

Ohmer, Susan. University of Notre Dame. "The Archive in the Age of eBay"

Historically, archives have functioned as a means to collect, store, and preserve original and significant materials and to make them available to researchers. Archives have served to substantiate the work of the powerful, as for example the archives of the Rockefeller family in Tarrytown, New York, which document the family's political, industrial, and philanthropic endeavors, yet they have also enabled less entrenched communities to preserve and document their culture, as in the archives for the queer Latino community that Horacio Ramirez explores in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2005). Archives enable the powerful to secure their versions of history and more marginal groups to assert counternarratives that challenge that hegemony. Beyond their function to preserve and protect, archives enable scholars and others to construct narratives of memory, community, nationhood, and identity from the artifacts they contain.

In film studies, archives such as the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, the UCLA Archive, the USC archive, and the Margaret Herrick Library of the Motion Picture Academy have enabled scholars to construct new histories of the studio system, and of directors, stars, and films, that reflect changing paradigms of film historiography. Whether one is working from an auteurist perspective, looking at new models of stars and celebrities, researching the role of the audience, or analyzing distribution and promotion, these archives have stood as a continuing source of material even as models of film scholarship have changed. Yet in recent years a new source of research material has developed at eBay, the online auction site through which collectors, dealers and even archives around the world can offer primary material for sale to the public.

This paper examines the impact of eBay on film scholarship and on the role of archives in preserving film history. The starting point of the discussion is my own experience collecting material on eBay while writing a history of the Disney studio during the early 1940s. Disney presents a paradox for film historians: the studio's archive is closed to scholars, yet eBay is awash with artifacts that would normally be found in an archive, from employee handbooks to interoffice memos, from original cels to storyboards. eBay thus makes what is inaccessible accessible, and in doing so, raises the question of what roles archives play in film scholarship today.

Some of the questions I consider are: the contrasts between personal collections and archives, the seeming randomness of what arises on eBay, compared to the more systematic collecting by archives, the nature of the historiographic claims one can make using material from eBay, and the challenges online auctions pose to preservation. Critical readings from *Archive Stories*, Thomas Richards' *The Imperial Archive*, the collection *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*, and Derrida's *Archive Fever* provide context and perspective for this discussion.

Susan Ohmer is the author of *George Gallup in Hollywood* (Columbia University, 2006), a study of the film industry's use of market research during the 1940s. She has also contributed chapters to the anthologies *Second Star to the Right*, *Screen Decades: 1930s*, *Global Currents*, and *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences*.