

Counterpoint

“The Truth is in the Red Files”: An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture*

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RÉSUMÉ Ce texte présente un survol de romans, de films et de séries de télévision afin d'examiner comment sont dépeints les centres d'archives et les documents d'archives dans la culture populaire. Malgré le fait que cette étude semble d'abord non-scientifique, et que les sources sont disparates, quatre grands thèmes communs ressortent : la protection du document est liée à la protection de la vérité; les centres d'archives sont des endroits fermés et les personnages y vivent une expérience intérieure; les documents sont perdus et cachés dans les centres d'archives; l'information qu'on cherche dans les documents d'archives est invariablement liée à la quête de soi ou de la vérité. Ce texte explore la validité de ces thèmes, offre quelques raisons pour expliquer leur prédominance, et suggère l'existence d'une forte dichotomie entre les divers récits d'expériences aux archives vrais ou imaginés. L'auteure conclut en se demandant si les archivistes devraient se préoccuper de cette représentation ou non.

ABSTRACT This article is a personal overview of novels, motion pictures, and television series investigating how the archive and the record are being represented in popular culture. Despite the initially casual nature of the review, and the disparateness of the sources, four strong common themes became apparent: protection of the record is equated to protection of the truth; archives are closed spaces and the archival experience is an interior one for characters; records are lost and buried in archives; and the information sought in the records invariably centres around the search for self or truth. This article explores the validity of these themes, offers some reasons for their prevalence, suggests the existence of a strong dichotomy between the real and imagined narratives of the archival experience, and concludes with some thoughts on whether archivists should be concerned about this representation.

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Archives are spatially bound as places of uncovering and recovering, as sites of concealment and suppression as well as of the expression, projection, and revelation of individual and social pasts and futures.¹

When Gandalf enters the archives in Gondor searching for proof that Frodo has the One Ring, he breaks every law known to archival science: he is smoking a pipe throughout his search, and there are flaming torches and open bottles of water. Far worse than all these physical threats to the record, the wizard displays a complete disregard for the principle of original order as he frantically hurls parchments hither and yon. Any archivist will cringe at this depiction, not only because of Gandalf's disrespect for the record, but also since it perpetuates the stereotype of dusty and forgotten documents languishing in disuse.

The Gondorian archive in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* resides in the realm of fantasy, but archives inhabit genres across the spectrum of popular culture. The most prevalent examples are from historical fiction where past events provide a narrative backdrop, such as Raymond Khoury's *The Last Templar* or Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian*. Other common genres include suspense² (both Robert Ludlum's *The Janson Directive* and *The Bourne Identity* use archives as plot devices); mysteries (many of the Inspector Pendergast series of novels from authors Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child employ archives to some extent³); and science fiction (both the British television series *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* mention archives in several episodes, while Robert Charles Wilson's novel *Darwinia* looks to a future where the universe itself is the archive⁴). Even children and teenage popular culture sources recognize the power of records; the movie *Transformers* has a firefight in an archive, while the anthropomorphized animals of Brian Jacques' *Redwall* series have a Recorder who frequently consults the Abbey's archive for advice in times of trouble.⁵

1 Francis X. Blouin, "Preface and acknowledgements," in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, 2006), p. viii.

2 For an in-depth examination of archives in suspense novels see Peter Gillis, "Of Plots, Secrets, Burrowers and Moles: Archives in Espionage Fiction," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979–1980), pp. 3–13.

3 See in particular Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *The Cabinet of Curiosities* (New York, 2002), pp. 394–95, 548; Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, *The Book of the Dead* (New York, 2006), p. 80.

4 Wilson writes: "Now it was time to pool those memories – to make a physical Archive that would outlast even the loss of free energy, an Archive linked isostatically with other Archives in the universe, an Archive which would harbor sentience well into the Heat Death ... The Archive, when it was finished, would contain all that the galaxy had been since the Eclectic Age." Robert Charles Wilson, *Darwinia* (New York, 1998), p. 140.

5 See for example Brian Jacques, *Pearls of Lutra: A Tale from Redwall* (New York, 1996): The

This article is not based on a systematic survey of popular culture, nor is it limited to a specific genre. My interest in the subject was originally piqued by a conversation with librarian colleagues who lamented the pervasiveness of their stereotypical image in popular culture. I began making specific note of any mention of archives or records in what I happened to be reading or viewing at the time. I had neither agenda nor preconceived ideas on the subject; neither did I follow a specific methodology in choosing or finding sources. I did take as my guide the definition of popular culture as provided by Ray B. Browne, one of the founders of the movement: “[Popular culture] is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments and diversions. It is our heroes, icons, rituals, everyday actions, psychology, and religion – our total life picture.”⁶ My only conscious choice was to exclude any references to documentaries, “history-on-film,” or other non-fiction sources such as newspapers and magazines.⁷ Rather, my references span the spectrum of fiction including novels, motion pictures, and television series. Some of these references are reflections of my own past or current “guilty pleasures,” while others are the result of subsequent inquiry on written reviews, referrals from trusted sources, chance encounters on airport bookshelves, or bowing to the inevitable and reading the purported “bestsellers” of our day. A total of sixty-nine sources provided information on archives and records for this article: thirty-five are novels and thirty-four are movies or television series.

Despite the initial casualness of this review and the disparate nature of the sources, four strong common themes readily became apparent (while it could be suggested that my reading and viewing preferences may have shaped these findings, there is a startling amount of consistency that could equally advocate for their universality): 1) protection of the record is equated with protection

Recorder consults his records for advice, p. 41; the Recorder asks another character to “dig out the volumes of [another Recorder],” p. 132; when confronted with a place of evil, the Recorder states: “I have read in the Abbey Records that on two occasions the enemies of Red Wall used this place as a refuge ...,” p. 265.

6 “Conversations with Scholars of American Popular Culture, Featured Guest: Professor Ray B. Browne,” *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* (Fall 2002), http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/browne.htm (accessed 3 May 2008).

7 I considered the image of archives and archivists in the newspapers, and the contributions of archives to documentaries and historical retellings as separate realms of inquiry. For further examination, see Richard Cox, “International Perspectives on the Image of Archivists and Archives: Coverage by *The New York Times*, 1992–1993,” *International Information and Library Review* 25 (1993), pp. 195–231; Sally J. Jacobs, “How and When we Make the News: Local Newspaper Coverage of Archives in Two Wisconsin Cities,” *Archival Issues*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1997), pp. 45–60; Kathleen Epp, “Telling Stories around the ‘Electronic Campfire’: The Use of Archives in Television Productions,” *Archivaria* 49 (Spring 2000), pp. 53–83. I also deliberately chose not to include live theatre or plays in my sampling of popular culture, as these are not consistent elements of my personal experience.

of the truth; 2) the archive is a closed space and the archival experience is an interior one for the characters (with all the obstacles and frustrations that that implies); 3) records in an archives are “lost” and “buried,” and characters must spend much time and effort “digging” in order to unearth them; and 4) the archival record invariably centres around the search for self or truth.

While these themes will be expanded upon – and in and of themselves are worthy of exploration – the true value of this overview became apparent through the further discovery of an ever present, sometimes faint, but always pervasive dichotomy: in many respects, popular culture is obviously aware of the true nature of the archival experience, yet it has chosen to embrace the more sensational and entertaining elements of information storage and retrieval. The dichotomy becomes evident when elements of a real-life archival experience are instead utilized to introduce narrative tension and obstacles. These elements may include such mundane aspects as security precautions, archivist mediation, or a closed storage vault, the usual corollary being that the more difficult it is for characters to seek out and fight for access to these records, the greater the degree of truth represented in the records. This article will first attempt to demonstrate the validity of the four common themes and will then explore the dichotomy that exists between the real and imagined narratives of the archival experience. I will then provide some insights on the reason for the pervasiveness of these narratives, and ultimately on whether this should be a source of concern for the archival profession.

Archives vs. Libraries

Since the writing of this article was motivated by a conversation with librarian colleagues, the first issue that should be addressed is the frequent substitution of libraries for archives in popular culture. Despite the essential differences in their purpose, contents and management, popular culture consistently substitutes libraries for archives. For example, in the television series *Supernatural*, brothers Sam and Dean Winchester often spend time in libraries tracking down historical information about the otherworldly entities that they hunt. The Winchesters may be searching in a library, but the records they find are often archival in nature: in one episode alone they access prison records, birth and death records, church ledgers, and cemetery and land records – all in a library setting.⁸ Given that the brothers need the information quickly in order to move the plot forward and for the sake of time, open and accessible libraries will do. However, there is one instance in the episode aptly entitled “Provenance” where Dean Winchester finds the record that completes their

8 “Hook Man,” *Supernatural*, DVD Season 1, directed by David Jackson (airdate 25 October 2005; (Burbank, CA, 2006).

search “archived” in the county records.⁹ This frequent substitution may be traced to the unfortunate but realistic fact that relatively few individuals from the general public are overly familiar with archives. Parents do not take their children to an archive on Saturday mornings to browse the shelves; while a significant number of these children will grow up to patronize libraries in the future, few of them will have the need, the occasion, or even the desire to visit an archive.¹⁰

The nature of research, too, plays a significant role. Scenes where characters are involved in research are frequently inserted as necessary but ultimately minor elements. While in real life archival research takes time, popular culture requires a quick discovery of information in order to move the plot forward. Libraries may trump archives, given the common perception that libraries are open and accessible, and known and comfortable spaces of quiet reflection and study. Libraries also appear to have longer hours of operation, and information is portrayed as being readily available on the shelves; on the other hand, the closed nature of archives and the difficulty of accessing material are plot devices that can depict narrative tension, however, these factors are not conducive to the swift location of necessary information used to move the plot forward.

There is also the perception that where libraries are about communities coming together to acquire accessible knowledge, archives are for the individual, for the lonely searches of academics and historians in pursuit of esoteric and hidden knowledge. While libraries can be accessed by anyone in the general population, there is frequently an implication that access to an archive requires a certain veneer of professionalism. Robert Langdon holds a PhD in Dan Brown’s novels. The title character in *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* is a world-renowned expert in the science of snow and cold. Fox Mulder of *The X-Files* has degrees in criminal psychology, while Dana Scully is a medical doctor. All the researchers in the novel *The Historian* are bona fide academics, as are the individuals who interact with the title character of Martha Cooley’s novel *The Archivist*. In contrast, the blue-collar Winchester brothers only require that their public sources of information be open at night.

The general public’s lack of familiarity with an archive is also evident in the number of different names used for these repositories, which are frequent-

9 “Provenance,” *Supernatural*, directed by Phil Sgriccia (airdate 14 April 2006).

10 Archivists are continually working on all aspects of outreach to alleviate this situation. See the following three articles, which appear in the same publication: Pina D’Angelo Felletti, “Children’s Use of Archives: The Principles of Uncertainty as a Basis of Instruction,” in *The Power and Passion of Archives: A Festschrift in Honour of Kent Haworth*, ed. Reuben Ware, Marion Beyea, and Cheryl Avery (Saskatoon, 2005), pp. 153–81; John Lennox, “Using the Archives,” pp. 141–51; and Wendy Duff, “Working as Independently as Possible: Historians and Genealogists Meet the Archival Finding Aid,” pp. 183–203.

ly vaguely menacing. In the novel *The Bourne Legacy*, maximum-security files on CIA personnel are known as “Four-Zero archives.” The movie *V for Vendetta* has the “Ministry of Objectionable Materials,” while the movie *Brazil* has the two “Information Retrieval” and more ominous “Information Adjustment” departments. The “Ministry of Truth” looms large in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* where records are altered to fit the present’s version of the past, while the title of the novel *The Atrocity Archives* speaks for itself.

Representations of the Archivist

Although the focus of this article is on the archive and the archival record, the representation of the archivist in popular culture should also be addressed. There are no truly iconic representations of archivists in popular culture, owing to the fact that archivists are rarely principal characters. While Giles the librarian¹¹ from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* now occupies a revered place in the pantheon of information-retrieval experts, archivists are confronted with the conflicted and numb title character in Martha Cooley’s novel *The Archivist*. While this character does take (rather dubious) action and destroys archival records at the climax of the story, he certainly does not engage in the excitement of saving lives, or fighting demons and vampires as Giles has occasion to do.

Generally speaking, as libraries frequently substitute for archives, so too do librarians substitute for archivists; the lines are often blurred between the two professions. For example, although the evocatively named Sourdust from *The Gormenghast Novels* is the “lord of the library,” his true function is as an archivist maintaining the protocol records for generations of Groan.¹² The substitution of librarians for archivists in popular culture may be done for the same reasons that libraries replace archives – a lack of public familiarity.

Interestingly, although archivists are often physically absent from the narrative in the corporeal sense, their influence and past presence is still evident. In these instances, the archivist’s “absence” could be related to what Tom Nesmith and Victoria Lemieux separately refer to as “ghosts.”¹³ The

11 Originally, Giles was a curator for the British Museum not a librarian. See Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters: The Art of Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (New York, 2005), p. 19.

12 From the introduction to Mervyn Peake, *The Gormenghast Novels: Titus Groan, Gormenghast, Titus Alone* (New York, 1995), p. 3. See also the discussion on librarians as archivists in Arlene Schmuland, “The Image of Archives and Archivists: Fictional Perspectives,” *American Archivist*, vol. 62, no. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 40–42.

13 Tom Nesmith, “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the ‘Ghosts’ of Archival Theory,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), p. 149; Victoria Lemieux, “Let the Ghosts Speak: An Empirical Exploration of the ‘Nature’ of the Record,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), p. 111.

assistance provided by these “archival ghosts” is evidenced in different ways. There are several examples of a surrogate taking an archivist’s place to assist the researcher: the disembodied computer voice of Aivas substitutes as the archivist in assisting knowledge seekers in Anne McCaffery’s novel *All the Weyrs of Pern*¹⁴; an even “ghostlier” guide is evident in the novel *Disclosure*, when a researcher looking for pertinent information in the virtual reality archive requests help:

“Help is here,” said a soft voice nearby. Sanders looked over and saw an angel, about a foot high. It was white, and hovered in the air near his head. It held a flickering candle in its hands.¹⁵

In addition, while the archivist may be physically absent, the results of their invisible work are often evident in tangible form, providing the researcher with the instruments required to access information. The tools left behind by the archivist reflect popular culture’s tacit recognition that through accurate appraisal and selection, and through exact arrangement and description, archivists provide a valuable service because characters are able to locate the information they require. In Dan Brown’s novel *Angels and Demons*, Robert Langdon expresses that acknowledgement after he deciphers the organization of materials in the Vatican Archives on his own: “I think it’s a thematic classification ... *This may be the shrewdest cataloguing I’ve ever seen.*”¹⁶

If the archivists have not vanished from the narrative completely, they tend to disappear into a flattened and telescoped stereotypical image. The elements of this stereotype are explored in Eric Ketelaar’s article “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection,” where he reflects on the various components of archival authority. Using the example of Jocasta Nu, the Jedi archivist from *Star Wars, Episode II, Attack of the Clones*, Ketelaar describes archives as sites of power where the archivist mediates, shares, or obstructs that power as the plot dictates.¹⁷ Obi-Wan is put in his place by the lady archivist who snaps at him: “If an item does not appear in our records, then it does not exist.”¹⁸ Other examples of a less than warm relationship between archivist and researcher include the reference archivist from Diana Gabaldon’s novel *Voyager*, who glowers at noisy visitors with “icy disap-

14 Anne McCaffrey, *All the Weyrs of Pern* (New York, 1991), p. 404.

15 Michael Crichton, *Disclosure* (New York, 1993), p. 434.

16 Dan Brown, *Angels and Demons* (New York, 2000), p. 243.

17 Eric Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 222–23.

18 *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, DVD, produced and directed by George Lucas (Beverly Hills, CA, 2002).

proval,”¹⁹ while the archivist from *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, is described as “frozen and dour in her demeanor.”²⁰ In the novel *The Historian*, the researcher finds himself face-to-face with a character that is described as “unpleasant,” “belligerent,” and “disgusting.”²¹

Archivists may also be portrayed as introverted characters that are completely subsumed by their occupation.²² Sam Lowry, the main character in the movie *Brazil*, works at the Department of Records “where it is impossible to be noticed.”²³ The archivist from the novel *The Cabinet of Curiosities* is described as a “fossilized anachronism who should have been put out to pasture long before.”²⁴ In an episode of *The Avengers*, the University Archivist is dismissed with the words, “After all, he was only an archivist, just a small man of no consequence, only an archivist.”²⁵ Archivists are sometimes depicted as less than human. The woman guarding the Wolfram & Hart Records Room in the television series *Angel* is actually a robot; when questioned about her encyclopedic knowledge of the information in the case files, she replies: “I’m Files and Records. It’s my job.”²⁶

The three simple words “it’s my job,” constitute a telling statement: popular culture is very aware of the weight of authority that archivists bring to their role as society’s recordkeepers. Despite the usual stereotypes of obstructionist fossils with no life beyond their narrow profession, popular culture has evidently also wholeheartedly embraced the “professional myth of the past century that the archivist is the . . . keeper of the truth.”²⁷ Archives have long been associated with “authenticating power”²⁸: the authority to bestow credibility, weight, and authority to records. Once records have crossed the “archival threshold,” archivists become the guardians of this evidence, a role they carry out with a sense of responsibility. Superman’s Kryptonian mother is the Keeper of the Archives and it falls to her in *Superman II* to tell her son

19 Diana Gabaldon, *Voyager* (New York, 1994), p. 99.

20 Peter Hoeg, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (New York, 1993), p. 73.

21 Elizabeth Kostova, *The Historian: A Novel* (New York, 2005), p. 30.

22 It is interesting to note Barbara Craig’s work on the personality types of archivists. In fact, she discovered that a greater percentage of archivists are extroverts, rather than the popular misconception of introverted individuals. See Barbara Craig, “Canadian Archivists: What Types of People are They?” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), p. 86.

23 *Brazil*, DVD, directed by Terry Gilliam (Hollywood, CA, 1985).

24 Preston and Child, *The Cabinet of Curiosities*, p. 121.

25 “A Sense of History,” *The Avengers*, DVD, directed by Peter Graham Scott (airdate 3 December 1966; New York, 2006).

26 “Dad,” *Angel*, DVD Season 3, directed by Fred Keller (airdate 10 December 2001; Beverly Hills, CA, 2003).

27 Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 5.

28 Luciana Duranti, “Archives as a Place,” *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1996), p. 246.

of the “darkest episode in Krypton’s history,” which relates to the imprisoning in the Phantom Zone of the three arch-criminals led by General Zod.²⁹ While the information itself is ripe with doom, the fact that the news is relayed by an archivist (and a dead one at that), imbues it with authority and credibility.

This in turn echoes Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz’s thoughts that “archivists – as keepers of archives – wield power over those very records central to memory and identity formation ...”³⁰ While archivists may not literally be the “dragons at the gate,”³¹ their vital role in information protection and dissemination ensures that they *are* gatekeepers with the ultimate authority over access to the records sought by protagonists. To emphasize this notion, the archivist in the novel *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* is actually described in biblical terms: “No makeup, no perfume, and no jewelry other than a silver cross at her throat. An angel. The kind you trust to guard something with a flaming sword.”³²

Protection of the Record = Protection of the Truth

This idea of archivists being portrayed as guardians,³³ naturally leads into an exploration of the first of the four common themes: not only does popular culture label the role of the archivist as one of “guardian angel,” it places additional weight and emphasis on the role of the archival record being guarded. Invariably, in popular culture, the archival record represents the truth and the truth represents power. Peter Gillis first explored this concept almost thirty years ago in his article “Of Plots, Secrets, Burrowers and Moles: Archives in Espionage Fiction,” where he notes: “The first [theme] concerns the concept of information as power ... novelists ... have spun many a plot around an agent or protagonist who must search out secret or hidden facts in order to achieve the power and knowledge to crush a plot or cabal.”³⁴ The same idea was reiterated a decade ago in Arlene Schmuland’s investigation into the representation of archivists and archives in novels: “The archives have potential to represent history, to provide information, and to reveal the truth.”³⁵ The concept still holds true today. The archive from the television series *Angel*

29 *Superman II*, DVD, directed by Richard Lester (1980; Burbank, CA, 2001).

30 Cook and Schwartz, p. 2.

31 Kathleen Marquis, “Not Dragon at the Gate but Research Partner: The Reference Archivist as Mediator,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, ed. F.X. Blouin Jr. and W.G. Rosenberg, p. 36.

32 Hoeg, p. 65.

33 Barbara Craig explores this concept of archivists as guardians in her articles “A Look at a Bigger Picture: The Demographic Profile of Archivists in Canada based on a National Survey,” *Archivaria* 49 (Spring 2000), pp. 20–52 and “Canadian Archivists,” pp. 79–92.

34 Gillis, p. 5.

35 Schmuland, p. 33.

stands as a microcosm of this concept: it is described as “the most comprehensive collection ... to be found anywhere ... [it is] a place that contains all the truths, every dirty little scheme, every secret, all evil great and small.” One character then goes on to speculate about the power represented by this archive: “Just imagine what you could accomplish with that kind of information.”³⁶ Neither Gillis nor Schmuland, unfortunately, looked much further, other than to comment that this concept was prevalent in the areas of popular culture that they were investigating.

Why does the modern world equate the residue of history – a residue that is still essentially paper-based for the purposes of popular culture – with truth? This stance appears rooted in the original meaning of the word “archive” from the Greek, whose etymology is variously described as “command” and “origin”³⁷ or “power.”³⁸ The archival record itself derives its authority from the truth that it is naturally assumed to contain, a concept that is articulated best by Heather MacNeil when she describes the “truth-value” of a record. In her article “Trusting Records in a Postmodern World,” MacNeil traces the foundations of an acceptance of the authenticity and reliability of the evidence represented in a record to the seventeenth century when a new relationship was being formulated between “probability and evidence.” Diplomatics would later be used to “establish a record’s legal and historical truth on the basis of its documentary truth.”³⁹ Today, popular culture continues to accept this “truth-value” ideal of the information contained in any record secured in an archival repository.

In an interesting juxtaposition that only serves to underline the importance of this “truth-value,” there is a wealth of popular culture examples where records are deliberately destroyed or hidden to keep the truth from those desperately seeking it. In the movie *V for Vendetta*, a character is frustrated to discover that all the records he needs to prove his case are “deleted, omitted, or missing”⁴⁰; he still manages to find the truth in the tax records, which have of course been preserved. The police officer in the novel *The Summer that Never Was*, naturally assumes that crucial evidence missing from an archive embodies the truth. In an episode from *Stargate SG-1* a village archive is burned in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent access to an important docu-

36 Jennifer Stoy, “And Her Tears Flowed Like Wine: Wesley/Lilah and the Complicated (?) Role of the Female Agent on Angel,” in *Reading Angel: The TV Spin-off with a Soul*, ed. Stacey Abbott (New York, 2005), pp. 163–75.

37 Rebecca Comay, “Introduction,” in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (Toronto, 2002), p. 14.

38 Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons,” p. 226.

39 Heather MacNeil, “Trusting Records in a Postmodern World,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 38–39.

40 “Protheroe’s Past,” *V for Vendetta*, DVD, directed by James McTiegue (Burbank, CA, 2006).

ment, while in the novel *The Janson Directive* “all the records, certificates of birth and death [were] destroyed after the place was torched.”⁴¹ And like Obi-Wan Kenobi before him, Captain Malcolm Reynolds in the movie *Serenity* discovers that crucial records about the existence of an entire planet have been deliberately concealed, leading him to remark bitterly that “half of writing history is hiding the truth.”⁴²

Details have been provided in the above examples to illustrate that not only is it understood that the truth is represented in these records, but also that this reflects a current cultural paranoia: records are destroyed or actively hidden by those in power in order to contain the spread of damaging secrets. This paranoia stems from the public’s increasingly jaundiced view of government and powerful corporations; there is a pervasive cultural notion that those in power have control over vital information. The increasing profile of real-life political and economic scandals that revolve around records only serves to underline this view: Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Somalia enquiry, and Enron to name but a few. Is it, therefore, surprising that the popular culture television series *The X-Files* was built entirely around the premise that both government and corporate sources were deliberately concealing vital records, information, and knowledge?

The preponderance of these types of examples leads directly to the general conclusion that the material evidence of history that *does* manage to be preserved in an archive must not only be of extreme value, it must be sacrosanct and true. To paraphrase the motto from *The X-Files*, “The truth is IN HERE.” All arguments tend to cease and all dissension is swept aside when the archival record is finally produced, and the veracity and authority of the information is confirmed. A character’s deathbed confession in the television series *The Pretender* that “the truth is in the Red Files,”⁴³ fuels a multi-episode arc where characters frantically search for that truth. In the movie *The Bourne Supremacy*, one character uses the archival nature of the evidence to silence her detractors and provide irrefutable proof that she has the information another character is denying: “I’ve been down to the Archives,” she states with finality, “I have the files.”⁴⁴

Archives as Closed Spaces: Getting In and Getting Out

The character from *The Bourne Supremacy* encountered several security thresholds and checkpoints before she could access “the files.” Popular

41 Robert Ludlum. *The Janson Directive* (New York, 2003), p. 466.

42 *Serenity*, DVD, directed by Joss Whedon (Universal City, CA, 2005).

43 “Bank,” *The Pretender*, DVD Season 2, directed by Michael Lange (airdate 9 May 1998; Beverly Hills, CA, 2005).

44 *The Bourne Supremacy*, DVD, directed by Paul Greengrass (Hollywood, CA, 2004).

culture takes a certain pleasure in escalating and overemphasizing the myriad of natural security precautions that real-life archives employ to protect the record's physical and intellectual content, twisting these measures into something sinister: protection of the record becomes, instead, a refusal of the rights of the individual to view the record, and consequently, to access the truth. The juxtaposition of standard archival security precautions used as clever plot devices is too tempting for popular culture not to explore or, rather, to exploit.

Unlike libraries, where patrons can remove the objects they request from the place that holds them, archival research is an interior experience. As a result, archives have traditionally been places of rules and regulations, sites of surveillance with the need for documented permissions. From the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, the number of keys required to access the archives was proportional to the worth of the records in storage.⁴⁵ Even today, the nature of the archival record lends itself to the idea of the panoptical archive.⁴⁶ Jeremy Bentham first envisioned the panopticon in the eighteenth century while trying to establish prison reform. Bentham proposed a circular prison constructed in such a way as to maximize the “fundamental advantages [of] the *apparent omnipresence* of the inspector [prison guard] ... combined with the extreme facility of his *real presence*.”⁴⁷ In this way, Bentham believed that “the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained.”⁴⁸

Although the panoptical archive does not strictly conform to Bentham's vision, his “sentiment of invisible omniscience”⁴⁹ does strike a familiar chord in both popular culture and the archival world. Timothy Findley writes in *The Wars* that “the archivist is gazing from her desk,”⁵⁰ while characters requiring access to records in the novel *The Atrocity Archives* are scrutinized by hidden cameras. Real-life patrons of an archive may have the impression of being subjected to prison-like rules and regulations: videotaped surveillance, sign-

45 Duranti, p. 245.

46 See Eric Ketelaar, “The Panoptical Archive,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, ed. F.X. Blouin Jr. and W.G. Rosenberg, pp. 144–48.

47 Jeremy Bentham, “Letter VI: Advantages of the Plan,” in *Jeremy Bentham: The Panopticon Writings*, ed. and intro. by Miran Bozovic (London, 1995), p. 45.

48 Ibid., “Letter I: Idea of the Inspection Principle,” p. 33. In another interesting popular culture side note showing the pervasiveness and relevance of Bentham's work in a post 9/11 world of increased surveillance, the 2008 season finale of the television series *Lost* introduced Jeremy Bentham as the name that John Locke chose for himself when he apparently returned to the “real world” seeking the Oceanic Six's assistance with the Island. See “There's No Place Like Home, Part 2,” *Lost Season Four*, television series, directed by Jack Bender (airdate 29 May 2008; Burbank, CA).

49 David H. Holtzman, *Privacy Lost: How Technology is Endangering your Privacy* (San Francisco, 2006), p. 276.

50 Timothy Findley, *The Wars* (Toronto, 1977), p. 4.

ing in and out of a repository, placing personal belongings in lockers, and having bags searched and identities checked before being permitted access to the records. These norms of real-life security procedures are fodder to popular culture; they heighten the innate desire to access the archives more quickly by circumventing this surveillance.

John Hunter echoes the interiority of the archival experience when he states in his article *Minds, Archives and the Domestication of Knowledge* that: "... metaphors of memory, interiority, and safekeeping have ... dominated our vocabulary of knowledge storage for two millennia."⁵¹ It is apparent that popular culture sees no reason to change this concept, as characters continue to journey inside the closed room or space of an archive to access records and information. Fox Mulder narrates his desperate hope "... that among these drawers is a sign, a glimmer, some small confirmation that the journey which has brought me here has not been in vain,"⁵² during a frantic search for records that might save Scully's life.

Popular culture also tends to overemphasize the interiority of an archive because it can be naturally exploited to impose obstacles for characters to overcome. Closed spaces directly imply hidden danger. The very mundane act of filing, of putting records or information away has been equated with the equally elemental sense of hiding. What better place to file/hide records than in an archive, a safeguarded site whose natural barriers to access can be distorted into a deliberate act of secrecy or as one author coined it, "a conspiracy of concealment?"⁵³ Max Evans, one of the aliens hiding in plain sight in the television series *Roswell*, is tapping into a common plot device when he asks the leading question, "Your archives ... are they open to the public?"⁵⁴ Most archives tend to have large signs on the door forbidding access,⁵⁵ while in an episode of *Doctor Who*, one character intones that "Archives Six is out-of-bounds,"⁵⁶ fostering a sense of foreboding and fear. Keeping the door to

51 John Hunter, "Minds, Archives, and the Domestication of Knowledge," in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. R. Comay, p. 199.

52 "Redux," *The X-Files*, DVD Season 5, directed by R.W. Goodwin (airdate 2 November 1997; Beverly Hills, CA, 2005).

53 This term was used by Ben Nicholson when describing the "lost body of knowledge" found in Michelangelo's Laurentian Library and when equating it to the "conspiracy of concealment" in Umberto Eco's library in *The Name of the Rose*. Ben Nicholson, "Secret Geometries: Beneath the Floorboards of Michelangelo's Laurentian Library," in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. R. Comay, pp. 41–62.

54 "Monsters," *Roswell*, DVD Season 1, directed by David Semel (airdate 20 October 1999; Beverly Hills, CA, 2003).

55 See: "Bloodlines," *The Pretender*, DVD Season 2, directed by Fred K. Keller (airdate 15 May 1998; Beverly Hills, CA, 2005) for a sign stating "No Admittance," and "Contact," *NoWhere Man*, DVD, directed by Reza Badiya (1995/1996; Los Angeles, CA, 2005) for a more strongly worded sign, "Archives – Unauthorized Admittance Prohibited."

56 "Bad Wolf," *Doctor Who, The Complete First Series*, DVD, directed by Joe Ahearne (airdate 6 November 2005; Cardiff, Wales, 2006).

the archives shut and barred heightens the drama, and provides the requisite narrative tension.⁵⁷

Circumventing these closed spaces frequently leads characters to resort to criminal behaviour by accessing the archive after-hours. Characters from the novel *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, the movie *Blade*, and the television series *Roswell* all illegally enter an archive. The obvious menace of illicitly accessing a closed and forbidden area is best encapsulated by Peter Hoeg's novel *Smilla's Sense of Snow*. When the title character enters the archives at three a.m., she notices ominously that:

The building is quiet. In the silence there is suddenly a sound that is wrong ... the doorway into the first small room is a faintly lit gray rectangle. One moment it's visible, the next it's not. Someone has stepped into the room, someone who is blocking the light with his body.⁵⁸

Breaking and entering is escalated in some instances where otherworldly forces must be employed. In these cases, the record is protected not only from the usual stealth and brute, physical force of entry, but by mystical means as well. Characters from Christopher Paolini's novel *Eragon*, the television series *Angel*, and the movie *Van Helsing* all use supernatural or magical means to break into an archive at night.

While most narratives focus on the obstacles of getting into an archive, others dwell on the dangers in getting out. Robert Langdon, the protagonist in Dan Brown's novel *Angels & Demons*, manages to get himself locked into the Vatican Archives, a hermetically-sealed vault, which can become an airless tomb. In *The Historian*, the undead themselves guard access to the archives; Dracula not only holds a character captive to act as his personal researcher, but he also offers to capture more archivists and immure them with the

57 Since underground locations provide excellent natural environmental conditions for long-term records storage, some real-life physical locations of archives only serve to reinforce popular culture's preoccupation with the hidden nature of records. The United Kingdom's National Archives is currently storing about eighty-two thousand feet of records five hundred feet below ground in an abandoned salt mine. See "U.K. Sends National Archives Underground," *Information Management Journal*, vol. 38, no. 3 (May/June 2004), p. 10. Similarly, a tunnel was dug into Mount McGillivray in the Bow Valley area of Alberta by Rocky Mountain Vaults & Archives Ltd. See Rob Alexander, "Mystery Cave Featured on History Bluffs," *Canmore Outlook* (Thursday, 29 June 2006), p. 37. The company built the tunnel in the cold-war era as an option for records storage "in the event of catastrophic happenings, whether localized or widespread, man-made or from natural perils." These real-life examples are echoed in the episode "Paperclip" from *The X-Files*. Mulder and Scully have tracked the location of records vital to their investigations to an abandoned mine where they discover literally miles of file cabinets hidden deep in the earth. See "Paperclip," *The X-Files*. DVD Season 3, directed by Rob Bowman (airdate 29 September 1995; Beverly Hills, CA, 2005).

58 Hoeg, p. 86.

records forever.

Virtual reality archives have also been used to create accessibility issues in a narrative. One interesting aspect of the use of virtual archives is that the truth represented in these records is identical to that of the original. Although Joan Schwartz argues that in the real world, “both inspiration and information are lost when interaction with the [record] is achieved through a digital surrogate,”⁵⁹ in popular culture the virtual copy is afforded the same power inherent in the hard-copy original. This may relate to the notion that the degree of truth in an archival record escalates in direct proportion to the difficulty it takes to find and retrieve that record. Considerable effort is required and a definite sense of danger is always present when a character must retrieve a record from a virtual archive. Both the movie and the novel *Disclosure*, feature a virtual-reality file room called “the Corridor,” situated in an empty, echoing, cathedral-like space. Virtual reality is also used to maximum effect in the television series *NoWhere Man*. The character of Thomas Veil is desperate enough to seek information in a virtual archive that is literally collapsing around him. The survival of the character is thus tied to the survival of the archive: Will Veil’s conscious mind be deleted along with the records when the system starts destroying itself?

Lost and Buried in the Archives

Popular culture also perpetuates the stereotype that information is not only hidden in the archives, but is “lost.” The finding or retrieval of “lost” information implies that the protagonist has accomplished some extraordinary feat of detection in bringing these records to the light of day. This continual equation of records or information being “lost” in the archives only to be “discovered” by some enterprising soul can be a source of exasperation to real-life archivists.⁶⁰ After all, archival mandates involve the arrangement and description of records specifically for the purpose of making them accessible to the general public.

The choice of titles in popular culture serves to perpetuate this stereotype through the excessive use of the word “lost.” A documentary series hosted by Dean Stockwell examined topics found in recently declassified government documents: it was called “*Phenomenon: the Lost Archives*.” A search of a

59 Joan Schwartz, “Having New Eyes: Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power,” *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006), p. 12.

60 Apollonia Steele from the University of Calgary’s Special Collections recalls that she “just shook her head when a researcher ‘discovered’ a ‘missing’ manuscript in the Mordecai Richler fonds ... researchers were able to ‘find’ the manuscript because [of a] very helpful finding aid.” *The Calgary Herald* (Sunday, 6 January 2008, Section C2).

typical library database can reveal the following: *Archives of Lost Issues*; *Lost in the Archives*; *The Lost Archives*; *Images of our Lost Past*, and more. More disturbing to archivists are the instances where information is not only lost but also completely destroyed. In a *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* episode, a search for twenty-year-old records leads to a decrepit storage area where precariously balanced boxes are stacked to the ceiling. It is obvious that no one has been in this records room for years. Rats have used records as material for nests so that evidence is well and truly “lost.”

Arlene Schmuland’s article on the image of archives and archivists in novels perhaps best articulates the vastly over-used analogy of information being “lost” or “buried” in an archive.⁶¹ It is also apparent in the near decade since Schmuland’s article, that popular culture (including the mediums of films and television series that she did not investigate) still teems with references to records found “deep in the bowels”⁶² or “buried deep”⁶³ in an archive; on the television series *24*, Chloe O’Brien tells Jack Bauer that she will have to “dig [the file] up in the archives.”⁶⁴ In the television series *American Gothic*, the Sheriff’s deputy gets a call from a ghost at the Hall of Records who ominously intones, “time to get a shovel ... it’s time to start digging.”⁶⁵

While Schmuland does investigate the motif of death inherent in these types of references, she does not make the link to another interesting corollary related to this clichéd symbolism of earth and unearthing, dirt and dust, gravesites and burials: not only are records and information being “lost” and “buried” in an archive, but souls are being lost as well. Archives seem to be regularly linked with vampires in general and the cult of Dracula in particular; the wealth of examples to support this idea comes from the television series *Angel*, and the movies *Van Helsing*, *Blade*, and *Underworld: Evolution*. Even more evocative is the novel *The Historian*, where academic researchers not only avidly study Dracula in the archives of Central and Eastern Europe, but Dracula himself apparently “collects” researchers and archivists in order to continue the work on his own personal archive. The number of these references begs the following question: Why do vampires seem to care so much for the preservation of the archival record? A possible answer is that as the

61 Schmuland, pp. 42–47.

62 Peter Robinson, *The Summer That Never Was: An Inspector Banks Mystery* (Toronto, 2003), p. 67.

63 “In the Hour of Our Death,” *The Pretender*, DVD Season 3, directed by Steven Lang Mitchell (airdate 27 February 1999; Beverly Hills, CA, 2005).

64 “7:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m.,” *24*, Television series, directed by Jon Cassar (airdate 19 March 2007; Beverly Hills, CA, 2007).

65 “Echo of Your Last Goodbye,” *American Gothic*, DVD, directed by Oz Scott (unaired; Universal City, CA, 2005).

66 José Saramago, *All the Names*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (New York, 1999), p. 5.

undead can exist forever, they may be especially aware of the value and importance of maintaining permanent records.

Alternatively, archives as closed spaces can be employed as plot devices in which to deliberately “bury” characters in obscurity. In the movie *Batman Begins*, a troublemaker is notified that his department has been merged with the Archives, implying that no one will see or pay attention to him again. Researchers themselves may be inadvertently “buried” in an archive as described in José Saramago’s novel, *All the Names*: “... a researcher became lost in the labyrinthine catacombs of the archive of the dead ... He was discovered, almost miraculously, after a week, starving, thirsty, exhausted, delirious ...”⁶⁶

The Search for Self: Confirming Identity

The last of the four common themes provides an answer to the question of why characters in popular culture constantly risk their limbs, lives, and souls to access the records in an archive: the records stored behind closed doors contain information that relates to individual identity. The fact that records encapsulate increasingly larger portions of our lives has become ingrained in our consciousness: “everyone either keeps records or is in one.”⁶⁷ As James O’Toole writes in his article on the symbolic power of records: “we are accustomed to the idea that there will be substantial compilations of recorded information, more or less accessible to anyone in the form of libraries, archives, web sites and other media.”⁶⁸ These records summarize the truth about ourselves, and our perception of who we are in the physical world. While libraries are frequently used as plot devices to answer the questions “What,” “How,” and “When,” the search through an archives is reserved for the vital and more intimate questions relating to personal identity of “Who” and “Why.” When one of the three atom-bomb physicists finds himself reincarnated in Lydia Millet’s novel *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart*, he goes to the library and asks the reference librarian for information to orient himself with a world that exists sixty years after his death. In contrast, when he is searching for evidence of his own identity, he has to break into an archive.⁶⁹

With respect to our sense of identity, the power that popular culture accords to records was best encapsulated in a television series that aired in the 1990s. Although on the air for only one year, it was a metaphor for the power of the record and the search for identity. The main character of the series

67 Sarah Tyacke, “Archives in a Wider World: The Culture and Politics of Archives,” *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001), p. 7.

68 James M. O’Toole, “Cortes’s Notary: The Symbolic Power of Records,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 47.

69 Lydia Millet, *Oh Pure and Radiant Heart* (New York, 2005), pp. 66, 116.

NoWhere Man was aptly named Thomas Veil. He struggled throughout the series to discover not only what happened to erase his past, but also to uncover the truth behind a record that may have held the key to his identity. The record is a photograph, again tellingly entitled “Hidden Agenda.”

In the series, Veil encountered all the archival obstacles previously noted as common plot devices. He is given the opportunity of accessing his file, kept in a hidden place, in an anonymous building. He narrates during his search: “a small piece of my life is tucked away in a distant corner ... I’m hoping that somewhere buried deep within their archives I might find some trace of my past.”⁷⁰ He does manage to break into the records room but is chased out by guards before he can find the evidence he needs. In another episode, Veil must overcome a series of obstacles such as scaling the side of the building in the dead of night and then breaking into the hidden records storage area. The aura of danger is compounded by the fact that once the file is released, so is a deadly gas; he must face the dilemma that accessing the information on his identity will literally be his last gasp.⁷¹

Defining and Depicting the Archive

What can these four common themes tell us about how popular culture defines an archive? Can this definition reveal the evident dichotomy between the real-life archive and the imagined experience? The debate over the definition and scope of the term “archive” has been an ongoing subject in the corridors of academia. Cultural theorists have been especially diligent in exploring archival implications and nuances. Art historian and curator Charles Merewether states: “it is in the spheres of art and cultural production that some of the most searching questions have been asked concerning what constitutes an archive and what authority it holds in relation to its subject.”⁷² Rebecca Comay plaintively inquires in her introduction to the compilation *Lost in the Archives*: “What *isn’t* an archive these days?”

Where to draw the limits of an archive? How to define its basic terms? The collection? The library? The museum? The list? The inventory? The document? Classification? System? Storage? Retrieval? Memory? Retention? Preservation?⁷³

Comay’s list contains most of the commonly understood (albeit decon-

70 “Contact,” *NoWhere Man*, DVD, directed by Reza Badiya (1995/1996; Los Angeles, 2005).

71 “The Spider Webb,” *NoWhere Man*, DVD, directed by Thomas J. Wright (1995/1996; Los Angeles, CA, 2005).

72 Charles Merewether, “Introduction: Art and the Archive,” in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Charles Merewether (Cambridge, 2006), p. 10.

73 Comay, “Introduction,” p. 12.

structed) elements of the archival profession. What is also interesting about this volume is that Comay has gathered philosophers, artists, and academics from many disciplines, but none from the archival profession itself. While the expertise of these authors may not be representative of the average person's knowledge or understanding of the "archive," it is still telling that the elements noted by Comay in her introduction can resonate with a world that is not steeped in our own archival discourse. This in turn has implications for the choices that popular culture has made in its depiction of the archive.⁷⁴

At its heart, Comay's list is a reflection of common perceptions. Ask any average person unfamiliar with the archival world to name one or two aspects of an archive, and some of the more common elements listed above would likely be the first mentioned. The general public can easily link the physical aspects of the list, the record, and the inventory with the idea of information storage. Since the common touchstone of the majority of archival public relations campaigns is frequently the idea of preserving the past for the future, the less tangible concepts of historical preservation and memory retention are also readily available to the non-archival world.

Given then that these concepts are the most visible aspects of the archive, it is understandable that this visibility is what popular culture first taps into when defining and depicting our profession. It is also understandable, given that many of these concepts contain a richness of detail even when abbreviated, that archives themselves can be depicted in an abridged manner, with only a few lines or one image as a visual reference, and that despite such brevity, the impact of the archive can reverberate throughout the balance of the narrative. For example, in the movie *Transformers*, an important firefight takes place in a visually-arresting archive, one portrayed as a cavernous room filled with dusty and cobwebbed boxes stacked to the ceiling. In the first episode of the new *Doctor Who* series, it only takes a few sentences summarizing an exhaustive archival search to encapsulate a general sense of the mystery surrounding the Doctor and his place in time, space, and history: "I tracked [the information] down in the Washington Public Archives ... if you dig deep enough ... this Doctor keeps cropping up all over the place."⁷⁵

In any deeper exploration of the definition of the archive, Jacques Derrida in particular should be mentioned, since as he stated: "nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'."⁷⁶ Brien Brothman explains how Derrida uses the metaphors of writing and archiving, and the concepts of memory and

74 For the idea that the non-archival world has views worth exploring as they themselves explore the "archive," see Joan Schwartz, p. 9.

75 "Rose," *Doctor Who, The Complete First Series*, DVD, directed by Keith Boak (airdate 26 March 2005; Cardiff, Wales, 2006).

76 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London, 1995), p. 4, note 1.

preservation, to formulate the two conflicting forces of the drive to archive and the drive to destroy.⁷⁷ In relating these concepts to examples from popular culture, many characters do indeed appear to be seeking aspects of the written record, often in a “fever” to prove the legitimacy of their existence, which others have either sought or are seeking to destroy or “forget.” If some of the elements of postmodernism are that “every meaning hides a meaning within an infinite cycle of deconstruction [and] that nothing can be known with complete assurance,”⁷⁸ then both of the television series *The Pretender* and *NoWhere Man* could themselves be described as prime examples of entertainment deconstruction; in both series, the principal characters struggle to “recover their marginalized voices”⁷⁹ by reading the “texts” (both literal and figurative) of their past in an attempt to reconstruct the facts of their personal histories. As each layer is peeled away, a new understanding of this personal history is revealed, leading them to reinterpret and re-examine the evidence. Although this certainly leads to the twists and turns necessary to further the plot lines in both series (both tellingly unresolved in the end as per the cycle of deconstruction), it is, however, unknown if the postmodernist approach was what the producers actually envisioned.

Representations of the Archival Experience

What becomes very clear when looking at how popular culture both defines an archive and brings that definition to life, are the dichotomy and tension that exist between the real and the imagined archival experience. It is evident from the examples presented in this article that popular culture is aware of the elements of the true archival experience, but that for various reasons, these are transformed differently. Frequently, popular culture only has the time or the need for the surface elements of the archival experience: an individual sitting passively at a desk surrounded by mountains of boxes and files. However, this simplistic view does not provide any opportunity for narrative tension, nor

77 Brien Brothman, “Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), p. 66. See also Brien Brothman, “The Limits of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), pp. 205–20; Brien Brothman, “Book Review of *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 189–92. Another useful source to Derridan concepts is Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive across the Disciplines,” *Libraries and the Academy*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2004), pp. 9–25.

78 Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 15–16.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 17. Although both of the main characters are indeed the ubiquitous “white males,” it could be argued that they are both members of a marginalized minority. Jarod from *The Pretender* is one of a select few individuals in the world with the unique ability to “become anyone he wants to be,” while Thomas Veil of *NoWhere Man* is the lone voice of reason and truth in a world turned upside down.

does it produce plot development or pithy dialogue. Although a few authors do sometimes choose to take the time to describe a character's internalized excitement of discovery or burning desire for knowledge,⁸⁰ popular culture tends instead to privilege only those aspects of the archival experience that will introduce obstacles to the narrative. While it is true that these aspects are themselves reflections of the real archival experience, they tend to be portrayed with a distorted viewpoint.

One obvious obstacle is the over-emphasis on the perceived difficulty of accessing archival records. By their very nature, archives do not have discreet items that can be searched for on shelves by the individual without mediated intervention. Unlike a book in a library, which in itself is a complete entity, the context of archival records determines their value and their meaning.⁸¹ This contextual arrangement of information is used regularly to cause confusion for characters. When Fox Mulder searches for documentary evidence in an episode of *The X-Files*, his only hope of assistance is what he terms in frustration an "old and antiquated filing system."⁸² Lilah Morgan from the television series *Angel* has only a cryptic finding aid for assistance, and consequently spends hours on her hands and knees searching through the thirty-five file cabinets that encompass one case file.⁸³ Archival records are also often given enigmatic codes, which can bewilder and perplex the characters: incriminating evidence is discovered in the television series *The Pretender* under the file title "CA543" and it takes the characters a moment to figure out that the "CA" simply stands for a receptacle in The Centre Archives.

Usually when an archive is described in popular culture, there is the ubiquitous mention of "dust." Archivists themselves sometimes add fuel to this stereotype: Sarah Tyacke's opening sentence from her article on "Archives in the Wider World," states: "The subject of archives is, on the face of it, dry and dusty."⁸⁴ Examples of "dust" abound in popular culture⁸⁵: a researcher from Raymond Khoury's novel *The Last Templar* complains "I don't know how many dusty archives I've rooted through,"⁸⁶ while Timothy Findley

80 See in particular A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (New York, 1990); Martha Cooley, *The Archivist* (Boston, 1999).

81 Although rare, popular culture sometimes does appear to be aware of this archival principle. The researcher in Elizabeth Kostova's novel *The Historian* states: "I knew, as a historian, that the order of any archival find is an important part of its lesson." Kostova, p. 54.

82 "Redux," *The X-Files*, DVD.

83 "Dad," *Angel*, DVD.

84 Tyacke, p. 1.

85 In his presentation on "The Future of Archives in the Future: A Science Fictional Forecast," David Mattison noted that the mention of dust is a constant, even in the archives of the future. Paper presented at the Association of Canadian Archivists' Conference, Kingston, Ontario, 22 June 2007.

86 Raymond Khoury, *The Last Templar* (New York, 2005), p. 186.

describes the archival experience in *The Wars* as "... the boxes smell of yellow dust. You hold your breath. As the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles."⁸⁷

On the other hand, some novels do provide considerable information on the intricacies of the archival profession: *The Historian*, *The Archivist*, *Possession*, *All the Names*, and *My Lovely Enemy* all ensure that lengthy descriptions of the archival experience are integral to the narrative; in *Angels and Demons*, Dan Brown actually spends a few token moments trying to disperse popular misconceptions when describing the Vatican Archives:

As Langdon's eyes took in the sacred chamber, his first reaction was one of embarrassment. He realized what a callow romantic he was. The images he had held for so many years of this room could not have been more inaccurate. He had imagined dusty bookshelves piled high with tattered volumes, priests cataloguing by the light of candles and stained-glass windows, monks poring over scrolls ... not even close.⁸⁸

The Archive and Semiotics

Brown's comment on his prior "romantic" view of an archive is instructive; it may provide clues as to the choices made by popular culture in depicting an archive. But more importantly, it may impart reasons as to *why* these choices are made. Langdon's previous "romantic" vision of the archive stems not from reality, but from historical depictions of records being created in the Vatican Archives by medieval monks labouring over handwritten scrolls by the flickering light of candles. This preference for the romanticized view of the archive is also found in modern times, as is evident in Rudy Wiebe's novel, *My Lovely Enemy*. The main character is a historian who laments the differences between the old and new sites of the Glenbow Archives in Calgary:

Originally the archives were housed in the first Calgary Public Library building, weathered sandstone of Carnegie dignity from the turn of the century soaked in the slow breath and memory of people reading, thinking, bumbling after the great and banal thoughts stumbled upon by its predecessors. Now everything is glass, sandblasted concrete slabs and blue humming computer screens, there is a kind of technological insistency in the air ...⁸⁹

The key to both Brown and Wiebe's characterization of the archive is the glorification of history, of age, of the idea that everything in the past was

87 Findley, pp. 3–4.

88 Brown, p. 241.

89 Rudy Wiebe, *My Lovely Enemy* (Toronto, 1983), p. 74.

better, or “golden.” These authors profess a longing for a past that was unsullied by the decidedly unromantic “technological insistencies” that progress has imposed on history, and by extension, on the archive. Similarly, in the archive firefight that occurs in *Transformers*, the older versions of technology on display are what save the day for the characters. Popular culture abbreviates these types of ideas through the use of images and words, which in turn translate into signs that stimulate visual references in the mind of the viewer or reader. These signs and references form the science of semiotics, which could be used to explain many of the choices that popular culture makes with regards to representations of the archive and the record.

Semiotics was originally a medical science started by Hippocrates; outward physical symptoms were studied as a representation, or sign, of something other than itself.⁹⁰ By the twentieth century, philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure believed that semiotics could be used “as part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology ... semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them.”⁹¹ Signs could be anything, from visual, physical, written, or any sensory input that would in turn conjure up images, thoughts, or feelings apparently unrelated to the sign itself. These images in turn were called concepts, cultural representations summoned on cue by their signs.⁹² The meaning of the concepts can be deciphered by codes, which were “systematic organizations or structures of signs.” For semiotics, “meaning is located in the codes of society.”⁹³

An example of how semiotics can be used in the study of popular culture is noted in a recent article from *Maclean's*. Photographs of five women (the “signs”) who portrayed mothers in various television series are used as immediate visual references for readers to identify one of five basic mothering types (the “concepts”) outlined in a book on the subject.⁹⁴ Anyone familiar with the characters (and the article is obviously assuming audience familiarity) has only to glance at the photographs to gain an understanding of the conceptual mothering “type” as described in the book. For example, the character of Elyse Keaton from *Family Ties* exemplifies the “complete” mother, while Claire Huxtable from *The Cosby Show* is depicted as the “perfectionist.” The audience’s understanding of these characters is the “code” that is used to decipher the “signs” that in turn immediately translates these images to a recognizable “type.”

Similarly, signs assigned to the archive can also produce immediate cultur-

90 Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 2001), pp. 4–5.

91 Quoted in Marcel Danesi, ed., *Messages, Signs and Meanings*, 3rd ed. (Toronto, 2004), p. 3.

92 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–6.

93 Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen A. Wartella, D. Charles Whitney, and J. Macgregor Wise, *MediaMaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, 2005), p. 144.

94 Alexandra Shimo, “Which Mother Messed you up?” *Maclean's* (7 April 2008), p. 65.

al references in readers and viewers. For example, in both *The Pretender* and *NoWhere Man*, the main characters are shown entering the National Archives of the United States of America in Washington, DC. In both instances, the imposing classical architecture of this building's façade is shown first, followed by an image of the characters involved in research inside the premises. The first image is not solely placed in the narrative as a visual clue as to a change of locale; the image is there to invoke a sense of the weight of evidence, a sense of trust that the information that will be found inside will be the truth and will subsequently further the plot in a reliable fashion. This sign conjures up the concept that in real-life, archives have stood as monuments to public trust since the Romans enshrined the concept in the Justinian Code of law and jurisprudence.⁹⁵ (As an interesting sidebar to this observation, it should also be noted that popular culture does take a certain pleasure in twisting the same sign to produce a different response: in the novel *Event*, a nefarious and ultra-secret operations department is fronted by the National Archives.⁹⁶) In this case, the concept of trust as exemplified by the sign of the archive itself, serves to escalate the seriousness of the department hidden within.

Semiotics could also be used to understand the choices made by popular culture of the interior representation of the archive. The ubiquitous dust previously mentioned is a sign that may (unfortunately) remain stamped on any archival representation for some time. The equation of dust with death, with the concepts of burying and unearthing has already been noted. Additionally, dust is a harbinger of, and a referent to, both the passing of time and the residue of history. These concepts of an archive are forever ingrained in the public's mind and will be difficult to erase from representations in popular culture: when a character from the Lee Child novel *Without Fail* inquires "how far back do the archives go?" the answer is "to the dawn of time,"⁹⁷ indicating that the relationship of time and history, and the archive is an indelible one.⁹⁸ The romanticized view of the archive noted above plays against extricating the image of dust from the archive – there is a resistance to

95 Duranti, p. 243: "an archives is a public place where records are deposited so that they remain uncorrupted, provide trustworthy evidence and continuing memory of that to which they attest." It should also be noted that the signs described here relate only to western society, and oftentimes solely to a North American audience. The same signs in other cultures or societies may have entirely different meanings. As an example, the sign of the archive in former Eastern Bloc cultures can have a negative connotation, illustrating secrecy and the ill-use of power. See Travis Holland, *The Archivist's Story* (New York, 2007), p. 14, where the literary archive is all that remains of many "silenced authors."

96 David Lynn Goleman, *Event* (New York, 2006), p. 52.

97 Lee Child, *Without Fail* (New York, 2003), p. 193.

98 The inescapable fusion of the archive with history is encouraged and assisted by archivists themselves. The now-cancelled CBC program *Who Do You Think You Are?*, used archival records to illuminate the past of certain individuals.

the idea that the march of technology and the pristine clarity it (supposedly) brings may erase the preferred images of dust-diffused candlelight from the archive entirely.

Some tentative semiotic explanations could also be applied to other prevalent images of the interiors of an archive. One of the main themes noted in this overview is the emphasis on the interiority of the archival experience. Given that certain spatial codes govern our understanding of public, private, and sacred spaces, these codes may provide some explanation of the prevalence of this theme.⁹⁹ We act and react differently when looking at, entering into, or interacting within, for example, a bank (public), a home (private), or a church (sacred). The spatial codes assigned to public areas are those that relate to communal spaces: there is a comfort level, a sense of trust, freedom of movement and of belonging to these spaces. When we see or read about an archive within the public domain, such as the visual reference to the National Archives, we translate that spatial code accordingly.

On the other hand, the spatial codes relating to private areas contain the concepts of barriers, or of transgressing on another's space. Archives within the private domain, such as those of corporations or the archive of an individual, consequently take on the concepts of a forbidden space, where trespass may be the only means of access. All of the examples of breaking and entering into an archive that were found in this overview, represent attempts to access what could be termed as private archives. These spaces are frequently characterized both visually and by title as file rooms or records rooms, vast storage areas where hidden records are kept. The conceptual impact of these private spaces and the feeling of trespass they engender, is easily invoked by the opening-credit images of the television series *The Prisoner*, with its endless row of file cabinets manned only by sinister and inhuman robot arms. Equally memorable is the image from *The X-Files* of the records-storage room deep in the bowels of the Pentagon. This image provokes so many meanings that it is used twice in the series: the first time in the final shots of the "Pilot" episode when the Cigarette Smoking Man walks alone through an infinity of shelves and file cabinets,¹⁰⁰ and again in an episode four years later, where Fox Mulder frantically searches alone through the "hundreds of rows of shelves" in this same records-storage room.¹⁰¹

99 See the discussion on spatial codes in Danesi, pp. 226–31.

100 "Pilot," *The X-Files*, DVD Season 1, directed by R.W. Goodwin (airdate 9 October 1993; Beverly Hills, CA, 2005).

101 "Redux," *The X-Files*, DVD. The concept of a vast and hidden warehouse of information was actually used years earlier at the end of the first Indiana Jones movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The viewer is left with the impression that, with the exception of the gentleman driving the forklift, the historical record of the Ark is forever concealed in an unknown location, one uninhabited by any record custodian or expert. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, videocassette, directed by Steven Spielberg (Hollywood, CA, 1981).

A single example from the series *Smallville* can serve to illustrate how semiotics can assist in “reading” the subtext of the record and the archive. In the episode *Descent*,¹⁰² Jimmy Olsen leaves a text message for Chloe Sullivan that states: “Lionel [Luther] not suicide. Have pic. Come to archive room.” The amount of time this shot remains on the screen is exceedingly short, but the ramifications are considerable. First, there is the rather fascinating use of the ephemeral quality of a text-message record used to introduce a major plot point, and the fact that a photographic record exists as evidence of the truth behind a heinous cover-up. The use of records in this context sends the audience a strong sub textual message of their importance and value. The choice of the archive as a rendezvous also reinforces the idea that the archive is a place rarely visited, where secrets can be revealed or discovered. The archive in question is (of course) in the basement of the *Daily Planet*. Although the archive is not covered in dust, it does boast an outdated computer that bespeaks obsolescence and age, and the room is untidy with boxes, books, and indefinable record-storage containers scattered on the floor and on the shelves. Equally telling is that when the message is intercepted by the wrong person, Jimmy and Lois Lane are forced into a cold-storage locker, conveniently located in the vicinity of the archive room, where they are subsequently “buried” to keep them from the evidence. This evidence represents an inconvenient truth that must be found and destroyed at all costs.

Cause for Alarm or Pause for Reflection?

Just what, ultimately, can be learned from the representations of the archive and the record in popular culture? Archivists have grown too accustomed to the stereotypical portrayal of their profession, and this preconceived impression can certainly not be denied. However, as this article has attempted to show, there is also a dichotomy present that should have considerable weight in the final analysis, and which illustrates that while popular culture continues to portray a flawed and incomplete image of the archive, it is equally aware of the depth and breadth of the intricacies of our profession. The subtext of this dichotomy also ensures that the audience is made aware that as archivists, we actually know what we are doing: through accurate appraisal and selection, we appear to be choosing the correct, critical, and crucial record that characters are bound to seek. Although popular culture appears to be perpetuating the pervasive power of a misrepresentative stereotype, it is also underscoring the vital role that archives play in society. Buried¹⁰³ beneath the stereotypical

102 “Descent,” *Smallville*, created by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar (airdate 17 April 2008; Burbank, CA, 2008).

103 ... and yes the pun is intended.

images are elements of the truth: that records matter, that protection of the record matters, and that the protectors of the records are dedicated to their profession.

The most obvious example of this dichotomy would be from the first of the *National Treasure* movies. Although the objections of the archivist to the use (abuse?) of archival documents are overruled in favour of the entertainment value of high-speed chases and nail-biting cliffhangers, those objections *are* strongly voiced, and they *are* heard. While the audience may enjoy the entertaining machinations involved in retrieving the Declaration of Independence from the National Archives, the authority of this document or of its custodians is never in question. The continued importance placed on archival value is evident in the scenes involving the Declaration, as well as in the preservation and display of the Silence Dogood letters in the Benjamin Franklin Archive. Equally telling is the portrayal of the archivist, and the emphasis placed on her passionate dedication to her profession.¹⁰⁴

Unfortunately, archivists tend to see only the negative connotations of their own portrayal in popular culture, and we rarely notice the myriad examples that can be characterized as both “brief” and “benign.” The benign but important nature of an archive is frequently used as a minor plot point to underscore the serious nature of the information: in the first season of the television series *24*, there are three brief references to the secure storage of archival records containing vital information. Even that most prosaic of protagonists, the ex-military police officer Jack Reacher from Lee Child’s series of novels, briefly requires the services of an archive on two occasions, both times in a successful search for the truth.

The multitude of similar examples in popular culture illustrates that the “sign” of the archive, or various deconstructed elements of the archival experience, have enough strength to invoke an immediate, positive connection or cultural reference in the mind of the audience. While it is not within the scope of this article to explore more fully how and why the audience is making these connections, the fact that they *are* being made, and the frequency and consistency with which they are being made, supports the need for the further investigation of semiotics and the archive. Interestingly, although the “sign” of the archive is certainly evident in the juxtaposition between burying secrets and unearthing the truth, between the individual drive to discover identity and the “corporate” tendency to hide or change the facts, it actually appears strongest

104 *National Treasure*, DVD, directed by Jon Turteltaub (2004; Burbank, CA, 2005). When discussing who should be contacted to assist in preventing the theft of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin Gates states: “We don’t need anyone crazy. We just need someone short of crazy.” Another character asks, “Obsessed?” and Gates replies, “Passionate.” The next scene shows the two characters waiting for a meeting with the archivist, indicating that the archivist had the requisite “passion” they were seeking.

in the concepts of truth, justice, evidence, and trust.

Another positive aspect of the representation of archives in popular culture – and an indication of the pervasiveness of the “archival sign” – is that the archive is being mentioned with more frequency in the more “mainstream” entertainment media. Arguably, more individuals read Dan Brown’s novels *Angels and Demons* and *The DaVinci Code* (or saw the movie) than all those who may have experienced the less “popular” novels such as *Possession*, *The Archivist*, or *My Lovely Enemy*, all of which contain lengthy expositions representing a balanced view of the archive. The reference from *Angels and Demons*, where Brown illustrates how the image of the archive has evolved over time has already been noted; in the even more successful novel and subsequent movie *The DaVinci Code*, Brown uses the hidden archive of the “grail documents ... records that go back thousands of years” to prove the genealogical lineage of Sophie Neveu as being a descendant of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. Sophie had earlier been trying to find out how her parents died but she lamented, “I couldn’t find any records.” Not until she and Langdon access the hidden archive at Roslin Chapel does she learn the truth about her identity.¹⁰⁵ The popularity of Brown’s writing has succeeded in introducing various elements of the archive, frequently in a positive light, to an audience who may not have had access to this representation before.

In 1999, Arlene Schmuland put forth a call for evaluation of the image of archives and archivists, suggesting that “archivists may still have the opportunity to help shape the stereotypes regarding the profession ...”¹⁰⁶ While it is clear from the examples in this article that those stereotypes are still with us, it should also be clear that there may also be some cause for a re-evaluation of what has long been considered the norm. Any immediate call to arms for archivists to change the public’s perception should be viewed through the very real limitations of popular culture itself. These would include the fickleness of the medium (does anyone besides myself actually remember the television series *NoWhere Man?*) and an understanding of the role of popular culture in society today. Although no one in our media-saturated world would deny that movies, television series, and books undoubtedly contribute to how we view the world, the fact that the primary purpose of these media is to entertain also should not be minimized.

Archivists tend to react to the portrayal of their profession in popular culture with varying degrees of exasperation. This emotion may stem from what Heather MacNeil has described as our “commitment to a philosophical idea of truth.”¹⁰⁷ We perceive that popular culture has tipped the scales of this

¹⁰⁵ *The DaVinci Code*, DVD, directed by Ron Howard (Culver City, CA, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Schmuland, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ MacNeil, p. 37.

truth in favour of the ridiculous, of exaggeration, of glorifying the transitory value of entertainment over the lasting “truth-value” of the archival record. This article strived instead to illustrate that enough of this truth remains – despite its sometimes-warped image – to provide a semblance of balance to the stereotype. It may also be time for us to look beyond the superficialities of this stereotype. While popular culture never appears to tire of humorous depictions of our profession, it is equally clear that an examination of the deeper ramifications of how the “sign” of the archive is used to evoke images and connections, and why these images and connections are being made, should be where our energies are next directed. Whether these “signs” are accurate, or whether the balance is weighted enough in our favour should hopefully continue to be a subject of debate among archivists.