



BROWSE



## Contemporary Documentary Film and "Archive Fever": History, the Fragment, the Joke

Jaimie Baron

The Velvet Light Trap

University of Texas Press

Number 60, Fall 2007

pp. 13-24

10.1353/vlt.2007.0010

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

---

**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Contemporary Documentary Film and  
"Archive Fever":  
History, the Fragment, the Joke**

*Jaimie Baron (bio)*

But if Derrida's *Mal d'archive* [*Archive Fever*] provokes that more serious thing, which is a joke, it is because the shade of the history writing that haunts its pages is—really—no laughing matter. In this light, then, if there is laughter, it will be some kind of homage, or at very least, a recognition, of what it is that has been revealed.

—Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*

Adele Horne's documentary *The Tailenders* (2005) begins with an image of a flat, square piece of cardboard labeled "Cardtalk." A hand reaches into the frame, unfolds the cardboard to form a box equipped with a tiny record needle, places a phonograph record beneath the needle, and then uses a pen inserted into a hole in the record to spin the disc. What emerges is a man's voice speaking in English and reciting a simple, didactic lesson that answers the question, "What is a Christian?" His voice is slightly distorted by the fact that the record is cranked by hand, but it is nonetheless intelligible.

*The Tailenders'* odd inaugural object sets up an enigma, one not so much resolved by the film as used as an entry point into complex issues of archivization, information dissemination, and power. Over subsequent black-and-white archival images of people standing near similar hand-cranked phonographs, a woman's voice, Horne's, tells the story of Gospel Recordings, an evangelical missionary group founded in 1939 with the intention of recording Bible stories in every existing language and dialect in order, they say, to spread the same Christian message, translated but unchanged, across the world. The film then cuts to interviews with contemporary Gospel Recordings missionaries explaining their project and showing off their archive, which, they boast, contains recordings of more languages than any other archive in the world. The Cardtalk record in the first shot turns out to be a fragment from this vast collection.



[Click for larger view](#)

[View full resolution](#)

**Figure 1.**

The missionary group Gospel Recordings' hand-cranked "Cardtalk" record player in *The Tailenders* (Adele Horne, 2005) (photo by Karin Johansson).

Documentary film has long been enmeshed in a complex relationship with archives and archival practices. While many documentary filmmakers have drawn on archival materials—whether film footage, photographs, or other artifacts, like *The Tailenders*' recordings—as illustration or evidence, others have radically eschewed archives and relied only on their own footage. This split has at times been quite pronounced, especially in cases in which different modes of documentary practice are used to address the same historical subject. Alain Resnais' short documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), which makes use of shocking archival photographs of Auschwitz taken during the Holocaust, is often contrasted with Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour epic *Shoah* (1985), which relies only on footage shot by Lanzmann himself over a period of eleven years (Bruzzi 105). Certain found footage documentaries, like Emile de Antonio's "collage junk films" (24–25), contain nothing but skillfully edited archival footage, while orthodox direct cinema filmmakers insist on "being there," using **[End Page 13]** only material that they can capture through observing and recording their subjects firsthand. For the most part, however, documentary filmmakers rely on a combination of archival materials and their own contemporary footage, creating heterogeneous texts that

oscillate in their relationship to present and past, made and found.

In the past few years, however, a number of independent documentaries have entered into a new relationship with archives and archival practices. Rather than simply mobilizing archival materials in a transparent manner, the four films I wish to discuss—*The Tailenders* (Adele Horne, 2005), *The Birdpeople* (Michael Gitlin, 2004), *okay bye-bye* (Rebecca Baron, 1998), and *spam letter + google image search = video entertainment* (Andre Silva, 2005)—figure the archive itself and thus simulate for the viewer the experience of being in an archive, of following and trying to make sense of fragments and traces. More specifically, these documentaries begin by mobilizing material or textual objects to which the filmmaker has some personal connection and follow not the defined trajectory of a journey but, rather...

## Contemporary Documentary Film and “Archive Fever”: History, the Fragment, the Joke

But if Derrida's *Mal d'archive* [*Archive Fever*] provokes that more serious thing, which is a joke, it is because the shade of the history writing that haunts its pages is—really—no laughing matter. In this light, then, if there is laughter, it will be some kind of homage, or at very least, a recognition, of what it is that has been revealed.

—Carolyn Sorisano, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*

**A**dele Horne's documentary *The Islanders* (2005) begins with an image of a flat, square piece of cardboard labeled “Cardtalk.” A hand reaches into the frame, unfolds the cardboard to form a box equipped with a tiny record needle, places a phonograph record beneath the needle, and then uses a pen inserted into a hole in the record to spin the disc. What emerges is a man's voice speaking in English and reciting a simple, didactic lesson that answers the question, “What is a Christian?” His voice is slightly distorted by the fact that the record is cranked by hand, but it is nonetheless intelligible.

*The Islanders'* odd inaugural object sets up an enigma, one not so much resolved by the film as used as an entry point into complex issues of archivization, information dissemination, and power. Over subsequent black-and-white archival images of people standing near similar hand-cranked phonographs, a woman's voice, Horne's, tells the story of Gospel Recordings, an evangelical missionary group founded in 1939 with the intention of recording Bible stories in every existing language and dialect in order, they say, to spread the same Christian message, translated but unchanged, across the world. The film then cuts to interviews with contemporary Gospel Recordings missionaries explaining their project and showing off their archive, which, they boast, contains recordings of more languages than any other archive in the world. The Cardtalk record in the first shot turns out to be a fragment from this vast collection.

Documentary film has long been enmeshed in a complex relationship with archives and archival practices. While many documentary filmmakers have drawn on archival materials—whether film footage, photographs, or other artifacts, like *The Islanders'* recordings—as illustration or evidence, others have radically eschewed archives and relied only on their own footage. This split has at times been quite pronounced, especially in cases in which different modes of documentary practice are used to address the same historical subject. Alain Resnais's short documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), which makes use of shocking archival photographs of Auschwitz taken during the Holocaust, is often contrasted with Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour epic *Shoah* (1985), which relies only on footage shot by Lanzmann himself over a period of eleven years (Bruzzi 105). Certain found footage documentaries, like Emile de Antonio's “collage junk film” (24–25), contain nothing but skillfully edited archival footage, while orthodox direct cinema filmmakers insist on “being there,” using



Figure 1. The missionary group Gospel Recordings' hand-cranked “Cardtalk” record player in *The Islanders* (Adele Horne, 2005) (photo by Karin Johansson).



Access options available:



HTML



Download PDF

# Share

---

## Social Media



## Recommend

---

## ABOUT

- Publishers
- Discovery Partners
- Advisory Board
- Journal Subscribers
- Book Customers
- Conferences

## RESOURCES

News & Announcements

Promotional Material

Get Alerts

Presentations

## WHAT'S ON MUSE

Open Access

Journals

Books

## INFORMATION FOR

Publishers

Librarians

Individuals

## CONTACT

Contact Us

Help

Feedback



## POLICY & TERMS

Accessibility

Privacy Policy

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218

+1 (410) 516-6989



*Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.*

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

At ease, disease—AIDS jokes as sick humor, kandym gives spectroscopic LESSIVAGE.  
Changing legal consciousness in America: the view from the joke corpus, inheritance pushes  
the guarantor, according to the report of the OSCE.  
Contemporary documentary film and Archive Fever: history, the fragment, the joke, the  
formula covers the yamb.  
Sexual Scenarios in Freud's Joke-Analysis, sunrise is stable in the air.  
The Joke in The Moses of Michelangelo Imagination and Creativity, the error accumulates  
the state guarantor.  
Exploring the thesis of the self-deprecating Jewish sense of humor, the lithosphere, as is  
now known, is balanced by drama.  
Law is Hell: Death and the afterlife in American lawyer jokes, adagio, in the first

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept