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Unfamiliar Archives: A roundtable on estrangement, secrets, and loss

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Introduction

This is an edited version of the roundtable discussion, 'Unfamiliar Archives', that took place as part of a two-day symposium at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, 22nd-23rd June, 2023, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Cultural Politics*. The editorial team did not want to mark the anniversary by focusing wholly on the past – through mining *Cultural Politics*' own journal archives, for instance – but offer trajectories forward for the next 20 years. As such, this roundtable, and the discussions leading up to it, brought together early career scholars working on a series of subjects that the editors felt were likely to animate the journal in the future. As illustrated by the articles, essays, and interventions in this special section, the subject-matter of the event and related discussions ranged from contemporary more-than-human scholarship to canonical social theory, and from debates about queer zine archiving to the politics of digital repositories storing sensitive feminist and anti-racist materials.

Yet, at the same time as looking forward, topics explored in the roundtable, and the articles that emerged from it, reflect long-standing strengths of the journal. Some of the materials in the preceding special section, for instance, speak to the journal's history of publishing art contributions – both within and on the cover of each journal – and its track record in social theory (as with *Cultural Politics* 13.3 dedicated in memory of Zygmunt Bauman). Other interventions engage with its strong tradition in media theory – from Jodi Dean's "Communicative Capitalism," in the first edition of the journal, onwards – or sit in dialogue with recent theorizations of more-than-human worlds (as exemplified by *Cultural Politics* 19.1, "Multispecies Justice"). As the contributions to the below roundtable underline, archives are a productive starting point for reflecting on '*Cultural Politics*: the next 20 years', precisely *because* they capture this dynamic of looking backwards to generate conceptual pathways forwards.

Archives have played an integral role in contemporary critical theory, most obviously as the theme of landmark texts such as Derrida's *Archive Fever* or, more recently, as reflected in socio-politically important research on 'non-traditional archives' (Salem, Taha and Kannemeyer, ND). The emergence of fields such as critical archive studies speak to the intellectual provocations generated by archives, with these fields offering especially valuable conceptual tools for interrogating the role of digital media in reformulating how archives are understood and operate (Thylstrup et al, 2021). Digitization, moreover, speaks to wider cultural shifts wherein a popularization of archives has emerged; archival analyses of digital media have engaged with the ethical and epistemic significance of personal data – often

owned by commercial tech companies, entrepreneurs, or even states – being transformed into resources for social inquiry.

The emergence of digital archives, however, is just one (albeit a particularly prominent and important) facet of archives becoming popularized. Social movements, community groups, and artistic collectives are increasingly archiving their material culture, with varying degrees of formality and equally varying degrees of controversy. As Stuart Hall asserts in "Constituting an Archive" (2001), archives are formed "at the moment when a relatively random collection of works is at the point of becoming something more ordered and considered: an object of reflection and debate" (89). Accordingly, both the "Unfamiliar Archives" special section as a whole and this roundtable draw together scholars who reflect on the challenges – and the potential – of approaching cultural artefacts at the brink of being formalized as objects of reflection and debate. More specifically, the contributors reflect on coming to archives-in-formation from a position of unfamiliarity with the norms and protocols of archival research, and the questions generated by this unfamiliar perspective.

The roundtable itself was the product of almost a year of discussion and reflection prior to the event at WSA, where participants reflected on their experiences of engaging with very different archives: of community arts groups, animal ethicists, and social theorists. These discussions generated three themes that resonated across people's experiences: estrangement, secrets, and loss (a trio of terms that Giraud and Wright, 2024, this section, suggest could be complemented by 'displacement'). The below discussion offers a more in-depth reflection on why these terms have been such valuable keywords for enabling participants to conceptualize, and work through, the challenges posed by unfamiliar archives. Jack Palmer reflects on tensions negotiating familiarity and unfamiliarity in the archives of Zygmunt Bauman; Catherine Oliver explores exclusions encountered in her work with animals in archives including those of Richard D Ryder at the British Library and suggests a need to rethink what constitutes an archive when engaging with more-than-human worlds; and Molly Drummond interrogates tensions in archiving material culture that was never intended to be archived, in the context of community archives. Focusing on the themes of estrangement, secrets, and loss, the roundtable discussion below offers insight and provocations offered when approaching archives through an unfamiliar lens.

What happens, for instance, when deeply personal LGBTQIA* zines are preserved in libraries, is this an important act of cultural preservation or a reification of objects designed for circulation, exchange, and community-building? Or what are the ethical implications of incorporating deeply personal disclosures into the institutional record of social theorists? What role do the agencies and materialities of nonhuman beings have in constituting archives? And to what extent are the academics working in archives complicit in attempts to control and institutionalise some social histories and not others? In reflecting on these themes, amongst others, this panel traces the challenges and opportunities that unfamiliar archives pose for the field of cultural politics. In particular, the panellists engage with difficult questions about a moment when theorists, activists, media, and artefacts with an important role in cultural politics are having their work archived in ways that open up a host

of new theoretical and ethical questions about how they are understood, engaged with, and commemorated.

Before presenting the roundtable discussion itself, some quick notes on format. Firstly, a note on how to read this roundtable. Our section of the event at WSA entailed speakers presenting case-study papers about their specific archives, with these papers then referred back to throughout the roundtable. It is these longer case-study presentations, which have been developed into the articles, essays, and interventions that constitute this special section. The roundtable below, therefore, should ideally be read in conjunction with the other items in this special section as participants are often responding to, and engaging with, one another's wider contributions. Secondly, while the event at WSA is the foundation for the below roundtable, we have not reproduced the discussion verbatim, but have lightly edited it for clarity and to incorporate some contextual information from discussions preceding the event to ensure the content is legible to wider audiences. Finally, in terms of how we have presented the discussion, each theme is introduced by Eva H. Giraud (who chaired the panel at WSA), before being engaged with in further depth by Drummond, Oliver, and Palmer as the roundtable participants.

Estrangement:

Eva Haifa Giraud: In discussions preceding this roundtable, many of your shared experiences seemed to coalesce around the theme of estrangement. To me, what seems especially productive about estrangement as a term is two-fold. Firstly, estrangement is a process; as Sara Ahmed (1999) describes; estrangement "indicates a process of transition, a movement from one register to another. To become estranged from each other, for example, is to move from being friends to strangers, from familiarity to strangeness" (343-4). Ahmed makes this point in relation to migrant experience, but this processual emphasis on making strange also seems to resonate with your experiences of the transformations that occur when people, artefacts, and nonhuman beings that you are intimately familiar with are reframed in new ways through archives. Secondly, estrangement has a complex politics. In a recent edition of *Cultural Politics* in the (seemingly very different) context of multispecies justice, for instance, Astrida Neimanis (2023) describes how the process of "bringing to light" the behaviours and capabilities of other species is often uncritically framed as an unalloyed good, something that sits in counterpoint to negative relations of estrangement. In certain strands of animal studies and more-than-human theory, for instance, new knowledge about the lifeworlds of other species is framed as generative of new care and ethical obligations. Neimanis offers a reversal of this argument, pointing out that - in many instances - "bringing to light" is often associated with instrumentalisation and extraction. In contrast, Neimanis proffers estrangement as a route into crafting a "non-extractive knowledge practice" that resists the presumption of mastery, recognizes the value of other worlds and epistemologies, and is necessarily a mode of situate knowledge (Neimanis, 2023, 32). Building on these generative engagements with estrangement, I'd like to invite you to reflect on the process and politics of estrangement in your own work.

Catherine Oliver: Thinking archivally can enable endless capacity and imagination for curiosity and liveliness of multiple relations to reality. In the final vignette offered by my intervention (see Oliver, 2024, this section), I reflected upon and engaged with expanding notions of planetary and more-than-human archives. Thinking about the chicken as a being that archives, is archived, and is an archive challenges notions of history as human and of archival study as only taking place in institutions. Expanding notions of the archive as embodied and more-than-human disrupt ideas of what an archive is - a conscious moment of creation - into something that can be conceptualised differently, to something that moves and is made meaningful; as Arlette Farge has put it: 'the archive is an excess of meaning, where the reader experiences beauty, amazement and a certain affective tremor' (2013, 31). The changing meaning and conceptualisation of archives in beyond-human directions is salient at this particular historical juncture of crisis and planetary transformation.

Archiving (in) the Anthropocene is an important and disturbing mode of preservation of planetary disaster and change. Whether recording extinction and loss, regeneration, colonialism, toxic ecologies, damage, or death, recording and documenting the changing planet in the Anthropocene requires new modes of collecting and imagining history. The chicken, a companion of the human since before the Anthropocene embodies part of this history, this technological transformation, but is also becoming part of a planetary archive, a changed biosphere, and is just one of the overwhelming amounts of novel entities that will not or cannot degrade will also become part of this planetary archive, whether plastics, chemicals, or radioactive materials. Debates over the sanctity of archives and their familiarity might therefore need to be seconded to the urgency of applying specialist knowledge to understand and adapt to a changing planet.

Thinking with, then, the concept of estrangement or strangeness, through the once familiar, now strange chicken comments on the potentiality of archival thinking to expand and adapt their analyses. Working in different kinds of archives, some more traditional, others not really archives at all enables a production of knowledge that is both deeply and commitedly partial, but also expansive and creative. As such, these modes of strange encounters (Margues Florencio, 2014) can challenge divides between human and non-human history and archives, rethinking history and the future as a conversation about changing and increasingly strange and estranged ways of archiving.

Molly Drummond: My presence in zine and community archives started prior to my work as an academic (as fig. 3 indicates, in Drummond, 2024, this section), and continues afterwards in more complex ways, particularly in the B arts site. In these communities, I am a researcher, volunteer, visitor, artist, zinester, and friend, and to become familiar in one of these roles I have often been estranged from the others by necessity. Furthermore, the personal nature of the contents of these archives has meant that research in these sites requires a process of estrangement, or a purposeful defamiliarization of the practices, contents, and communities through which they are produced. Another example of how this process is negotiated is demonstrated by Heidy Berthoud's (2017) work, in which the formation of zine archives and libraries necessitates an understanding of how archival practices come into contention zine

community production and distribution practices. Berthoud understands that the zine is a personal form that is made for sharing, and remade through sharing. However, archival processes to prevent or reduce loss may restrict, as well as open up, the community through changing and expanding the zines' intended circulation path and reader community. Therefore, she contacts zine makers to let them know where their zine has ended up, an unfamiliar practice developed through familiarity with both zine and archival community practices.

Jack Palmer: Like Catherine and Molly, my forays into the Bauman archive, at least in the period of cataloguing, were not conditioned by the formal institutional processes of visitation that usually govern archival research. Often alongside my friend and collaborator Tom Campbell, my *modus operandi* would be to sit in a usual spot at the back of the reading room and work through boxes of materials that were brought out on trolleys for us. On at least one occasion, we received deliveries of new boxes on the steps of the Brotherton Library from family members who had packaged up stray items that they'd found.

The task, in short, was to impose some kind of order on the collection. This, of course, has a certain resonance with key theoretical and indeed normative concerns within Bauman's thought and the task was shot through with ambivalence. This was especially challenging in relation to the fact that the Bauman archive collects the personal collections of both Janina and Zygmunt Bauman. Especially in the late 1980s, each is present in the work of the other. They lived together, obviously, but also travelled inseparably. In the wake of *Modernity and the Holocaust* and the ensuing Amalfi and Adorno prizes, when much of the correspondence addressed to Zygmunt in the archive becomes invitational, Zygmunt would insist that Janina speak alongside him. How to demarcate where one person and their traces ends and the other begins, particularly when lives are so imbricated? How to do justice to the autonomy of both minds and their work – especially important, I think, in Janina's case – without unduly estranging them from one another? Other ambivalences derived from the pairing – at times, an odd pairing – of professional archivists and academic specialists. The sterling work of the archivists, especially Caroline Bolton and Tim Procter, had to include delivering crash courses in archival procedures and regulatory policy. Now the archive is ordered, I am likely to be estranged from items that I have already seen on grounds of GDPR restrictions.

As I have said already, one of the ways that estrangement became such a significant keyword for me is on account of my own *estranged* positionality vis-à-vis the familiar figure of my investigations. If my reflections appear indulgent, it is because I feel compelled to narrate my own presence in the archive, as a stranger. I suspect, though I may be wrong, that my book on Bauman is the first written by an author who never met or communicated with him. In my encounters with his family and friends, I have been deeply aware that many people have a stake in the interpretation of this archive. In another Leeds-based archive, this time that of the Leeds Camera Club, Bauman's interventions in minutes in the early years of his involvement (the late 1970s) appear under the elusive moniker 'Prof Bauman'. By the mid-80s, he bore the name 'Ziggy', which comes from the Polish diminutive 'Zigi'. Many of the letters in the

archive are addressed to 'Zigi'. I did not know him; I continue to know the archival subject as Zygmunt Bauman, the public intellectual and global social thinker.

Loss

Giraud: Loss has clearly animated all of your reflections about, and experiences with, archives. Like estrangement it seems to carry a distinctive politics. In my own experience with digital archives, for instance, the threat of loss is constant: not just in terms of the loss of data, but the loss of contexts with which to make sense of this data (which has been a central concern of digital archives created by social justice movements, in order to resist decontextualised, extractive uses of data that are often associated with marketers or big data analytics). However, while many of the examples I've engaged with in the context of digital archives seem to be pushing back against loss or displacement (see Giraud and Wright, 2024, this section), in your shared reflections you have recast loss as something that is also creative or constitutive, especially in relation to community-formation, or indeed academic field formation. Again, I'd like to invite you all to speak to this theme of loss - and its ambivalence - in a little more depth.

Drummond: Each of the themes discussed in this roundtable arose initially through conversations convening around the shifting definitions of archives and their role, but specifically the definition of an archivist and archival practice across research. Of the contributions in this special section, I felt that my encounters with archives were the least professional, and that my definition of sites as archives was mainly in response to how the communities I was researching had defined some of their community sites. Therefore, of the three themes, estrangement and secrecy appeared to be the most applicable to my own position in these spaces. The third – loss – emerged when reflecting back on my earlier engagement with these spaces in prior research, as potential safe spaces and sites of 'everyday utopia' (Cooper 2013). Noting that loss appeared to be a generative concept in theories of utopian cultural production (Munoz 2009; Bloch 1986), I applied this generative potential to debates about the 'loss of loss' (Licona and Brouwer 2015), and debates about the production of community cultural identity through the pursuit of safe community spaces and social change. In my contribution to this special section (see Drummond, 2024), to illustrate that loss contains a generative potential, I have chosen to discuss the production, maintenance, and contents of DIY archives as community sites that are under construction by and alongside the communities that construct them. In other words, through their relationship to loss, I have argued that the community archive and the archiving community are producing each other. Furthermore, by foregrounding loss as a key concept in the production of the B arts archive, Salford Zine Library, and Brumfest Zine Library, I have attempted to make these kinds of archives more familiar to readers, but additionally to make myself more familiar to these sites and communities.

Palmer: A number of reflections on loss stand out in Molly's intervention, namely the 'loss of loss' incurred in the transition to the digital archive and the question of the 'right to be forgotten' in an age in which, as Catherine points out (Oliver, 2024, this section), everything can be archived. I also recognize my own experience in relation to the disappearance of the

'hand of the author' as the Bauman archive moves from paper to USB sticks and compact discs. There are snippets in the archive that detail Bauman's own views on the 'loss' that unfolds in this transition. To a longtime correspondent, he lamented that where 'there used to be once something like spiritual communion' in the form of letter-writing, this has become 'senseless now in the age of messaging, when keeping track replaced knowing and *mitfühlen* [empathy/sympathy] and made them null and void'.

Especially interesting to me in Molly's reflections is the notion that loss can be generative. I have said that the Bauman archive is shaped in various ways by loss, principally by the losses incurred as a result of exile. I argue in conclusion to *Zygmunt Bauman and the West* that this plays out in the 'melancholic' disposition of his late style. Bauman once penned a short essay on Walter Benjamin, which argued that Benjamin's notion of history was that it was 'a graveyard of possibilities' (Bauman, 1993: 75). Benjamin, as is well established, was attentive to the generative potential and political value, affective dispositions towards loss – grief, mourning, and so on – but he was surprisingly dismissive of melancholy. As Wendy Brown (1999) noted, Benjamin's 'left-wing melancholic' is one who sees history as litany of losses than cannot be relinquished: lost opportunities, lost possibilities, lost movements, moments and ways of life, lost convictions. This is situated in the Freudian tradition that posits melancholia as the pathological counterpart to the healthier process of mourning, in which the libido is consciously and distressfully drawn from a lost love object. Melancholia, by contrast, is a type of grieving that does not comprehend what has been lost and thus retreats into denialism, resignation and nostalgia. Enzo Traverso has sought to recover a critical dimension in melancholia, one which is, I suggest, present across Bauman's corpus. In this context, 'left-wing melancholia' denotes an orientation that refuses to mourn the passing of a socialist utopia after the end of state-socialism. This is especially apt in the case of Bauman who, despite losing by force his social position and status within a socialist state nevertheless and unlike some of his contemporaries (namely Leszek Kołakowski), never relinquished a commitment to socialism. This melancholia, generated by loss, suffuses the archive.

Oliver: Archival history, in its traditional institutional forms, has unavoidably a human-centred way of collecting, ordering and interpreting the past and it is always politicised, gendered and raced, run through with power dynamics and hierarchies that reflect broader society. Working in the Ryder archives, which I write about in my first vignette, was riddled with unequal access and dynamics. Ryder, a wealthy upper class man with money, education and networks was able to archive himself and, in so doing, a particular version of animal activist histories. Historical work centres a particular way of remembering, one imbued with and by the meanings and memories of the powerful which also requires the loss or erasure of other histories. As Jack and Molly have put it: thinking about loss can be generative.

In the history of animal activism, this has led vegan-feminist scholar, writer and activist Carol J Adams to ask: 'what happens when a group [older women] who is supposed to be invisible tries to make animal issues visible?' (2016). Adams is concerned with the loss of women in animal activist histories, the plagiarism of their work and the notion that a raced and classed

male subject has been centred in political activism before it is taken seriously. Those who understand the institutions of history and are able to navigate them are best placed to shape and dictate what counts as history. In animal activism, there are countless activists, advocates, writer, and thinkers who have not kept materials, who don't have the space to do so, and who wouldn't how to donate them to an institution like the British Library even if they did, echoing Molly's reflections on activist archives (Drummond, 2024, this issue).

Thinking, then, about this theme of *loss*, I am drawn to think about the absences of the archives - not just within the space, but those histories that will never make it into a formalised archive. It matters who thinks, who speaks, who represents (and who doesn't) and who is thought, spoken and represented to (Haraway, 2016). The stories of the archive matter, but they also shape and (re)produce the power dynamics and exclusions that have prevailed in animal activism, to centre voices of the privileged. This includes the exclusion of animals themselves. When thinking about loss in the archives, then, the absence of these voices and beings weighs heavy on historical political knowledge.

Secrecy:

Giraud: The final theme generated in your reflections is secrets, from the excitement of uncovering personal materials that - through virtue of their novelty - could be the focus of future research, to subsequent disquiet on realising that these discoveries also mark potential intrusion on intimate exchanges. Again, this transition of excitement to disquiet is something that has characterized my experience with digital archives. In a project examining counter-narratives on the social media platform Twitter (now X), for instance, our research team frequently encountered exchanges that, though potentially rich material for academic analysis, risked exposing everyday exchanges that were not intended for public audiences (see Poole et al, 2023). While it might seem paradoxical to describe such exchanges as "secret," there is growing awareness that posting on a public platform whose terms and conditions happen to allow third party use does not negate social expectations that particular exchanges are intended for a friendship group or community. Growing academic awareness of the messy ethics of datasets is compounded by the way these datasets often preserve narratives even after they have been deleted by users. While acts of preservation can be important in preserving fragile digital histories, therefore, again, there is an ambivalence to this process due to mismatches between the desires and expectations of those archiving data and the users who generated it. I wondered if you might speak in further depth to the complexities and tensions surrounding secrets - and secrecy - in your own archives.

Palmer: As Catherine perceptively notes in her interventions, part of the 'allure' of the archive is its 'untouchedness'. In the case of the Bauman archive, what it promises is a repository of unseen information and documentation that allows one to glimpse into the *depth* below the writer's published works. What I found myself frequently having to guard against was a hyperfocus on epistolary curios (who wrote to whom and when, for instance), or a proclivity to revel in notes scrawled in exercise books and marginalia. The 'temptation' of the

archive of the intellectual, I think, is that one can imagine oneself as having found the 'secret key' to the work at the surface in its depths. In Ryder's archive, that is framed as the encounter with the dead blackbird. In Bauman's, one might, as Izabela Wagner (Wagner, 2020) has done, see 'The Poles, the Jews, and I' in these terms.

Like Catherine, I kept what she terms 'ethnographic archival notes' over the duration of my work on the archive, which now constitute, if you will, an archive of the archive. In 2019, when much of my archive work unfolded (the lockdown prevented access, of course, from March 2020), I reflected on this tension between depth and surface. I noted that geological and archaeological metaphors abound in historiographical writing. The 'present' is often figured at the apex of sedimented layers of history. For example, for Braudel and the *annales* school, *l'histoire événementielle* was but a surface level that illuminated processes unfolding in the deeper layers of the *moyenne* and *longue durée*, the latter a category that encompasses the 'deep time' of geology, the time of landscape formation, mountain ranges, climactic shifts. Working in the archive, in this sense, is akin to excavation and exhumation.

In the depths, one can lose sight of the surface. This poses challenges in terms of the 'return to the work' which Keith Tester suggested in his reflections on reading Bauman in the *Cultural Politics* homage. The archive, as I have said, presents manifold opportunities for the sociology of intellectuals. But one common effect of the sociology of intellectuals is to render the work epiphenomenal. Attention is directed instead, as in Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* (1988) for example, towards the situated activity of intellectual work, the *sui generis* frames of conflict, competition and cooperation organised within the institutional settings of academic departments, laboratories, disciplinary networks and so on. The factuality and normativity of ideas come to matter less than the process of their legitimation and their circulation within a network of 'interaction ritual chains' as in Randall Collins' magisterial *Sociology of Philosophies* (Collins, 1998). The sociology of intellectuals becomes an example of what Hannah Arendt criticized as the 'two-world' approach, a schism between a space of appearances (the surface level of individual intentionality in which ideas circulate) and a hidden realm of deep generative mechanisms and structural regularities that cause phenomena to appear, which it is the prerogative of the sociologist to 'uncover'. She saw this at work in Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, which was particularly emblematic of sociology's 'mistrust of the mind', its proclivity to 'uncover the determinants of thought, in which thought itself takes no interest' (Arendt, 1994 [1930]: 33, 36-7). This balance between surface and depth, between publicity and secrecy, was one of the major challenges of the Bauman archive: how to account for the work without sociologising it out of existence.

Oliver: Writing about the archives and archival practice has often romanticised and even glamorised the feeling and experience of being *in* the archive, and thus *in* history, as Jack has reflected - it is a *temptation*. Part of the allure of the archive is its seeming *untouchedness*, its relative closure, and the rules and norms of "traditional" archival spaces that usher in a sense of sanctity: be quiet, don't use that ink, respect the space. Within this context, it is perhaps no surprise that historical scholars are captured by the idea of being "secret-ed into" the archival space. While these traditional archives no doubt still persist - most strongly, perhaps, with

national archives, university archives, and institutional archives, like those in my first vignette - there has been a shift in archival practice that has not just legitimised, but celebrated a diversification of archival spaces.

In my second vignette (Oliver, 2024, this section), I touch on a secret held and uncovered in the Royal Geographical Society's archives about the sexual behaviour of Adélie penguins. This study was hidden at the time, even written in a language that many in the British archives would not be able to read, in order to make sure it didn't "corrupt" people. Writing about uncovered secrets is much easier than writing about the secrets that we, as researchers, feel compelled to keep. With the rise of digital archives and archiving of the self, the temporal distance between a person's life and their archive is shrinking. There are now many archives of people who are still alive and active who've chosen to archive themselves but, in those archives, there are also the stories of all of the people they've worked and interacted with who might also still be alive and didn't choose to archive themselves. This shrinking of distance between archive and subjects makes ethical and political decisions about what we share, how and with who vitally important.

Keeping secrets in the archives require an extension and engagement with feminist ethics, and critical reflections on our roles as researchers. Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010) have reflected on the balance between breaking silences and keeping trust. Obviously, I'm not going to divulge any secrets here - nor even if I have any (which, perhaps, I don't). But, as the temporalities of archiving change, the distance between the archivist and the object/subject of the archive is shrinking. This spatio-temporal shrinkage has created the conditions where archival characters do not necessarily remain fixed in the beyond, but circulate and share space in our contemporary worlds.

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