Finn D'Amico-Jubak

Archival encounters: Institutional critique in contemporary found footage films

2024

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/23660

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
D'Amico-Jubak, Finn: Archival encounters: Institutional critique in contemporary found footage films. In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Enough, Jg. 13 (2024), Nr. 2, S. 234–258. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/23660.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MEDIA STUDIES
www.necsus-ejms.org

Archival encounters: Institutional critique in contemporary found footage films

Finn D'Amico-Jubak

NECSUS 13 (2), Autumn 2024: 234–258
URL: https://necsus-ejms.org/archival-encounters-institutional-critique-in-contemporary-found-footage-films/

Abstract
Reuses of archival film continue to proliferate in filmmaking practices across the United States, concurrent with the opening up of film collections for expanded use and activation. Building upon past scholarship on appropriation and found footage filmmaking, this article argues that appropriation films are uniquely positioned to foreground the material conditions of ownership and the histories of enclosure and extraction that shape the film archival world. It proposes the metaphor of an 'archival encounter' between a filmmaker and a specific film collection, which becomes the subject of an institutional critique. Two films are discussed as examples that stake out political and ethical positions regarding the material they use and make demands of archival collections: Expedition Content (2020) demonstrates the embedded racism of 'objective' ethnographic film material through textual interventions and aural parapraxes; Riotsville, USA (2022) follows a painstaking research-based route to contextualise a visual narrative of American racism that white audiences are eager to misremember. Rather than perfect models to imitate, these films exemplify the strengths and limitations of filmmakers as agents in the push to democratise film archives. They also add nuance to contemporary discussions of appropriation films that mostly focus on the changes wrought by digital technology.

Keywords: archival encounters, appropriation films, found footage films, institutional critique, ethnographic film

I am interested in both purpose and process. – Jay Leyda

In the last ten years, reuses of archival film have proliferated in filmmaking practices across geographies and styles, from experimental to mainstream. In the United States, filmmakers are creating films that use 'collage' or 'found footage' techniques to address or critique the production of historical knowledge. Filmmakers working with preexisting material is not new: such techniques are often dated to Esfir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), which re-edited pre-revolution home movies of Russian Tsar Nicholas II.[2] Since then, scholars have referred to these films under a variety of monikers, including: found footage,[3] compilation, collage, remix, and mash-up films, each one roughly corresponding to a subset of the practice and a historical moment to which it spoke (or speaks).

Film scholar Jaimie Baron proposes using the term 'appropriation film' to describe these films. In referring to the notion of propriety, this term centres the category's recontextualisation of material as a basis for critique and its interrogation of what is 'proper' in historical discourse.[4] It also captures more accurately the fact that many recent appropriation films originate and exist in a purely digital form; there is no actual 'footage' to speak of. In Baron's treatment and in other contemporary discussions of appropriation film, there is an emphasis on the new possibilities afforded via digital technology (e.g. digitised archival material and digital tools). This is a crucial element of the recent changes in the practice of appropriation film, but there is more to the picture.

Discussions about appropriation film have increasingly intersected with a concurrent conversation in the archival film field about the opening up of collections for expanded use in the digital age. Film archivist and theorist Rick Prelinger argues that expanding 'the right to see, hear, reuse, and make derivative works from the archival record' while balancing 'respect for cultural sovereignty, autonomy, and tradition'[5] would allow us to reconceptualise archives as 'incubators of social change and justice'.[6] Prelinger pushes us to rethink the relationship between archives, communities, and records in a way that foregrounds material conditions of ownership (who are film archives *really* for?). This push, what archival theorist Terry Cook calls the 'democratizing'[7] of archives, is still very much in process despite best intentions. Writing in 2021, Floris Paalman, Giovanna Fossati, and Eef Masson

note that although film archives 'have made parts of their collections available […] in ways that would have been inconceivable in the 1990s',[8] the archive is still characterised by the enclosure of material and a long list of restrictions.

The premise of this article is that appropriation films are uniquely positioned to foreground the material conditions of ownership and the histories of enclosure and extraction that shape the film archival world. Canonical theorists of found footage, like William Wees, have highlighted their function as a form of critique, political or otherwise.[9] Jay Leyda references a similar phenomenon in what he calls 'compilation films', which are made up of 'propaganda and ideas'.[10] More recently, Jaimie Baron speaks of appropriation films that disrupt 'the hegemonic gaze' or reframe the gaze of a perpetrator of injustice.[11] But what about a film that focuses its inquiry on the source of its own images, launching an *institutional critique*[12] against the film archive that serves as its source? Here I propose the metaphor of an 'archival encounter' between a filmmaker and a specific repository to describe appropriation films that reuse material from a named archival source, which becomes a subject of investigation and thus a character in the film itself.

Foregrounding the source of their material, such films take a reflexive approach that both asks how such material arrived there to begin with and how a new context might transform settled meanings. In so doing, they dramatise the elements of contingency, critique, and the tension between insider/outsider perspectives that are present in all appropriation films. The idea of an encounter also references the avant-garde tradition of found footage filmmaking and the moment of encounter between the filmmaker and unviewed material as a creative act.[13] In this article, two examples – Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati's *Expedition Content* (2020) and Sierra Pettengill's *Riotsville, USA* (2022) – will be introduced and analysed. I argue that while strongly grounded in the formal conventions of appropriation film and the historical tradition of found footage, they differ in that their critique expands to include the archival repositories from which material is sourced. This institutional critique allows us to think more deeply about the power relations that exist between film archives, filmmakers, and community stakeholders. Each film takes a slightly different approach: *Expedition Content* demonstrates the embedded racism of 'objective' docu-

mentary material through textual interventions and aural parapraxes; whereas *Riotsville, USA* follows a painstaking research-based route to contextualise a visual narrative of American racism that white audiences are eager to misremember despite its dissemination on live television.

These two films stake out political and ethical positions regarding the material they use and make demands of the collections that serve as their sources. Neither one was institutionally sanctioned in any official manner. They meet the archive 'on equal footing', and I believe it is for that reason that they can take a critical stance. It is worth noting that two of the three filmmakers discussed are white; two of them were affiliated with a well-resourced institution of higher education at the time of making their film. I do not think that all appropriation filmmakers are able to work in this way, nor should they. Furthermore, many important appropriation films made in recent years, whether community-based collaborative works or commissioned projects, are worth discussing as well but are outside the scope of this article. With these limitations in mind, I believe that pulling out the specificities that emerge in the context of an archival encounter, with its embedded institutional critique, allows us to see patterns and relations within the larger subset of appropriation films, as well as the potential for pushing the form even further.

No two archival encounters are alike. As with Leyda in his study of compilation films, the interest here is in both the purpose and process of archival appropriations: not only *why* they are made but also *how* they are made. As a set of economic, artistic, ethical, and political choices, the practical approach of each film is embedded with an ideology that is worth considering as conversations about democratising the film archive continue to unfold. These films exemplify the strengths and limitations of filmmakers as agents in that push.

The colonial sound archive in *Expedition Content*

Expedition Content appropriates sound recordings created during a 'visual anthropology' expedition to what was then known as Netherlands New Guinea in 1961. The expedition was led by Robert Gardner, a 'founding

father of US ethnographic film'[14] and a founder of the Film Study Center at Harvard; it resulted in the documentary film *Dead Birds* (1963). Ernst Karel, an employee of the Center, was approached for help completing some of Gardner's short film projects and came across 37 hours of digitised sound recordings that had been created by Michael Rockefeller, son of New York governor Nelson Rockefeller and heir to the Standard Oil fortune,[15] who joined the expedition as a sound recordist.

The context in which *Dead Birds* was created is worth quickly mentioning. The film grew out of Gardner's interest in the place of war in society in the context of US intervention in Southeast Asia and was one instalment in a series of films in which he depicted Indigenous subjects as representations of typified ways of life.[16] Gardner believed that 'cinematic recordings of human life are unchanging documents providing detailed and focused information on the characteristics of man',[17] a theoretical perspective that fits into the paradigm of 'salvage ethnography'. Even at the time that he was working, this was considered an outmoded way of conceptualising anthropological projects.[18] Gardner's goal was to (incorrectly) depict the Indigenous Hubula (also known as Dani) as a society based around war.[19] The Dutch colonial government's interest in the project was clear: under pressure to decolonise, officials saw in Gardner's framing of a 'Neolithic society of warrior farmers' the chance to make the argument that the Papuan people were not ready for self-determination.[20] To this end, there were many elements of Hubula life encountered during the expedition that were not included in the film, in order to support its depiction of a warrior society.[21] Gardner's film is notable in that the soundtrack is constructed so as to give the impression of being recorded in the field, although this is not the case. Subjects who appear to be speaking were actually dubbed later by European actors speaking Dani in a studio.[22]

Michael Rockefeller joined the expedition, making unsynched monoaural sound recordings on 123 ¼ inch tapes with a handheld microphone attached to a Nagra III tape recorder (See Figure 1). Some recordings were used in *Dead Birds*; all were donated to the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in 2005. The analogue recordings were digitised by the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music in 2005-2006[23] and are still held by the Harvard Peabody Museum as CDs. *Expedi-*

tion Content is a feature-length film that uses only the digitised sound recordings and added subtitles and intertitles.

Fig. 1: Nagra III tape recorder. Photo: Wikipedia.

Visually, *Expedition Content* is difficult to describe. The content it repurposes are sound recordings, thus there were no images to work with. In one brief sequence, the filmmakers use a two-minute visual outtake from *Dead Birds* (See Figure 2). Besides this single shot, the film is a black screen, on which intertitles and subtitles occasionally appear, and an audio track that is all archival. There is no contemporary voiceover. After long stretches of black, a tone is played before text or image appears on screen. This cues the listener to look at the screen to read the text or see the image. Despite the lack of visual material, *Expedition Content* was explicitly designed for cinema exhibition and is referred to as a film. It may, indeed, be discussed within the tradition of 'imageless films', something outside the scope of this article. The film circulates in cinemas and occasionally as a video installation in gallery settings, although it is designed to be experienced from beginning to end.

Two individuals are credited as directors, although they collaborated with a larger network of individuals in West Papua and elsewhere in order to create the film. Both of them were affiliated with Harvard at the time: Ernst Karel as an employee at the Film Study Center and as a member of the Sensory Ethnography Lab who occasionally taught production classes, and Veronika Kusumaryati as a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology. Upon first listening to the recordings, Karel was immediately intrigued by the combination of music, speech, and the everyday life of the

Hubula people of the Baliem Valley in what is now West Papua. Karel shared the material with Kusumaryati due to her academic work on Papuans. By assembling Rockefeller's recordings (including his own descriptions of their content, the conversations of expedition members, conversations with Hubula subjects, and the various analogue and digital artifacts that exist on the tracks), the film reflects on the legacy of this expedition and of ethnographic filmmaking in general.

Expedition Content is instructive in three primary ways. First, it makes use of the found footage technique of allowing material to 'speak for itself', and in the process surfacing hidden meanings and un-doing Gardner's original aims. Second, the interventions of the filmmakers – both within the film and in subsequent public statements – highlight the complicity of the Film Study Center and other repositories in distorting the representation of the Hubula. Finally, the filmmakers used their privileged position within the institution in order to affect a return of these extracted materials to the community that they belong to, demonstrating that the act of appropriating archival material can occasionally contribute to returning it to stakeholder communities.

Karel and Kusumaryati make use of a recognisable found footage technique, what Tom Gunning calls objet trouvé ('found object'),[24] in which found material is presented, unedited, in a new context, and hidden meanings inevitably rise to the surface. Working with the recordings, Karel and Kusumaryati include not only the errors and outtakes but the quotidian moments that reveal Rockefeller's attempt to shape the world around him. They also include the fragments of past classification systems that still exist on the tapes, including Rockefeller's description of each recording and the date (both of which he often gets wrong) and the audio description created by the Indiana University archivists during the digitisation process. They thus gesture towards the chain of custody that this material has passed through and the many transformations it has undergone. The result does not constitute a distortion of the original material through an aggressive edit as much as an un-doing of the way that the material would be edited in Gardner's film to fit a preconceived and incorrect thesis.

Fig. 2: A two-shot outtake from Robert Gardner's footage is the only image sequence in *Expedition Content*.

Theorists of found footage practice such as Gunning and Catherine Russell emphasise that allowing the material to 'speak for itself' in this way calls attention to how fragmentary moments echo differently in a contemporary context.[25] In a much-discussed section of the film referred to as the 'party scene', Rockefeller clandestinely records the conversation of the expedition members as they discuss kidnapping and assaulting Hubula women and make racist comments about African-Americans. The party scene confirms the suspicions of the viewer about the intentions of the group; it also literalises the violence of the entire project as it dawns on the viewer that these men are admitting to abducting women from the surrounding areas. By presenting this scene as a single long take and without additional commentary or framing, Karel and Kusumaryati reveal the violence that lurks below the surface of the whole project. As viewers, we are reminded of the ongoing suppression and violence in West Papua to this day.

Karel and Kusumaryati also work to un-do the distorted view of the Hubula that Gardner and Rockefeller intended by adding subtitles to all of the Hubula speech that is captured on the tapes. One example is a humorous sequence at the end of the film that has children discussing the appear-

ance of the expedition members (See Figure 3). If Rockefeller (and Gardner) had hoped to be unnoticed as observers, the subjects of their film indicate at every turn that this is not possible. The approach to casting subjects within a simple narrative is revealed to be the result of the purposeful removal of their voices.

If *Expedition Content* levelled its critique at *Dead Birds* and Gardner as examples of a historical injustice, it would be fairly typical in scope for an appropriation film. However, Karel and Kusumaryati go further: they turn their sights on the Film Study Center and the Harvard Peabody Museum, transforming their found footage critique into institutional critique. Charting a chain of custody between these institutions, the film calls attention to the fact that these materials were extracted – stolen – from Hubula subjects and have not yet been returned. We are made to ask: why do Karel and Kusumaryati have access to this material, rather than those depicted or their families? The recordings are listed on the websites of both the Harvard Peabody Museum and the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music, but they are not playable or downloadable. This is not to say that the recordings need to be accessible to everyone at all times – in fact, Hubula communities should decide, in consultation with archives, how to share materials while respecting privacy and cultural sovereignty.

The film is transparent about its privileged vantage point and a certain degree of complicity with the institutions that have extracted this material and caused harm. This begins with an understanding of Robert Gardner's role: despite his flattening of the Hubula, he remains celebrated as one of the founders of visual anthropology and as the founder of the Film Study Center and its director from 1956 until 1997. Untangling Gardner from Harvard is not possible. The discomfort lies at the heart of the project but is also what made it possible in the first place. Reflecting in an interview, Karel says:

> […] You could think of it as institutional critique. We're definitely thinking of this in relation to the legacy and history of the Film Study Center, and Robert Gardner, and visual anthropology.[26]

Gardner and his ideas pose a problem for the Film Study Center now, as he symbolises an outmoded and debunked vision of ethnographic film, but

also lends an aura of historical import. This tension could, conceivably, lead to a situation in which the institution would be disinclined to facilitate an appropriation film for fear of looking bad. But Karel and Kusumaryati had both access to the material and the ability to criticise their institution without facing reprisal (for example, loss of funding). This example demonstrates the power relations that might underlie appropriation films that involve collaborating with an individual archive, in which a filmmaker who has been commissioned to make an appropriation film would be hesitant to create something that reflects negatively on their funder and partner. Karel and Kusumaryati were able to meet the archive 'on equal footing', in this instance making a wider critique possible.

Karel and Kusumaryati aim to maintain reflexivity about their own position, and they largely do. Although a deeper engagement with postcolonial and decolonial studies, especially in connection with documentary film, is unfortunately outside the scope of this article, it is worth pointing out that *Expedition Content* could risk veering into a kind of 'saviorism', in which the filmmakers – one white, one Indonesian, both from outside the Hubula community of West Papua – aim to speak on behalf of their subjects. I will say that the filmmakers are clearly aware of this dynamic and aim to subvert it. They make no attempts to hide the access that has allowed them to make the film – in fact, this injustice is a driving force of the film.

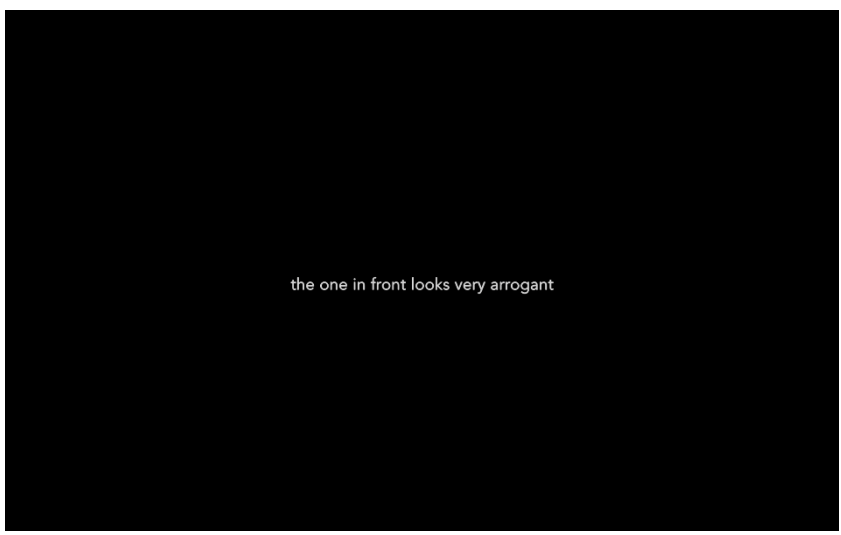

Fig. 3: Children discuss the expedition members' appearance in *Expedition Content*.

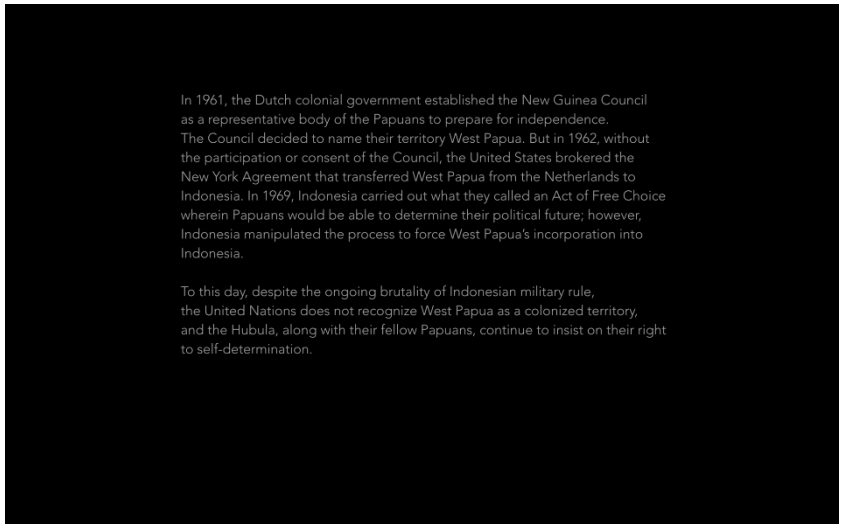

Fig. 4: Final intertitles connect the 1961 expedition to ongoing struggles for West Papuan self-determination in *Expedition Content.*

The subject is deeply connected to Kusumaryati's work as an anthropologist on the experiences of Indigenous Papuans in Indonesia. The film's added intertitles connect the colonial context of the 1961 expedition to the continued refusal to grant West Papuan self-governance and the continued support of the US for Indonesian military rule of the area today. This is most clearly laid out at the end of the film (See Figure 4). The filmmakers refuse to treat this subject matter as a historical curiosity, relegated to the past, but rather as part of a struggle that still offers lessons.

Additionally, the film functions as part of a larger project that collaborates with the Hubula community in West Papua, where Kusumaryati has a network of collaborators who were involved in making the film, including translating the recordings into English. Working with local musicians like Korneles Siep, she wants to release the music captured in the recordings as a CD.[27] There is also a plan to translate ethnographic texts created on the expedition into Hubula, as well as the revitalisation of the local museum as a Hubula Museum. This new museum would then receive digital copies of the recordings to facilitate local access. Karel and Kusumaryati also seek to make all the recordings available for listening online (with privacy re-

strictions determined by Hubula collaborators), either through the Harvard Peabody Museum website or through a separate platform.[28]

These various projects engage with the fact that the original expedition was never concerned with sharing information with Hubula subjects, denying their protagonists a say in how they were portrayed and perpetuating a pattern of the extraction of knowledge that typified ethnographic research of the era. Rather than an end in itself, or an example of privileged filmmakers 'saving' powerless subjects, the film can be seen as a strategic use of time and energy with the ultimate goal of returning extracted archival material. It is a partial step, with many caveats. Nonetheless, it represents a strategic approach to archival appropriation that is self-critical about its privileged access to the archive and the Western audience it is addressed to.

Government records and television archives in *Riotsville, USA*

In Riotsville, USA, an exacting approach to editing, research, and the provenance of material unveils a layered 'alternate history' of the militarisation of American policing. As in Expedition Content, the film relies on recognisable techniques from found footage practice to defamiliarise material and generate new meanings – in this case, mainly the juxtaposition of a contemporary narration with archival images and sound that seem to contradict each other. However, the film goes beyond Baron's notion of critiquing hegemonic representations. By attending to the absence of certain images and histories in the film archive, as well as the many (financial, temporal) limitations that arise when attempting a self-financed appropriation film, the film makes a strong critique of the limitations of the form itself. It reveals how material that is too expensive to license, considered low quality, or hard to find in online databases does not often make it into appropriation films, which limits their scope and can even serve to reinforce misleading historical narratives. In the case of this particular archival encounter, there are three strands that are worth highlighting: the film's attention to the material specificity of working with broadcast television material and government records, its address to a specific audience that must be 'taught'

how to view this material, and its use of 'poor images' as a critique of and response to archival enclosure through corporatisation.

The film is about riotsvilles: simulated towns built on military bases in order for police and military to practice 'riot suppression'. The first one was built in 1967 at Fort Belvoir, near Fairfax, Virginia, and is often seen as a response to a wave of rebellions that spread across the US in those years, including Watts in 1965 and Detroit and Newark in 1967. The footage in the film comes from two sources. The first is the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the government agency tasked with preserving US government records and making them accessible to the public. The material shot by the US military as documentation of the riotsville project, considered government documents, is housed at NARA. The second type of material used in Riotsville, USA is from television in the United States and Britain. The sources are credited at the end of the film; they include the ABC News/Disney archive, Getty Images, CBS News/Veritone Licensing, the Library of Congress Archive of American Broadcasting, and the archives of WTVJ (Miami) and WXYZ (Detroit).

In addition to these sources, the film contains a few archival still images, intertitles, a voiceover written by Tobi Haslett and performed by Charlene Modeste, and a soundtrack by Jace Clayton. Haslett, who documented firsthand the George Floyd Rebellion in New York in 2020,[29] wrote a voiceover that is more of a poetic reflection on the events witnessed in the film and how they resonate through time, whereas the intertitles provide more direct context to the images viewed on screen. Using footage of the riotsvilles themselves as well as television coverage of unrest, police and military training, and wars, Riotsville, USA relates how American policing was increasingly militarised over the course of the 1960s. It argues that the wave of rebellions across the US in the late 1960s was a reaction to police violence and state-imposed poverty, as opposed to the commonly accepted narrative that more policing was required to control an inherently violent urban populace. Through meticulous research, it constructs an alternate history of the era that reveals its layered and shifting nature – what Sergei Eisenstein called a subhistorià.[30] In revealing how this moment has been misremembered, the film calls attention to the complicity of American media in promoting a distorted version of events. It questions how a contemporary

American audience can claim not to know about this violent history, given that it played out publicly on television.

As in Expedition Content, the film attends to the material specificities of particular archives (although in this case, there are more than one to analyse), considering not only how media housed there are stored and accessed by researchers today but how they echo in the context of a contemporary appropriation film. The film primarily reflects on this through its intertitles, but the director, Sierra Pettengill, also mentions it frequently in press materials and public talks about the film.

Pettengill's first point is that the film footage of riotsvilles that was shot by the US military is supposed to be publicly available through NARA.[31] However, in practice many of the documents housed at NARA are not available, especially analogue film that has yet to be digitised. This is common practice for many archives with large moving image holdings, which practice digitisation on request. However, the large amount of material, and the limiting factor of proper and accurate records of what the footage contains, often means that it can be a question of luck for a researcher to find what they are looking for. With fees charged for digitisation, making a guess can be prohibitively expensive. However, this is exactly how Pettengill found the material that would become her film: via Google, she encountered a listing on the NARA catalogue and borrowed funds from another project in order to cover digitisation costs.[32] This series of fortuitous circumstances, including her ability to pay for digitisation up front, resulted in the film. According to the NARA website, the archive holds 448 million feet (137 million meters) of analogue film; it is unclear what percentage of this has been digitised.[33]

Fig. 5: Opening title of *Riotsville, USA*.

The film alerts the viewer to the source of its material from the beginning. The first intertitle reads: 'All of the footage was created for broadcast television or by the US military.' (See Figure *5*). In subsequent intertitles, it becomes clear that this footage has not been seen before. And then, there are the images themselves: a model American town with posters advertising grocery discounts, the city hall, a clothing store, and a tobacco shop. It is only after a few seconds that the first soldier appears, perched on a rooftop, automatic rifle in hand. The intrusion is shocking and produces a sense of uncanniness that only builds as the images parade past: more soldiers, carrying flags and weapons, then standing at attention as a helicopter flies low overhead, releasing smoke. Wider shots reveal that this 'town' is merely an illusion, a stage set for military and police drills. The viewer's sense of incredulity at seeing these scenes is inflected by the fact that they have previously existed outside of the public eye – this is a 'hidden history' being revealed. At moments, this approach can risk a fetishisation of archival material and the idea of discovery (for example, mainstream documentary films that market themselves by advertising 'never before seen material'). Yet rather than a fetish fulfilled, the viewer experiences a cognitive dissonance between the revelatory and overpowering nature of the riotsville images and the sense that they have been hidden from view.

This dissonance that the film instils in its viewer relates to Baron's notion of a 'layered gaze' of differing intentionality between original author,

filmmaker, and contemporary audience.[34] One might also add the archival repository to this list. The viewer wonders not only how and why these images were created, but also questions how they have existed outside of the historical record for so long. Thus, while the film does not hold NARA accountable for hiding riotsville *on purpose*, it asks what the role of a seemingly bureaucratic and neutral institution in disseminating these contested histories could be, if any.

The film's critique posits a relationship between the institutional film archive's limitations in disseminating its holdings and the film's audience, an educated and politically engaged (white) subject who claims to be learning this history for the first time. The white subject's lack of knowledge about riotsvilles (and the larger constellation of anti-Black violence that they represent) is echoed in their surface-level engagement with history and is enabled by archival enclosure. In an interview about the film, Pettengill says that riotsvilles have been 'wiped from the greater cultural narrative'.[35] The absence of a wider knowledge of riotsvilles was mirrored by its status within NARA, as material hidden in plain sight. For her, this is symptomatic of a larger tendency to ignore the ugly facets of American history:

> […] There is something reassuring to audiences to find out that something was secret and that we had no way of knowing. I think there's a kind of self-soothing that comes with that idea, as opposed to a public history that played out on television. […] That it's news to a lot of us is a telling story about the lessons we're determined not to learn.[36]

Riotsville, USA invites parallels between archival enclosure and the (white) public's disinterest in confronting the history of American imperialism and racism,[37] demonstrating the appropriation film's role in mediating between the two.

The film attends to the origins of the television sources it pulls from as well, both public and commercial. While using individual reports on specific events to create a narrative arc for this moment in history, it also recreates the experience of watching live television, with its many chance occurrences, juxtapositions, and contradictions. To the contemporary viewer, the segments that include commentary on American politics – for example, a series of test audience interviews after watching President Johnson's speech

announcing the Kerner Commission in 1967 – feel completely alien compared with the highly polished and polarised television of today. The film also includes scenes from the well-known PBL (Public Broadcast Laboratory) program. One PBL segment is a roundtable with Bayard Rustin, Kenneth Clark, and Charles Hamilton. The conversation is intellectual and measured compared to contemporary political television.

The film reminds us that although public television offered a platform for members of the Black community and other dissenters to speak, economic relations nonetheless structure which programs achieve success. PBL had public funding but was forced off the air when it lost support from the Ford Foundation in 1969. In contrast, a commercial for Gulf insecticide punctuates an NBC report from inside the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami (the news desk itself bears a Gulf logo). We are reminded that corporate funders are part of the economy of commercial television as well as profiteers from the suppression of 'rioters' at home and 'insurgents' in Vietnam. The insecticide segment foreshadows a scene in which tear gas is used on demonstrators protesting the Miami Convention.

With regards to sourcing materials from commercial television, Pettengill raises important questions about the corporate archives where this material is now stored. Other appropriation filmmakers have recounted the process of creating an archival compilation film and the astronomical costs charged by commercial archives.[38] As Pettengill says in discussing the film:

> Archival films are really expensive to make, as most of these archives are corporately owned. So some of the footage that we wind up with that's fair use is really bad quality. I wanted to lean into that, making the material conditions of the making of the film visible.[39]

Pettengill references Hito Steyerl's well-known essay 'In Defense of the Poor Image'. In this text, Steyerl frames the low-resolution images that circulate in the early twenty-first century as 'lumpen proletarians' that exist outside of capitalist networks of monetisation. For Steyerl, these images have their own political value as loci of 'anonymous global networks' of piracy and resistance.[40] She claims that allowing only high-quality images to be shared reproduces hierarchies and reifies the power of institutions, including archives. In invoking this piece, Pettengill is claiming that she sees

the insistence on high-resolution images in archival films as another means of corporate control, of privileging NBC over PBL.

For this reason, the film is adamant that it will not grant 'preference' to material that is higher quality, or with sound instead of silent, because it is often material that is considered 'unimportant' that is not digitised at ideal settings and is thus not included in the historical narrative. In this way, the film perfectly illustrates Charles Jeurgens' argument that what is not digitally available in the online archive is often assumed to not exist.[41]

The film plays this out visually: in one sequence, we see a still image that depicts an aerial view of Harlem, in New York City, while the voiceover discusses June Jordan's proposed utopian public housing project there. As the voice continues, the film 'zooms in' on the centre of the image, getting closer so that the pixels of the digital image are revealed, and continuing to do so until the entire screen is comprised of six boxes in varying shades of grey (See Figure 6). The film ends on the six central pixels of the original image. In this way, it points to the low resolution of the materials it relies on, and implicitly equates them with an anti-institutional version of history. Rather than using the canonical images of 1960s America, which have been digitised in high resolution for use in historical documentaries, the film relies on material that is harder to access, not as well-preserved, or absent – but is adamant in its refusal to let the difficulty of using these materials shape the narrative it is trying to tell.

Rick Prelinger argues that the enclosure of materials in archives is not simply about whether materials can be accessed, but is 'implicit in archival organization and structures', such as research and license fees, 'restrictions on unpreserved or yet-to-be-reformatted materials', and 'prohibitions on furnishing materials beyond a certain resolution or quality level'.[42] These obstacles were all faced in the process of making *Riotsville, USA*; however, rather than allowing archival policies to determine what materials the film would include, lower-quality, partial, and damaged materials are used.

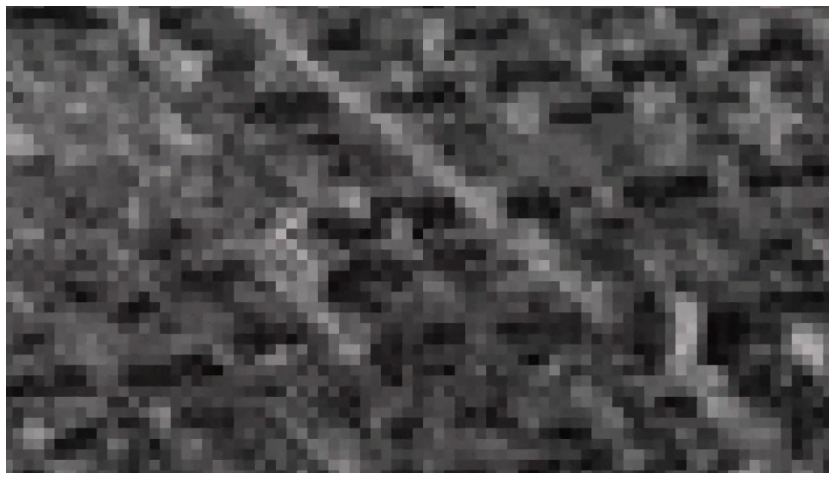

Fig. 6: The limits of archival access in *Riotsville, USA*.

Riotsville, USA thus reveals the role of archives in shaping the historical narratives we see on screen and suggests an alternate way of working. In order to finish the film, Pettengill invested considerable amounts of her own time and money (the film took ten years to make and was undertaken alongside her day job as an archival researcher). At the same time, the film served as a means by which to digitise and share this valuable but previously inaccessible material. It both reveals and participates in this lopsided system.

By including new images and research, the film completely reverses the causality between 'rioting' and policing. Throughout the film, the absurdity of the riotsvilles as a historical project becomes clear: we learn of the various inaccuracies, misconceptions, and racial/class/political biases that made this approach to addressing poverty and inequality in the US seem to make sense. As with the filmmakers behind *Expedition Content*, Pettengill insists on grounding her film in the contemporary context, in this case police violence in America. She writes that the 'structural forces' of white supremacy and militarisation that the film takes on 'could not seem more urgent in 2022'.[43] Pettengill's embrace of the connection stakes out a political stance, which she combines with an ethical position regarding her role as a white filmmaker. By insisting on the American public's responsibility in facing this history, the film moves beyond a simple archival activation that reveals hidden histories; rather, known facts are revisited with the aim of a redress.

The film maps a relationship between Pettengill, her sources, and her audience, demonstrating the responsibilities and limitations of each in creating a shared narrative.

Conclusion

In an era where archival collections are more open than ever before, the possibilities of appropriation practice seem to expand as well, activating 'the social potential of the moving image'.[44] However, the proliferation of appropriation films also requires closer attention to the material conditions that give rise to them, and the artistic and political choices that are made in the process. In addition, considerations around cultural sovereignty and privacy are of the utmost importance. Ultimately, it should be up to affected communities to make choices about how and when material is shared. What, then, is the position of the appropriation filmmaker in relation to this process?

The two films discussed here are typical appropriation films in many ways – they use the formal techniques of found footage to make a critique. Appropriation films (and before them, 'found footage' and 'compilation' films, et cetera) have always been associated with challenging settled narratives. But in examining these examples, it became clear that appropriation films also have the power to reveal the limitations of their own source(s) – that is, a film archive that is still in the process of opening up to community use and will always be only a partial record. This institutional critique can be undertaken in good nature, but nonetheless seriously.

As we have seen, such critiques influence each filmmaker's way of working. Pettengill's use of 'poor images' is a deliberate choice that resists the hegemonic narrative about that period in history, allowing a new narrative to form. Likewise, the film makes viewers aware of the limitations it faced in sourcing images, including licensing, cost, resolution, and sound quality; it ultimately makes an argument about the limitations of the form itself. *Expedition Content* similarly questions the ability of filmmakers to avoid complicity when working with the colonial archive. Ultimately, the filmmakers decide that they can acknowledge their privileged position

while serving the 'greater good' of returning extracted material. Of course, this requires a kind of extraction itself, but for them the ends justify the means.

In addition to being a critic, the appropriation filmmaker is also a mediator. One form of mediation occurs between filmmaker and audience. These two films instil in their viewers an analytic frame from which to interpret and understand archival images as representative of a partial viewpoint, allowing alternate histories to bubble forth. As Prelinger points out, 'History experienced as distraction, entertainment, and weapon does not equal consciousness.'[45] Learning to read images this way guards against the danger of viewers experiencing history as entertainment and distraction, as the availability of violent and decontextualised archival images rises through digital networks.

Expedition Content and *Riotsville, USA* also embrace a reflexivity about the filmmaker's position as a mediator in more concrete terms. Self-reflexivity in documentary is of course not new. What is new is to highlight the role of the filmmaker in disseminating archival moving image material, serving as a bridge to digitisation and access in cases where material would otherwise remain out of reach. These films reveal the relationships between archives, filmmakers, historians, community members, and activists in material terms and allow us to appreciate the importance of appropriation films in actually digitising and sharing images. In the current fractured and underfunded state of the US film archive landscape, this practice provides a 'glue' that allows the entire entity to keep working. Despite their best intentions, film archives or other repositories of material may not have the resources to digitise all of their material, let alone contact the rightful owners or provide them with copies or control. In the case of *Expedition Content*, Karel and Kusumaryati began a conversation that now leads towards the return of Rockefeller's recordings to West Papua as part of new projects, including a CD and a museum. In the case of *Riotsville, USA*, Pettengill's intervention remains the only way that the American viewer can watch and analyse material that is ostensibly public.

Additionally, the two films I have chosen were undertaken by 'outsiders' who were able to make demands of the archives they drew from. As opposed to appropriations done through collaborations and residencies, this

way of working provides filmmakers with more leeway to explore and contextualise their material.[46] Each film resulted from a set of unique circumstances, a chance encounter combined with strategic risks that filmmakers took regarding their specific position (their employment, privileges of access and knowledge, and connections) in order to maximise what they could access.

In the ongoing work of expanding community reuse of the archive, archival theorists, film scholars, and film archivists should be aware of the role that filmmakers can play as mediators between archives and communities as well as with audiences. These found footage filmmakers model techniques and approaches that could be replicated, for example by using poor images, embracing reflexivity, or taking on a higher degree of risk. They also reveal the basic truth that what is available in the archive will structure any future appropriation films. As digital images proliferate and archival appropriations continue to be released, greater attention to the political, ethical, and visual differences within this category of practice is needed. The individual experiences of filmmakers in working with archives are useful data as we determine the route towards a spectrum of openness that prioritises both new interpretations and the right to opacity.

Author

Finn D'Amico-Jubak is an independent film archivist and researcher who focuses on the role of moving image artists in disseminating and reframing archival material. He holds an MA in Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image from the University of Amsterdam and a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities from the University of Chicago.

References

Applewhaite, C. 'Focus: Listening Against a Colonial Present, an Interview with Expedition Content's Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati', Open City Documentary Festival, 2020:

https://opencitylondon.com/news/open-city-documentary-festival-2020-focus-listening-against-a-colonial-present-an-interview-with-expedition-contents-ernst-karel-and-veronika-kusumaryati/.

Baron, J. *The archive effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history*. London-New York: Routledge, 2014.

_____. *Reuse, misuse, abuse: The ethics of audiovisual appropriation in the digital era*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Cook, T. 'Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms', *Arch Sci*, 13, 2013: 95-120.

The Film Study Center at Harvard University, 'Robert Gardner', no date: https://filmstudycenter.fas.harvard.edu/fellows-works/robert-gardner/.

Fossati, G. *From grain to pixel: The archival life of film in transition*, 3rd edition. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009.

Frick, C. *Saving cinema: The politics of preservation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Gardner, R. 'Anthropology and Film', *Daedalus*, 86, 1957: 344-352.

Gilliland, A. 'Archival and Recordkeeping Traditions in the Multiverse and Their Importance for Researching Situations and Situating Research' in *Research in the archival multiverse*, edited by A. Gilliland, S. McKemmish, and A. Lau. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2017: 31-73.

Gunning, T. 'Finding the Way: Films Found on a Scrap Heap' in *Found footage: Cinema exposed*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press/EYE Film Institute Netherlands, 2012: 49-55.

_____. 'Anthropological Cinema' in *Picturing culture: Explorations of film & anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000: 95-113.

Haslett, T. 'Magic Actions', N+1, 2021: https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-40/politics/magic-actions-2/.

Jaillant, L. 'How Can We Make Born-Digital and Digitised Archives More Accessible? Identifying Obstacles and Solutions', *Archival Science*, 22, no. 3, 2022: 417-436.

Jeurgens, C. 'The Scent of the Digital Archive: Dilemmas with Archive Digitisation', *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 128, no. 4, 16 December 2013: 30-54.

Jubak, F. 'The Blueprint For Police Militarization: Sierra Pettengill on Riotsville, USA', PIN-UP, 2022: https://www.pinupmagazine.org/articles/sierra-pettengill-interview.

Kusumaryati, V. and Karel, E. 'Expedition Content and the Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea, 1961', *The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory*, 2, no. 2, 2021.

Leyda, J. *Films beget films*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964.

Light Industry. 'Stop Cop City Teach-In and Fundraiser', 16 February 2023: http://www.lightindustry.org/stopcopcity.

Luksch, M. 'From the Cellar to the Cloud: The Network-Archive as Locus of Power' in *Lost and living (in) archives*, edited by A. Dekker. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017: 120.

National Archives. 'Mission, Vision and Values', National Archives, 15 August 2016: https://www.archives.gov/about/info/mission.

_____. 'National Archives by the Numbers', National Archives, 26 September 2022: https://www.archives.gov/about/info/national-archives-by-the-numbers.

Paalman, F., Fossati, G., and Masson, E. 'Introduction: Activating the Archive', *The Moving Image*, 21, no. 1-2, 2021: 2-25.

Palacios, J. 'Exile, Archives, and Transnational Film History: The Returns of Chilean Exile Cinema', *The Moving Image*, 22, no. 2, 2022: 29-58.

Pettengill, S. 'Director's Statement', Riotsville, USA Press Kit, 2022.

Prelinger, R. 'Beyond Noblesse Oblige', *The Moving Image*, 21, no. 1-2, 2021: 145-155.

Rebecchi, M. and Vogman, E. *Sergei Eisenstein and the anthropology of rhythm*. Rome: Nero, 2017.

Ruby, J. 'Robert Gardner and Anthropological Cinema' in *Picturing culture: Explorations of film & anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000: 95-113.

Russell, C. *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and archival film practices*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Steyerl, H. 'In Defense of the Poor Image', *e-flux Journal*, 2009: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image.

Wees, W. *Recycled images: The art and politics of found footage films*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993.

Notes

[1] Leyda 1964, p. 10.

[2] Ibid., p. 25.

[3] Wees 1993, p. 7.

[4] Baron 2014, p. 21.

[5] Prelinger 2021, p. 151.

[6] Ibid., p. 145.

[7] Cook 2013, p. 116.

[8] Paalman & Fossati & Masson 2021, p. 10.

[9] Wees 1993, p. 7.

[10] Leyda 1964, p. 135.

[11] Baron 2020, p. 21.

[12] The art-historical term 'institutional critique' originated in the 1960s and has multiple valences in relation to art. I use this term in the sense that it was mentioned by one of the directors of *Expedition Content*, Ernst Karel – meaning a criticism of the institutions that collaborated to make a film.

[13] Gunning 2012, p. 53.

[14] Ruby 2000, p. 96.

[15] The connections between the Rockefeller family, Standard Oil, and West Papua abound: Karel & Kusumaryati write that 'with Dutch partner Shell, Standard Oil had drilled in West Papua since 1935. [Michael Rockefeller] had wanted to travel to West Papua to extract art objects from the Asmat group for the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, newly opened by his father Nelson.' Karel & Kusumaryati 2021, p. 19.

[16] Ruby 2000, p. 98.

[17] Gardner, 'Anthropology and Film', quoted in Ruby 2000, p. 97.

[18] Ibid..

[19] Ruby 2000, p. 97.

[20] Karel & Kusumaryati 2021, p. 17.

[21] As Ruby argues, 'Gardner believed that the footage he had of any one battle was inadequate to make the statement he wished to make about Dani warfare. So he constructed a "cine battle" containing all the elements he considered important.' Ruby 2000, pp. 100-101.

[22] Ruby 2000, p. 100.

[23] Marie Wasnock, Associate Archivist, Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, email correspondence, 16 June 2023.

[24] Gunning 2012, p. 50.

[25] Russell 2018, pp. 42-43.

[26] Applewhaite 2020, p. 6.

[27] Kusumaryati notes that due to the ongoing 'slow-motion genocide' of the Hubula and a loss of cultural knowledge, the music in the recordings is no longer performed and thus is important to preserve and distribute. Applewhaite 2020, p. 5.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Haslett 2021.

[30] Rebecchi & Vogman 2017, p. 87.

[31] National Archives, 'Mission, Vision and Values', 15 August 2016: https://www.archives.gov/about/info/mission.

[32] Pettengill 2022.

[33] National Archives, 'National Archives by the Numbers', 26 September 2022: https://www.archives.gov/about/info/national-archives-by-the-numbers.

[34] Baron 2020, p. 10.

[35] Jubak 2022.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Archival scholar Lise Jaillant argues that the privatisation of archival digitisation is one of the main factors that has impeded true open access in recent years. Jaillant 2022, pp. 431-432.

[38] See, for example, Luksch 2017, p. 120.

[39] Jubak 2022.

[40] Steyerl 2009.

[41] Jeurgens 2013, p. 32.

[42] Prelinger 2021, p. 147.

[43] Pettengill 2022.

[44] Paalman & Fossati & Masson 2021, p. 10.

[45] Prelinger 2021, p. 153.

[46] Collaborations or residencies often maintain a power dynamic between the filmmaker and the archival institution, which is allowed to determine the scope and goals of the work. This risks instrumentalising filmmakers who enter the archive under the guise of a collaboration, and who invest significant amounts of labor and financial resources into archival collaborations.