

“Let us grind them into dust!” The new aesthetics of digital archives

Archives are imagined as dusty places with serried rows of boxes, books or film canisters shrouded in a fine, grey-white cloak. Like a physical manifestation of forgetting, dust settles on the obsolete, and its removal is symbolic of re-use—the archivist pulls a dusty tome from the shelf, blows across the cover, and as the cloud of dust disperses, the obscure knowledge within is alive once more. Dust is a metaphor for rejection, for failure or dismissal—we “eat the dust”, “dust off” unwanted attention and ultimately “bite the dust”.¹ Vast amounts of the knowledge and creative output of the last century is fated to turn to dust, forgotten, unwanted and unknown.

Projects like the BBC’s Creative Archive² seek to liberate these archives through technology—to blow off the dust and digitize thousands of hours’ worth of audio and video content. Through digital networks, these things can be reanimated, made available again for new contexts and uses. By transforming dusty archives into clean databases, content can be reused and remixed, becoming the starting point for new stories instead of the final resting place for old ones.

But there is beauty in dust itself. The scientist and artist Hubert Duprat³ has placed Caddis worm larvae in vitrines lined with gold dust and tiny particles of jewels. The Caddis larvae normally live on river-beds, and make cocoons for themselves from bark, gravel and other river detritus. Placed within Duprat’s vitrines of precious metals, the larvae construct beautiful geometric jewelry with alternating bands of stones and gold. The Caddis larvae re-order dust into something intimate and organized, creating objects with purpose and formal beauty. We have long had a similar desire to order our overflowing, ephemeral stream of media into something intimate and meaningful. The cheap printing presses of the 19th century created an overwhelming flood of newspapers, catalogues and magazines, and the new railway networks sent them to all corners of the developed world. Readers would capture knowledge from these cheap, ephemeral forms by making scrapbooks, often pasting clippings into other, unwanted, books.⁴ Newspaper articles, instead of decaying to pulp or dust, were instead memorialized if they caught the attention of the reader, valued over the more rarified knowledge contained in expensive books. Ellen Gruber Garvey reports the following exchange between a writer and a scrapbook maker in the 19th century:

“Why,” said I. “You are using up good printed books!”

“Good for what!” was the reply [...]. “There is nothing in them that we want, and so we propose putting in something, rather than having them stand idle. Hubert’s, you see, is an old day-book, and we have one or two others. Some of them are old school-books, not much worn, but out of date. Almost every library has some useless books.”⁵

Garvey has likened this process to “gleaning”, where overabundance of goods provides a surplus that can be gathered and put to productive use:

The gleaner’s bounty depends on the planter’s willingness not to squeeze every possible bit of profit from the land; following the biblical injunction to leave food for the gleaners, the planter does not pursue every scrap of grain or produce but leaves some unclaimed.⁶

Like the planter's grain or publisher's newspaper clippings, the overabundance of our media archives can now be clipped and gathered by a new generation of gleaners.

These vernacular forms of creative expression have long been overlooked in our accounts of media history. The histories of photography, film and now digital media have first sought to establish a canon, the list of stars whose contributions define a dominant aesthetic. But underneath these stars there are worlds of amateur productivity, creating informal alternative aesthetics from the detritus of mainstream culture. Sometimes, these vernacular forms are recognized for their influence on the mainstream aesthetic, and for the sheer wealth of their creativity. They are less visible because they are intimate, expressing the creator's feelings about their immediate lives and emotions, not grand historical narratives. Like the Caddis larvae's cocoon, they are tactile and close to the body, to be consumed by the hand as much as the eye:

When we touch an album [of photographs] and turn its pages, we put the photograph in motion, literally in an arc through space and metaphorically in a sequential narrative. Albums are also prompts for speech, an excuse for friends and families to gather, for stories to be exchanged, incidents to be recalled, biographies to be invented. When we view albums in museums, we can only imagine the murmur of laughing voices that would have animated and shaped the experience of leafing through them.⁷

Will we see similar forms of vernacular creativity with digital media? How can we encourage the creative decay that turned newspapers and libraries into cheap ephemera, available once again for reuse and remixing? How can intimacy be expressed in a medium that is so radically global and connected?

It is only within the last few years that internet use in developed countries has tipped over 50 per cent of the population. This, combined with increased bandwidth and processing power has led to the "mass-amateurisation,"⁸ of digital image production, an activity that was previously limited by the cost of capture and editing equipment. Mobile phones, already very intimate devices, have changed the aesthetic of photography as much as the Box Brownie did for chemical photography. Web services like *Flickr*⁹ encourage people to collect and contextualize their images with friends and other communities. This combination has led to a huge abundance of images, available online to be recontextualised and remixed into new creative forms. Like the scrapbook or photo album, *Flickr* encourages users to add supplementary information, in the form of tags describing content, notes drawn directly on the image, or comments from other users. This accrual of written information creates a kind of intimacy around the photograph, capturing some of the 'murmur of laughing voices' that surrounded their creation.

Flickr users are constantly finding innovative new ways to exploit these features. Matt Haughey combined images taken from Google's satellite imaging service with the notes function in *Flickr* to create "memory maps"¹⁰—annotated images of the university he studied at, or the town he grew up in. These notes are revealed as the cursor brushes over the photograph on the screen, creating a tactile interface that resembles the intimacy of a photo album. Geoffrey Batchen has described how photo albums used similar collage effects, combining photographs with ticket stubs, cigarette cards, writing and drawing to evoke more than just visual memories:

[in photo albums] we are witness to the creative efforts of ordinary people who, by coordinating sound and smell as well as sight and by exploiting the possibil-

ities of a touched and touchable photography, were able to express the intricacies of their social rituals, personal dreams, and project memories in tangible visual form.”¹¹

Could the moving image find a similarly intimate and tactile context? Film never quite reached the level of mass participation as photography in the last century. Although Super 8 cameras, and later cheap video cameras, have encouraged some amateur production, there is nothing like the wealth and variety of material that there is with photography. Where are the moving image equivalents of the Victorian photo locket, with each lover framed in one half of chamber that seals them together when closed? How can film develop an equivalent vernacular aesthetic to the photo album or *carte de visite*?¹²

Perhaps these completely new forms of vernacular media might be found through projects like the Creative Archive. By opening up the archives of the BBC’s film and television output, these projects could create new contexts and aesthetics for film outside of the formal narrative structure of Hollywood. But for this to happen two conditions must apply—we must build tools for intimate expression, not grand narrative; and we must aspire to turn media into dust—to make it as abundant and ephemeral as newspaper clippings and cigarette cards.

Intimacy

In commissioning new films intended for distribution on mobile phones, the curator Andrew Wilson¹³ created a novel brief for budding film-makers—“Think of making haircuts, not movies.” This might seem a bizarre request, yet it recognizes that mobile phones are not just smaller versions of the movie screen, but are instead intimate expressions of their owner’s identity. This is why ringtones can be sold for exorbitant prices, whilst better quality MP3s have to be sold as less than half the price, if not given away free. A ringtone is like a badge or fashion item—it is chosen to say something about the personality of its owner. Like badges, haircuts, stickers and jewelry, mobile phones are customized to help us explore and express our identity. Can moving images also be part of this secondary skin? Will they be collected and displayed, passed from hand to hand, and in turn adapted and remixed? Is this the kind of new creativity that the Creative Archive will make possible? At the moment, most digital media production tools use the metaphors of their ancestors. Video editing packages still have echoes of old Steenbecks and tape splicers. The tools are geared up for the epic, not the intimate. How could we create different kinds of tools to encourage different kinds of expression?

Dust

If we are to encourage new kinds of creative expression, we have to accept that this will only happen if we allow our content to degrade into dust. Remix culture requires flexibility—the ability to reduce content to the single atom that can then be reconstructed into a hook, a loop or a collage. Digital versions of the archive have this potential flexibility, but will it be in the owner’s best interest to realize it? Or will it be easier to preserve old content in its original form, in the hope that there might one day be some more small drops of commercial value to be squeezed out of it?

As the new economics of digital networks are discovered, the risk is that keeping content in a state of suspended animation will seem the safest bet. Unlike the planters willingly leaving the excesses of their overproduction for the gleaners to use, media owners are proposing digital rights management tools that put more control than ever before on the reuse and redistribution of material. If this scenario succeeds, there will be no dust in future digital archives—every piece of content will be locked up in its own clean, perfect cell.

Projects like the Creative Archive propose an alternative scenario, in which content is opened up to creative entropy. By providing clips rather than full programmes, the project encourages users to see the archive not as programmes, but as dust to be remixed and reassembled. We have to encourage more media owners to see the creative potential of this, and to support the development of new kinds of tools for a new generation of artists.

The fate of every new reproductive technology in the last two hundred years has been overproduction. Technological progress has provided the tools for easy manipulation of this excess of content—photography through the box brownie, text through photocopiers and desk top publishing, and music through cheap synthesizers, turntables and mixers. Each of these discovered a new aesthetic through the gradual decay of its high cultural forms. Photography became the snapshot and photo album; newspapers became fuel for fanzines, and the vinyl record became a tool for scratching and sampling.

Film and television now have the chance to embrace their own moment of creative entropy. Whilst the Hollywood studios try to sustain an artificial life for the reels and tapes in their archives, outside there are many projects that are trying to do the opposite. There is a race on to find new aesthetics for the moving image, but the guardians of the last century's cultural output are refusing to take part, trying to set limits on future creative expression.

It's a doomed enterprise. After all, almost every library has its useless books. Far better to liberate them for new forms of creativity than to preserve their uselessness. For every voice saying that the archives must be kept pristine under lock and key, there will be thousands saying "No!—let us grind them into dust!"

This text represents the opinions of the author, not the BBC or the Creative Archive License Group.

- 1 Amato, Joseph, *Dust: A History of the Small and Invisible*, University of California Press 2001, p. 18–19
- 2 <http://creativearchive.bbc.co.uk/>
- 3 <http://mitpressz.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo/isast/articles/duprat.html>
- 4 Gruber Garvey, Ellen. "Scissoring and Scrapbooks", in: Gitelman, Lisa (ed.): *New Media: 1740–1915*. p. 209. Cambridge, Mass. 2003, p. 209
- 5 *ibid*, p. 216
- 6 *ibid*, p. 208
- 7 Batchen, Geoffrey, *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance*, p. 49. New York, 2004, p. 49
- 8 http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2003/09/weblogs_and_the_mass_amateurisation_of_nearly_everything.shtml
- 9 <http://www.flickr.com/>
- 10 <http://flickr.com/photos/mathowie/8496262/>
- 11 Batchen. *op cit*, p. 60
- 12 <http://www.photography-museum.com/histsw.htm>
- 13 <http://www.pocketshorts.co.uk>