Andrew Lison, Marcell Mars, Tomislav Medak, and Rick Prelinger, **Archives (In Search of Media)**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 112 pp., $18.00 (paperback), free PDF.

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Archives explores the theory and practice of archives in conversation with the terms and traditions of media studies. Available as a free ebook, as well as a physical book, this slim release is part of the *Terms of Media* series copublished by the University of Minnesota Press and Luneberg, Germany's meson press. As all books in this series, *Archives* pairs thinkers from Europe and North America who each contribute essays exploring a media keyword. This is not so much to trace the shifting meaning of a term, as is explained in the series foreword, but rather to engage in a Friedrich Kittler-inspired project of exploring the "conditions under which media is produced, as well as the ways in which media impacts and changes these terms" (p. vii).

To this end, *Archives* is composed of contributions from scholars who operate what the book calls "unconventional archives," repositories that are marked by an "eccentric curatorial touch," (p. xiv) or that otherwise encounter or contest the norms of dominant archival practice—say, physical records organized using Library of Congress Subject Headings. Indeed, what dominant archival practice means in the age of public funding cuts and corporate digital platforms is one of the book's underlying queries. The book grapples with this question and others, offering brief but rewarding provocations for those working with archives, theoretically and practically.

Media studies scholar Andrew Lison introduces the book by offering the term "unconventional archives" as a means of understanding the work of Rick Prelinger, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak. These unconventional archives take different forms. Prelinger's are the Prelinger Archives, consisting of more than 60,000 ephemeral films held by the Library of Congress and partially hosted online by the Internet Archive, as well as the brick and mortar Prelinger Library in San Francisco, cofounded with partner Megan Prelinger. These projects inform (and sometimes constitute) his work as a filmmaker and a film professor at the University of California Santa Cruz. The unconventional archive of Mars and Medak, both of the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University, is the Memory of the World/Public Library project. This online library offers thousands of books for free download, often skirting intellectual property laws by doing so. By looking to scholars who have helped create these unconventional archives, the book both explicitly and implicitly meditates on the relation between abstract concepts of "the archive" as it is often taken up in media studies and the real demands of archival practice, examining the way media theory might relate to the labor and epistemological practices of organization and preservation.

While Lison introduces archives that are unconventional, Rick Prelinger frames his discussion around archives that are inconvenient: messy, dangerous, illogical, lossy, political, or otherwise presenting thorny

problems. In his wide-ranging and engaging essay titled "Archives of Inconvenience," Prelinger surveys core problems at the juncture of archival practice and theory while narrating archival encounters based in his own film work. Peppered by quotes drawn from his and others' Twitter accounts, the essay proceeds first through a discussion of the differences between theories of "the archive"—often used as abstract shorthand for anything that is saved, especially digitally—and archives, or real places of practice where materials are organized and accessed, where the often racialized and gendered work of archives unfolds.

Asserting that theorizing of the archive should come from an understanding of archives as sites of work practice, Prelinger proceeds to examine the theoretical implications based in his own work practice, his own experience of inconvenient archives. This takes the reader to sites like industrial New Jersey, where Prelinger collects cans of film from a studio's neglected vault. Here, the material qualities of highly flammable nitrate film pose a dangerous inconvenience, just as their eventual preservation in a different format and accessibility might warrant, at least for some, their inconvenient rescue. These meditations on inconvenience and what justifications there are for dealing with inconvenience lead in different theoretical directions; Prelinger explores at length "whether physical objects have a right to exist" before turning to discussions of the risky convenience of digitization and digitality in general, concluding with a discussion of the ways that archival inconvenience can be both unfortunate and formative.

Mars and Medak's "System of a Takedown: Control and De-commodification in the Circuits of Academic Publishing" completes the book by diverging from archives as such to explore the conditions of knowledge creation, publication, and access under capitalism. Framing the public library as the social institution that makes knowledge accessible without regard to status, they note the ways that these institutions' abilities to perform this function under digital publishing models has been greatly diminished. This may come through exorbitant fees for ongoing digital access to academic journals or through limits on ebook lending. This problem—maybe we could call it an inconvenience—was the beginning of their own unconventional archive, the Public Library/Memory of the World, founded in 2012.

Discussing their work on this project and others, Mars and Medak critically interrogate the structures and the strictures of academic publishing. They recount the ironic tensions that exist here, for instance, admiring books from a particular academic press, being invited to write a chapter in a book by that press, and in turn, fielding takedown requests from that press for books uploaded to their Public Library website. These paradoxical tensions are what Mars and Medak, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1983), call "capitalism and schizophrenia." It is a refrain repeated throughout the essay, signaling the simultaneous embodiment of disjunctive positions. They use it to describe the outdated "unfortunate metaphor" of intellectual property (p. 49), as they use it to describe the experience of working within academic publishing. How to address these disjunctures? Mars and Medak argue that it must be through politics, not through modifications in law, that the problem of copyright be addressed—and civil disobedience at scale is what is proposed.

The book, while it could be characterized as offering provocations or meditations on the subject, may be best described through the etymological French roots of the *essay*, that is, as an attempt, a proof, a trial, or an experiment (Sullivan, 2014). The essays that compose the book are generative attempts to understand archives as changing sites of political contestation; they are attempts to understand how and why we use the term *archives* and where these uses lead; and they are attempts to understand the preservation, organization,

and circulation of knowledge under changing sociomaterial conditions. What the book sometimes lacks in a unified thread between essays it makes up for in generating multiple, interesting paths forward.

One of these productive paths was in foregrounding archives as sites of labor and practice. The authors rightly acknowledge that archives are politically charged sites on multiple levels, gendered and racialized not only in the stories traditionally represented within archives but also in who occupies the role of archivist and in who is able to access records. More expansively, this leads to thinking about the racialized and gendered nature of knowledge structures and who gets to make epistemological arrangements. I was left wanting these firsthand accounts too, especially in relation to the ideas of inconvenience and unconvention. For people of color, women, and others made marginal by virtue of identity, archives may be inconvenient or unconventional not by choice but as an inevitability. How have they theorized archival inconvenience and unconvention? What are some of the projects that have emerged in response? The authors rightly cite some of the scholars who have been exploring these topics: Michelle Caswell, Safiya Noble, and Miriam Posner, among others. We might also think about projects like Documenting the Now, the social media archival organization grappling with emerging archival problems as they foreground the preservation of records around civil rights events.

Archives is a book that rewards external engagement. One of the pleasures of reading it is being "sidetracked" by looking to the accessible unconventional archives the essays draw from. The Prelinger Archives hosted online by the Internet Archive offered hours of mesmerizing digitized film—hygiene videos about maintaining skin health, educational films about the do's and don'ts of dating, a disturbing children's cartoon with a witch who screams about hating herself. The Public Library/Memory of the World offers endless pages of book PDFs, and digital marks of their own disobedience: If you Google them, for instance, the page will display a notice that the site has been found in violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. And perhaps it is fitting that the book leads there, to an illegal public library that one looks for through Google, a trillion-dollar entity based around "keywords" and sometimes referred to as an archive. It is strange tensions like these that *Archives* is adept at bringing out.

References

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Sullivan, J. J. (2014). The ill-defined plot. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/ill-defined-plot