

## **Re-considering History and Narrative Through the Short Factual Film The Archive (UK 2018)**

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## Re-considering History and Narrative Through the Short Factual Film *The Archive* (UK 2018)



### Abstract

This paper considers tensions between narrative story-telling and historical accuracy in the context of archive based documentary film-making. Taking the case study of the author's own short film production *The Archive* (2018) the paper will draw on theories of the archive, particularly those of Jamie Baron (2014), as well as Syd Field's (1979) highly influential 'paradigm' for narrative structure in the development of feature films. Ultimately the paper will ask: can a factual film edited for dramatic effect according to guidelines put forward for commercial film story-telling also have value as a project of historical enquiry?

*The freedom to continually use and re-use archival documents means that we will never determine a stable, objective truth about the past, but it is that freedom that makes the archive a site not only of repression and*

*limitation but also of possibility. (Baron 2014, 13) [1]*

## ***Introduction***

In this paper I will discuss my short factual film *The Archive (2018)* [2] in the context of theories of the archive and historical story-telling, as well as considering some of the tensions inherent in a film that mediates the past through a model for genre narrative story telling.

Running to just under 12 minutes and telling the story of New York lawyer David Drucker *The Archive* is entirely compiled from archive materials including unique 16mm home movie footage of newly communist China in 1952 and a de-classified Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) file. [3] As well as creating the visual form of the film - the distinctive rich colour palette of the Kodachrome film stock and the inky, blotchy memos of the FBI file - the two archives also act as its primary historical sources.

The two conflicting histories as signified by the ‘official’ FBI dossier and the ‘found’ family archive of 16mm footage and audio testimonies come together in an editing strategy that juxtaposes the two accounts and problematises the traditional orthodoxy of the official government source.

The paper will also be a discussion of my role and motivations as film-maker in the interpretation of the archival materials for presentation as a cause and effect film narrative complete with inciting incident, plot points, climax and resolution. Moreover, the editing strategy for the film was based on a model for genre narrative film story-telling, commonly used in the development of Hollywood fiction films.

Thus, the paper will consider: can a factual film edited for dramatic effect according to guidelines put forward for commercial film story-telling also have value as a project of historical enquiry? Furthermore, can the presentation of government and family archives according to

this editing strategy present an opportunity for a different perspective on events from the official one, and in doing so offer us a fuller understanding of this period in US history?

I will briefly look at some theoretical background in the use of archive materials in film-making and how this sits within the broader new historicist debate around narrative as a methodology of the historian. However, I would like to further explore the shared discourse between history and story-telling in the context of *The Archive*, which narrativizes David Drucker's story as a historical thriller film.

In order to do this I will outline the Syd Field [4] model for genre film story-telling and argue that, despite being a factual film, *The Archive* successfully fulfils many of the requirements of this quite strict template for narrative structure originally developed for the production of fiction films. Finally, I will discuss my own approach to the archive as film-maker of *The Archive*, and some of tensions as well as opportunities presented by applying the genre narrative model to factual materials.

### *Theorising the archive*

The re-purposing of pre-existing footage to create a new film can be traced back to the very early days of cinema when Soviet film-maker Esther Schub used home movies of Tsar Nicholas II to make *The Fall Of The Romanovs* (1927), a 10 year anniversary project of the Bolshevik revolution. [5] In doing so, the entirely partisan pro-Bolshevik completed film was produced using footage recorded pre-revolution by the Tsarist enemy. As Stella Bruzzi says "it thereby exhibits the dependency upon dialectical collision between the inherent perspective of the original archive and its radical re-use that remains a characteristic of the compilation documentary". [6]

Key studies of the archive, or compilation, film have been produced by Jay Leyda in 1964 [7] and William Wees in 1993 [8] but in the most significant recent work in this area Jamie Baron [9] argues that notions of 'the archive' are less stable and more fluid at start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than ever before. What were previously deemed un-official collections of amateur audio-visual materials increasingly vie for authority in their validity as accurate representations of the past. Furthermore the distinction between the official archive of state or government organisations

and the un-official found materials of family collections or flea markets is increasingly harder to justify. [10]

*Conceptualizing the archival document in this way undoes the previous hierarchy, in which ‘archival’ footage is given more value than ‘found’ footage, and suggests that amateur and other documents often excluded from official archives may have as much potential historical value as documents stored in an official archive. (Baron 2014, 17) [11]*

Baron also considers the use of archive and found footage within the wider new historicist debate which suggests researchers should look to individual stories and events of history that serve to challenge the grand narratives of traditional historical enquiry. The expansion of what we understand by ‘the archive’ to now include audio-visual documents of the individual in addition to those of the state has enabled this development. [12]

Moreover, the historian inevitably narrativizes and plots the facts of historical archives often according to tropes of literature and genre as argued by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. [13]

*The historian arranges events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle and end. (White 1973, 4) [14]*

Further to this Philip Rosen has suggested in his book *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* [15] that the distinction between document and documentary is a difference of temporality and sequenciation; in other words the re-contextualisation of archive material into new formal and narrative representations through film.

*(Rosen) argues that this transition – the conversion of primary materials to a secondary, historicized understanding – is characteristic of the modern historiographic project, and that it is the act of sequenciation of documents that generates the interpretive meaning that is fundamental to both documentary as it is edited and history as it is written. (Baron 2014, 10) [16]*

These perspectives on historical story-telling will be useful to this study of *The Archive*, particularly the process by which the project has re-framed its primary sources for the purpose of creating a narrative.

### *Theorising film narrative*

In his highly influential 1979 book *Screenplay* the Hollywood script guru and educator Syd Field suggested a ‘paradigm’ for successful screen storytelling that could be applied at script stage. Drawing on theories of drama narrative that date back to Aristotle he based this paradigm around a three-act structure with a clear beginning, middle and end. [17]

During the first act, otherwise known as the ‘set up’, characters including main protagonist and contexts are established using various narrative techniques of exposition. Crucially within this act there exists the ‘inciting incident’ at which point the main protagonist is confronted with the central problem, often in the form of an antagonist character, that will propel them through the film narrative to its conclusion.

The transition to the second act or ‘confrontation’, around one quarter of the way through the film, is introduced by what is known as plot point 1, where the protagonist will irretrievably be sent on a journey to solve their problem or achieve their goal. This will entail a confrontation with the antagonist, usually in the form of a human adversary but this could also be a psychological state or environmental obstacle to be overcome.

This second act is the most open and least formulaic in terms of its developments but crucially the protagonist will undergo the transformation, or character arc, which will enable them to resolve the central problem. Lasting approximately half of the screen time, in this central act we will experience the most drama and all-important conflict that drives the narrative forward in the guise of a variety of mini obstacles before the main confrontation near the film’s conclusion.

The second plot point marks the beginning of the third act or ‘resolution’ where there will be a climax of action which will bring all the film’s tensions and conflicts to a head and confirm the main protagonist as victorious, before the action falls off quickly toward the film’s finale or

denouement. All sub-plots and loose ends will be tied up satisfactorily leaving the viewer without any doubt as to the film's conclusion, both narratively and morally.

Through its emphasis on conflict to drive forward a cause and effect narrative, this unashamedly commercial model for screen story telling has proven phenomenally effective in producing both financially and critically successful films in a variety of genre, and will be further discussed later in this paper.

### *Collation and Discovery*

Stella Bruzzi has suggested two distinct phases of “collation and discovery” and “assimilation and analysis” [18] in the production of the compilation film which will be useful as I consider my own role as film-maker of *The Archive*.

The period documented by Drucker's footage covers around 10 years during the 1940s and early 1950s, while his audio testimonies look back over his 80 year or so life span and were recorded in the mid to late 1980s. The third major archival element is the extensive 2000 page FBI surveillance file on Drucker, acquired by him after his return from exile which covers 43 years from 1929 until 1972. In addition, the film includes audio of an interview recorded with Drucker's daughter Susan in 2011.

The footage comprises three cans of single reel Kodak 16mm film running to approximately half an hour as well as several rolls of 8mm film of just under one hour in duration. This includes film of David Drucker's trip to newly communist China and Hong Kong in 1952 as well as images of the family on a European tour that takes in Pisa, the Cote d'Azur and a visit to friends in Durham, UK. Additionally there are scenes shot in Sunnyside, Queens New York where the family lived and their upstate holiday home in Hillsdale.

The predominant picture is one of a comfortable middle class family in 1950s America with much of the home life footage shot in summertime with images of children and parents playing, dancing and swimming in a creek, as well as several scenes of tennis playing, evidently a favourite family pastime.

The footage evidences a particular technical ability and understanding of film-making not always apparent in family archive, with Drucker's camera work displaying expertise in a range of shots and compositions. These include nicely composed close-ups of his daughter Emily and a Chinese ferry master; a tracking shot – evidently taken from a rick-saw – as well as 'cinema verite' style images of street life in 1950's Hong Kong. The depth and rich colour palette of much of the 16mm footage is striking given that it was more than 50 years old when it was digitised. The lower resolution 8mm footage hasn't survived so well and has lost much of its texture and contrast, displaying more washed out images.

Before his death in 1995 Drucker recorded an interview with American academic or journalist Marilyn Starr [19] in which he outlined his life, commitment to communism and travels to the Soviet Union as a recent graduate from Yale Law School in 1929, and again in 1932 with his new wife Esther; they had a second marriage in a Moscow registry office during the trip. He also discusses his working life as a New York lawyer from the late 1920s until the early 1950s, which included periods representing the Soviet Union and communist China in their external trading operations, as well as his surveillance by the FBI.

Apparently recorded on some sort of analogue tape recording device the audio is somewhat deteriorated and compromised by 'hum' but largely audible with some minor adjustment made using a post-production sound correction tool.

The detailed FBI surveillance file on Drucker was compiled over several decades using pro-forma reports, evidently as a way of standardising information on individuals under suspicion that would have come in from a large network of informants. [20] Their names and those of the FBI agents compiling the reports have been redacted, presumably to protect their identities. But a number of personally written and signed memos by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover concerning Drucker's activities are also included in the file, where his name and signature have been left un-redacted. The pro-formas and memos are type-written onto FBI crest headed note-paper. Some of the documents contain whole paragraphs that have been blacked out, again, presumably to conceal names, places and other sensitive information that the FBI were not ready to reveal at the time of the file's release to Drucker. He was able to obtain the file over several years based on a number of Freedom of Information requests he made to the FBI after his return from exile in 1977. [21]



Also included in the film is some original news footage of J. Edgar Hoover testifying at the House of Un-American Activities Committee [22] and a still of him at his desk which were acquired from a commercial stock footage library, and are the only elements of the film not drawn from the Drucker family archive.

In terms of visual and aural qualities of the film these historical sources have undergone little physical adjustment in their transition to the completed film. With the exception of minor sound and colour correction, the footage, audio and memos have essentially become the form of the film: ‘cine-look’ footage, ‘hummy’ audio and inky photo-stats of the type-written FBI memos.

### *Assimilation and Analysis* [23]

While the starting point for the project was very much Drucker’s extraordinary original 16mm Kodachrome footage documenting his adventures in the far east, a question emerged as to whether within the broader family archive there might be the potential for a film narrative as a way of presenting his story.

Drucker was long since deceased when the project came into development so there would be no opportunity for a participation by the protagonist himself whereby he could be asked questions in relation to the footage he shot or the FBI file entries detailing his activities over so many years.

With around 90 minutes of footage, nearly 3 hours of audio testimonies, 2000 pages of FBI file, and numerous family photos it was evident that if a film was to be produced there needed to be an organising structure. If the necessary moments of drama and conflict could be found within the materials then perhaps a three-act structure based on the Syd Field model [24] could be constructed, with Drucker re-framed for narrative purposes as main protagonist, or hero character, and Hoover as antagonist.

Archive materials have traditionally been thought of as a form of historical purism, allowing the historian a direct insight into in a particular moment in time as argued by Jamie Baron. “The footage has been ‘found’, and it therefore has an aura of being directly excavated from the past” [25]

In the case of the film project under consideration here these materials also presented the opportunity for a plotted short film narrative perhaps in the genre of a historical or political thriller. But it became evident that in order to achieve this there would need to be a particularly high degree of authorial selectivity in the curation of the historical artefacts; a process that would inevitably bring further slippage in the connection between the archive media and its original referent as a layer of narrative signification is added.

Drucker's audio testimony became key in providing not only a narrative voice and backbone for the film but also a pre-recorded 'script' of sorts full of potential plot points and moments of drama. After a set-up where Drucker's family and background are established, his employment by the *Amtorg* trading organisation [26] acts as the first plot point, propelling the narrative into the second act or confrontation, where the protagonist experiences a number of challenges and obstacles. This takes the form of two further plot points - grand jury appearance and office eviction - which took place over a 10 year period as represented by about two minutes of screen time.

In some scenes Drucker's description of events coincides neatly with an entry in the FBI file allowing the viewer to observe a contrast between the official version of events and his own, enabling the found archive to challenge the traditional orthodoxy of the official government record. At other times the images are more loosely used, so that an event described by Drucker might be illustrated by some family footage shot perhaps years prior or after.

The film comes closest to a historically accurate chronology as it moves into the third act when Drucker is invited to represent a Chinese-American export company in a similar legal role to his previous one for the *Amtorg* trading company. This final act begins with a perilous descent into Hong Kong airport for which it is unknown whether the footage we see on screen is of the actual event described. We then follow Drucker as he has his passport confiscated, is tailed by an FBI informant and is finally extradited home (climax) - where screen time at 4 minutes and story time of two weeks become the most closely aligned at any point in the film - before escape and exile in Mexico (resolution).

Drucker's role as protagonist is very much that of reactive to events; his actions are characterised not so much by obstacles to be overcome so that he can achieve an ultimate goal,

but rather by his fight for survival and liberty in the face of an increasingly suspicious FBI. Nonetheless his narrative journey leading to ultimate salvation in the face of adversity does fit the role of main protagonist as under-dog that an audience can get behind.

### *Concluding comments*

“All was subordinated to the theme,” said Esther Schub [27] with reference to her re-purposing of the Tsar’s home movies in the service of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Similarly, it was for the purposes of constructing a genre narrative that the archive materials of *The Archive* were arranged, irrespective of their original intended purpose many decades earlier. As argued by Baron ‘foundness’ is not only a window onto the past but also identifies a material as distinct from that for which it has been purposely produced. [28]

Furthermore, “The sense of the ‘foundness’ of the footage enhances its historical authority because what has been ‘found’ has not (ostensibly) been fabricated or shaped by the filmmaker who repurposes this footage.” (Baron 2014, 6) [29]

Established signifiers of historical truth such as family archive film, audio testimonies and government documents have undoubtedly provided a degree of this ‘historical authority’ to *The Archive* - and fulfil this function in any number of historical documentaries - but in this case have also been utilised for their narrative worth.

While arguably the ‘historical authority’ of the original materials has been compromised by an editing strategy informed by a model for commercial film-making, I would argue it has also presented an opportunity for a new way of understanding this episode in US history, enabled particularly by its emphasis on conflict between two individuals. In the first instance J. Edgar Hoover and Drucker - a previously un-heard and un-known subject of FBI investigations - have been given ‘equal billing’ in the film. Each character and his political outlook is established in the first act of the film through footage, first person audio and a dissolve between photographs of Drucker and Hoover at the first major plot point.



Fig 1. David Drucker and J. Edgar Hoover (The Archive, 2018)

Further moments of confrontation in the second act operate to give Drucker right of response to his accusers. For example, the Wall Street based *Amtorg* trading organisation which employed Drucker as a lawyer is described as a ‘front organization’, presumably for a Soviet spy ring, in the FBI memos. [30] This may have been the case but the editing strategy necessitated by the genre narrative approach has enabled an on-screen juxtaposition between Drucker’s voice over and the FBI file entry at this plot point, which serves to challenge the official view.



Fig 2. FBI Memo (The Archive, 2018)

In another scene we hear Drucker describe his work representing a company called ‘Bookniga Inc.’ ‘as a lawyer for the Russians and which was the importer of Soviet books and periodicals’ which according to the FBI memo we see on screen addressed to J. Edgar Hoover places Drucker, along with a number of other individuals, as ‘Agents of Foreign Principals’. [31]

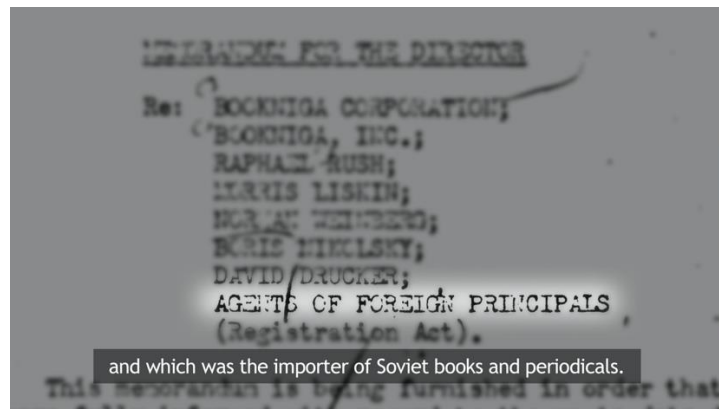


Fig 3. FBI Memo (The Archive, 2018)

In this way the film is able to give voice to a target of FBI suspicion where previously the official, government record on the activities of Drucker and others like him would have likely prevailed as the accepted version of events. As Baron states,

*I contend that the presence of such documents in appropriation films may represent a democratizing of history and contribute to public knowledge about or experience of past events by including traces of otherwise unknown individuals into histories that previously accounted only for those who held the most social and political power. (Baron 2014, 82) [32]*

Furthermore, in the case of *The Archive* the ‘found’ artefacts consisting of Drucker’s first person audio testimony and shot footage bare a much closer indexical relationship to their referent than the ‘official’ written FBI documents, largely based on informant information, arguably giving them greater historical value in this context.

During the Hong Kong episode we hear Drucker’s first person audio description and footage inter-cut and overlaid with rostrum shots of the FBI memos, where the two accounts of events largely support each other, so that in this instance Drucker’s archive actually adds a degree of validity to the surveillance documents.

In addition to the opportunity provided by the film for Drucker to give his own version of events, the coming together of the FBI file and family archives documenting his life enable a fuller representation of the individual: both as loving family man diligent in documenting on film his daughters throughout their childhood years as well as a suspected Soviet spy - not that the two roles are mutually exclusive.

*The Archive* has screened to audiences in New York and Moscow, and at a number of international film festivals, which has enabled greater exposure for Drucker's story and its place in history – alongside many others like it.

To conclude, where the film-maker's imperative to tell a good story has undoubtedly deprived the artefacts of *The Archive* of a degree of their historical purity, the genre narrative approach has also presented an opportunity. Archive materials from two conflicting sources have been brought into close contact with each other through the film's editing strategy of juxtaposition and overlaying of media to create new understanding and perspective. Furthermore, this new context of juxtaposition between the two archives asks us to question the respective 'value' of these historic documents that may previously have been categorized according to a hierarchy of 'official' and 'found'.

## Endnotes

- [1] Jamie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audio-visual Experience of History* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 13
- [2] *Archive, The*, Peter Spence, 2018
- [3] The file comprises approximately 2000 pages of surveillance documents relating to New York lawyer and communist party member David Drucker, who obtained it using a Freedom of Information Act request in 1977.
- [4] Syd Field, *Screenplay* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979)
- [5] Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 27
- [6] Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 27
- [7] Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964)
- [8] William Wees, *Recycled Images* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993)
- [9] Jamie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audio-visual Experience of History* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014)
- [10] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 16 - 17
- [11] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 17
- [12] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 3
- [13] Hayden White, *Meta-history: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (John Hopkins University Press, 1973)
- [14] White, *Meta-history: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, 4

[15] Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001)

[16] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 10

[17] Syd Field, *Screenplay* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1979)

[18] Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 27

[19] The purpose of this interview is unknown, possibly for an academic research project. The date of interview or further information about the interviewer is also unknown.

[20] Ted Morgan, *Reds. McCarthyism in Twentieth Century America* (New York. Random House, 2003), 585

[21] Copies of David Drucker's letters of request for the surveillance information kept on him cover several years and indicate that the memos were only released to him in limited batches.

[22] Newsreel footage of HUAC (1947). Universal © original copyright holders.

[23] Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 27

[24] Field, *Screenplay*

[25] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 6

[26] *Amtorg* was the external trading organisation of the Soviet Union responsible for procuring goods that couldn't be produced domestically; its New York office opened in 1924.

[27] Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, 25

[28] Baron, *The Archive Effect*,

[29] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 6



[30] Ted Morgan is in no doubt as to Amtorg's role as a front organisation for Soviet spies. Morgan, *Reds. McCarthyism in Twentieth Century America*, 115

[31] The Foreign Registration Act (FARA) was passed in 1938 and requires "certain agents of foreign principals who are engaged in political activities or other activities specified under the statute to make periodic public disclosure of their relationship with the foreign principal." FARA is enforced by the Counterintelligence and Export Control Section in the National Security Division. [www.justice.gov/nsd-fara](http://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara). Accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

[32] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 82

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### **Filmography**

*Archive, The*, Peter Spence, UK 2018

*Fall Of The Romanovs, The*, Esther Schub, USSR 1927