

## **Photographic Archives: From the Documentation of the Cultural Heritage to the Formation of a Visual Culture**

*Caterina Martino / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract<sup>1</sup>*

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This research aims to provide a theoretical definition and a practical method for archiving photographs. This should not be considered entirely as a practical and technical activity, but should be thought of in theoretical aspects, related both to the main function of the archive that preserves pictures and to the role and value that photography assumes in an archive. The research is divided in two parts: the first one consists of constructing a theoretical perspective that is very specific for photography in the archive, the second one consists of an empirical research that looks more in depth at the reality of photographic archives. The research is also characterized by a comparison between Italian theory and methodology that would create a unique practice when applied, and British theory and methods that prefer to respect differences and specificity. During the research stage of my thesis work, I visited several photo collections as well as spent a period as a visiting research student at the Photography and the Archive Research Centre (London College of Communication). I also worked as a volunteer at the Stanley Kubrick Archive, which has been a substantial reference for my work.

The research has inquired into the use of the word ‘archive’ so that the photographic document can finally be separated from a bureaucratic field. I considered the archival theory with particular reference to the Italian discipline. It appears that in Italy the archive is related to an administrative context which makes

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it a bureaucratic system with legal value. In fact, in Italy the archetype is the State Archives and the most common notion of the archive is the result of combined action between archival theory and state laws. In addition, state intervention has also established that the archive is part of the cultural heritage contradicting its legal and administrative value. The archival theory is a well-established practice and is validated by state regulations; for this reason it is extended to all forms of the archive, including collections of photographs. However, an administrative archive contains written documents that are entirely different from the content of a photographic archive. The shared classification under 'archive' does not make them identical. What they have in common is the presence of a catalogue that determines both as ordered systems, but the catalogue should be designed according to the specific characteristics of the archive's contents. The first part of the research is a deconstruction of the traditional idea of archive and an attempt to define a more specific notion of the photographic archive. It is necessary to make a distinction between terms that in Italian are wrongly used synonymously to refer to the archive and to also consider some twentieth century authors, philosophers and artists who have theorized about the archive and the relationship between the archive and photography (among others M. Foucault, J. Derrida, P. Ricoeur, H. Foster, A. Sekula, O. Enwezor).<sup>2</sup>

I also inquire into the documentality of photography. The value of the document depends both on the indexical character that makes photography evidence that can be preserved and duplicated, as well as the way through which it has been used to collect the world. The documental character of pictures is emphasized when they are included in an archival system, thus becoming a historical source which can be consulted. I also mention historical episodes and photographers who have produced photographic documentation and archives. According to their public or private nature, these photographic projects have presented photography as both historical document and artistic work. Photography is a visual document that has both these values, which is demonstrated by the contemporary tendency of artists who recycle photographic documents in a context

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'a priori historique et l'archive*, in Id., *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1969 (It. ed. *L'a priori storico e l'archivio*, in Id., *L'archeologia del sapere*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano 1999, pp. 169-176); Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'Archive: Une impression freudienne*, Editions Galilée, Paris 1995 (It. ed. *Mal d'archivio. Un'impressione freudiana*, Filema, Napoli 1996); Id., *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2010; Paul Ricoeur, *Archives, documents, traces*, in Id., *Temps et récit. Tome III: Le temps raconté*, Seuil, Paris 1985 (It. ed. *Archivi, documenti, traccia*, in Id., *Tempo e racconto volume 3. Il tempo raccontato*, Jaca Book, Milano 1994, pp. 178-191); Hal Foster, "The Archive without Museums," in *October*, vol. 77, Summer 1996, pp. 97-119; Id., "Archives of Modern Art," in *October*, vol. 99, Winter 2002, pp. 81-95; Id., "An Archival Impulse," in *October*, vol. 110, Autumn 2004, pp. 3-22; Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *October*, vol. 39, Winter 1986, pp. 3-64; Id., "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital," in Liz Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader*, Routledge, London 2002, pp. 443-452; Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, Steidl – International Center of Photography, New York 2008.

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of performing art after extracting them from a real archive. A photograph is an administrative document only if it used in an administrative context.

Finally, to understand the criteria of archivability for photography I choose to analyze in depth three archives where photography is stored: the Saverio Marra Archive in San Giovanni in Fiore (in Calabria, Italy), the Fratelli Alinari Archives in Florence and the Lambeth Archives in London. These three photographic collections are very different in terms of geographical boundaries, chronological period, typology, photographic techniques, quantity, purposes and organization. I compared them according to all the stages of their management. In the last chapter of the dissertation I propose a methodology that integrates the theoretical and empirical data I have collected throughout the research.

The practice of archiving photographs takes place at both diachronic and synchronic levels and is characterized by many stages (from the design of the archive to the promotion and the valorization of its content). The photographic archive can be defined as a system that includes mixed content that is not always produced by a single creator nor consequently managed and owned by the one who created it. It is however characterized by a universal dimension (the history of photography) that includes an individual dimension (the history of each piece). It is a combined system that can be divisible and that escapes the life cycle of archives because it always has a historical value. The Italian archival theory has classified photographic archives as “new sources,” and in administrative archives photographs are still subordinated to the written files. The English distinction between *archive* and *record* could be useful to separate the two. Even in this case, the archive is the last part of the life of a document while the photographic archive is not the final destination for photographs that have lost their use value. For all these reasons a photographic archive seems to be more similar to those modalities of preservation that usually are considered opposed to the archive: collection, museum, library. Perhaps, I argue, it is necessary to change the denomination from photographic archive to photo library (*fototeca*) and manage it in relation to the visual culture perspective.