

Media Archival Studies: The Logistics of Cultural Visibility Research

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“Cultural studies, then, is the study of cultural products from their subjective and consciousness-oriented points of view.” – Julie D’Acci

Cultural Studies as a Historiographic Method for Federal Preservation Work

I write this commentary as the steering strategist and national director of the Library of Congress’s Radio Preservation Task Force of the National Recording Preservation Board (#RPTF for short). The task force was convened August 2014 by a core team of roughly a half-dozen Film and Media professors and several program directors at the Library of Congress, our mandate to materialize recommendations of the National Recording Preservation Plan. The RPTF has grown into an associated constellation of 30 directors, over 250 professors, 40 archivists, 30 collectors, 40 partnerships, and 1300 assessed archival collections. The goal of the project is deceptively straight forward – to locate, chronicle, and if possible preserve radio collections. And there are several dividends expected of a federal project such as the RPTF: 1) completion of a big data interface, 2) increased accessibility to historical recordings, and 3) educational applications, including new opportunities for research. The political economy of these tasks are quite complex, requiring the participation of public, private, archival, federal, and academic sectors, involving an intensive level of organizing, coordination, inter-institutional arbitration, and digital management of records. I look forward to discussing our partnerships and strategies at the conference panel itself.

What I’d like to highlight in this brief piece is how principles of representational parity have motivated (or interpellated) actants to work with parallel coordination toward the common goal of creating a more comprehensive record of the diversity of historical experience, as captured by sound recordings. Informed by the work of the Birmingham School and Critical Pedagogy, associated scholars have started to collaborate and write about the relationship between principles of Cultural Studies and *logistical* practice. This has meant 1) continued close interrogation of how inequities in race, gender, orientation, and class are reproduced by the circulation of codes and representational tropes, and 2) conceptualizing how Film and Media studies might wield the archive as a tool in the struggle to provide better visibility for alterity discourses. On the latter point, Film and Media professors have been working side by side with Information Scientists, Public Historians, and Collectors to make otherwise inaccessible content available for research and education. Each institution has its own reason for conducting this work. Tens of thousands of hours of combined labor recently converged at two conferences on Capitol Hill, at partnering institutions such as

NPR, the Smithsonian Wilson Center, and the University of Maryland, and at special sessions at academic conferences like SCMS. The RPTF endeavors to synthesize the practices of multiple sectors into a communicative process.

Media Archival Studies: The ‘Conjunctural’ Role of the Archive in the ‘Circuit Model’ of Analysis

Flow participants will note that accounting for the “synthesis of the work of multiple sectors into one process” is already a central occupation of Cultural Studies in the tradition of Stuart Hall, a research approach articulated by Richard Johnson’s foundational “circuit of culture” model.¹ According to Julie D’Acci’s update to Johnson, the “circuit model” exemplifies “linked but distinct moments of connected practices” in media production, reception, and social context, as they converge into a “conjunctural” phenomenon that can be empirically mapped.² According to D’Acci, each division of an economy of scale within a media industry represents a distinct set of practices. In consortium the phenomenon of “media” represents a “continuous circuit through a passage of forms” closely tied to socio-cultural processes. “Media” is hence a discursive strategy that takes the form of an expression, such as a text; and texts, as “artifacts”, hold the potential to inform discursive adjustment in a public. The “text” is important for its ability to act as a “signified” that connotes homological directions for self-identification during cultural change.

What does the “circuit model” have to do with organizing and managing a national task force?

The circuit model poses the *active* state of discursivity. In theory, the introduction of a new artifact holds the possibility of interjecting new reference points of signification within the circulation of codes. Which means that the circuit model can hypothetically be expanded to include a broader repository of codes – namely, curated codes made newly conspicuous from among the residual contours of this process.

The source of those codes is rarely interrogated; emphasis on conditions of emergence has concealed the fundamental role that residual artifacts play within what Raymond Williams calls discursive “selectivity”. Based upon the extensive trial and error experiments of the Radio Preservation Task Force, I propose that the “archive”, while already implicitly supposed, deserves designation as a node within the “circuit model” to mark the logistical and conceptual site of residuality within the broader conceptualization of temporal mediation. The archive is the

¹ Johnson, Richard. 1986. What is Cultural Studies Anyway? *Social Text*. 38-80.

² D’Acci, Julie. 2004. Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities. In *Television after TV*, edited by L. Spigel and J. Olsson, 418-46.

“stock” for residuality, as well as a tangible site with its own unique economy of scale on par with production, distribution, and reception spheres.

“Media archival studies” proposes that the logistical work of preservation is a subtle yet crucial dimension of Cultural Studies research into texts, audiences, industries, and social conditions, anticipated by the shorthand of the circuit model. Attending to archival traces requires a multi-sector coalition dedicated to the curation and promotion of underrepresented and underresearched utterances and events. When a discursive bloc succeeds at embedding a circulating determinant within a set of relations, it structures contours for future belief and affiliation. Because discursive blocs actively work in conversation with residual time, a curated, structured layering of previously inaccessible residual precedents hold the potential to set limits and pressures on the direction of selectivity during discursive emergence.