

Jane A. Gaines with Rachel Schaff

# Documentary: The Archival Double

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The idea of a plenary panel devoted to documentary and archive came about when we started to see the parallels between documentary theory and practice and archival theory and practice. Some of the very questions that have kept the Visible Evidence conferences alive and vital for eighteen years have reappeared in another form in the discussions around archival practice: the investment in the originary moment is echoed in the discourse around the value of the original artifact, and the ideology of realness returns, now shifted from the world before the camera to the artifactual object. Once deposited in an archive, documentary work (as feet of footage, hours of tape, or megabytes of hard drive storage) becomes something else again. It is both documentary work with a privileged relation to the event and another kind of document, a document governed by an additional set of institutional rules. This is what we mean by the “archival double”: documentary transcription becomes documentary archival material; documentary work becomes documentary archival document.

But while in documentary making the rules are now meant to be broken (evidence of which is the faux doc), archival practices now submit documentary material to new rules “after the fact.” Whereas once we were focused on the manipulation of events in the pro-filmic now the attention is on rearrangement in the post-filmic. Panelists will thus weigh in at this moment that archivists refer to as the “transitional moment” between the photochemical and the digital. While

Visible Evidence conferences have for the last ten or more years debated the loss of the indexical guarantee, we have yet to take up the archival implications of the this so-called “loss.” In what ways is this ostensible “loss” a gain? Or not?

Caution Ahead. The following position points are meant to be polemical! They are for debate only and do not represent the views of the management.

## 1. The Return of Authenticity

While we may have critiqued the overinvestment in the authentic moment-before-the-camera has authenticity come back to bite us again, now in the form of archival standards? Where the scene before the camera, the event, conferred “authenticity” and defined documentary, now the archival institutional process confers a second “authenticity.” Does “realism” (disguised again as ethics) return with a vengeance through another door or because of this double commitment? And do we now have a double duty (first to the real historical, now, second, to the real material)? We wonder if archival “verification” of the authenticity of moving image and sound material is the new “truth” or if the archival concern about the real material is better considered as like journalistic ethics. As we privilege the “identification” of existing print material or audio or video, do we may be re-investing in the possibility that we can know what it is—now through the kind of science of verifiability of which we were once so suspicious—

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the camera and recording devices as verification of the existence of objects and events. New truth-claims may now be made on behalf of fragments that do or do not belong to any whole. We wonder if the old prohibition against reconstruction of the scene is like or unlike the concern about the digital reconstitution (really a constitution) of something in the image that was “never there.”

### 2. Documentary Infidelities

Consider the trouble and expense of the retrieval and restoration of “reality” if what we mean by “reality” might be better termed “fidelity.” Then draw a parallel between the “fidelity” of cinematic realism (and its companion archival authenticity) and the impossibly high expectations of sexual fidelity. Fidelity to an original is as difficult to determine or to legislate in archival politics as it is in sexual relations.

### 3. Radical Loss and Radical Action

Documentary film and video made an enormous investment in the objective presence of a real world only to lose the advantage of that investment in the advent of the digital image. For a minute, pretend that we never argued that “there is no such thing as unmediated reality.” Perhaps something terribly important *is* endangered. What records of marginal communities and what counter-ideological images world historical events are endangered and what are the consequences?

### 4. Nightmare Scenarios: Storage, Never-ending Migration, Overload

Documentary practice in film, video, and now digital has historically been about collecting as much visible and audio evidence as possible. Most documentary archival practices support this commitment. But at what point should we rethink “collection”? We must consider again the problem of cutting corners, the economies of shooting and saving. While digital capture technologies make it possible to shoot and save more, at the other end, the physical storage problem places stress on institutional budgets. The solution for individual film and video makers may be commercial. One

thinks of filmmaker Sally Potter’s effective “sale” of her personal filmmaking archive to a for-profit company that is placing it online.

Given archival economics, there may be a point at which we begin to question the value of “more footage,” the existence of which will require expensive labor to categorize, database, and periodically migrate—indefinitely. What is the nightmare scenario in which we move from reclamation and preservation of the scarce and inaccessible to the overload of moving image information we cannot afford to properly archive in our lifetimes? We might consider here the future ecology of time management that takes up a new concept: over-documentation. On information overload we are told more than we need to know and save more than we can ever see or hear again, documentation thus taking us further away from, not closer to past events. These events are buried under the weight of signs.

### 5. Buried Alive:

This point goes to the question of endangerment and the fear of loss. It assumes that documentary moving image work belongs to an idealized “living history” that privileges the document that, when projected, brings past scenes “to life” before our eyes. If we subscribe to the idea that there is a potential for “life” in footage (now data) hidden deep in motion picture archives we come to see it as “buried alive.” Rescue is imperative because it will not live much longer. Decomposing or otherwise endangered image material might fit into this category. Considering Giovanna Fossatti’s idea of “the *archival life* of film,” we might come to think that the material existence question we once focused on the material world “brought to us” by the camera and projection system is shifting to something more like survivability or longevity given the morbidity of photochemical material.

### 6. Coded Realities and Digital Forensics

The digitization and deposit of an artifact into a digital archive increases the potential for access not merely in one, but in multiple archives (once the artifact is reduced to a JPEG it has to potential to even be found in Google images). What does this mean for the artifactual—the indexical artifact

(the “real” object)—or even the digital artifact produced at the original point(s) of digitization? Through digital preservation these points of origin may fall to the wayside or disappear entirely in the translation process (the transcription of digital code) to become something else again – realities lost in code. These coded realities, devoid of point of origin, may indeed produce a new process of archival work that is forensic archiving—working backwards to decode the trail left behind through the “copy” and “paste” to find the original (which brings up a whole new set of problems). The question is: do these coded realities have artifactual value or does the distance from the original diluted through incarnations of code devalue these digital images entirely?

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