

## FILM AND THE ARCHIVE: NATION, HERITAGE, RESISTANCE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses a range of discourses articulated around the figure of the film archive between the late nineteenth and the early twenty-first centuries, accounting for the various possibilities that they open up for considering audiovisual heritage as a potential space either for revolutionary change or for political or textual resistance. Focused mainly on archival discourses in Mexico, the article traces their interaction with both national-historical and anti-imperialist narratives, and the implications of digital and online culture for the encounter between the archiving of film and resistance. It accounts for the position of the archive in negotiations between state and private capital and spaces of artistic autonomy, and for the relationships between the archive, modernity, postmodernity and the notion of posterity.

**KEYWORDS:** film; archives; nation; heritage; modernity; postmodernity; Mexico

‘The cinematographic print, unrolled between a light source and a white sheet,’ wrote Boleslas Matuszewski in 1898, ‘makes the dead and gone get up and walk, this simple ribbon of imprinted celluloid constitutes not only a historic document, but a piece of history, a history that has not vanished and needs no genie to resuscitate it. It is there, scarcely sleeping, and—like those elementary organisms that, living in a latent state, revive after years given a bit of heat and moisture—it only requires, to reawaken it and relive those hours of the past, a little light passing through a lens in the darkness!’<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding the naivety that the contemporary reader might discern in the epistemological equivalence that this early advocate of film preservation strikes between the filmic image and the event it portrays, Matuszewski’s words are strongly evocative of the eerie defiance of death and the drive towards immortality that many observers of early cinema identified in the new medium’s capacity to register, represent and archive time and movement.<sup>2</sup> They also suggest a new, visceral immediacy in the relationship

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1. Boleslas Matuszewski, ‘A New Source of History’, *Film History*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1995, pp. 322-324 (hereafter ‘NSH’), p.323.

2. Doane, Mary Ann, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge, Mass./ London, Harvard University Press, 2002.

between the modern subject and history. By this account, history is no longer the redoubt of distant and rigid narratives and of 'vague description in books' (NSH 322), but rather a dormant organism that is not simply written about in the past tense, but which actually and physically exists, imprinted into celluloid, within the present moment.

Matuszewski, enthusiastically promoting the establishment in Paris of an archive of cinematographic records, signals the increasing diffusion of authorship that such an imagistic writing of history would entail: 'the price of the cinematographic camera, like that of film stock, very high in the early days, decreases rapidly and will tend to come within the reach of simple amateur photographers' (NSH 324). Such individuals would come to form a whole army of cinematographic historians who, between them, would narrate historical events from unprecedented perspectives:

It is far from the case that History is composed solely of scheduled solemnities, organized in advance and ready to pose in front of the lenses. It is the beginnings, initial movements, unattended facts that avoid capture by the photographic camera ... just as they escape inquiry. [...] Even oral accounts and written documents do not deliver to us all the class of facts to which they correspond, and nevertheless History exists, true after all in its broad outlines, even if its details are distorted. And then, the cinematographic photographer is indiscreet by profession; always lying in wait, his instinct very often enables him to divine where those events will pass that will become historical causes (NSH 322-323).

History as written by the cinematograph, then, would not simply respond to the interests of the powerful, but would rather rest upon the instinct of the cameraman and the providence of contingency to deliver key events to his lens. The place in which this audiovisual patrimony would be stored—the new cinematographic archive—would thus mark a fundamental breakdown of the social, political and representational hierarchies that had previously characterized the writing of history.

The actual set of relationships that developed between cinematic representation and the writing of history during the twentieth century did not turn out quite as Matuszewski envisioned, but his utopian comments on cinema's ability to store time and history and, in turn, humanity's responsibility to store cinema, illustrate the extent to which the temporal, spatial and perceptual transformations underway in late nineteenth century modernity informed the impulse to archive cinema from its very beginnings. Furthermore, even though Matuszewski himself was a cameraman tightly bound up in the workings of imperial power,<sup>3</sup> he expresses a strong desire for the cinematic record to probe, resist and challenge existing paradigms of historical narration. The following essay will address this conjuncture between modernity, the archival impulse and its appeal to posterity, and the audiovisual questioning of and resistance to existing modes of 'writing' national history, accounting for some of the ideological discourses that emerged around the figure of the film archive during the twentieth century. It will also trace the transition of these discourses and debates into the postmodernity of the late twentieth and early

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3. In the same essay, Matuszewski recounts an anecdote relating to footage he shot while working as the 'photographer' to the Emperor of Russia; NSH, 324.

twenty-first centuries. This discussion will rest on the fundamental notion of heritage: the rhetorical figure that has frequently moved individuals, institutions and states to invest great quantities of time and money in the preservation and diffusion of moving pictures. Ultimately, the essay will ask to what extent, in the context of the film archive, the notion of heritage is compatible with that of political and/or textual resistance.

### NATIONAL HISTORY AND ANTI-IMPERIALISM

Although Matuszewski's ideas on the establishment of a film archive took some decades to take root on an institutional level, he was not alone in advocating and practising film preservation in the medium's early years.<sup>4</sup> Far from the metropolitan centres of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century film production in France, Italy and the USA, the Mexican cameraman, compilation filmmaker, film collector and exhibitor, and forestry and highway engineer Salvador Toscano built up a sizeable archive of actuality footage filmed by himself or by his partners and competitors, covering a whole range of key historical events in his country dating from the late nineteenth century to the 1910-1917 Mexican Revolution and beyond. Like Matuszewski, Toscano saw film as a device for narrating history in a radically new way: as early as 1912 and up until the mid-1930s, he exhibited feature-length compilations of actuality footage with titles such as *The Complete History of the Mexican Revolution*, to recount his country's recent history with an unprecedented immediacy.<sup>5</sup>

For Toscano, the accumulation of actuality film footage also represented, on occasion, an act of defiance. In one episode of her biography of her father Salvador, Carmen Toscano depicts his impulse to preserve his film collection as an act of cultural and political resistance against the brutality and censorship of the military leader Victoriano Huerta as he seized power in a lengthy pitched battle in the streets of Mexico City in 1913:

Somebody told Victoriano Huerta about a man who made films that maybe shouldn't be shown in public, and Huerta ordered some soldiers to search Toscano's house and destroy them; but [...] Toscano managed to jump onto the roof and escape through the adjoining houses, taking his negatives with him [...] The soldiers of Huerta's disciplined army [...] found a lot of films, which they took out onto the pavement and set fire to them, gleefully watching them burn, twist and vanish almost immediately. They never imagined the testimony that had

4. On early film preservation in Western Europe and the USA, see Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives*, London, British Film Institute, 1994; Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States*, Jefferson, North Carolina/London, McFarland, 2000.

5. On Toscano's work, see Ángel Miquel, *Salvador Toscano*, Mexico City, Universidad de Guadalajara/Gobierno del Estado de Puebla/Universidad Veracruzana/UNAM, 1997. Specifically on his compilation films, see Pablo Ortiz Monasterio, Verónica Zárate, Ángel Miquel and David M.J. Wood, *Fragments: narración cinematográfica compilada y arreglada por Salvador Toscano, 1900-1930*, Mexico City, Conaculta/Imcine/Universidad de Guadalajara, 2010; David M.J. Wood, 'Revolución, compilación, conmemoración: Salvador Toscano y la construcción de caminos en el México posrevolucionario', in Aurelio de los Reyes and David M.J. Wood (eds.), *Cine mudo en Iberoamérica: naciones, narraciones, centenarios* (forthcoming).

escaped them or that somewhere, many years later, those dramatic moments of Mexican life, which the usurper [Huerta] tried to hide, would survive.<sup>6</sup>

Carmen Toscano's mythologizing account characterizes her nimble father's act of archival derring-do as a gesture of political resistance to an oppressive regime, casting memory, or testimony, as a radical category. Yet by the time she wrote these words, many decades after the event, Huerta had long been consecrated as the official villain of the revolution era in the hegemonic post-revolutionary historiography—a point on which almost all subsequent accounts of the Revolution have concurred—and this narrative of archival resistance thus also stands as one of many that proves Toscano senior's fine revolutionary (that is to say, institutional) credentials. Toscano himself, like Matuszewski, was close to political power: many of his compilations overtly voiced support for the Constitutionalist faction that defeated Huerta and emerged victorious from the Revolution. Moreover, the feature-length documentary *Memorias de un mexicano*, compiled from his archive by his daughter Carmen and released in 1950, narrates a story that clearly justifies the modernising agenda of the post-revolutionary regime that, by the 1940s, was socially and fiscally conservative. Successive government authorities and state agencies were well aware of the film's power in this respect, and in 1967 the National Institute of Anthropology and History declared *Memorias* a national 'historical monument' on a par with the country's pre-Hispanic archaeological sites and colonial edifices. This new status sought to protect the physical integrity of the Toscanos' documentary, affording its historical narrative of early twentieth-century Mexican history legal protection against those who wished to extract from it decontextualized stock-shots, or to use the footage, in Carmen Toscano's words, 'in a manner that would not be entirely convenient for Mexico.'<sup>7</sup>

Earlier, contemporary and subsequent efforts at forging a film heritage have also been frequently marked by a similar tension between monumentalization and a resistance to existing hegemonic discourses. Carmen Toscano's own short-lived Cinemateca de México was reticent to sell out entirely to official control over the national filmic imaginary. Broadly, it aimed to buttress existing topographical and symbolic conceptions of Mexican-ness, by creating 'a special cinematographic archive that will refer to the territory, life, customs, history, scientific achievements and culture of Mexico, which will serve future generations to know better our country'. Yet even in this period of high nationalism, Toscano—married to a high-ranking politician of the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI)—sought a space of relative ideological autonomy, stating the Cinemateca's intention to acquire prints of new Mexican films 'before they are modified by censorship prior to their commercial exploitation.'<sup>8</sup> Such discursive negotiations between film archives (among a whole array of other institutions) and states have, of course, long been played out the world over.

6. Carmen Toscano, *Memorias de un mexicano*, México City, Fundación Carmen Toscano, 1993, pp.121-122.

7. Elena Poniatowska, 'Declaran monumento histórico el filme Memorias de un Mexicano', *Novedades*, 8 October 1967, pp.1, 9.

8. *Cinemateca de México, A.C. Estatutos*, Mexico City, Cinemateca de México, 1963, p.4.

When the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (International Federation of Film Archives, FIAF) was established in 1938, the founding national archives of the UK, the USA, France and Germany were moved variously by appeals to film's role in national unity and propaganda, its aesthetic study and appreciation, and social edification and education.<sup>9</sup> Yet the institutional complexity, personalism, political interests and/or underfunding that have often characterized these institutions have meant that they have rarely been simple monological apologists for state or governmental interests. A case in point was the 'Langlois affair' of early 1968, in which the French government ejected and later reinstated (in a reduced capacity) the head of the Cinémathèque Française Henri Langlois. For Sylvia Harvey, the affair brought the French national film archive to the forefront of a wider debate over state interference in cultural policy, and stood as a liberal forerunner of the more radical protests of May that year.<sup>10</sup>

On a geopolitical level, that the four founding members of the FIAF were both four of the world's leading film producing nations to date and four of the world's leading economic and imperial powers of the day is by no means a coincidence,<sup>11</sup> and implicit in the early archival movement is a claim for those countries' respective national cinemas' central place in the emerging modern art and industry of film. Yet as the archival movement evolved after World War II, its expansion continued to reflect the geopolitical configuration of global affairs. By the late 1960s, the revolutionary New Latin American Cinema was at the aesthetic and political vanguard of global film production, both inspired and propelled by the political and cultural achievements of the 1959 Cuban revolution and by a broader set of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements and discourses worldwide. With the obvious exception of Cuba, revolutionary Latin American filmmakers were generally reluctant to collaborate with state institutions and funding mechanisms and tended to work independently, seeking spaces of artistic and political production outside hegemonic structures. This, though, did not prevent the language of anti-imperialism from seeping through to the discussions of the Unión de Cinematecas de América Latina (Union of Latin American Cinémathèques, UCAL), the regional association of variously state-run or subsidized, private and university film archives—each of which entered into its own local negotiations with state financing and/or private capital.<sup>12</sup>

This was seen particularly clearly in the declaration of the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of the UCAL in Mexico City in 1972, entitled 'National Culture and Cultural Decolonisation',<sup>13</sup> and

9. Houston, *Keepers*.

10. Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, pp.14-16.

11. On the links between film and colonialism in cinema's early decades, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, London/New York, Routledge, 1994, particularly pp.100-21. For Shohat and Stam, 'of all the celebrated "coincidences"—of the twin beginnings of cinema and psychoanalysis, cinema and nationalism, cinema and consumerism—it is this coincidence with the heights of imperialism that has been least explored'; p.100.

12. For a detailed discussion by Latin American film archivists of the benefits and drawbacks of state funding, see 'Dos diálogos', *Boletín CIDUCAL* (2<sup>a</sup> época), no. 5, 1984.

13. 'Unión de Cinematecas de América Latina' (dossier), *Cine Cubano*, no. 73-75, 1972, pp.115-39 (hereafter 'UCAL').

in an interview that UCAL's incoming Secretary General Pedro Chaskel granted to the magazine *Cine Cubano*, linking the labour of most of Latin America's cinémathèques with 'our struggle against cultural colonization and for the rediscovery of our national and Latin American identity' (UCAL 118). Chaskel further signalled the continental archival movement's role in the broader effort by the New Latin American Cinema to move from existing bourgeois towards new proletarian modes of film spectatorship, indicating cinémathèques' ongoing commitment to replace 'traditional programming, centred on works considered the classics of film history' with 'a new logic focused on the diffusion of works linked to our current situation, that are generally marginalized from commercial distribution and that somehow contribute to undoing the alienation and raising the consciousness of the spectator' (UCAL 119). The imperial modernity that underpinned the establishment of the founding archives of the FIAF here gave way to a revolutionary cultural tendency that, while itself drawing on certain modernist aesthetic, social and political paradigms, was critical of a globally hegemonic western modernity and its analogical cultural practices.<sup>14</sup>

The host country's principal film archive, the state-funded Filmoteca UNAM (referred to in this document as 'Cinemateca de la UNAM'), was—and is—a university body rather than a national institution, established in 1960 under the aegis of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) having evolved out of the film-society movement of the previous decade. Even though the Filmoteca was committed above all to preserving and disseminating Mexican rather than foreign film, its foundational principles were humanist and Latin-Americanist in orientation, stating its aims as 'artistic, historiographic, pedagogical, documentary and educational' and conveying its concern for 'the social and political problems of Latin America and the world'.<sup>15</sup> The Filmoteca was far more circumspect in its own report to the 1972 UCAL Congress than were the discourses cited above, focusing on an overview of its advances in film preservation, cultural activities and research (UCAL 136). Even so, it apparently could safely be seen to endorse UCAL's anti-imperialist discourse: firstly because such third-worldist rhetoric was, in any case, common and encouraged under the regime of the then-president Luis Echeverría (who was, however, strongly repressive of internal dissent), and secondly thanks to the UNAM's statutory autonomy, which allowed university and Filmoteca alike considerable space for ideological, political and even financial manoeuvre within the framework of a relatively authoritarian state. The Filmoteca thus found itself at a complex discursive juncture between film heritage, national narrative, aestheticism, didactic humanism and anti-imperialist cultural revolution, mediated by competing notions of modernity.

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14. For an interpretation of the New Latin American Cinema in similar terms, see Zuzana Pick, 'The New Latin American Cinema: A Modernist Critique of Modernity', in Michael T. Martin (ed.), *New Latin American Cinema*, vol. 1, *Theory, Practices, and Transcontinental Articulations*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1997, pp.298-311.

15. *Filmoteca de la UNAM, 1960/1975*, Mexico City UNAM, c.1975, pp.9-10.

## HERITAGE AND MOBILIZATION

In other cultural and artistic fields, however, the counter-hegemonic politicization of heritage has not been in such evidence. In 1990, cultural anthropologist and media theorist Néstor García Canclini wrote that ‘in debates on Latin American modernity the question of the social uses of heritage is still absent. Historical patrimony would appear to be the exclusive jurisdiction of restorers, archaeologists and those who study museums: specialists in the past’. He continues:

Heritage is the space in which the ideology of the oligarchy, that is, substantialist traditionalism, persists most strongly. [...] The confrontation between this ideology and modern development [...] produced a reactive, metaphysical, ahistorical vision of the ‘national being’, whose superior manifestations, which descend from a mythic origin, might only become evident today in the objects that commemorate it.<sup>16</sup>

In a later essay, García Canclini observes a conceptual expansion in the notion of national heritage, in order to include the products of contemporary popular as well as elite and monumentalized culture, and identifies four paradigms of heritage preservation: the aforementioned substantialist traditionalism; a mercantilist conception; a conservationist and monumentalist imaginary; and a participationist paradigm.<sup>17</sup>

This final category, which focuses on the fluid and processual signifying practices that surround objects of heritage, rather than their ritualized stagnation in traditionalist national discourses, is developed in Eduardo Nivón’s later work on what he calls ‘the new mobilising role of heritage’.<sup>18</sup> Nivón points out that in recent years, mercantilist incursions of national and transnational capital in heritage sites such as the historic centre of the city of Oaxaca and the pre-Hispanic archaeological sites of Teotihuacán and Chichén Itzá have met popular mobilizations that defend the rights of local people both to preserve the architectural and historic integrity of such sites and to earn their livelihood (often in the informal economy) by working in or around them. Such an articulation of popular resistance via the language of the preservation of heritage suggests considerable popular investment in and appropriation of hegemonic historical narratives of national belonging. This type of bottom-up democratization of cultural and historical heritage appears to have been largely absent from the elite environment of the international UCAL meetings of archivists and government bureaucrats in the 1960s and 1970s. Even though UCAL declared its firm commitment to overhauling and revolutionising existing modes of film distribution, exhibition and reception, and notwithstanding the great successes that the various member archives’ programmes of popular distribution and cinematic consciousness-raising may have enjoyed, the radicalized archives were

16. Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas: estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, Mexico City, Grijalbo, 1990, pp.150-51.

17. Néstor García Canclini, ‘El patrimonio cultural de México y la construcción imaginaria de lo nacional’, in Enrique Florescano (ed.), *El patrimonio nacional de México*, vol. 1, Mexico City, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997, pp.57-86 (hereafter ‘PCM’).

18. Eduardo Nivón, ‘Malestar en la cultura. Conflictos en la política cultural mexicana reciente’, *Pensar Iberoamérica: Revista de Cultura*, no. 7, 2004. [www.oei.es/pensariberoamerica/rico7a01.htm](http://www.oei.es/pensariberoamerica/rico7a01.htm).

seen in those discussions as a top-down vanguard of consciousness-raising and cultural decolonization. There is little evidence that the principle of film preservation in itself served as a basis or pretext for grassroots popular organization.<sup>19</sup> The exponential acceleration of access to media heritage in the digital era, however, and the increasing possibilities of recycling and resignifying that heritage, might point to a new form of counter-hegemonic media practice. Unlike the 1960s and 1970s discourses of wholesale revolutionary upheaval, these contemporary practices are more often articulated in terms of resistance—that is to say, of cultural or textual operations *within* existing paradigms.<sup>20</sup>

### THE POSTMODERN ARCHIVE AND RESISTANCE

In his critique of postmodernism, García Canclini is eloquent in rescuing the social usefulness of concepts such as originality, meaning and historical depth that are central to the social, participationist use of heritage and which, for him, are frequently trivialized in postmodernist criticism (PCM 84). However, he stops short of considering how the culture of postmodernity and the technological devices that shape it, along with their own inherent questioning of received notions of originality and historical depth, might introduce new modes of resistance to both hegemonic historical and national narratives and political and economic structures through entering into discursive dialogue with notions of heritage. We will now turn to this question with a focus on cinematic and media heritage in the early twenty-first century.

Present-day film archivists have engaged at length with the complex implications of digital and virtual culture for the social, technical and curatorial role of the film archive.<sup>21</sup> Beyond the (crucial) technical question of archives' stance towards the apparently inevitable migration from analogical to digital storage formats with increasingly short lifespans, what concerns us here is the role that digital and virtual technologies might have in the forging of a new notion of media heritage, and in how far the logic of that heritage might run contrary to existing political, economic, historiographic and cultural models. As the recent archival and curatorial project [*ready*] *Media: hacia una arqueología de*

19. This is not to say, though, that film archives have not been the site of popular organization over related issues such as exhibition. For instance, in June 1979 an arson attempt was made on the Cinemateca Boliviana in La Paz in an attempt to prevent it from showing a retrospective of the revolutionary film director Jorge Sanjinés, and considerable government pressure was brought to bear to bar the screening of *El coraje del pueblo* (The Courage of the People, Jorge Sanjinés, Bolivia, 1973). An array of cultural and political institutions and journalists protested against this act of censorship, and a petition with 5,000 signatories was presented to the Ministry of the Interior to request that all obstacles to the exhibition of Sanjinés' films be removed. See Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, *Cine, censura y exilio en América Latina*, La Paz, Sindicato de Trabajadores de la UNAM/Centro de Integración de Medios de Comunicación Alternativa/Federación Editorial Mexicana, 1979, pp. 75-76; Mari Carmen Figueroa Perea, 'El coraje del pueblo, un filme prohibido', *Excelsior*, 10 August 1979.

20. On the opposition and interaction between revolution, defined in terms of sequentiality, and resistance, defined in terms of simultaneity, see Paulina Aroch's essay in this issue.

21. See, for instance, Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein (eds.), *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace*, Vienna, Synema, 2008.



*los medios y la invención en México* ([ready]Media: Towards an Archaeology of the Media and Invention in Mexico) at Mexico City's Laboratorio de Arte Alameda has shown,<sup>22</sup> a processual (rather than a stagnated and commemorative) conception of media heritage is tightly bound up with both technological development and contemporary artistic and aesthetic practices, which frequently bring the very notions of media preservation and recycling to the fore. [ready]Media seeks to expand the scope of media heritage to (audio-) visual and sound supports that exceed the bounds of traditional film (or other) archives, concentrating its efforts on the array of technological formats and aesthetic models that experimental media production has used and theorized since the explosion of digital technologies in the late twentieth century; but without neglecting the dialectical relationship between digital production and the now-obsolete analogue formats that they have largely displaced. The project reflects on the triangulation between the physical difficulty posed by the storage of a wide range of digital and analogue media supports, the curatorial challenge of mapping the artistic terrain they represent, and the aesthetic reflections and refractions of those dilemmas, as well as the implications of this scenario for the formation of mediated and mediatized cultural memory. Contemporary media practices such as found footage films (for instance, *Cinépolis*, Ximena Cuevas, Mexico, 2003 or *Húbris*, Eduardo Thomas, Mexico, 2010), film-archaeology projects (*Los rollos perdidos de Pancho Villa*, Gregorio Rocha, Mexico, 2003) and audiovisual production that makes conscious use of outdated technologies (such as *Noelia, la otredad #1*, Enrique Favela, Mexico, 2008, filmed with a pinhole camera) engage with the interplay between technological obsolescence, audiovisual nostalgia and cultural memory, and confront the notion of linear artistic, technological and social progress.

In a sense, such films in themselves constitute extremely non-linear and non-systematic archives of old materials and filmmaking practices. On the one hand they respond to an archaeological drive towards excavating the obsolete, but rather than obeying the encyclopaedic or commemorative logic of the traditional archive (or of the aforementioned compilation film *Memorias de un mexicano*), they reflect diachronically on the materiality and the mediating role of such materials and practices and the alteration of meaning over time. Such audiovisual discourses thus implicitly resist their own consignment to neutral spaces of storage in which discourses and meanings are preserved for posterity. [ready]Media finds itself in the paradoxical position of striving to form, organize and display a living archive of such practices.

Indeed, contemporary digital and online culture appears to radically question the very notion of posterity on which the conventional archive is predicated. Dating back to classical philosophy, posterity was strongly adopted by nineteenth century romanticism, which linked artistic genius to originality, the defiance of death and semantic intangibility. Andrew Bennett observes that in late-eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticism:

If the work is to be defined by its reception as new or original, then once the audience has been habituated to its particular mode or acclimatized to its new

<sup>22</sup>Tania Aedo and Karla Jasso (eds.), *(Ready)Media: Hacia una arqueología de los medios y la invención en México*, Mexico City, Conaculta/INBA, 2010.

conventions, the work will no longer figure as original, new, or unique. For the work to be *eternally* the work of genius it must be resistant to acculturation—indeed, resistant to reception itself. [...] The work of art is directed towards an infinitely deferred and always future reception.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise the archive, by proposing to render its contents immortal by guarding them for posterity, promises to defer reception and interpretation—although unlike the romantic culture of posterity, the twentieth century archive tends to offer immortality to an increasing range of historical actors beyond the artist of genius. The archive can thus be read in the light of Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of historicity, which sees the long transition from pre-modernity to modernity to postmodernity as a gradual democratization of the access to history-making, a 'relaxing of the limitations once constraining the chances to individual immortality'<sup>24</sup> (remember Matuszewski's utopian film archive of the late nineteenth century). But for Bauman, this transition to postmodernity also tends towards the loss of meaning: 'with the gates to history-making thrown wide open and admission tickets abolished, everything is "historical" and therefore nothing is'; in postmodern culture, 'immortality [is] deconstructed into fame' (MIOLS 171-72). This is deeply linked to postmodernity's de-centring of authorship and the elimination of originality in postmodern art, which Bauman reads as a banalization of death through the mass expansion of an *artificial* immortality.<sup>25</sup> This same collapse of historical meaning and of originality would appear to characterize the highly dispersed and indefinitely reproducible (un)structure of the internet: the postmodern archive *par excellence*.

Yet contemporary online culture can also be read beyond Bauman's critique, as an archival space in which this very collapse of received notions of meaning and originality takes on a politicized function. Derrida's mistrust of the possibility of the neutral and objective storability of meaning leads him to define 'archive fever' as the urge 'never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. [...] to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.'<sup>26</sup> Writing on the online *Derridabase*, Peter Krapp has thus proposed the online logic of hypertext—'decentred, dispersive storage on the internet'<sup>27</sup>—as an apt format to store and to interact with Derrida's own work, not through an attempt to gain encyclopaedic knowledge of it, but by viewing it as 'a structure of many heads, the totality of which cannot be retrieved and is perhaps indeed saved

23. Andrew Bennett, 'On Posterity', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1999, pp. 131-44 (hereafter OP), quotation on pp.131-32.

24. Zygmunt Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992 (hereafter MIOLS), p. 171.

25. Zygmunt Bauman, *La posmodernidad y sus descontentos*, trans. Marta Malo de Molina Bodelón and Cristina Piña Aldao, Madrid, Ediciones Akal, 2001, pp.189-202.

26. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 91.

by its irretrievability'.<sup>27</sup> The non-formalized and unstructured online archive, on which contemporary audiovisual artists store, circulate and interlink their work on an almost inconceivable array of online platforms and websites, obeys this same logic, making a rounded and fully contextualized comprehension of it literally impossible. On the internet, since the updating and alteration of content is potentially perpetual and multi-sourced, the deferral of meaning is inescapable. Although for Bennett, 'in the work of Derrida, the culture of posterity—the collusion of the work of art with its unpredictable, posthumous future—becomes the very condition of the possibility of writing' (OP 139), the online archive rejects permanence as unknowable, and instead engages with the future by offering up its contents to be indefinitely recycled and resignified.

To express this in more concrete terms, we will finally turn to a brief discussion of the recent film *RiP: A Remix Manifesto* (Brett Gaylor, Canada, 2009), which enjoyed an open-air screening in a recently renovated (gentrified) street in central Mexico City during the inauguration of the *Ambulante* documentary film festival in February 2010. *RiP* is an outraged critique of U.S. copyright law, focusing on the legal obstacles that the corporate music industry places in the way of creative remix music, which recycles and resignifies existing recorded music. Gaylor's project also involves the construction of an open source internet platform that encourages users to alter and remix his own film online.<sup>28</sup> Despite fair criticism of the schematic structure and misleading rhetoric that the film mobilizes, and of its appeal to a middle-class audience more likely to gain an inconsequential thrill from the idea of digital piracy than they are to engage with progressive or anti-capitalist causes as a result of viewing the film,<sup>29</sup> and beyond the merits or otherwise of its narrative structure, *RiP* signals a broader cultural shift underway that challenges the right of the corporate defenders of copyright to penalize those who make creative use of existing artistic or cultural products. Furthermore, to exhibit this film in a recently gentrified street in the historic centre of Mexico City—albeit with the permission of the city authorities—in itself constitutes a political statement, since it inserts a pro-piracy discourse into the heart of an area that until very recently was one of the hubs of the capital's popular informal economy, and whose 'sanitization' was justified partly by the desire to eliminate media piracy from the zone. Both *RiP* itself and this particular exhibition practice thus demonstrate how postmodern and digital cultural and aesthetic practices can pose a challenge to a capitalist logic of artistic production and originality, and to a traditionalist historical notion of semiotic stability.

The notion of remix in postmodern audiovisual production poses the internet as a decentred archival device whose function is not that of a purportedly neutral space of storage aimed at buttressing conservative narratives of collective identity, as in García Canclini's conceptualization of heritage in the traditional space of the museum, nor as an exclusive bearer of historical or artistic legitimacy as in Bauman's pre-modern

27. Peter Krapp, 'Derrida Online', *Oxford Literary Review*, no. 18, 1996, pp. 159-73.

28. The portal is located at <http://opensourcecinema.org/>.

29. Laura J. Murray, 'Brett Gaylor (dir.) (2009) *RiP: A Remix Manifesto*', *Culture Machine*, June 2009, [www.culturemachine.net](http://www.culturemachine.net).

or modern historicity, but rather as a broad-based, widely consultable and recyclable heritage in which meaning is fluid and constantly refigured. This is not to disavow the very real economic and infrastructural problems of server and connection ownership and unequal internet access, which fall outside the bounds of this essay. Nor is it my intention to idealize online 'heritage' as an inevitably oppositional and grassroots cultural device, as opposed to a purportedly conservative traditional film archive. It is rather to signal the coexistence of traditional, constructed and geographically located archives which tend towards posterity, and virtual archives which allow more scope for rapid resemantization—and to argue that both models of audiovisual heritage exist within complex and sometimes contradictory political and cultural configurations. Even so, while earlier revolutionary conceptions of the film archive suffered from a seemingly inevitable tendency to effect cultural change from the top-down, the postmodern archive tends towards a decentred and dispersed mode of artistic interaction that, in certain circumstances, encourages low-level acts of resistance articulated within existing power structures rather than broader calls for revolutionary transformation outside of them. In the aesthetics of recycling, resignifying and remixing, the romantic culture of artistic posterity, with its deferral of meaning towards an undefined future, is replaced by the imperative to seize and to remould meaning towards the immediate future.

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