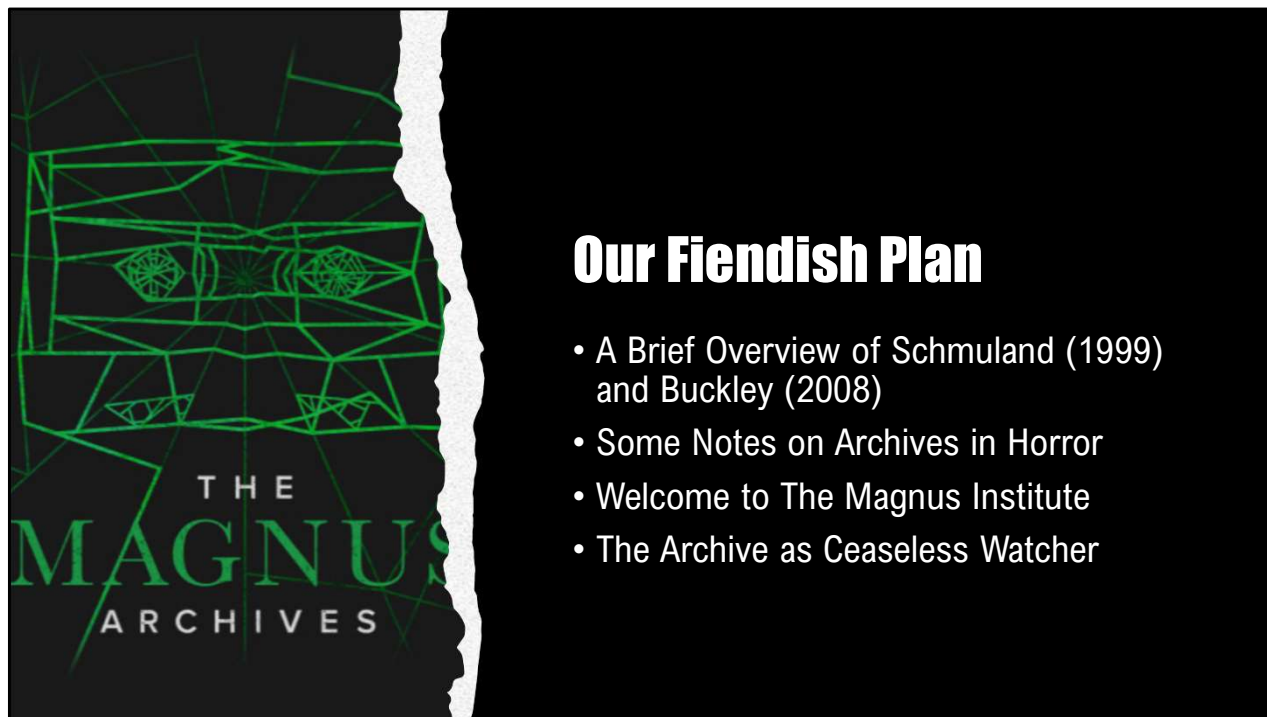# Archival Horror

Revisiting Schmuland & Buckley in *The Magnus Archives*

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Hi! I'm Laura Bernhardt, and today I'll be presenting on behalf of myself and my co-author Shane White. We're both currently Research & Instruction Librarians at the University of Southern Indiana, and we've also both worked for and been trained to work in archives. This presentation is on a bit of work in progress, so we'll see how it goes… I've included a PDF with my slides and script in the platform file spot for this session. Also: all *Magnus Archives* images used on slides in this presentation belong to Rusty Quill and/or are taken from merch designs specifically approved and sold by Rusty Quill – I take credit for none of them.

Our Fiendish Plan

- A Brief Overview of Schmuland (1999) and Buckley (2008)
- Some Notes on Archives in Horror
- Welcome to The Magnus Institute
- The Archive as Ceaseless Watcher

My presentation today proceeds in the following steps:

1. I'm going to spend a little time laying out an overview of two frequently cited and representative articles addressing images of archives and archivists in popular culture, including a short description of some basic tropes or preconceptions that they identify. I'll also briefly work those tropes or preconceptions out in the context of genre horror.
2. Next, I'm going to give you a whirlwind tour of *The Magnus Archives*, a recent horror anthology podcast, with a quick look at how the show both conforms to and deviates from the stereotypical archival image – I want to spend some time thinking about what it gets right and what it gets wrong, and what that might mean. Spoilers will happen. Sorry – not sorry.
3. Finally, I'm going to take up what it gets right as a source of its core horror, directing attention toward the difficult territory of privacy, power, and self-image that may confront archival collections (particularly collections related to individuals, either living or dead, and their personal papers or items).

Note: This is *not* one of those "everything is an archive" LitCrit jams that seem to be all the rage in some circles when it comes to studies of the idea or concept of an archive – my interest is perhaps a bit more practical, although most of what I'll end up saying here is consistent with the core insights of that approach (particularly with regard to the relation of information to power).

- Archives = Document collections
- Archives = History
- Archives = Secret/hidden/buried knowledge
- Archives = Dusty. Very, very dusty. Soooo dusty…
- Archivists = Librarians, only dustier

Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography" (*The American Archivist* vol. 62, Spring 1999, pp. 24-73)

So: let's get started! Once upon a time, back in 1999, Arlene Schmuland wrote a masters' thesis addressing pop culture and archives, from which research work her *American Archivist* article – "The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography" – appears to have been derived. In it, she addresses a perennial problem: the frequent failure of the general public, funders, and related organizational actors to understand precisely what it is that archives are and what archivists do. This remains a live issue – we need the people who use archival collections to understand the work in order to gain their support for it (including financial/institutional support). Schmuland suggests that it is worthwhile to consider one likely source and perpetuator of misunderstandings about archives: popular culture, in this case mostly in the form of popular fiction.

In her study of her chosen literary corpus, Schmuland reveals a set of common tropes or images of archives and archivists, including:
1. A tendency to understand archives almost exclusively as document collections (including the occasional conflation of archives and libraries and the identification of idiosyncratic personal document collections as "archives")
2. The persistent equation of archives with the historical record as such, with archivists represented as the custodians of the historical record embodied in the collection

3. The treatment of archives as sites of secrecy or hiddenness, either due to deliberate measures taken to bury information in them or due to a tendency to see archival collections as indiscriminate, poorly organized collections of continuously accumulating junk.
4. Archives are *dusty,* y'all. This is, Schmuland says, "the single most pervasive motif associated with archives, even outside of fiction."
5. And finally: Archivists are conflated with librarians, perhaps as a handy shorthand – we don't even get our own stereotype!

Keeping all of this in mind…

Buckley, "'The Truth is in the Red Files': An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture" (*Archivaria* vol. 66, Fall 2008, pp. 95-123)

- Protection of the record = Protection of the truth
- Archive as closed space; archival experience as inward-looking or interior experience
- Records/truths are "buried," awaiting disinterment
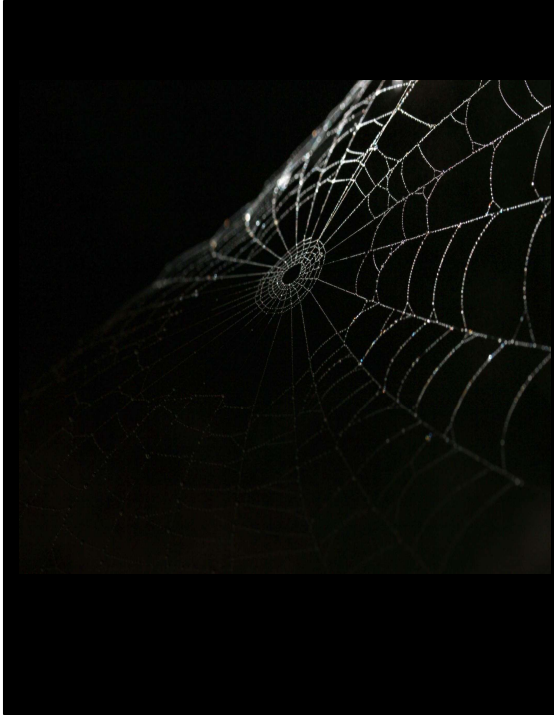- Searching archival records = Searching for self or truth

…Nearly a decade later, when Karen Buckley uses a slightly different pop-cultural corpus to visit the territory Schmuland's initial survey describes, the landscape she discovers is familiar. Very little appears to have changed with regard to the basic images, stereotypes, and preconceptions. Where Schmuland confines her attention to the written word, Buckley also looks at television and film examples, many of which tend to be genre stuff (*Supernatural*, *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Roswell*, *The X-Files,* etc.). She refines Schmuland's images with some additional impressions, digging a bit deeper into the work pop culture representations do for/in/on audience perceptions:

1. **Protection of the record is equated with protection of the truth**
2. **The archive is a closed space and the archival experience is an interior one for the characters (with all the obstacles and frustrations that that implies)**
3. **Records in archives are "lost" and "buried," and characters must spend much time and effort "digging" in order to unearth them**
4. **The archival record invariably centres around the search for self or truth. (Buckley, 97–98).**

Buckley, "'The Truth is in the Red Files': An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture" (*Archivaria* vol. 66, Fall 2008, p 98)

"[In] many respects, popular culture is obviously aware of the true nature of the archival experience, yet it has chosen to embrace the more sensational and entertaining elements of information storage and retrieval."

As far as Buckley is concerned, the problem that needs to be solved is not necessarily making the broader pop-cultural world aware of what archives really are and what archivists really do. It's something a bit more complicated. It often appears to be the case that the demands or conventions of the narrative and format of presentation dictate which things are done right and which things are done wrong. *Ignorance* is less of a problem than *disregard* (potentially a quite common problem in pop cultural representations of a great many professions, institutions, and events). Buckley (drawing on Ketelaar) suggests what I'll call here a "semiotic turn" to consideration of the power of the *idea* of an archive (which should sound familiar to lit theory folks).

Some Notes on Archives in Horror

- Conflation of Library/Archive
- Hiddenness, secrecy, and burial/interment
- Archives as component of the broader Research Trope
- The horror occasioned by discovery
- King's *IT*; Lovecraft-o-rama

If we take a look at genre horror (in print and on screen), we see that Schmuland and Buckley's various observations are borne out there as well, particularly within the context of a broader "research trope" common to certain kinds of horror narratives. One important point for horror (if we take up Buckley's archives/truth bit) is that in a horror archive, as in horror stories more broadly speaking, some hidden truths are terrible, and should remain buried. There are innumerable examples of characters using pseudo-library (because: archives) collections to discover things they ultimately find reason to regret knowing, both about their situation and about themselves. This is a fairly familiar horror fiction motif.

Welcome to the Magnus Institute

The Magnus Archives Podcast
- 5 seasons/200 episodes, 2016-2021
- Written by Jonathan Sims
- Directed by Alexander J. Newall (Rusty Quill Podcast Network).
- *https://rustyquill.com/the-magnus-archives/*

So: With all of that groundwork laid, at last we come to the podcast!

Spoilers Beyond This Point! Beware!

The Magnus Archives is a serialized horror fiction podcast written by Jonathan Sims and directed by Alexander J. Newall, with the main story playing out in 200 episodes over five seasons from March 2016 to March 2021, produced by Rusty Quill. While it initially appears to be a straightforward horror anthology framed as a presentation of the contents of the eponymous archival collection, it eventually develops into a complex apocalyptic drama involving the Archivist (played by and named for Sims) and a large cast of characters whose interactions are shared with the audience via the same device that gives us access to the contents of the archive: cassette tape recordings. It functions as the audio-only version of found footage horror, as the listener and the characters piece together the overarching nightmare within which each statement or recorded conversation takes place. While the formula for episodes changes a bit over time as the narrative develops and more characters are introduced, the basic setup is simple: The newly promoted Head Archivist for a private academic research facility studying supernatural

subjects (the Magnus Institute) reads witness statements describing horrifying, impossible events into a tape recorder, occasionally adding his own comments on research done to confirm or falsify these statements.

We come to learn that the Magnus Institute and its Archive are not at all what they seem. The Institute, as it turns out, has two missions, both of which the archive serves. Its public, mundane mission is maintaining and organizing a collection of evidence and supporting materials for academic researchers. Its underlying mission, however, is much darker: feeding a supernatural force of fear (variously referred to as the Eye, Beholding, or the Ceaseless Watcher) with the terror experienced by the witnesses in each statement, and eventually using the Archivist who reads, performs, and internalizes these statements as the focal point to remake the world itself to feed the Eye and a host of other fear-entities that represent a complex, interrelated collection of primal terrors (the Lonely, the Vast, the Buried, the Flesh, the Spiral, the Desolation, The Web, etc.).

Describing the Collection

- Collection policy per evidentiary function
- Distinct from library/artifact collections
- Recognition of preservation as archival function
- Bonkers format conversion practice
- (Dis)organized?
- Staffing

So – what goes right in the archival collection at the Magnus Institute, and what goes wrong, where images of archives and archivists are concerned??

The few very basic facts that we learn about the Institute and its archival collection suggest something unremarkable, consistent with at least some usual archival operations. It's an evidentiary collection with what's probably a pretty straightforward collection policy, collecting written statements and supporting documentation related to cases or incidents studied by Institute researchers. There are mentions of climate-controlled document storage space, so at least someone thought a bit about *preservation* as an archival activity. There is apparently an in-house organizational system for assigning ID numbers to files in the collection. Staff consists of a Head Archivist and some archival assistants. The archive is explicitly distinct in function, staff, and location from the Institute's library and artifact collections (although the latter does match Schmuland's point about identifying archives exclusively with document collections). So far, so…familiar.

What makes familiar archival territory alien, however, starts from the very conceit of the podcast: the Archivist is doing an absolutely ridiculous format conversion, going from (relatively stable) print content to deprecated tech (the cassette tape). While he is ostensibly doing this in preparation for digitization of the records (some statements appear to crash the computer, hence the need to transcript from voice recording, allegedly), this is

– and I can't stress this enough – bonkers with a side of sillysauce as a format conversion practice. The local file ID system is also bizarre, inconsistently applied, and entirely unhelpful (as the archivist and others tell us). The archive space may not be particularly dusty, but it is in the basement, burial fans, with a hatch that leads down to horrifying tunnels below London and the buried remains of Millbank Prison (home of the Panopticon).

Interestingly, the slow reveal of the show's larger narrative depends on calling out everything that's wrong about the archives. We learn that the archive is a disorganized mess, not because this is typical archival function (people who work there know better and say so), but because Jon's predecessor (Gertrude Robinson, played on the show by Sims' mother) deliberately messed it up in order to defeat the Institute's darker agenda. Jon, of course, is a terrible archivist (promoted from among a group of archival assistants, at least two of whom were more qualified). Although he starts the job honestly, his true calling is not archiving, but feeding, internalizing, making the statements with himself and witnessing their horror. Jon learns that he was not chosen for his skills. He was chosen because he had already been touched by fear.

The Archive as Ceaseless Watcher

- Magical Spy Tapes
- The fear of Beholding (and being beheld)
- Documentation as intrusion or imposition
- Autonomy, privacy, and power

THE EYE

Most of the features of the narrative and the setting of *The Magnus Archives* seem to bear out Buckley's suggestion that what drives the correctness or incorrectness of archival representation in stories of this kind isn't necessarily ignorance, and that the *idea* of the archive has a power beyond an everyday understanding of its practical mechanics. The cassette tape recorders that seem so ridiculous for format conversion take on a life of their own in later seasons, unexpectedly appearing and recording and giving the audience a sort of voyeuristic access to events and conversations that might otherwise have remained unknown to any but their participants. While the tape recorders do not all, as it turns out, purely belong to the Eye (the Web uses them), they also serve the unsettling function of reinforcing the terror the Eye represents, leaving nothing unheard or undocumented and closing off the occasional blessing of forgetfulness by constituting a continual reminder of terrible things.

It may be that what is most frightening and most intimate about any archival collection that documents a person's life is what is most valuable about it from a historical/archival perspective: it gives us the details we otherwise might not encounter in public in everyday life. It makes an illusion of privacy as an act of self-determination, potentially removing from the individuals documented in it the power to curate or control how they are perceived or remembered (and how they perceive and remember themselves). For the dead, this is less troubling than for the living (and ethical archival practice definitely

includes (or ought to, anyway) appropriate measures for respecting privacy, sometimes in tension with maintenance of the record), but it is disturbing nonetheless, especially if one takes up the idea of the archive as a site of power over and through the control of information (there, Derrida fans – a little something for you!). *The Magnus Archives* effectively uses its deviations from correct archival representation to get at something legitimately scary and interesting about the idea of the archival record and the work of those who maintain it.

Further Steps Into The Dark

- Audio Drama
- Archives as Anthologies-in-Waiting

What's the upshot of all of this, both for Schmuland's (and the archival profession's) original problem – helping folks to understand archives – and for a deeper understanding of the idea or sign of the archive? As I close here, I want to name the two avenues of inquiry this project is likely to explore:

1. *The Magnus Archives* is hardly the only audio drama podcast that begins with an archive or archival collection and uses it to build stories (see, for example, *Archive 81* and *The Black Tapes*, among others, although the latter has more in common with public radio reporting in the *Serial* style). The unique demands of the format may suggest some podcast/audio-specific ways in which archives are represented and understood, and may in turn offer an interesting venue for possibly improving understanding.
2. The audio drama format's demands also suggest another idea or image of the archive: as an anthology-in-waiting, not so much a *historical* business as a *narrative* one – the home of the possibility of the story. The archivist's position there may shift from maintenance or protection of the record to custodian or curator of the story.

Thank you! Questions?

Selected References:

Karen Buckley, "'The Truth Is in the Red Files': An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture," *Archivaria* 66 (2008): 95–123, http://dx.doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/34730.

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Arlene Schmuland, "The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography," *The American Archivist* 62, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 24–73, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.62.1.v767822474626637.

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Magnus Archives Sources Online (Official and Fan-Produced):

Alex J. Newall and Jonathan Sims, "The Magnus Archives – Horror Podcast | Rusty Quill," http://rustyquill.com/the-magnus-archives/.

"The Magnus Archives Transcripts Archive Archive A (Extremely Unofficial)," https://snarp.github.io/magnus_archives_transcripts/.

"The Magnus Archives Wikia," https://the-magnus-archives.fandom.com/wiki/The_Magnus_Archives_Wikia.