# ARCHIVE, ATLAS, *HISTOIRE*: READING GODARD, WARBURG, AND LANGLOIS THROUGH ARCVHIVAL THEORY

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> … Musty books … dusty boxes … fading blueprints … documents in disarray, a mysterious storage area inherited from "those who were here before our time." These terms describe an area in almost every library, school, church, business, or home. "How can I bring order to this impossible collection?" you ask yourself. "Will I discover something worthwhile?" "Will I discard something of value?" (Ford xi)

This introduction to Jeannette Ford's charming, hand-illustrated *Archival Principles and Practice* sets a familiar scene. Archives trigger thoughts of dust, must, and old stuff, but also the anxieties of assuming responsibility for historical documents. There is also the problem of distinguishing what is "historical" from what is not. Ford calls it the inheritance of those who were here before our time, adding this label in quotation marks. These quotation marks do not invoke the voice of her reader, as does the list of questions following her opening sentences; rather, they are meant to establish reverence, or possibly satire. "Those who were here before our time" mandates the significance of archival records based on the presumptive superiority of historical knowledge—presumptive, yet comically imprecise. It says, *a civilization would be foolish to disregard the stories of the past*, endowing the archive with powers of testimony that inform decisions for the future. Yet at the same time, Ford denotes the ubiquity of such documents, in their distressed, disorganized state. This tension between the significance and shapelessness of the historical record produces the affective drive guiding the archivist's endeavor to preserve cultural heritage and to create meaning.

In this sense, the work of the archivist is creative. Archives are built and maintained according to the specifications of an institutional mission, but the individual decisions made in the service of accession, appraisal, and disposition—the ground-level functions of maintaining a collection—require analysis that cannot be governed by firm rules or algorithms. Those individual decisions provide the contours of each unique archive, whose outstanding feature is in representing "some measure of knowledge which does not exist in quite the same form anywhere else" (Jenkinson 15). As a unique repository of intellectual value, the archive becomes an object of cultural production. The custodian of records who introduces the instantiation of cultural elements surpasses the role of collector or even assessor. The archivist produces meaning.

This, of course, contradicts key dictates of archival theory and practice, which hold the archivist to standards of objectivity. The archivist must be dispassionate—at once a subject expert and a disinterested party. Foundational archival theorist Sir Hilary Jenkinson unambiguously warned that one must never "turn Student, or may at most do so only as an occasional treat, and with the strictest precaution against his own possible malfeasance; for every Student has an axe to grind, a theory to establish, a statement to prove"; such conduct is incompatible with the "processes in which the tiniest modification may have the most far-reaching results" (20). But in these tiny modifications lie the creative power intrinsic to the work of cultural production. Just as the critical essayist harvests meaning from literature, in turn producing a new instance of literary art, so the archivist engages in the business of creative assembly. They are unstable boundaries, those that distinguish the artist, the creative essayist, and the curator-archivist.

These blurred boundaries are specifically notable in two art historical texts, which are discussed in detail below. The *Mnemosyne Atlas*, originally curated by German art historian and

cultural theorist Aby Warburg in 1927, consisted of 40 panels of thematically composed black-and-white images of art pieces, cosmographical images, maps, and contemporary newspaper and magazine excerpts. The panels were organized by unique themes such as “ancient cosmology,” “the afterlife of classical expressive values in Renaissance, mainly late quattrocento art,” and “Baroque excess, *art officiel*, and Rembrandt’s mediation; theatricality and anatomy” (“Mnemosyne Themes”). Sixty years after Warburg’s death, Jean-Luc Godard began work on *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, an eight-part video project that explores the French filmmaker’s ruminations on the concept of cinema, particularly how it has impacted and been impacted by events of the twentieth century. The film presents a nonnarrative visual collage of film excerpts, original footage, fine art and photography, dramatic recitation, and newsreel, among other visual and audio elements. Both *Mnemosyne Atlas* and *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* exemplify an archival collection—albeit loosely defined—as an artistic iteration. As collections, these artworks expand on the work of the archives to produce meaning from an array of cultural artifacts.

Archives are not intrinsically logical, although they feign organization insofar as they are identifiable as a unified collection. Chronology is often the chief concern, but time is not the best or only organizing principle. Series of records may be arranged based on subject, function, activity, or format of the original materials, decisions which are at the discretion of the archivist (Ford 147). Arrangement of records, or any classification work, has to do with understanding a whole by assessing its individual parts. The archivist is called to preserve the provenance and original order of individual records, along with the three-fold task of maintaining evidential value, ensuring their accessibility, and attributing an arrangement that facilitates the description of the records (Schellenberg, “Arrangement” 150-51). Ultimately, an archive is only as good as

it's finding aid. Likewise, a collage devoid of identifying attributes becomes an aesthetic experience that is fundamentally separate from the originating materials.

Though it remained unfinished upon his death in 1929, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* was Warburg's attempt to produce a visual accounting of significant "images of great symbolic, intellectual, and emotional power," through time and across cultures, following their emergence and reappearance in different historical stages. The title, translated as "memory atlas," suggests Warburg's desire to literally "map the afterlife of antiquity" (Johnson par. 1). Godard's title for his sprawling video essay, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, also suggests his intent to create a history of cinema, though it's simultaneously a play on the dual meaning in French, where *histoire* can mean both "history" and "story." Both projects are engaged in building a holistic understanding through the arrangement of individual parts: Warburg's art history composed of images of art and Godard's cinema history built "out of the material of that history: clips, texts, sounds, and allusions" (Morgan 171). Where Warburg composes a panel devoted to twenty-six images of nymphs, that emblem of ethereal femininity, Godard presents a list of ten female first names, serialized in a set of two on-screen titles, accompanying a series of still and moving images that memorialize the perfected beauty of Hollywood starlets.

Warburg's *Atlas* and Godard's *Histoire(s)* are emphatically not simple works of collage. While archivists are usually working with a pre-existing set of materials, Godard and Warburg take as their originating source vast swaths of history. Determining the delimitations of the archive is the first form-giving judgment made. Warburg's collection spans Western history from Alexandrian Greece to Weimar Germany, but he is particularly interested in the Renaissance "struggle between forces of reason and unreason" (Johnson par. 1). Godard's history of cinema is presumably limited by the emergence of moving image technology, but his project includes film,

painting, literature, theatrical performance, journalism, and a sort of diaristic narration. Yet, he playfully acknowledges his responsibility as curator with a faux dismissal: “We’ve got ten fingers; there are ten films” (*Histoire(s)* 2A). Both projects invoke photographic testimony to augment the historical analysis, but there are limits to the indexicality of the visual elements selected for inclusion. Again, the archive is only as good as its finding aid. Warburg used spatial relation on his black-cloaked panels, as well as “photographs of maps, manuscript pages, and contemporary images drawn from newspapers and magazines” (Johnson par. 3); in turn, each panel was itself numbered and ordered in relation to the whole collection. Expanding on Warburg’s vision for the atlas, a flexible digital display now allows the ability to zoom in and out and to access secondary iterations of the image in pop-up windows. In *Histoire(s)*, Godard employs superimposition at a near-constant rate, at times, layering moving images, still images, and stroboscopic relay between images, amidst layers of sound, overlayed with stylized text, and accompanied by an external text that provides references. Correspondingly, titles, identifiers, metadata, notes, catalogs, finding aids, arrangement, and authority control are tools the librarian uses to foster a user’s meaningful experience in the collection.

Inclusion of metadata to augment cinematic narrative is a Brechtian technique that Godard often employed, even in his early films. Numbering and title cards were used as early as *Masculin Feminin* in 1966. He numbers the chapters: 1, 2, 3, 4, 4A… They are arranged in chronological order, but in an inconsistent pattern. Chapter 4A is the only lettered subheading, and segments skip from 4 to 9 to 12 to 15, and so on. Peter Wollen identifies this inclination to complicate a straightforward chronology as characteristic of Godard’s avant-garde style, an intentional affront to the standards of classical cinema. His work embraced narrative intransitivity through “gaps and interruptions, episodic construction, undigested digression” that

resembles the picaresque novel in its "random and unconnected series of incidents, supposed to represent the variety and ups-and-downs of real life (80). Wollen describes Godard's constructive principle as "rhetorical, rather than narrative, in the sense that it sets out the disposition of an argument, point by point" (80). Godard's image-building is a "kind of pictography, in which images are liberated from their role as elements of representation and given a semantic function within a genuine iconic code, something like the baroque code of emblems" (83-84). Here, Wollen is writing of Godard's narrative films pre-1970, but it is clear that *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* closely follows in this theoretical approach: "the whole project of writing in images must involve a high degree of foregrounding, because the construction of an adequate code can only take place if it is glossed and commented upon in the process of construction. Otherwise, it would remain a purely private language" (Wollen 83-84). This analysis further supports Godard's composed image as a primary source, a whole whose meaning surpasses the sum of its constituted elements.

Once the delimitations of the collection are in place, a rigorous selection policy must be established to guide the shape of the collection. For a records manager, this means choosing which materials to retain and of which to dispose. Appraisal of archival records endeavors upon a test of informational value guided by three priorities: uniqueness, form, and importance. While the priorities seem clear enough, such standards are mere "guidelines to steer the archivist through the treacherous shoals of appraisal … Complete consistency in judging informational values is as undesirable as it is impossible of accomplishment" (Schellenberg, "Appraisal" 68). The practical archivist is guided by moderation and common sense. Dennis Meissner, past president of the Society of American Archivists, affirms that "extremes are to be avoided," and "too great an abstraction is an evil" (qtd. in Schellenberg, "Appraisal" 68). Such standards of

moderation are certainly irrelevant to Godard, who has no fear of abstraction. Still, a study of Godard's selection policy provides fruitful for understanding his role as archivist-creator.

Traditional archival theory provides that, "By a judicious selection of various groups and series an archivist can capture in a relatively small body of records all significant facts on an agency's existence—its patterns of action, its policies in dealing with all classes of matters, its procedures, its gross achievements" (Schellenberg, "Appraisal" 59). One might consider, in *Histoire(s)* episode 1A, Godard's tribute to Irving Thalberg, the prodigious MGM producer credited with realizing the full potential of the Hollywood studio system. Godard's visual collection of films, evident from the external document providing a time-stamped list of references (i.e., the finding aid), is an effective series used to denote this era of Hollywood filmmaking. This sequence provides evidence of his selection policy at work. Appraisals "should not be based on intuition or arbitrary supposition of value; they should be based instead on thorough analyses of the documentation bearing on the matter to which the records pertain. Analysis is the essence of archival appraisal" (Schellenberg, "Appraisal" 68). Such guidance clearly delineates the line between poetic license or artistic liberty and the curatorial work of an archivist. With *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, Godard seems firmly encamped in the analytical work of the archive.

Interestingly, Henri Langlois, notable archivist of the famed *Cinémathèque Française* film archive, claimed to operate without a selection policy. He was first driven by the goal to preserve films and second by his insistence on showing films to the public; this mission was a distinguishing attribute of the French film archive against the MOMA archive in New York and the British Film Institute, neither of which regularly screened materials from their collection until well after World War II (Roud 11). Langlois was not interested limiting the materials in his

collection, and he believed the best preservation strategy was to screen as many films as possible; as noted by Roud, “Films, he would say, are like Persian carpets: they have to be walked on” (20). As it turns out, Langlois’s top priorities were well-aligned: screening the films gave an opportunity to dispel accumulated gasses in the canisters that would have promoted deterioration. His films were also programmed “*sans débats*,” with no discussions. The lineup was not guided by theme, and there were no guest speakers. Langlois placed nothing above his emphasis on the film itself, and, trusting the pure benefit of that emphasis, he eschewed the librarian’s tradition of pedagogical outreach: “I have not helped. I have not taught. I have put food on the table and they have taken the food and eaten, and then gone on to eat more and more food. All I give them is food, food, food, food. This is my work, to show films; to save and to show films, nothing more. Henri Langlois does not exist; only exists the *Cinémathèque Française*” (qtd. in Roud xxvi). Nonetheless, Ingrid Bergman thought him an artist: “‘Henri Langlois has created a work of art. Like a painter creates a painting, a sculptor a sculpture, he has created a Cinémathèque’” (qtd. in Roud xxvi).

Langlois’s straightforward approach to his archival work is attributed with creating an attitude of openness in the generation of New Wave critics-cum-filmmakers who studied in his cinematheque. He prepared them to receive. Daniel Morgan describes Godard’s experience with the cinematheque as absorbing films—those screened as well as others—art, people, and historical events, all which would then constellate into new images in his mind. Morgan quotes Godard: “‘The image is the relation with me looking at it dreaming up a relation at someone else. An image is an association’” (235). The generative experience of producing a network of associations—this image as a new meaning—is a foundational concept in Godard’s selection policy. An overabundance of material will quickly obstruct meaning. The image must be

carefully chosen, produced from select artifacts to represent the intended concept. For Godard, these are the artistic decisions of a filmmaker, but, specifically in the montages of *Histoire(s)*, there is a test of informational value in play: which records should he include? As Giorgio Agamben asks of Warburg's nymphs, "In which one of the table's twenty-six apparitions does it reside? To search among them for an archetype or an original from which the others have derived would amount to misreading the *Atlas*. None of the images is the original; none is simply a copy" (64).

*Histoire(s) du Cinéma* presents literal layers of conceptual artifacts to construct new constellations of meaning. Among the records Godard chooses from: emblems of French history and culture; music of differing genre, style, and selections; lists of films, obviously, both visual lists that appear on screen and meta-lists in text meant to accompany the screening; artworks; techniques of representation, such as images superimposed in still form, images that switch rapidly between two stills, and images which are blended into one moving image; written script: voiceover narration, interview, performed monologues; titles: description, design, animation, languages represented; affective provocations: humor as a symbolic process, word play, the non-literal; historical figures: the Lumières, Méliès, Eisenstein, Hitler, Langlois, and others. Daniel Morgan has written similarly of Godard's lists, conceding that the lists "mark a method" (194). This method elevates the creation of emphatically partial lists into historiographic procedure. Morgan continues, "In order to understand the present, it's not pure historical knowledge that's needed, an accurate picture of everything that has happened, but a selection of figures who, taken as a partial history, can serve as models." Godard shows the lineage by which the concept is best understood. Morgan: "I think the lists in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* do similar creative work with and out of history. They mark out various strands, multiple throughlines within the history of cinema

that can be teased out through the activity of criticism" (195). This presents a curated batch of material from which the critic may produce meaning(s)...with an s.[1]

A method is apparent, but Morgan also holds up Godard as an appropriately dispassionate archivist who, like Langlois, creates an environment for generative thought and allows the artifacts to speak. Sometimes there is a direct correlation with the film clip on screen and the narration or animated overlay, in other cases the elements function within different contexts. Morgan proposes that, "there is no universal model for interpretation here, no absolute principle of making meaning. There are no hard and fast rules to determine which instances do and which don't require contextual knowledge in order to be understood (regardless of whether that information is external to the film itself). The viewer is simply faced with a juxtaposition in the stream of images, a moment that demands interpretation" (177). The inconsistency, this resistance to providing a code is critical to the compelling fascination of *Histoire(s)*. It's a riddle to be solved. Godard allows the viewer access to his curated archive, but the finding aid he provides is appropriately limited as to allow for interpretive interventions.

Warburg's work was influential in contemporary approaches to art history. Prior dogma, attributed to Johann Winckelmann and the rise of mid-18$^{th}$ century neoclassicism, focused on "ideal" forms as the essence of art. These are ultimately highly subjective, and culturally relative, judgments of taste guided by aesthetic norms of the time—described by Georges Didi-Huberman as, "the mediations of the mind in search of that point outside of time that is the ideal" (8). Warburg reacted against this aestheticization of art history, which he saw as being "for cultivated people" content to evaluate art based on beauty. He called those attributionist art historians of the mid-19th century "professional admirers." Warburg's approach instead favored "the role played

[1] Throughout the film, Godard's narration vocalizes the title of the project as *histoires du cinema, avec un 's'* ("with an 's'"), emphasizing the plurality of possibilities inhabiting the history/histories/story/stories of cinema.

by the social practices that are linked to all forms of the production of figurative art" (Didi-Huberman 16-17). Additionally, like Godard, Warburg discovered the defining imperative of the archive as a form. With his *Atlas*, "Warburg multiplied the links between the fields of knowledge, that is to say, between the possible responses to the insane overdetermination of images. And with respect to this multiplication, he probably dreamed of not choosing, of postponing, of cutting nothing out, of taking the time to take everything into account—surely a kind of insanity. How does one orient oneself in the midst of this knot of problems?" (Didi-Huberman 22).

A modern archivist wouldn't approve of such a policy of extremes, but it's a familiar problem invoked in the anxiety described in Jeannette Ford's introduction: "How can I bring order to this impossible collection?" "Will I discover something worthwhile?" "Will I discard something of value?" (xi). The importance of the selection policy is to identify the interval between and around conceptual units. These are creative decisions that produce the instantiation at the root of Warburg's *Atlas*. The nymph exists *among* the images in the forty-sixth panel, though not necessarily in any single one of them. In moving away from ideal forms, Warburg embraced a dialectical approach to archival arrangement, examining what Christopher Johnson calls "the polarities that riddle culture and thought" (par. 1). Didi-Huberman notes Warburg's emphasis not on the "communal and archetypal," but on the "differential and comparative." Warburg's collection policy sought "not an object, but rather a complex of relations—indeed, a pile, a conglomeration, or a rhizome of relations," bound to "enlarge the field of admissible phenomena" from art history to a science of culture. This contribution produced "a significant crystallization or condensation of what a 'culture' was at a given moment in its history" (Didi-Huberman 23).

Godard seems to be oriented within this approach in his project of telling the story/history of cinema. Morgan makes note of the difficulty in identifying the contextual connections in *Histoire(s)*: “sometimes they concern matters of plot, sometimes personnel, sometimes style. At other times, they appear to be based on a private association Godard has with the particular film. And this is all prior to the actual interpretation challenge of understanding the relations among clips that can potentially emerge from their backstory” (175). Like Warburg’s network of crystallizations, Godard creates connections across history, literalizing historical allegories through visual montage. Morgan describes, “Weimar in 1945 is not *like* Weimar in 1806, it *is* Weimar in 1806; Berlin of 1944 is *Nosferatu*'s village of 1922. ... Analogy becomes equation, comparison turns into identity; all events are made, through cinema, contemporaries” (Morgan 215). *Histoire(s)* is rife with sets of visual analogues that form a tempting strategy for interpretation. Portraying consecutive images of Elizabeth Taylor, religious icons, and the Auschwitz extermination camp as a conceptual set, the film produces an evocative statement relating the death face with religious ecstasy in the manner of the erotic sublime. However, the strength of this set isn’t necessarily in the connections, but in the space between, within the dialectic. Writing of *Mnenosyne Atlas*, Didi-Huberman calls it kaleidoscopic phenomenology: “its very uncertainty and ambiguity throws up the possibility of some new, hitherto unconsidered affinity, configuration, relation” (Rampley 11). While the similarities between Warburg’s *Atlas* and cinematic montage are evident, Rampley argues that the significance of this goes beyond the merely formal: “It is based on the idea of montage as representational procedure. For just as avant-garde montage embodied an alternative epistemology, … the *Atlas* was an attempt to restructure the logic of historical representation; its juxtaposed images are presented in their singularity, with all their affinities, conflicts and differences.” This analysis is not unlike Peter

Wollen's assessment of Godard's early work as images liberated from representation. Rampley quotes Didi-Huberman: "*Mnemosyne* thus arranges its anthropological objects … without ever sacrificing to the scientific myth of exhaustive classification, to the positivist religion of final explanations or to the causal superstition of univocal determinations" (10). The *Atlas* is thus not a project of revelation but of a production of tensions or conflicts, which provide critical pathways to meaning.

Agamben's work on the *Atlas* invokes Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, one that appears where meaning is suspended: "The dialectical image is … an unresolved oscillation between estrangement and a new event of meaning. Similar to the emblematic intention, the dialectical image holds its object suspended in a semantic void" (Agamben 69). Agamben takes notice of Theodor Adorno's disavowal of this concept—"The ambiguity must absolutely not be left as it is" (qtd in Agamben 69)—but judges his criticism as a misunderstanding of Benjamin's emphasis on standstill as a threshold of indifference between two opposing fields: "the two terms are neither removed from nor recomposed in unity but kept in an immobile coexistence charged with tensions" (69-70). This concept is immediately relevant to the historical use of the archive (or *an* archive, in the sense of Warburg's or Godard's respective projects), as Agamben notes the ability of the dialectic's constellatory capability of "placing an instant from the past in relation to the present" (70).

Dialectical ambiguity, then, is key to the archive's form. It is also key to the archivist's passive objectivity in acting as steward of the collection. The archival collection must initiate a receptive quality in the spectator, characterized by openness to contradiction and willingness to decipher pattern and significance. If Langlois changed the Cinémathèque's evening program at the last minute, no one protested: "It was like a private party or dinner, where you take what

you're given and no one dreams of complaining to the host or hostess about the choice of the menu" (Roud 28). Godard believed that cinematic power rests in its "ability to produce thoughts—more specifically, to produce the activity of thinking" (Morgan 168). It's easy to comprehend this when thinking of Godard seated at Langlois's table, consuming every morsel provided. Langlois had the habit of forcing this dialectic, sometimes making a film program that he knew would never be screened: "In one hundred years… people will see that the two films were programmed together, and then they'll do it, and they'll be the ones to see the connection" (qtd in Morgan 222). The archival constellation carries an interpretive imperative: the cinematic corollary suggested by Morgan is the spectatorial position of "beholder as montagist" (227). The driving theory is one used to interpret experiential engagement into the production of new thoughts and works. Godard and Warburg, with their rather personal or subjective entanglement with their archival collections—breaking the barriers set forth by traditional custodial objectivity— set an example, providing a critical template for others to follow. Morgan delineates this beautifully:

> Godard positions himself as an exemplary spectator: we're not supposed to simply understand and appreciate the connections he draws but to treat his example as a model, to begin to draw our own connections—make our own *histoires*—when we watch films. *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* is a lesson about how to see cinema; more generally, it is a set of teachings for understanding what we already do in the theater, for making sense of the films we have already seen. We might say that the goal of the video series is to effect a transfer of Godard's experience of cinema to a form in which it can be part of a broader public awareness. *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* may be an account of his own experience, but

> the claim it makes is that it's our experience as well; Godard presents his viewing habits and associations as representative of a more general kind of experience. (227-28)

Godard's early inclination to think thoughts and produce images (associations) out of his engagement with the *Cinémathèque* was the foundation of his practice as a critic and as an artist. In a 1962 interview—only two years after the release of his first film—he wrote, "As a critic, I thought of myself as a filmmaker. Today, I still think of myself as a critic, and in a sense I am, more than ever before. Instead of writing criticism, I make a film, but the critical dimension is subsumed" (171). The critical attitude is to consult as one does with the archive, carrying the interpretive imperative into literature, film, culture, etc. With *Histoire(s)*, Godard is the archivist who challenges the world to engage with his collection. Godard's personal archive may be the entirety of cinematic history, but each viewer brings a wealth of experience into the theater that is at once unique and universal.

Warburg's work as an archivist endeavors to explore a new sort of relationship between the particular and the universal. He finds in the "unhierarchical world of the archives … elements of a body of material, both moving and unlimited, suitable for reinventing the history of the Renaissance" (Didi-Huberman 20). Writing in 1944, Hilary Jenkinson noted on the universality of archives, "once writing has become general in use, they include potentially everybody in the world and, in consequence, every conceivable human interest" (21). This limitless opportunity, however, must also be triangulated with the interpretive imperative and the archive's form as a dialectical image. Didi-Huberman writes of Warburg's humility in the pursuit of knowledge, "It meant recognizing the unity of all culture, its fundamentally organic nature. On the other hand, however, it meant refusing to assert it, to define it, or to claim one has grasped it as such: things are to be left in their state of division or of disassembly" (40-41). Didi-Huberman calls this

"postponing the moment of conclusion, the Hegelian moment of absolute knowledge" (41). Respecting the ambiguity of the dialectical image in the archive's form is chief in both stewardship of and engagement with the collection. The very universality of the archival collection bars the existence of any universal truths to be found there. The scholar of the archive, like Godard's viewer and, to follow this template, any critical consumer of culture, must take on the interpretive imperative not in the search for ultimate truth but in celebration of the tensions between records that must only produce more questions.

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