

History is, media studies is

John Sundholm

NECSUS 10 (2), Autumn 2021: 93–97

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/history-is-media-studies-is/>

The extensive and sprawling discussion on the archive – regardless of your position or your take on the matter – has irrevocably deconstructed any naïve position vis-a-vis our presumed object of study, making us aware of the contingency of the contexts and the obscurity of the objects. The archive is a regulated, connecting, and converging apparatus; a conceptual metaphor that reminds us that we are dealing with social practices and material premises where subjects and objects meet and interact, tearing against each other. And since not everything has been archived and cannot be archived, and not every document remediated either – history is. Made and remade. But not by pure will.

I am writing this piece from Frankfurt, at the beginning of the easing of the curfew. I am here for two reasons: I will teach in a seminar titled 'Jede Kopie ist ein Original' ('Every copy is an original'), led and organised by Tobias Hering; and I will spend two days at the National Library in order to go through material for a research project on the New American Cinema tours in Europe in the 1960s (the latter project is in collaboration with Miguel Fernandez Labayen from University Carlos III, Madrid). For the seminar I will screen a unique 16mm print of the legendary political documentary *Finally Got the News* (1970), a film that confirms in a fascinating way David E. James' point that every film is an allegory of its production.

Finally Got the News was made in conflict-ridden collaboration between a Newsreel team and front figures from The League of Black Revolutionary Workers in Detroit – a production history that is well preserved in the finalised film, constituting a diverse and antagonistic ensemble of voices. What makes the print unique is that it is that very copy which Glanton Dowdell, one of the key figures of the radical Black revolutionary movements of 1960s Detroit, distributed in Sweden at the time. Dowdell had arrived in Stockholm

in 1969, secretly escaping from the US in order to get away from the harassment and surveillance of the local police. He was convinced that he would get killed if he stayed in the US. As the American authorities realised that Dowdell resided in Sweden they demanded to have him extradited and a campaign was initiated by activist groups to grant him permanent residency. As part of the struggle they managed to persuade Swedish public television to broadcast a special program in which Dowdell was interviewed and *Finally Got the News* was shown. Although the program was made in support of Dowdell's case the film was substantially shortened in a way that reveals an overt and blatant racism on the part of the producers and technicians. It is that slashed and mutilated print that I have brought with me to Frankfurt.

Both research projects — the New American Cinema tour through different regions of Europe and the local Swedish history of a reel of Black militant cinema — build upon extensive collecting of material dispersed through different places and nations, encompassing both archives and private collections, such as the archive of the Supreme Court in Sweden and cine clubs from the former Yugoslavia. Nearly every place that holds some of the material suggests a different story to tell. While I have been conducting the research, and especially because of the pandemic, my attention has become more and more drawn to the very premises for doing comparative and transnational film historical research in today's hybrid media situation. Not only that the media practices of today are heterogenous, but so are the archival practices for storage and access. The traces of past events and discourses are remediated through traditional bindings of newspapers, microfilm, software for reading the material, and other technologies of storing and accessing. These remediations not only alter the original artefact and its previous practices but also reflect the difference in infrastructural conditions and resources for making material from the past accessible in the present. The differences cut across nations and regions, archives and collections. Also here digitalisation constitutes a space for the privileged, for those who may take advantage of the digital accessibility and its high speed of reading.

The model image of digitalisation – to travesty Paolo Cherci Usai's well-known criticism of the idea that a film is a stable and self-contained object – provides us with the idea that the past is widely accessible digitally, and that due to the effective means for searching this newly-digitised past, it has become a most attractive source for writing history. However, despite all the different political turns in the humanities and the social sciences when it

comes to activism, oral history, counter-history projects, practices of deconstruction and decentering, there is still a considerable difference between how resources are allocated and which financial means are available for archives, organizations, societies, and people. Who has the possibilities to deconstruct; where may counter-histories take place; which sources are supposedly worthy to be made accessible? The availability of these means does not only affect who may access material, but also what will be defined as sources – as the past, that is. A well-known case is the sudden rise in the use of the American trade journal *Variety* as a historical source after it had been digitised, and it is just as sad to see how few of the major European newspapers have been digitised and made accessible transnationally (not to mention journals and special magazines). It is telling that when I boarded my flight to Frankfurt in Stockholm those who were absent were the priority people – the business class travelers, those for whom Zoom is an option. Those who boarded the flight were mostly manual laborers who carried neither German nor Swedish passports, but as far as I could identify spoke the languages of the EU countries that provide the Union with that labor, where your body is your prime working tool; in this case, workers from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland.

My intention is not to pitch the digital and the analogue as opposites. The enforced closures of archives due to the pandemic have not stopped dedicated archivists from excavating material and distributing it through whatever technology is at hand at the moment; copying, scanning, or taking photographs with their private mobile phones and mediating the material further. It has arrived in a plethora of different forms, formats, and languages; by mail or e-mail, uploaded or packaged, from Croatia, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, the US, and so forth. Not to mention colleagues who generously shared material from their own collections. This heterogeneous practice of copying, collecting, archiving, sharing, circulating, and remediating is a good reminder of the very instability of our field, of its supposed objects and sources. When reading assessment protocols by those who inspected prints in the mid-60's at the Cinematheque of the Swedish Film Institute, it is striking that uncertainty and imperfection was rather the rule: damaged prints, missing sequences, reversed sections, prints compiled from different sources, misinformation of what the cans contained, not to mention precarious projection events that were interrupted because of technological failures or misbehavior (once it was reported that a man entered the projection

booth, turned off the projector, and demanded the film to be shown in another speed). Each screening was an event during which almost everything could happen regardless of the preparations and intentions to steer and monitor the situation, the efforts to create an ideal circumstance for the encounter between audience and filmic object.

The strength of the obscure notion of media studies is that it is porous. It leaks and changes. While we are dealing with a socio-cultural field of making meanings and initiating interventions, the value in our practice is to keep it heterogeneous. Such a momentary and changing foundation means that a form, a format or a technology, can neither be the founding formation nor the object as such on the basis of which meanings are to be constructed. So, my introductory examples are not used in order to suggest that the digital is always the form for the privileged, and the analogue the last pockets of resistance against the neoliberal imperialism of digitalisation. But, that each form or object is part of a precarious practice that includes questions of the distribution of resources and thus positioned in relation to perspectives of power and hegemonic struggle. An institution such as NECS could and should monitor that resources are distributed equally across countries and regions, and also use its hegemonic power for keeping the field open and diverse. This encompasses a kind of archaeological ethics, guaranteeing the preservation of the stratigraphic layers of our culturally and geographically dispersed media so we may take a fresh look back in order to pave the way for the future.

Every copy is an original. In the case of *Finally Got the News* its specific local and material history is only traceable if you hold the actual print, because it was never archived nor copied, and never screened under its original title either — neither before it was shown on TV or thereafter — thus almost impossible to trace on the basis of existing documents. Moreover, there is no other trace of the racist intervention, of the political and abusive act, than the one that has left its marks on the print. It is when that print is brought into light that a new story can be revealed. The fate of the Swedish print of *Finally Got the News* and its non-existence as an archival object is not only a reminder of the shortcomings and arbitrariness of the archive — that it is embedded in social and material practices, in a state of flux, always being worked upon. Every copy is an original because every copy has a different story to tell, hence Enno Patalas' suggestion that the 16mm prints of the German silent

classics that were shown in the 1950s at the wrong speed and with a sound-track should be archived because they constitute a specific history of their supposed originals.

History is made and remade (but not arbitrarily) in order to make a difference in the future. Media Studies should also be made and remade to similar ends.

Author

John Sundholm is Chair of the Department of Media Studies and Professor in Cinema Studies at Stockholm University. He is member of the examination board of the PhD program in Fine Arts at the University of the Arts, Helsinki, Finland since 2006, and Editor-in-Chief of the open access journal *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* (Routledge).