

WHO IS THE USER? the use of audiovisual archives for research and education

Floris Paalman, TAPE-seminar KNAW, 12/10/2004

INTRODUCTION

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archives used:

- Nederlands Film Museum (NFM), Amsterdam
- Beeld & Geluid (B&G), Hilversum
- Gemeente Archief Rotterdam, Rotterdam
- incidentally some smaller archives

CASE

film fragment: Nul Uur Nul (?Zero Hour Zero?, 1927, Simon Koster), collection Beeld & Geluid
(1.) importance of context; (2.) importance of original material; (3.) organization of archive and destiny of objects; (4.) how discoveries can be made.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

- necessary data of an audiovisual production: (1.) title; (2.) director or producer; (3.) year of production
- archives should compare collections; researchers can play an intermediary role
- second set of necessary data (according to Thomas Elsaesser):
- (1.) commissioner; (2.) reason of production; (3.) use
- who has presented the material to the archive?

USERS AS EXTENSIONS OF THE ARCHIVE

- researcher and teacher are extensions of the archive
- can all users have some kind of contract?
- add users's information to records
- create conditions so that users can meet each other
- writing biographies of objects; ?the social life of things? (Arjun Appadurai, 1986)

EDUCATION

- objects are no ends but nodes in a network
- archive itself is (part of) a network
- archive should accommodate interaction within the network
- archive as memory ? archive as learning system
- providing digital catalogues and data-bases
- databases can record users? information (e.g. www.imdb.com and www.amazon.com)
- archive as a meeting place
- how digital media can help to regenerate original settings and contexts

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WHO IS THE USER?

the use of audiovisual archives for research and education ?

Floris Paalman, 2004

INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to me to speak as a representative of the users of audiovisual archives. However, there are many kinds of users, and I can certainly not speak for all of them. Each user is different, and each uses the material for different reasons. In my case, I use the material for research. I am a PhD candidate at the Department of Media Studies of the University of Amsterdam. My research concerns the relationship between film and architecture, and more in general, cinema and the city. To carry out this research I focus on Rotterdam from the 1920s up to the present. Therefore I use the collections of the Netherlands Film Museum in Amsterdam and of Beeld & Geluid in Hilversum (related to Dutch broadcasting stations), and the audiovisual collection of the Municipal Archive in Rotterdam. The latter is probably the most important for me, and that is one of the reasons that I am here. Besides that, I visit occasionally some other, smaller collections.

CASE

I would like to show you a fragment of a film from my research, which I have shown before to students, colleagues and to people at a conference abroad. The film illustrates four points: (1) the importance of context; (2) the importance of original material; (3) the way that the destiny of an object is defined by the organization of archives; (4) how discoveries can be made. The fragment

is from the unknown film 'Zero Hour Zero' (1927, Simon Koster), which I discovered in the collection of Beeld & Geluid in Hilversum. The film shows images of Rotterdam and The Hague. The images are avant-gardistic, which is reflected by its editing and cinematographic features like superimposition, comparable to the films of Dziga Vertov and Walter Rutmann. Also its content is highly avant-gardistic, dealing with modernity itself. We can roughly distinguish four general themes: industry, mobility, communication and leisure. These themes are highly relevant within current debates of media studies, urbanism and sociology, which makes the film of interest today.

The film was part of a theatre play. This was something new at that time, which is actually the reason that the work has neither been mentioned by theatre historians nor by film historians. The script and the film are also in different archives. However, the overall play was a critical reflection upon different media. It even used images of at least one other film, an industrial documentary that was made for a big event in Rotterdam at that time. I discovered this because I recognized the images from a film I had seen in the Municipal Archive of Rotterdam. Or more precisely, I discovered it because I had just asked Beeld & Geluid for a tape, since I wanted to show it to students (the tape I will show you too), while just before I had received a digital copy of the other film from someone on the internet who copied Rotterdam films, probably using material from the Municipal Archive of Rotterdam. This discovery gave me new insights in connections between filmmakers and provided answers to several other questions. It also made me aware of something else. The recycled images were themselves part of the urban environment, they were just taken just like images were taken from buildings or traffic that we see in the film. Indeed, 'Zero Hour Zero' addressed the fact that media created new urban conditions. But this vision was too new, and so it has been forgotten. Ironically enough, the play had predicted this already. However, media nowadays are not only frequently used on stage, but also in the city as a large mediated stage, by way of different kinds of events, large and numerous video and computer screens, projections, moving billboards and other kinds of displays.

[film fragment]

What is the matter with this film? The original negative is lost, although it is still mentioned in the database. Beeld & Geluid has only one film copy and a VHS viewing tape, of which mine is a copy. I would love to see the negative, first of all to know its quality, because it can tell more about the project itself, but also to learn about the use of pieces from other films, and, most importantly, what might be missing. The script that I have found in the archive of the Theatre Institute of the Netherlands suggests that there must be more material.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

In order to get things right, let me begin with some basic things. As a researcher, I need at least three data of an audiovisual production: the original title, the director or producer, the year of production. This might seem self evident, but it turns out to be problematic sometimes. Especially smaller archives might have material that has been produced for reasons of promotion, education or general _document_ation, and often for specific occasions. The material might be unidentified and anonymous. To handle the material, archives attribute titles, which do not always correspond to titles in other collections. The same counts for dates of production. Besides that, confusion might exist because material is sometimes re-edited afterwards for all kinds of purposes. To solve some problems, archives compare collections. It might also avoid that the same work is done twice. Independent researchers could play an important role in this too.

For further understanding of audiovisual material, I need a second set of data: the commissioner, the occasion for which material was made, as well as following occasions, and the users. This is what film historian Thomas Elsaesser has called the three A?s: Auftraggeber (commissioner), the Anlass (reason) and the Anwendung (use). These data are often difficult to trace, so other information might be useful, like the name of the person who has presented the material to the archive.

USERS AS EXTENSIONS OF THE ARCHIVE

I have briefly expressed some of my concrete interests. But I leave it up to you to decide which kind of user I represent. However, if you want to have a broader understanding of the user, I would like to turn the question around. For what do the archives use the material? In which ways can we identify the users within the archive? So far, the user of audiovisual material has been identified within the realms of research and education. If we count research and education among the core-businesses of archives, researchers and teachers are extensions of an archive. The only difference with people inside the archive is a matter of contract. But this is exactly the kind of thing I would like to discuss. Can we think of some kind of contract with people who are not employed within the institution? And, could different users be treated differently? This contract can be any kind of agreement, dealing with exchange of information, to the benefit of both the institution and the individual. For example, in exchange of watching material, the institution can ask the user several questions about the material that can be added to the record. This information is then also accessible to other users, so that the archive can develop over time. And why not to mention credits?

Credits are helpful. As a researcher I am interested to know other users, because they can tell new things to me, and vice versa. Just let users write down addresses, so they can contact each other. It builds a network in which the archive becomes the nodal point where different lines get together. In this way, an archive becomes a place where people can learn and meet others. The archive will be embedded in social-cultural practices. This is especially interesting for smaller archives, since the people to which the material makes sense are often not far away.

My proposal here is to record information of users, including their names and what they use the material for, and to realize exchange between them. This information should be connected to the two basic sets of data I have indicated. Together this results in ?biographies of objects?. It is exactly this which gives objects value, and which can eventually be capitalized. Referring to the famous book of the cultural anthropologists Arjun Appadurai, we are dealing with ?The Social Life of Things? (1986).

EDUCATION

Objects are no ends, but nodes in a network. The total archive is a network, or actually, a part of a network that extends far beyond the walls of any particular institution. All users are similarly part of the network. Therefore it does not make sense to speak about insiders or outsiders. The archive should accommodate the interaction within the network, which means interaction between people via objects. Accessibility and presentation are the ways to do this, and that is where education comes in. But who is being educated? Who is there to learn? If we take the common notion of ?archive as memory?, we should probably connect it to other cognitive functions such as learning, and to consider the archive as a learning system.

For archives it is necessary to define with whom information is communicated. Dealing with researchers, students or school children, could we suggest programmes in which they can compare certain material, find sources or contact other people in order to find out something that can inform the archive? How can we learn from the ways others understand things? If we find means to attract people, young and old, to study material from the archive, the question is of course how this collection is made accessible. I will not suggest to digitalize complete collections. Digital conservation is a different issue. Of course, it would be nice if we could combine conservation and preservation to such an extent that materials are readily available, at any moment. But we could wonder what the actual benefit would be. The quality of images that we can receive by the internet is still not comparable to the original material. And what would happen to the actual archive? We cannot reduce it to a metaphor, unless we also believe that we can break down a monumental building after we have taken a picture of it.

The most important is that people know what is in the archive. Catalogues and databases with good search engines are needed, and may-be some digitalized extracts. Elaborated digital databases also facilitate recording users' information (see for example www.imdb.com; see also information about buyers of books on www.amazon.com). And if we know what is in the archive, I have no problem with going there in person. Moreover, the actual archive might be an appropriate meeting place. Here one can meet people working with the material. Digital presentation offers possibilities for innovation, but it should be interrelated with other kinds of presentation. It is a challenge to think how digital media can help to regenerate original settings and contexts as parts of presentational or educational practices. We should, after all, keep in mind the power of original presentations for which the material once was made. As I have tried to make clear, the object itself is important, but not without knowing its purposes and the ways it has been used.