

Purpose without a Purpose: Philosophical Analysis of an Archivist

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Introduction

The work of the archivist creates a form of thinking, which deserves a philosophical meditation. The research work concerning archives is usually technical or historical, but I would like to argue that there can be philosophical analysis from within the archive. In order to illustrate and deepen my point, I will use archive material that concerns the film maker Yaacov Ben-Dov, which is found in the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive (The Hebrew University in Jerusalem).

What is Archiving?

In one of his small essays, Walter Benjamin, perhaps unintentionally, has famously written about the archives:

"Language has unmistakably made plain that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium. It is the medium of that which is experienced, just as the earth is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried...And the man who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize. In this sense, for authentic memories, it is far less important that

the investigator report on them than that he mark, quite precisely, the site where he gained possession of them."¹

It is the vocation of the archivist to "establish location" of articles. However, in contrast to the historian, the archivist role is to establish that location without a purpose. Despite Benjamin's plea, to mark the finding in relation to when it was found, the archivist remains an anonymous character, without a signature or trace. The archivist places and marks the article according to its own date and character, without involving anything beyond it. The article is placed in its memory only as far as it reveals. Its context and meaning is divulged by the user of the archive, rather than the archivist.²

The sole purpose of the archivist is the archive. From the ancient Greek "Archon" (ἄρχων), meaning the chief magistrate or head of state, the archive was reworded into the office of rule, which thereby held the public documents and records. The place that held documents of value was then called the archive. The decision of the content of the archive is very rarely in the hands of the housekeeper, rather the archive is built by those wielding power and only then is the archivist put into service.

The action of the archivist is to give access to others. In order to do that he must have a supreme understanding of the ways of seeking knowledge. The skill of the archivist is measured by his ability to anticipate and advance the process of finding the needed information or article. Work in an archive will always involve technology, continually improving and keeping current with developing methods. This is required, in order to be relevant and effective to the researcher and also to be able to archive new material

¹ Walter Benjamin, "Excavation and Memory", in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 2, part 2 (1931–1934)*, 1932, ed. by Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 576

² This invokes similar discussion between memory and history, notably: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (University of Washington Press: Seattle 1982).

which in itself is technologically advanced. The catalogues will be in a constant process of updating itself, furthering the craft to a profession of technician.

Without purpose other than to archive, the archivist scan and catalog sometimes almost undecipherable articles, in a manner which requires an equal valuation to each piece of material. The work itself has no further purpose for the archivist. This is the unique analysis of the archivist, whereby everything has potential value and must be treated as such. It is the inspection of possible details within each description of the article, which could potentially give meaning and reveal what Benjamin has called the "richest prizes". Furthermore, the archiving process itself creates a space that can change perspective for the archivist and thereby change the archived material.

Yaacov Ben-Dov's Censorship

After reviewing the metaphysics of the archivist, I would like to consider as an illustration, the acuteness of archival work. The material is from the file of Ya'acov Ben-Dov, "The Father of Hebrew Film" who has been portrayed as somewhat of a tragic person. Even though, he captured the most important cinematography of the beginning of modern Zionism in Israel, including the Balfour Declaration and the opening ceremony of Hebrew University, his recognition was posthumous several decades later.³ Going through and archiving the hundreds of documents, mostly correspondence between Ben-Dov and numerous people of importance and anonymity creates a deeper picture of Ben-Dov's case.

There are difficulties in archiving these numerous documents. The first problem is to distinguish the content itself. Ben-Dov's writing although circular, is clearly written

³ Hillel Tryster, *Israel Before Israel: Silent Cinema in the Holy Land*, Hebrew Edition, Translated by Ada Paldor (Bialik Institute: Jerusalem, 2010), p.50.

and once you could differentiate between letters, the work becomes easier.⁴ The quality of the document itself unfortunately creates problems in deciphering the actual content, many times the copy has been eroded, or the scan itself was done poorly, mostly coming from the Central Zionist Archives.⁵

The more difficult to decipher the document, the more inclination to catalogue in more general fashion and it has been said in many professions, that it is better to say less and remain correct, then say more and be wrong. However, in archiving the opposite is true, the more said and the more details, creates a greater potential of the article being found. Notwithstanding time and budget constriction of the archive, the archivist will thrive to treat every detail with care. In the case of Ben-Dov, details are in bundles, since what is revealed in the many documents is that filming is many times the least of what is done in cinema.

Writing to Arthur Rupin, a prominent Zionist leader and then head of the office Israel-Land Histadrut office, Ben-Dov sends him a report of filming costs, resulting in 6 francs.⁶ Does this document have any meaning further than a mundane office report? This is of no concern to the archivist; the content of the letter has only raw meaning. The dates in the corner and the names and places need to be cataloged to allow those searching for meaning, for it to be found.

Within these numerous common documents and articles from the Ben-Dov file, without intending, the archivist can begin to understand and even develop sentiments for its subject. Once the ordinary has value and is noted and catalogued, the ordinary becomes intriguing, because each piece of material strengthens or weakens the

⁴ Figure 1 and 2.

⁵ Ben-Dov's materials have value as part of the Zionist history as well as cinematography, the original films are held by the Spielberg Archive, while the documents are held by the CZA.

⁶ Figure 1

perception, which is being built within the archivist's mind. Small details become enlarged, revealing further context, further depth into the material and subject. In a letter to Dr. Yaacov Tahon, then a colleague of Ruppin in the Israel-Land office, Ben-Dov requests funds for filming which is an example of the constant correspondences, containing apparently dry requests for funds and payment, but revealing the frustration of unfulfilled promises.^{7 8} The archivist must, nevertheless, ignore those sentiments, lest he become an historian, giving a hierarchy to details.

In seeking to film the Jewish Legion, Ben-Dov required censorship permission from the British Mandate. In a telegram between Zionist Commission and the Commander of the 40th Palestinian Battalion Royal Fusiliers, trying to convince the importance of the film, the commander writes:

"...I strongly feel that to produce such Films in public would be ridiculous.

With regard to historical interest. At present there can be none, but if the Palestinian Battalion becomes a good Unit, I hope that it will found History. I really cannot imagine any scenes in this Camp which would be suitable for Filming or of interest to the Public."⁹

Despite denying here the permission to film the Jewish Legion, eventually Ben-Dov filmed the battalion in other locations. The commander demonstrates my point through the negative, for the archivist everything must be of interest. The historical perspective of the archivist is that which does not discriminate nor devalue its material, but describes everything, knowing that most will heed nothing, but something might be that treasure. Since the Lieutenant-Colonel had a certain

⁷ Tryster, p. 53.

⁸ Figure 2

⁹ Figure 3

"historical interest" in mind that contained a specific purpose, Ben-Dov's filming was excluded. The archivist without a historical purpose, would only demand a copy of the film and surrounding documents involved, though, indifferent to the films actualization.

Therefore, we can conclude that there is also passivity in the archivist, constantly receiving material, though never producing. The irony reached is that if everything is of value to the archivist, of what value could the archivist see to add?

Summary

This short essay can be seen as dark romanticism, turning a difficult vocation into a philosophical perspective. As any romanticism it can be targeted with the same criticism of neglecting reality.

Even if the archives and archivist vary in culture and creed, the work of collecting and cataloging I argue can be distilled into giving equal value without devaluation. This is accomplished by disregarding a specific purpose for the articles and giving the most potential for it to be found.

Bibliography

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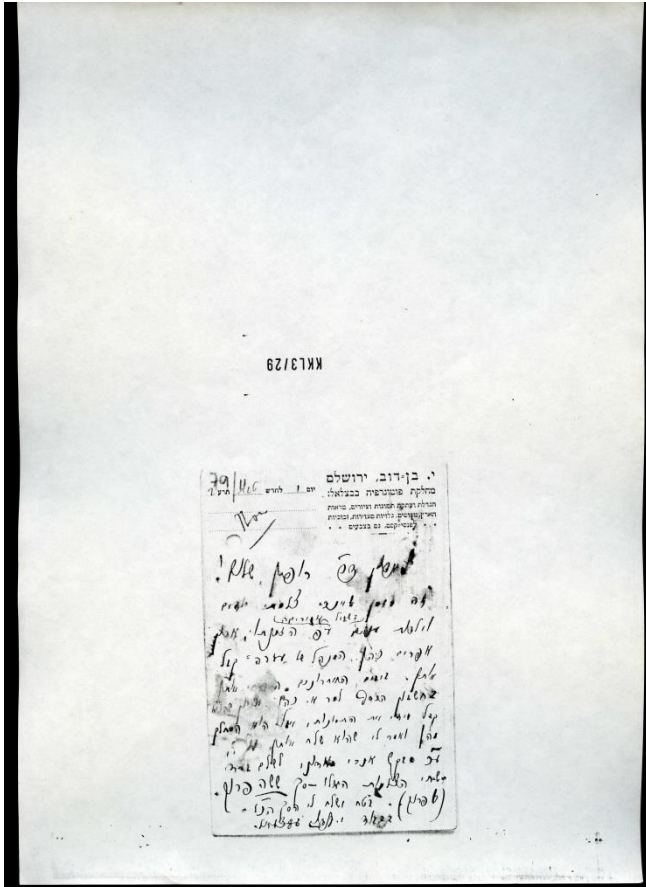


Figure 1. Yaacov Ben-Dov Letter to Arthur Ruppin

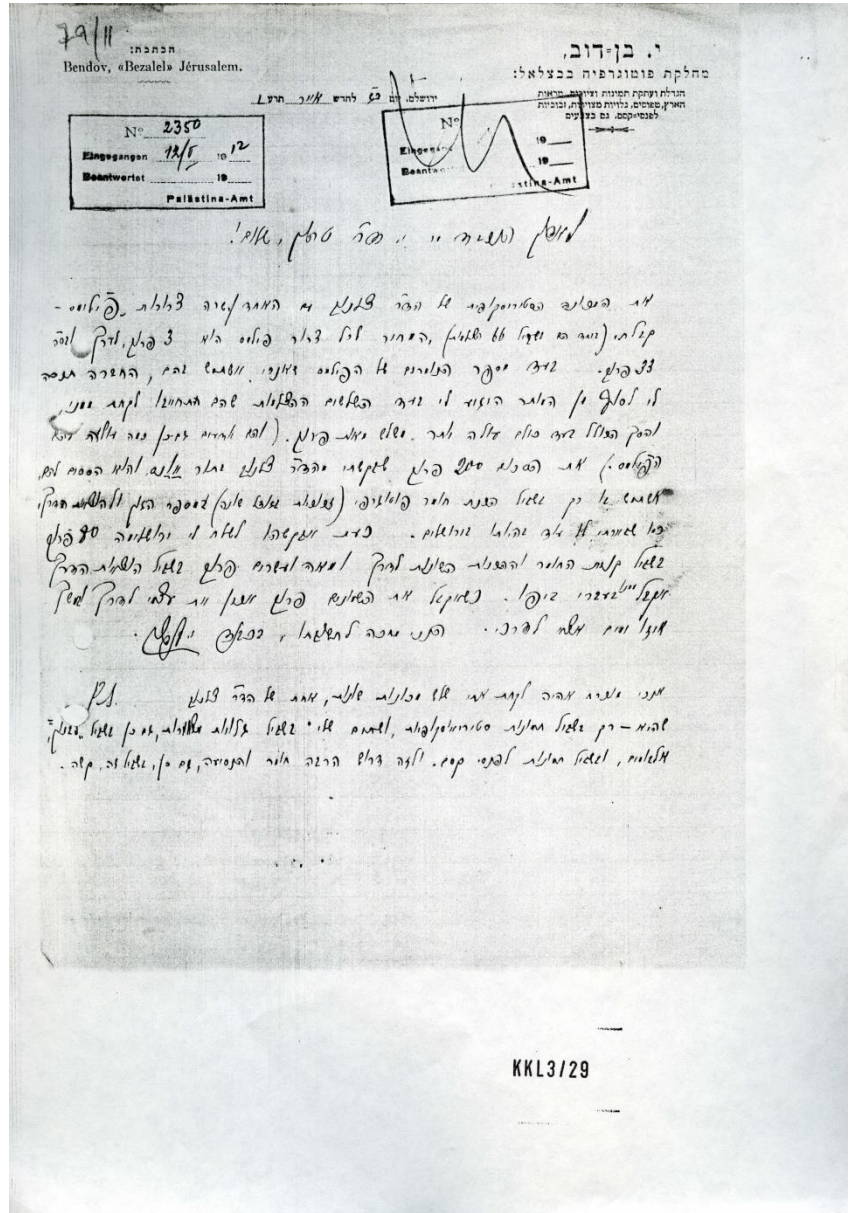


Figure 2. Yaacov Ben-Dov Letter to Dr. Yaacov Tahon

L4/26

Chairman,
Zionist Commission.
Tel-Aviv. J A F F A.



I have your letter of December 13th with reference to proposed visit of a Photographer to take Filming Scenes of the life of the Jewish Battalions for Cinema purposes.

Permission for this will have to be obtained from G.H.Q. as by A.C.I. no Photographer is allowed in any Military Camp or neighbourhood. I am afraid I cannot agree that there should be a Cinematographic record or that such record will have any Historical interest, and I strongly feel that to produce such Films in public would be ridiculous.

With regard to historical interest. At present there can be none, but if the Palestinian Battalion becomes a good Unit, I hope that it will found History. I really cannot imagine any scenes in this Camp which would be suitable for Filming or of interest to the Public.

Lieut-Colonel.
Commanding 40th (S) Palestinian Battalion Royal Fusiliers.

P A M L E H.
December 19th 1948.

Figure 3, Commander of the 40th Palestinian Battalion Royal Fusiliers to Zionist Comision