On June 8, 2008 at Los Angeles Filmforum, a heated debate arose during the question and answer session with filmmaker William E. Jones following the screening of his latest film entitled *Tearoom* (2007). Two members of the audience in particular voiced concerns about the ethics, artistic value, and historical value of the film. *Tearoom* consists exclusively of silent 16mm film footage originally shot surreptitiously through a two-way mirror by the police department in a men’s public bathroom in Mansfield, Ohio during a three-week sting operation targeting homosexual men in 1962. The images reveal men of various ages and races in the men’s room performing homosexual acts with one another — although much of the actual sex is off-screen in a stall and is therefore extrapolated from, rather than actually recorded on, film. The footage was used to prosecute and convict many of these men under anti-sodomy laws on the books at the time.

Jones, a queer Los Angeles-based filmmaker who often makes films from appropriated materials, acquired this footage many years after the event from filmmaker Bret Wood, who had received the material from John Butler, who had been Police Chief in Mansfield at the time of the sting operation. Jones had initially seen some of the footage online incorporated into a homophobic police how-to film entitled *Camera Surveillance*, and he had reedited *Camera Surveillance*, which also included reenactments, into a film called *Mansfield 1962*. However, Jones found that audiences found *Mansfield 1962* funny and campy due to the poorly-produced reenactments, which was not the effect Jones desired. When he later acquired the original footage—or the version edited for the trials of the homosexual men—from Wood, Jones ended up showing the film silent and unedited except for one thing: he moved the footage of the police showing how they set up the operation using a camera hidden behind a two-way mirror on a towel dispenser from the end of the film to the beginning. He then titled the film *Tearoom* and put his signature on it.

The two members of the Filmforum audience who objected to the film did so on several grounds. Their first objection was that, they argued, Jones did not make the film, that it was just found footage, not his film and not art. The second was that this footage was of no value, that such images could be shot in plenty of public bathrooms now, that these images were therefore not of value and not “history.” The third was that surveillance footage could not be repurposed as “art” or as “history;” it could only be surveillance footage used to unfairly convict men for consensual acts. And the fourth was that the showing of the film was illegal, or at least unethical, since the men in the footage might still be alive and might feel exploited by Jones’ use of the material.

Jones—and his many allies in the audience—argued in response that these men had already been exploited, that the making and using of the footage in court to prosecute these men for sodomy was
the exploitation, and that Jones was reclaiming this footage as a part of queer history, one of the few indexical recordings of the underground culture of the “tearoom” where men met secretly to have sex. Jones also suggested that the act of screening this footage in the context of a museum or an experimental screening series like Los Angeles Filmforum transformed the footage into an object very different from its initial manifestation and that this recontextualization realized the footage as a film, as art. The two audience members, however, were persuaded neither by Jones’ response nor by that of Jones’ supporters.

In fact, it seems to me that the arguments made on both sides of this debate were based in a Manichean structure of thought in which a film is either ethical or unethical, historically valuable or worthless, art or evidence. Nevertheless, I would argue that there were several wider issues at stake in this interchange. Where is the line between document and documentary? Where is the line between text and context? And how does the placement of these lines alter the way in which we think about the film, its status, its meaning, and its value? In what follows, I will attempt to unravel this complex set of questions raised by the production, promotion, and reception of Tearoom.

Authorship, Context, Frame

Like Ken Jacobs’ A Perfect Film (1986), which consists of a reel of film that Jacobs says he found in trash can on Canal Street and screened exactly as it was (except for a slight adjustment to the soundtrack), Jones’ Tearoom raises the question of what constitutes a new context and therefore a new text. This is crucial in terms of defining what I refer to as “the archival.” Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, it no longer makes sense to define “archival footage” as film footage retrieved from some official archive like the Library of Congress or the UCLA Film and Television Archive—a definition made increasingly suspect given the rise of alternative archives like personal collections, community-based archives and digital archives. I suggest, rather, that we redefine “the archival” as an experience of the viewer produced within a single text. In other words, “the archival” exists only when the viewer recognizes that certain materials in a given film come from either a time or place other than the text in which they appear. Moreover, the experience of the archival can only occur in a given text in relation to an experience of some other part of that text as “not archival.” Following Roland Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect,” I call this experience of the archival the “archive effect.”

Crucial to our understanding of the debate around Tearoom is the fact that, in defining the archival in this way, I am excluding extratextual aspects, such as the space or time of a particular instance of reception of a text, from the production of the archive effect. Of course, as a wealth of scholarly work on reception has indicated, meaning is highly dependent on the context in which a text is experienced. Thus, the space of reception is always a kind of appropriation, a recontextualization, in which what we infer to be the original intended meaning of the film is altered or even subverted. Moreover, the time of reception also influences the way in which a text is read and experienced. Screening a given film at different historical moments changes the way in which these films are received and understood.

My decision, however, to limit my definition of the archival to an experience produced within a single text through a contrast between the materials that we read as produced for the film we are watching and the materials that we read as coming from another time or place is not arbitrary. Without this limitation, the term “archival” would cease to allow us to distinguish between the different ways in which the viewer experiences different aspects of a single text during a single screening. For instance, to begin from the assumption that every screening of Night and Fog (Alain Resnais, 1955) is a different text entirely and that therefore the whole film is necessarily archival would prevent us from understanding the function of the different materials within the text itself, some of which I would argue produce the archive effect and some of which do not. Thus, for my purposes, it is the perception that certain materials within a given film have been recontextualized that generates the archive effect.

Tearoom, like A Perfect Film, however, forces us to further elucidate precisely what constitutes a recontextualization. While Jones’ film has been listed as Tearoom (1962/2007) in the catalog for
the 2008 Whitney Biennial, his website lists it as *Tearoom: A Document Presented by William E. Jones.* This difference in title is illuminating because it forces us to consider whether the film footage is simply an old document being re-screened in a new historical context (specifically in which homosexuality is not a crime and is more socially acceptable, at least to a much larger degree than in 1962) or if it is a new work entitled *Tearoom* by William E. Jones. Is it a document or a documentary? Does the fact that Jones renamed the film, put his own signature on it, and showed it at festivals and museums make it a different film than what it was “originally”? Indeed, this points to the much larger question of what constitutes the frame that marks off the text from its context. Are title and authorial signature inside the text or outside of it? Can the extratextual materials like the program notes be considered part of the text?

In the question and answer session, Jones said that he tries as best he can to show the film in what he calls an “unalienated” viewing situation, meaning that he tries to show the film only in a context in which it would be regarded through a critical lens. I would suggest that this idea of an “unalienated” viewing situation refers precisely to an audience that can recognize the difference between the present context of use and the previous context of (intended) use and therefore experience the archive effect. Clearly, however, this recognition is very much dependent on certain cues—not only the title and byline but also the materials that Jones provides to his audiences in the form of program notes, which seem to be more obviously extratextual than the title and signature but which are crucial to understanding what Jones wants his film to mean. If one regards these elements as outside of the text, however, the film may be experienced rather as a graphic piece of dated film footage, not art and not history.

Jones clearly wishes to control the way in which his films are received. When he made *Mansfield 1962*, he was distressed by the way in which audiences reacted to his film. He writes:

> When the work I made from this material [footage from *Camera Surveillance*, of which Jones found a degraded copy online], *Mansfield 1962*, was shown to audiences, I discovered that some spectators laughed at the footage. Laughter is a fairly common reaction to unexpected images, but in this instance, there was more than discomfort in the response. *Camera Surveillance*’s clumsy re-enactments of police procedure lent a campy aura to the video, and worse yet, gave rise to the suspicion that the entire work was somehow fraudulent. In this era of fake documentaries and of falsification in many aspects of public life, an elaborate simulation might seem plausible. From this point of view, the degradation of the image could serve to cover up problems in art direction or acting...To satisfy skeptics, only the clarity and artless instrumentality of the original would truly suffice.

Here, Jones blames the degradation of the video and the awkward, added reenactments for the audience’s misunderstanding of his film and believes that the “clarity and artless instrumentality of the original” footage will make his intended meanings clear.

However, despite Jones’ attempts, the two angry members of the audience were dissatisfied. It seems to me that these objectors precisely could not see the document as a documentary or, in other words, could not experience the recontextualization and, by association, the archive effect. For them, the difference—between the surveillance footage and Jones’ appropriation of the surveillance footage—lay outside the frame of the text. The only difference was the time and place of reception, which they saw as no difference at all. In their experience, the document—and its original intended meaning (or the projection thereof)—remained intact.

Thus, *Tearoom* presents a conundrum. If we locate the frame of the film, which divides text from context, at the level of Jones’ one edit or of the act of titling and signing the footage as a “work,” then the surveillance footage becomes archival material through its appropriation. However, if we require some more active intervention on the part of Jones, then the footage remains surveillance footage, a re-presented document, neither more nor less.
I would argue that the question becomes one of translating the document across time and space. On the one hand, the word “translation” suggests sameness, an attempt to transfer exactly the meaning of a statement made in one language into another. On the other hand, translation also suggests transformation, an act of reconfiguring some original message in order to make it comprehensible within a new context. Indeed, translation is constituted by both similarity and difference. Even the most literal translation of a statement from one language to another nevertheless often involves changes—however slight—in the meaning of the sentence. Some languages do not share correlates that can be exactly substituted for one another. Thus, translation is always also an act of creation.

Similarly, taking footage out of one context and placing it in another necessarily alters the experience and meaning of that footage. If we rethink the act of appropriation as an act of translation, we may be able to develop a more nuanced understanding of the transformation inherent in the use of archival documents as one involving both similarity and difference. The two members of the Filmforum audience critical of *Tearoom* were, in my view, either unable or unwilling to recognize the difference involved in the act of appropriation or translation. By the same token, in their emphasis on the difference between the surveillance footage’s original intended meaning and the new meaning with which Jones had imbued it, Jones and the rest of the audience perhaps neglected the continuity and sameness within the document as it becomes—or verges on becoming—documentary. To be able to hold in one’s mind both sameness and difference—perhaps not unlike the simultaneous translator who knows multiple languages equally well—is to fully recognize the complexity of the archive effect and the appropriative gesture.

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**Notes**

1 A written account of the events is included in William E. Jones, *Tearoom* (Los Angeles: 2nd Cannons Publications, 2008).
6 Jones, 6.
7 Indeed, of all the objections made against the film, the one that perhaps holds the most weight is the one made on the grounds of ethics, on the fact that some of the men in the surveillance footage may still be alive and might not be pleased that this footage is being shown as “art” or “history.” For these men, whose lives may have been ruined by this footage, the historical context in which the footage was originally made and used may not have fully passed. Indeed, this footage is still a part—and most likely a painful part—of their own lives. For them, no matter how it is reused, this footage is the surveillance footage that sent them to jail.