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A Call for Experimentation in Archiving

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Archiving is undergoing a grammatological shift that began with the invention of photography nearly two centuries ago. Walter Benjamin was the first to theorize the age of sampling, and he did so by drawing heavily on the work of the Surrealists. In his essay on Surrealism, he writes: “a collection is composed of objects wrenched out of their contexts of origins and reconfigured into the self-contained, self-referential context of the collection itself, and this context destroys the context of origin.” Robert Ray comments on Benjamin’s insight: “The *Arcades*, surrealism, cinema—these events, Benjamin began to realize, were not discrete; they were all part of what he would later call, in the now famous phrase, ‘the age of mechanical reproduction’” (41).

Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, a massive collage of artifacts and scholarly sources, was based on surrealist principles, which Ray names as “the preference for drifting, the openness to chance encounters, the attentiveness to details.” He notes that “Benjamin began to suggest that these tactics *already* lay at the heart of scholarship; one needed only to follow surrealism’s lead and formalize them” (43). Benjamin’s work seems radical, however, when contrasted with the work of most scholars. Whereas most scholars maintain a commitment to fidelity in the use of their source material—never quoting out of context, always perpetuating or establishing categorical structures, adhering to the principles of single voice, audience, and purpose—Benjamin, as well as his contemporaries the Surrealists and heirs such as Barthes and Derrida, felt no such

commitment.

Benjamin recognized that the function of the archivist had to change. These changes are best understood within the framework of grammatology, the study of the ways in which ideological apparatuses shift in relation to information technologies. Thus, in oral (pre-literate) cultures, the *griot* is an archivist who stores information in his memory and recalls the collected stories and myths of the tribe. In print culture, the archivist is the librarian, and in electronic culture it is the curator, the multi-role playing figure described by Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook in *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media*.

General Features of Archives

	Oral Culture	Alphabetic Culture	Electronic Culture
Archivist	Griot	Librarian	Curator
Logic	Narrative (myth)	Argument (treatise)	Poetic (dream work)
Structure	Ritual	<i>Topos</i> —arrangement by category (taxonomy). The goal is to be comprehensive.	<i>Chora</i> —any detail may link two or more texts regardless of category. Also, texts have no clear boundaries and are fragmented and recombined.
Search Method	Divination	Author, citation, concept	Pattern, image, affect
Effect (dominant narrative)	Continuity (the preservation of traditions)	Progress (arising from a pattern of expectation and deviation)	Surprise (the jarring results of juxtaposition as collision)
Mood	Awe	Doubt	Shock / Anxiety
Human Subjectivity	Tribe (Collectivity)	Humanist subject (culminating in the author). The dominant value is personal responsibility although it conflicts with the dominant mode of social relations, which is authoritative and didactic.	Post-human subject. Assumption of shared responsibility.

Though admittedly broad in its generalizations, this table illustrates shifts in our understanding of the archive. These shifts are by no means complete; although we are well into the era of electronic culture, archiving today is still rooted mainly in 19th century alphabetic culture. The archivists/curators I discuss here (the Surrealists, Benjamin, etc.) made their careers by experimenting with electronic curating. Here “electronic” means the grammatological shift represented by photographic and audio technologies, later by digital media. In the 20th century, curators had precedent for working with printed works and fine arts, but not for films, audio recordings, and digital media. Roughly a half-century after these media were invented—the 1930s through the 1950s—there were no histories of film and audio and the archiving of these media was still being invented.

The curatorial pioneers I discuss in this essay gave us methods for challenging the prevailing paradigms of “metadata”: the ways in which we “tag” art. I would argue that these curatorial pioneers made cultural metadata the real show, putting it front and center so we could disassemble and reassemble it. How do we bring the same attention to the metadata structuring our digital archives today?

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