

Julie Maeck, Matthias Steinle (dir.), L'image d'archives. Une image en devenir, Rennes (Presses universitaires de Rennes) 2016, 340 p., nomb. ill., diagr. et pl. en n/b (Histoire. Série»Archives, histoire et société«), ISBN 978-2-7535-5169-5, EUR 24,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Alan Forrest, York

Archives are the documentary bedrock without which historians could not work, but it is important to remember that even they have their limitations. Every archive has been assembled for a purpose, whether it is to support the work of the state, to provide a historical record for an institution or a business, or to assemble materials that were seen to be of critical interest at some moment in the past. They can seldom claim to provide an unbroken record; for archives have fallen victim to fires, war, and periodic culls by archivists themselves. And we may read them today very differently from readers in earlier epochs, asking different questions of their holdings and less ready to recognise their intrinsic authority. For Jacques Derrida, the archive is best understood as a concept with which to interrogate the power of institutions. It, too, has entered the postmodern age.

But, as this very timely volume of essays shows, the archive has now extended far beyond paper records or their digitized equivalents. Images, like other forms of material culture, have become indispensable resources for the study of history, not least in the expanding field of cultural studies. Caricatures, drawings, photographs, pottery and painting are primary sources like any other, often offering a visual clarity and conveying emotions and sensibilities that the written word finds it hard to express. The invention of photography added an immediacy and pathos to the depiction of war, for instance, that means that the battlefields of 1914 etch themselves on the popular imaginary to a degree unrivalled by previous campaigns. The photographs are part of the archive of war; they are, without question, *images d'archives* (or stock-shots, in English). But on what does their status rest? They have no special claim to objectivity: they are, like other eye-witness impressions, subjective, authorial, and often highly personal. Their popularity, indeed, is often explained by the powerful emotions and sensibilities they convey.

Visual evidence has an immediacy that written sources seldom equal. Unlike the memoir, which was often written up years after the event when the writer's memory might be affected by old age, forgetfulness, or knowledge picked up from elsewhere – war memories are particularly prone to distortions of this kind – the photograph has what Léon Vidal, the nineteenth-century inventor of photochemistry, called an »undeniable authenticity«. The person taking the photograph was there at the very moment when the picture was taken, without the intermediary of time or memory, and it is this immediacy, the knowledge that the scene was recorded in the flicker of a camera shutter, that gives it what he believed was »testimonial value« and convinced him that such images should be collected and kept for posterity. This was Vidal's aim when he went on to propose, in the 1890s, that France should establish what he called



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

a»service of documentary photographic archives« to complement the paper records in the Archives nationales. Photographic evidence had, he believed, something unique to offer. With his initiative the concept of the *image d'archives* was born: an image that would be a reference for others, and which could be borrowed, cited and reproduced by historians and journalists in the future.

But when does a photograph attain this status? How does it become an *image d'archives*? Is it only when it records the great events of history? Or can such images record moments of intimacy, of grief and loss, of happiness, work and play, or the routines of everyday life? For so many aspects of modern history-writing – one only has to think of the history of work, of leisure and entertainment, of domesticity and the family, *Tagesgeschichte*, history from below – there are no great events to provide a context. Images of the most ordinary things can become useful, sources of nostalgia, even symbolic of their times. And while great photographers – like any other artists – can contrive to take striking and memorable images that become instant classics, less artistic photographs, snapshots taken without any thought for posterity, memories of city streets or of family holidays, have gone on to symbolise the pleasures or struggles of everyday life. They, too, can become stock-shots. Indeed, among the contributors to this volume there is general agreement that images are never born as *images d'archives*; it is a status they achieve with time.

What is true of still photography is just as true of moving images, of the world of cinema, television, and network news, and it is these that are most intensively examined in this book. The immediacy of these media and the innumerable images that can be captured from them at once pose a problem, as it is often the choice of the journalist or film editor that determines what pictures are preserved for posterity, and the picture editor who selects images to illustrate a future report. In other words, though the pictures themselves may reflect the moment, it is only later, and sometimes much later, that they can assume their place as *images d'archives*. And the subjective element in their selection is impossible to erase. In a fascinating series of articles the contributors to this volume – historians, art historians, anthropologists, archivists, and curators – examine various ways in which images from the archives have been used to throw light on present-day political events, different techniques that are used to give the images added gravity and wider credence, and the challenge of integrating the past with the present on television or in the cinema.

Their value as propaganda, to governments and to social movements, is well-known and is richly documented in these essays. It was important to have a record, even if there were circumstances where that record had to be concealed from the public, like the photographs from the Great War which the French government classified for fear of spreading panic and despair amongst the civilian population. Or governments wanted a pictorial record of how things were in order to impress on the public the extent of modernisation or social improvement. Newsreels of life in the slums helped to glamorise the new council estates of post-war Britain. Joseph Goebbels even demanded that a film be made of life in the ghettos so that future generations could understand how Jews had lived in Germany and learn about a way of life that would soon be swept away.

New media, of course, risk making the problem of authority even greater. In an age of mobile telephones and social networks, when the number of images captured and circulated has risen exponentially and a



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

picture can go viral on the internet without any professional intervention or qualitative judgement, the very notion of the *image d'archives* may seem under threat. But it may be a mistake to concentrate too narrowly on the medium. The more important element is surely the image itself and the place it occupies in cultural memory. Some will go further and suggest that the very fact that it has been preserved – however it has been preserved – justifies its place in the archive.

19./20. Jahrhundert – Histoire
contemporaine

DOI:
[10.11588/frrec.2017.4.43172](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2017.4.43172)

Seite | page 3



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)