

Giuseppe Boccassini

Q1Q: How would you define and describe the archive today, both broadly speaking and then applied to your work. Where do you position amateur archives in this field?

Q1A: The issue is complex enough, but for putting it in simple terms, the archive has a double identity, in the sense that the concept of the archive as its roots 'arche' includes the meaning of the original object that it aims to describe. To a certain extent, the archive is used in an approximate way, as a tool of power and control. Historically the archive has been used to 'stop time' and to confirm a secular meaning to things. Somehow the archive has been used to bring to light 'the truth'. This is the main use of the archive. It becomes a sort of testimony of history, but very often instead of opening up the truth that it beholds, it closes this meaning inside a coffer, as it does not open up to various interpretations. Therefore, in my personal opinion it happens very often that the archive is used in a wrong way and in order to realise why we need to go to the roots, to the cause of the issue, to the object of the archive itself. We need to analyse the archive objects (content), how much we are able to describe it and circumscribe it in the world. The idea of the archive is this complex. Then we go over a little to what I am trying to accomplish through my work: I try to liberate the archive from its essence and the will to behold a specific truth. I try to open it towards 'other' truths and other layers of meaning. I therefore try to mix different pieces and fragments of archives and give them a new meaning, one that is not tacit or obvious from a first visualisation. What I try to do is to create a collage, made from pieces that each possesses a specific meaning, but put together they acquire different meanings. What I am trying to do is to create a sort of short circuit of meaning connected to an object, a classification or a label. My work becomes in a certain way Dadaist, in a funny and ironic way it could be called a punk work, which operates on the archive as an index that renders its content meaningful.

Q1Q: I suppose that your vision excludes any kind of attempt to categorise the material inside archives in a certain way.

Q1A: Yes, for sure. But in the case of the home movie the situation is somehow different. Home movies by their amateur nature, do not impose a didactic meaning; they do not pretend to disseminate universal meanings and absolute values in relation to history. They possess this naïf nature, which does not manifest a will of control, but simply an affective memory and a remembrance. Being a personal memory, the home movie does not take up the role of popular material. As it is empiric material, it is suspended between a carved form of history and personal history. It represents somehow anarchic material, as it is disconnected from any power mechanism and representations. It acquired therefore a different dimension with respect to the historic and scientific archive. What makes the home movie interesting is the fact that above not having any interest in the politic and didactic aspect, it follows no linear narrative line. It does not want to become beautiful in the eyes of the public by following a specific edited structure. This makes it also a little bit 'uncomfortable' and preoccupying as material to handle. By not being built on specific editing principles, this material has not been made with a specific audience in mind. It is rather uncomfortable, because it is as if you are invited somehow to dinner by a family you do not even know. You are becoming a testimony dramas or situations which are completely unknown to you. This is the scary aspect of the home movie, and at the same time the crazy and anarchic one. It completely takes distance from the narrative flow, the code that is typical of the archive, in order to free and become personal. In my opinion the home movie archive is often considered as a sweet and

nostalgic repository, but in reality it contains material that is very difficult to handle and to perceive. At a certain point you feel trapped, in the middle of private issues that do not concern you, things that were not meant to be seen by a larger public, but only by those who recorded these memories and has stored them. Therefore home movies are a specific case, because as I said it occupies a peculiar position that is impossible to classify, a language that is personal. Home movies tend to be united by the fact that they do not have a specific shape, a shape that is not recognisable, like a sort of a coded language.

Q2Q: Regarding your work as an artist, how do you perceive the evolution of the public for this type of work built on archives?

Q2A: I have some problems with the public. It is difficult for to talk about audience, because I cannot easily identify the public. I can talk about experiences with the audience in specific cases, for specific works, but talking about public on a large scale, is difficult for me. I do not manage to form a clear idea on the multiplicity of interpretations. In general terms, I could say that the concept of public on a large scale is a complex issue. The idea of archive has become completely liquid compared to the past; the fact of having Youtube, of being able to record any event from one's own life and upload it on sharing platforms like Youtube or Vimeo, determines a constant shift of memory. On the other hand maybe it also renders the awareness of that memory poorer than before. The public is used nowadays to use in a very superficial way the archive, especially the contemporary archive as it is very fluid. For example Instagram or Facebook, where you can upload a short video, a memory, that has the duration of one day and then is cancelled. This is very interesting but also very scary, for the fact that we are getting used to a fluid memory, a changing memory. Therefore in my opinion the contemporary public has some difficulties of going down deep into the concept of memory. Of what I said in the beginning that it is difficult to define the public (who the public is: mass-idea of the public or a more segmented idea of public), it is also because contemporarily there is a huge individuality in terms of public nowadays. It becomes difficult to have an idea about the concept of collectives, because the concept itself does not hold truth anymore. If there is, it is masked behind a fake individualism and identity, but then it becomes problematic, at least for me, to be able to grasp the idea of mass/collective as a public. What I can say is this: the public generally has difficulties in terms of keeping up the levels of attention. Many TV series have more and more lowered the level of attention needed from the public. I imagine we will go more and more towards this direction, with formats that are lower and lower as duration. This concept of attention is somehow a reflection of the concept of the archive and memory.

Q3Q: Regarding the reuse of archives, to you think there are genres or formats that suit better this reuse or do you think it is a field that is totally free?

Q3A: Let me think a second about it. I never asked myself this. It is not easy to answer. For sure it depends on the type of film you want to produce. I do not pay attention so much to the issue of the format or to the philological aspect. I use the archive in a very instrumental way, as if they were my colours to paint with. I use them in a creative purpose, (not my personal purpose but that of the work), to support what I want to represent or narrate. As I said in the beginning I am not interested in the archive as a crystallisation, sedimentation of knowledge, but rather as a gesture. For me this gesture, once it is taken out of its original context and it is used in combination with other gestures, is able to create something different than the original and its obvious meaning. Therefore I use the

archive freely. I do not see one archive more important than another. It depends on the work that I do and the material that serves me, be it scientific, historical or experimental. For my latest work for Chicago I collected 200 movies and I have put them together, independently of the meaning that each of them could represent. I repeat that for me there is no way to measure if one type of archive is more useful than another. In some way I am attracted by some details such as a hand, a colour, a light or a tree, a face. Whatever material can become interesting. Depends on the context where you are going to use it. It is clear that a specific kind of archive has a fascinating effect, especially if it was shot in 16mm rather than 8mm. The medium has for sure a specific fascination and aesthetics is of course essential in this discourse. It is in this aesthetics that I am interested, independently if it can be found inside a documentary; because there are often parts of documentaries, which can be used in a rather abstract manner, as they make up a sort of microcosm in their own right. There is of course a documentary foundation of this material, but then the images are so disconnected from the context, that it can be used in a very different way compared to the documentary (at least the more classic and didactic type of documentary). This footage can acquire a very different meaning. As a conclusion I can say that I am giving much importance to the aesthetics that the material in itself can offer me, be it a documentary, experimental work, or more scientific or didactic material or family film. What interests me is the new life that this material acquires, its new blood or new flesh.

Q3Q: Ok, I understand, this is a more critical position in relation to the official nomenclature.

Q3A: No, it is not critical, but on the contrary...well yes it is, if you consider it in relation to a system of values and organisation.

Q3Q: Yes, I refer to a critical position towards this categorisation, the labelling of genres and of course this division between the types of reuse of the archive: the documentary or the experimental approach.

Q3A: In my opinion, if you use the archive for the 'cinema of the real', this is a position that I fight with all my forces, as it represents the contrary to my own ideas and concepts. If the documentary film reuses archives in a strict sense of documenting an event, it somehow plays a 'dirty game', in the sense that it demonstrates to be able to speak about itself only by showing itself. There is no will to go beyond its own context, there is no apparition or epiphany, but a closure in its own self and what can be found inside. This is opposed to what I want to do with the archive. This is the problem with the archive, the thought that as an object the archive needs to bear a 'truth'. For this reason I am for the work of artists on archives. Artists are able somehow to re-evaluate and re-position this material in order to acquire a new life. Very often institutions are still afraid to open up their archives to artists, because they fear a diminishing the importance of the archive, a trivialising its representative power (as an index). In my opinion it should be the contrary: in order to give strength to the archive one needs to look at it again and re-position it; due to its official position the archive cannot remain a simple and dusty catalogue for searching material, but it needs to put itself at stake in order to acquire a new life. The documentary by using the archive in a didactic manner does the contrary, it becomes an extension of itself that does not lead to the creation of a new body, but crystallizes and freezes itself.

Q4Q: What about when you started working with archives? When did that happen and how do you proceed with your creative process?

Q4A: I would not know, the first impact with the archive is not very clear, I cannot remember. Maybe I have seen some work based on found footage, which is the classic name given to this type of work

based on memory, Baudelaire's concept of finding and putting together pieces of other stories and memories. In some way, maybe also because of the lack of material one gets closer to this material. Found footage, as material, is cheap footage, compared to the high costs of production of images. Then I was always interested in this alchemy aspect of the footage, its nature of magic lantern and its spectral character. Maybe this is the right word, the spectral dimension; we know that this footage is a sort of a body that is neither alive nor dead, especially if it is shot on film. This has always fascinated and haunted me, like a sort of a vampire. It is a body levitating between life and death; what I do is to collect these pieces and reposition them, give them another body with a different anatomy. The methodology I use is this. I move on the territory that interests me, for example the World War in my work 'Tin Hat' or found footage that builds the core of Lezuo, another work. For Lezuo it all started when I found the diary of this immigrant, who at the end of 1800 departs from Italy to the United States and he writes this diary (written in this Italian-Austrian language, because he was living in the extreme north of Italy). His diary contains a huge awareness of the transformation he is undergoing through his trip. I was attracted by this and tried to reconstruct from archives this intimate world of diary. I sometimes move as if I want to reconstruct the universe belonging to the private diary of a character (real or invented). I am much interested in the nature of the diary, because I can somehow overlap the two dimensions: reality and dreams/memories. The diary connected to the concept of the archive is something that interests me a lot because it wanders (Ita: vaga) in misty grounds that are very difficult to define compared to real events. This is one way in which I proceed. Then there is the other approach, that is somehow more Soviet; like in the topic of the World War where I was interested in the topic and my research work dug deep into archives that are connected to the topic in order to find the right one. I search the history of the images connected to the topic, such as spatial trips for examples, or sound archives, which are very important. I therefore undertake a deep research of the topic I am interested in. Then in reality the film is built to a certain extent by itself. There is a total control of the research, the editing and other processes behind the construction of a film, but sometimes it is the unique and offhand combinations that form an autonomous life of the film. There is a deep research work and a meticulous editing work, but it is this that enables the work to become also autonomous. If you do not work in this direction (sometimes also mechanically), you do not manage to liberate the archive from its structure. There is continuous dialogue between structure between structure, chaos, form, non-form, memory, present, past, truth, reality, dream and so on. The vitality of the film lies in this continuous dialogue. This is why I was saying in the beginning that the documentary, which nurtures itself from its own material and petrifies history, is not something that interests me. I am interested in the complete opposite.

Q7Q: Talking about matter and flesh, are there particular images of archives that you affectionate about? If yes, why?

Q7A: No, I am actually not affectionate about archives; there are images that have stuck to my mind for example the images I used for Lezuo, which I cannot remember where I found (maybe on Youtube). There are for sure images that stuck to my mind. I am fascinated about faces, as they represent for me a sort of landscapes. In 'Tin Hat' on the World War, there is this face of the soldier, with white eyes, because soldiers were very often visually and acoustically shocked during the War. These haunted eyes were continuously shocked, through the continuous exposure to the tough and ugly aspects of war: the weapons, the effects of industrialisation and so on. This was a sort of shock

for the soldiers, not used to the effects of the second phase of industrialisation. Faces are maybe the things that stick most to my mind. Nevertheless in relation to the original archive I try not to remain stuck on images, because of the reasons I explained during the interview.

Q7Q: one curiosity: for the images that you find and reuse, do you have specific curiosities: like do you want to know where these images come from, what they are? Or is the image in itself enough for you?

Q7A: Well, it depends on the type of material. Sometimes the contrary happens, many things build up a certain imaginary rather than single scenes. From this universe, this imaginary, which I study closely (as for example space travel, the World War or sea trips from the end of the 1800) – I did not mention one thing: that at the end of the 1800 there was yet no cinema, so in some way there is no real visual or film archive connected to that period; I have first done research regarding the kind of visual material that could be found during that time, about the imaginary – the magic lanterns, the spectral tools that are the precursors of the cinema – and after this process I selected the images for it. Once I have those images, I am almost towards the end of my work. That research work that leads me to reconstruct a certain imaginary belonging to the topic leads me to specific images, which I then use. So these images already have a sort of connection to my work, to the topic, so I see them already in their essence, ‘naked’ and outside of their original context. Not always, but most of times I already see these images and I am not interested in their background context, in the philological aspect. It is already naked; it possesses already a meaning.

Q7Q: So they manage to complete the meaning of your work.

Q7A: Yes. They already assume an identity. A background analysis would not enrich my work, because I have previously done this analysis. I am more interested in the gesture that is behind the way of conceiving the images. For example for the First World War I read books such as *Polvi* by Liosk talks about the avant-garde, about war as two parallel dimensions. I am interested about the gesture behind the construction of the images: how was WWI depicted in that period in relation to that kind of imaginary? WWI was often depicted by cinema, in a very chaotic way – and there is another book on this by Guyne Alonge. The main trait of representing WWII is the chaos of sources – gas, trenches – all these dimensions are new. The imaginary belonging to a specific period is difficult to develop in a conscious way during the period itself; the moments of lucidity and awareness of representation of a specific period at the time of its manifestation are very rare. It is hard to see how the image is being shaped, of how it is moulded according to the imaginary belonging to the shaping if the image itself. There are several errors in the films depicting WWII, because these movies represent the war according to a Napoleonic approach (‘*deus ex machina*’). I am interested to look for the motivations behind the gestures of construction of the image, because I find it important to see what is behind, the consciousness, awareness, the body, because the eyes are a part of it and they obey a bodily positioning (physical/haptic).

Q9Q: A curiosity. For *Lezuo*, where did you find the images, in which archive? I was kind of struck by the image of this mysterious character.

Q9Q: I did not tell you one thing about my work. I do not use the archive as it is, but manipulate it almost every time. The last work that I did for Chicago there is no type of editing of the scenes, I did not manipulate them. For the other works instead, I generally use lenses, gelatine, mirrors or reflecting surfaces through which I re-film the original scenes. I use a MiniDV for filming, which is a half-digital half-analogic instrument: a tape that records the images on a physical carrier, yet it uses

a digital process. I record the scenes on tape, using these spectral elements that offer to the image a misty character. For Lezuo I move in this direction. I obviously collected and put together the scenes that could recall and represent the sea universe and sea travel (ships, old faces, waves, shipwrecks, ropes). I undertook this kind of research work for the material needed then put it together, re-filmed the images and edited the scenes. The same thing I did for sound: I collected sounds of waves, water, ropes and wood, voices from the past, of narrative films, because very often my research stumbles upon narrative film, that represents a piece of reality that is petrified/crystallized – petrified has a rather negative connotation while crystallized has a rather positive connotation – but both manage to stop' time, sometimes in a virtuous manner and other times in a sterile manner. (where were I? I have lost myself a little in the discourse). For Lezuo I did this kind of work, where I wanted to create this spectral world, made of transformation, metamorphosis; because this kind of trips on the sea at the end of the 1800 were very long trips, taking several months, where time was somehow suspended, and generated a sort of awareness for the changes that occurred. It was not the sort of the trip with an economic aim, and even if it was such a trip, during the process, the metamorphosis was an important element as it represented new blood, new flesh. It is strange to say new flesh in Italian, but this is the sense, of what Deleuze and Guattari understood by body, flesh and spirit. This is if we want to come close to the concept of metamorphosis, the body and matter...

Q9Q: As you mentioned it in an email before, this fact of the archive as an agonising body, which do you think is the future of the archive?

Q9Q: Well it is a difficult future, because we need come to terms with the extraction mechanisms. If we talk about historical archives is one thing, if we talk about the contemporary archive, it is another. Regarding the classic, historic archive (often recorded on film, of documentary and cinematic nature), it would be important to open the imaginary of the archive to artists, with a very detailed selection. It is not given that this happens on a large scale. In my view the artist needs to be aware of the nature of the archive; even if there are some punk tendencies that could result interesting. Obviously the discourse is this: the archive needs a new life. It is inevitable that the archive needs an artistic re-evaluation, a fascinating and seductive re-interpretation. But in general, the archive needs to be seen, used and shown. The archive reused by artists would be the ideal approach, but only the mere act of showing it, opening it to the public is important; the more you keep the archive closed, not-seen, it is in danger of extinction. It is like with the digitalisation of film: if you keep the digital version of a film on a hard disk for 20 years it is possible that you loose this material. You need to shift the location of the archive. Therefore an archive needs to be movies, it needs to be watched and not stay closed in some drawer. Ideally the artist would be the most indicated to do this. In essence, the archive needs to move, it needs its own life.

Q10Q: As a last thing I would like to show you a brief edited version of home movie scenes and tell me what you think about it.

Q10A: Yes, it is interesting. It is a little bit of what I was saying earlier, those rabbits, those faces, that brut film at a certain point, the elderly lady on the motorcycle, coming towards the camera, are all aspects that....and then the fact that even if there is a sort of narration in the edited video, it is liberated from an obvious storyline. The images by themselves hide entire worlds inside. They have a specific alchemy that favours the creation of new aesthetic mechanisms. There are some things that do not appear in other classic-narration videos, it is matter that has freed itself and has acquired another power of association. Yes, it is more like an epiphany, but at the same time scary and

spectral. Yes, I like this aspect. Of course, it is one minute, which is short enough. Maybe I would go ahead, I do not know.

Q10Q: Yes, it was a small test to see for you what kind of world comes out.

Q10A: Yes, it is obviously a farmer's universe, but beyond this, there is a kind of a journey of the matter, that attracts me. Me for example, when I seeing this edited video I did not became aware foremost by the social position of the people represented, but rather by the physical aspect of the matter. It is clear that on a first sight the appearance is that of a farmer's universe, but it is not on this aspect that the editing is pointing. This is why I am very interested in this hidden aspect of the image; the appearance is that of the farmer's world, but the essence that trikes us is another; it is as if the voids become important and not the full part, that what is missing instead of that which is present. The power of the images is in the non-narrative aspects, of archival nature, of truth or history, but rather in the orbits of the eyes of those faces, the parts where the film is burnt. Your work has a more impressionistic nature, rather than historical one. It is a light matter that wanders around, looking for a position. It is not static and petrified like the columns in one of your scenes. These are images that should disappear, that are temporary, and for this that they are fascinating us: they are there because they exist, but it is as if they didn't exist, because in the same moment they exist too much they become static. If they would be slave to a narrative or a documentary aspect they would be flat images, because they would not wander anymore.

Q10Q: You mean a sort of auto-destruction of images.

Q10A: Yes, because if you decided to put a voice-over that says: 'during 1900 in Sicily, the famers....' then this historic dimension would cancel the fascination of the images, because they would enter a dimension that is too much circumscribed. Like this instead, it is as if images appeared and disappeared, because they do not have a specific place. Me for example I do not like voice-overs or captions, which most people do like, because otherwise they would not understand much. For me it is the contrary; I need something that appears and disappears and that has an epiphany and force. I therefore fight for this and am against the documentary that tries to demonstrate itself through the imaginary of the archive. Then there are obviously aspects that can be saved. There are scientific documentaries that can be useful, but in general I like a poetic approach that is wandering, outpatient. The word 'wander' (ita:vagare) is interesting because it is generally associated with vague (Ita:vago), which has a negative connotation. Instead to wander means to go in less known spaces. I think that it also comes from the English vagary that means a caprice/whim. It is about this will of not feeling at home, of understanding. The archive is often used to feel at home. Instead the home movie archive, as we said is not meant to make you feel at home, except for those who have produced the images and now the context. For this reason it is interesting. It isn't absolutely fulfilling scenery.

Q10Q: Yes, if is because often home movies are thought to represent a scheme of family life, but in my opinion there is always something novel and surprising. For example if 'go' to dinner in one family's home, this dinner will be completely different than with another family.

Q10A: Yes, absolutely. Moreover, we do not know anything about that family. That is the scariest aspect of it; if you were invited to have dinner with a family you do not know and they started to talk about their family issues, I would like to see who would feel comfortable with it. Therefore it is not about the duration of the home movies, they can take hours or just several minutes, but about the fact that you are projected inside an unfamiliar space of which you become a testimony. It is therefore ruthless, not like a narrative film that should like to a broader public, whose perception

schemas are already known (like Hollywood for example). The family archive does not want to be 'beautiful', it is simply itself, which is somehow uncomfortable and worrying, not like a 'nice' thing.

Q10Q: Indeed, for me the home movie is a sort of minefield; you do not know what the next step brings.

Q10A: Yes, indeed. Then there is the child who laughs, and you do not know what his life looks like, his dramas, maybe his aunt arrives soon and hits him and his life changes. Ok, now I am a little joking, but nevertheless...

Q10Q: yes, this is interesting about the home movie. It is able to open up so many doors towards unknown territories, show you so many worlds, and sometimes only show you, without letting you in; sometimes this fact of having a peep inside, not being sure of what is being said, of what the filmmaker wanted to say with his images.

Q10A: At this point I feel like I can suggest you Michel Powel's film 'Peeping Tom', where he kills his victims with a sort of knife that is attached to the camera. He records reality and at the same time he kills. Anyways, he was marked by his father who used to record him continuously, so he had this trauma of voyeurism and ends up becoming a voyeurism-killer. Maybe this is interesting enough.

Q10Q: Thank you for the recommendation and thank you for today's interview.