinds of reuse, the choice will be how to encourage that – or if this is even desirable.

Notes

1. Abby S. Waysdorf, "Remix in the age of ubiquitous remix," *Convergence* 27, no. 4 (2021), 1129–144
2. Terry Cook, "Evidence, memory, identity, and community: four shifting archival paradigms," *Archival Science* 13 (2013), 97
3. Cook, "Evidence, memory"
4. Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom.* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2016), 4
5. De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*
6. Robert Gehl, "YouTube as archive: Who will curate this digital Wunderkammer?" *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no 1 (2009), 43–60
7. Waysdorf, "Remix in the age"
8. A type of electronic music genre based around samples of Muzak, ambient music, and things of that nature, with a strong visual component – see Laura Glitsos, "Vaporwave, or music optimized for abandoned malls," *Popular Music* 37, no 1 (2018), 100–118
9. Abby S. Waysdorf, "Vaporwar and military contents fandom," *Journal of Fandom Studies* 10, no 1 (2022): 19–37
10. See Adéla Gjuričová's piece in this special issue
11. Abby S. Waysdorf, "This Is Our Night: Eurovision Again and Liveness through Archives," in Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somani, eds., *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory* (Lunberg: meson press, 2020), 295–204
12. Paul Booth, "Fans' list-making: memory, influence, and argument in the "event" of fandom," *MATRIZes* 9, no 2 (2015): 85–107; Matt Hills, "The expertise of digital fandom as a 'community of practice': Exploring the narrative universe of *Dr. Who,*" *Convergence* 21, no 3 (2015), 360–374
13. Gjuričová, this issue