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Traces of the past: Joseph Merrick's records

Introduction

To develop my essay's argumentation, I have chosen the question concerning the process of archive appraisal in relation to Terry Cook's quotation "We [archivists] are literally co-creating archives as records as we create archives as institutions."¹ In doing this, I will discuss how appraisal influences practices of researching archive items.

The main purpose of my choice is to prove the inaccuracy of the theoretical and methodological approach used by Terry Cook and by Deconstructionist approach more broadly. This essay bases its disagreement on Luciana Duranti's studies concerning the nature of archival material as defined by traditional archival theory.

The origin of archival body of knowledge lies in the legal disciplines which developed over the centuries through integration with philological and historical disciplines.² As a humanistic science, it addressed its own research questions using the "archival method," which derived from its body of interdisciplinary theory. In the past half century, the Anglo-Saxon archival science has slowly moved towards the social science, this movement is not common in other parts of the world, but it has had a strong impact on the nature of the discipline and on the character of the researches carried out by its specialists.³ Although social science methods

¹ Cook, T. 'We Are What We Keep; We keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future, *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011) pp. 174

² Duranti, L. and Michetti, G. "The Archival Method." in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish and Andrew Lau, Melbourne: Monash Publishing, 2015, p. 1. https://www.academia.edu/11567349/Archival_Method_-_Pre-print

³ Duranti, L. and Michetti, G. "The Archival Method," Ibidem

are primarily valid to solve practical nature's issues, they show considerable "weaknesses in addressing issues that affect the core of archival theory and which, at this time of fast and seemingly uncontrolled use of new and emerging technologies, loom larger and larger."⁴

Overall, academic reasons push me to reject this type of approach because of its invalidity in term of historical-scientific reconstruction and rational organization of the archival knowledge heritage. A-logicality, a-historicity and irrational explanation of cultural heritage and phenomena more generally must be fought in every place since, as correctly asserts Tomás Maldonado in the introduction of his book *Tecnica e Cultura: il dibattito tedesco fra Bismark and Weimar*,⁵ "the rejection of technical-scientific rationality" was among the main causes of the birth of the Third Reich. Therefore, protecting the heritage of European knowledge based on logic and history means protecting European citizens and providing them with logical tools to face the present challenges and to understand the intrinsic rationality and complexity of reality. "What is rational is real; And what is real is rational"⁶ said Friedrich Hegel, and there is no freedom without reason because it is the unique faculty which frees man from the permanent and continuous mystifications of reality.

The inquiry

Joseph Carey Merrick's records stored in Barts Health NHS Trust Archive will be the object of my inquiry. He is certainly one of the most famous English men of the Victorian age, whose life, though full of misery and pain, was an example of courage and challenge to the social conventions of the time. Afflicted by irregular periosteal neurofibromatosis, that is, the

⁴ Duranti, L. and Michetti, G. Ibidem

⁵ Monaldo, T. *Tecnica e Cultura: il dibattito tedesco fra Bismark and Weimar*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979, p. 16.

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=_8RsFFQjNO8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁶ Hegel, G., W., F. *Philosophy of Right*, 1820.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/preface.htm#xxvii>

irregular formation of fibrous membranes on the surface layers of bones and skin, Merrick's life story continues to show an extraordinary power to disturb and obsess. However, it has a specific value on the theme of human dignity and on our own sense of humanity. Its implications touch on issues such as: at what extent is our society willing to accept diversity? Are monstrosity and diversity definable as inner or outer human attributes? What place does deformity occupy in modern contemporary societies? Looking closely the events related to Joseph Merrick's life, we can agree with Diane Arbus, queen of freaks, who declared "Almost everyone goes through life fearing traumatic experiences. The freaks were born together with their trauma. They have passed their exam in life, they are aristocrats."⁷

FIG.1 Portrait photograph of Joseph Merrick (1862-1890), photographer unknown, nd (c.1889). RLHINV/771, Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

FIG.2 Sir Framed photograph, Frederick Treves, photographer unknown, nd (c.1890). RLHMC/P/3/187, Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

⁷ Di Genova, A. *Il circo nell'arte. Dagli arlecchini di Picasso al fachimiro di Cattelan*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2008, p.161

On Merrick's life is possible to find a rich bibliography,⁸ a notable 1979 play by Bernard Pomerance,⁹ a 1980 film by David Lynch and at least one important BBC documentary in 1997.¹⁰ He was born under normal circumstances¹¹ in Leicester on 5 August 1862,¹² his disease began to manifest itself as abnormal deformity of face and limbs during the first few years of life.¹³ Despite his deformities, Merrick's family support and care for him until his mother's death in 1872.¹⁴ In 1874 Joseph's father married Emma Anthill, who was unsympathetic to his condition, refused to feed him and finally sent him to live with his uncle Charles. However, in 1879 his uncle was unable to support him economically thus Joseph was forced to enter the Leicester Union Workhouse where he lived until 1884.¹⁵ In that time, Merrick left the workhouse seeking employment in a freak show from Sam Torr, here he became a living exhibition known as The Elephant Man.

In 1886, he moved to London, in Whitechapel, to work under the management of Tom Norman and lived practically in a condition of semi-slavery and solitary confinement. According the account of Sir Frederick Treves (1853–1923) (FIG.2), a surgeon of the London

⁸ Treves, F. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, London: Cassell and Co., 1923 <https://archive.org/details/elephantmanother00trevuoft>; Vigor-Mungovin, J. *Joseph: The Life, Times and Places of the Elephant Man*, London: Mango Books, 2016; Howell, M. and Ford, P. *The True History of the Elephant Man*, London: Penguin Books, 1980.

⁹ "The Elephant Man (play)." Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elephant_Man_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Elephant_Man_(play))

¹⁰ "The Elephant man - QED - Documentary - The True Story Of Joseph Merrick." *YouTube*. Video File. May 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUj8y0sCU2w>

¹¹ Brosius, S. "Neurognostics Question Metamorphosis of a Man: Diagnosing Joseph Merrick", *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 19, no. 2 (2010) p.171-172

¹² "Elephant Man' Joseph Merrick letter in Leicester display." *BBC News*. September 9, 2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-41207179>

¹³ Ibidem

¹⁴ "What Was the True Diagnosis of the Elephant Man?" (n.d.) London: Barts Health NHS Trust Archive, p.1

¹⁵ Brosius, S. "Neurognostics Question Metamorphosis of a Man: Diagnosing Joseph Merrick," Ibidem

Hospital, here he met Merrick for the first time¹⁶ and later arranged an examination with him at the Royal London Hospital.¹⁷ The police, however, prohibited the exhibition as against public decency and Merrick, unable to earn his livelihood, fled in Belgium.¹⁸ The exhibitions were soon banned also in Belgium thus Merrick, no longer a source of profitable gain, was abandoned on a train for London by his manager, who also robbed him the money he had saved.¹⁹

Joseph, therefore, with much difficulty, returned to London and reached the Hospital. Here, for some time, Merrick occupied a little room in the attics, while Mr Treves attempted to find him a permanent resting place. Finally, Mr Carr Gomm, the chairman of the hospital committee, wrote a letter to the *Times* asking for money for his support²⁰ and the authorities accepted Merrick as a permanent resident. During this time, Mr Treves and Joseph Merrick became good friends. Merrick's condition deteriorated in 1890, he died on 11 April at the age of 27. Cause of his death was given as asphyxia at which the weight of his head had contributed.²¹ His skeleton is kept at Royal London Hospital Museum's medical school. The precise cause of his deformities is still unknown.²²

¹⁶ Treves, F. *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, p.2-3

¹⁷ Brosius, S. Ibidem

¹⁸ Treves, F., p.9

¹⁹ Ibidem, p.10

²⁰ "The Elephant Man." *Letters of Note*. August 5, 2016.

<http://www.lettersofnote.com/2016/08/the-elephant-man.html>

²¹ "Elephant Man' Joseph Merrick letter in Leicester display." *BBC News*.

²² Ibidem

FIG.3 Primary sources displayed in the Royal London Hospital Museum. Accessed April 11, 2014. Available from <https://www.traveldarkly.com/joseph-merrick-elephant-man-london-hospital-museum/>

My inquiry on Joseph Merrick's records started with a catalogue research, which has showed the complex organization of materials. Indeed, from the interview to an Archives member of staff, I could notice that these records have four characteristics. Firstly, Joseph Merrick's records come from two different series: the Royal London Hospital Archives and the Royal London Hospital Museum related to the Pathology Medical School. Secondly, the fact that part of materials is exhibited in the Royal London Hospital Museum and the rest is stored in NHS Archive. Thirdly, there are few primary sources such as hat, skeleton, a work of art and a picture of him (FIG.1), exhibited in the Royal London Hospital Museum (FIG.3),

while the inpatient registry (FIG.4-5-6) and the death registry (FIG.8) are stored in NHS Archives; and a several amounts of secondary sources (FIG.7-9), which have accumulated over time and could widen in relation to the acquisition of new studies on Joseph Merrick. Fourthly, materials come from different place, such as permanent preservation or people donations, and different times but they are compiled together because they are related to him.

FIG.4 Inpatient registry, cameraphone image by Giada Di Trinca, 18 December 2018. Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

FIG.5 Inpatient registry, cameraphone image by Giada Di Trinca, 18 December 2018. Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

Moreover, materials as subject files collected many sources of different types such as articles, correspondence with the Pathology Museum for 30 years, which came when the Pathology Museum closed 10 years ago, various photocopies, films, photographs, people who wrote about him as Doctor Treves. Records are stored in three boxes, which collect a huge number of secondary sources, which came in last 20-30 years. All these strange series of records came at the Archives as subject files, that is as sources collected because of the fame of Joseph Merrick, not as authority files. Thus, the NHS Archives tended to collect anything

relevant to Merrick out of its own specific task, which become part of the archives itself. In this regard, Joseph Merrick's records are also a good example of a mix of materials, which are not all original and have different proveniences. The significance of one of its most famous patients has so pushed the Archives to collect new records and continuously integrate them with other materials.

Number	Name	Details
1389	John	...
1390	Thomas	...
1391	William	...
1392	William	...
1393	Charles	...
1394	George	...
1395	Charles	...
1396	Patricia	...
1397	George	...
✓ 1398	Joseph	...
25 1399	Benjamin	...
1400	Charles	...
1401	Thomas	...
1402	Robert	...
1403	James	...
1404	Robert	...
1405	John	...
1406	Frederick	...
1407	William	...
26 1408	Thomas	...

FIG.6 Inpatient registry, cameraphone image by Giada Di Trinca, 18 December 2018. Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

The particular nature of these files show how the concept of appraisal is changed with the time adapting to the different circumstances, in this case is based on historical research value and on historical significance value. According the Archives' member of staff, appraisal should be done as much objective as it is possible, however, it is hard to imagine what kind of appraisal was done on these materials because they came in many different ways on the basis of their evidential value.

Traces of the past thus come to life in the enormous flow of time though historical significance and even though we do not keep everything from the past such as the few primary

source of Joseph Merrick's records, secondary sources help us to rearrange the past rationally. Boris Eikhenbaum asserted, "we do not apprehend all the facts at once; it is not always the same facts we take in, and not always the same correlations of facts we need to bring out."²³ This because the past must be ceaselessly rethought, reorganised and rediscovered in the light of the present in order to be used "in a creative way to shape our society."²⁴

FIG.7 Secondary sources, cameraphone image by Giada Di Trinca, 18 December 2018. RLHLH/P/3/24, Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

²³ Dabrowski, M. *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998, p.80 https://monoskop.org/Alexander_Rodchenko

²⁴ Duranti, L. "So? What Else is New? The Ideology of Appraisal Yesterday and Today." in *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice, Proceedings of the Joint Meeting of the Association of British Columbia Archivists and the Northwest Archivists Association*. Vancouver, British Columbia, April 26-28, 1990. Christopher Hives, ed. (Vancouver: Archives Association of British Columbia, 1990), p.13. https://www.academia.edu/24464057/_So_What_Else_is_New_The_Ideology_of_Appraisal_Yesterday_and_Today_

Past records must, therefore, necessarily be limited in number, although they are rich in information, and oblige us to “invent new science to access their hidden messages,” as for example semiotics, palaeography, epigraphy, diplomatics and so forth. Integral preservation of all documents is both impossible and not desirable, because it “mirrors an idea of stillness,” which is “in contrast with the sense of life” and its continuous innovations.²⁵ At this point my inquiry has taken in consideration the core question of my research: the concept of appraisal and how it influences practices of researching archive items.

FIG.8 Death registry, cameraphone image by Giada Di Trinca, 18 December 2018. Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

Appraisal: Theory, Methodology, Practice

In the last decades, appraisal has become one of the central subject matters of archival literature, however, as Luciana Duranti claims, “the approach to appraisal issues has been primarily methodological and practical,”²⁶ instead of theoretical. Appraisal is a process to establish the value of documents made or received during the conduct of affairs, it qualifies the value and determines its duration.²⁷ Its primary aim is to identify the documents which has “to

²⁵ Duranti, L. “So? What Else is New? The Ideology of Appraisal Yesterday and Today.” p.4

²⁶ Duranti, L. “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory.” *American Archivist* 57, Spring 1994, p. 328

https://www.academia.edu/11313402/The_Concept_of_Appraisal_and_Archival_Theory

²⁷ Duranti, L. “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory.” p.329

be continuously preserved for an unlimited period of time.”²⁸ The identification can happen both as appraisal for selection and as appraisal for acquisition.

FIG.9 Secondary sources, cameraphone image by Giada Di Trinca, 18 December 2018. RLHLH/P/3/24, Royal London Hospital Archives and Museum.

Appraisal for selection is an essential archival function that demarcate our knowledge of past and influence our ability to form future.²⁹ Nowadays archival theory includes a huge number of conflicting and ambiguous criteria and terminology that correspond to an imprecise conceptualization of the appraisal issues involved.³⁰ The crucial problem is how mitigate the distortion in the documentary heritage of society caused by the subjective process of

²⁸ Duranti, L. Ibidem

²⁹ Turner, J. "A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection". Master's thesis, Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1992, p.ii
<https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0086420>

³⁰ Turner, J. "A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection".

apportioning value to records.³¹ Value is, indeed, a relative concept, which is not inherent in records, but is relative to the perspective of who ascribes such value: the records creator, the researcher or the archivist.³² In the modern time the massive growth of records has determined the development of several methods to select records for permanent preservation.³³

The debate on the concept of appraisal has associated to it some ideas as that it must be impartial, objective and professional; it must be based on an analytic knowledge and provide a complete picture of society.³⁴ Western countries have defined different methods for attributing record's value with diverse and contrasting approaches, such as provenience or pertinence, top-down or bottom-up, macro-appraisal and documentary strategy. The fact is that some of the archival methodological ideas derived from archival theory, such as the principle of provenience and original order, but when these methodological ideas reached the North America the ideas about the nature of archival material, namely theoretical, have never really entered in the North American archival discourse.³⁵

Luciana Duranti defines archival theory as “the whole of the ideas about what archival material is,” archival methodology as “the whole of the ideas about how to treat it,” and archival practice as “the use that archivists make of both theoretical and methodological ideas in their work.”³⁶ Moreover, she notices as for example, the concept of impartiality, derived by Hilary Jenkinson, “is a characteristic of archival documents, not of their creator, who are naturally partial to their own interests.”³⁷ This exemplifies as the misunderstanding of some key archival concepts has generated the current state of confusion related to appraisal process.

³¹ Ibidem

³² Turner, J. “A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection”. p.ii

³³ Ibidem

³⁴ Duranti, L. “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory.” p.330

³⁵ Duranti, L. Ibidem, p.334

³⁶ Ibidem, p.330

³⁷ Ibidem, p.334

Appraisal is, indeed, an ideological process, it has always been so and will always be.³⁸ Rightly Duranti claims that societal evolutive process, like evolutive process of nature, consist in the reception from the past of those elements which are essential and functional to develop the present, and to overcome it. This happens extracting from the past what gives at present the possibility of operating creatively in order to construct the future.³⁹ Therefore, the action of selection has two implications: firstly, societies preserve what they need for their survival, secondly, selection has to be functional to this purpose and has to occur within the complex political, juridical, economic, cultural and moral factors.⁴⁰ Factors which are essential in making up the society that has created the documentation. The choices of a given society, in preserving or rejecting documentation, are sources to understand such society because the criteria of choice have always political purposes, therefore, also impartial appraisal has itself an ideological nature.

In relation to this, documentation strategy of Total Archive supported by Terry Cook is in itself ideological besides is proved to be difficult to apply in practice.⁴¹ Indeed, according Rebecka Sheffield, it “is not a realistic strategy for capturing memories of minority groups, activist communities, marginalized populations, or social outcasts. Nor is it able to ensure the preservation of records that document the everyday lives of all Canadian citizens in an increasingly diverse society.” Moreover, it presupposes archival appraisal as an objective process but, as we have been able to notice, the ideological nature of archival appraisal process excludes this possibility. “The society, from which the material is originated and for whose

³⁸ Duranti, L. “So? What Else is New? The Ideology of Appraisal Yesterday and Today.” p.5

³⁹ Duranti, L. “So? What Else is New? The Ideology of Appraisal Yesterday and Today.”, p.4

⁴⁰ Ibidem

⁴¹ Sheffield, R. “Total Archives: A brief history.” <http://www.rebeckasheffield.com/total-archives/>

sake it is to be preserved, is the only one which can provide archivists with tools to assess the conceptions by which they bring the past into the present.”⁴²

According Luciana Duranti, it is with Schellenberg’s definition of archives that begin the conceptual distortion of archival knowledge heritage because it was theoretically flawed from the fact that “he arrived at it on purely pragmatic grounds.” Indeed, although he was willing to accept that archivists needed rules of procedure, he did not base those rules on ideas about the universal proprieties of archives or examined his own basic ideas about archives, presenting them as self-evident truths.⁴³ Essentially, the main conflict, that this distortion determined, was between users’ need for accurate and complete evidence and practical archival needs to evaluate and preserve the documentation. Above all Schellenberg’s distinction between records and archives conflicted with the role of archivists as creators of historical value, collectors of historical information and protector of evidence. Because Jenkinson principles, instead, openly founded archival documents’ qualities on their nature as means for, and by-products of, actions, which were not “in the interest or for the information of Posterity.”⁴⁴ For this reason, documents are “free from the suspicious of prejudice in regard to the interests in which we now use them, archival documents are impartial and cannot tell...anything but the truth.”⁴⁵

Impartiality is, therefore, a quality inherent to the nature of document not to appraisal’s practices or methodologies. Appraisal methodology and practices should be driven primarily by archival theory, without attributing external imposed values to records. As stated by Luciana Duranti, the duty of archival profession is acting “as a mediator between those who produce archives and those who use them, as a facilitator of public memory making and keeping.”⁴⁶

⁴² Turner, J. “A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection”. p.49-50

⁴³ Duranti, L. “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory.” p339

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p.334

⁴⁵ Ibidem

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p.343

This means that, ensuring an integral and complete preservation of a societal archives must be always “accompanied by the effort to ensure its reliability and trustworthiness, its procedural authenticity and formal genuineness.”⁴⁷ In short, Jenkinson principles are still necessary to assure the probative nature of records, the challenge is to mediate between users’ needs and the archival profession responsibility to preserve, mediate and facility societal evidences, not necessarily to document or interpret them.⁴⁸

From this point of view, Merrick’s records prove as our limited past knowledge is necessary for the natural development our society, which needs the past for creatively build the future. The gaps in the flux of the time are engendered by the natural impenetrability of reality, which has, however, needed to be explored and investigated in order to give it a rational explanation. An explanation which should take in charge of solve organically the conflicting points of view without invalidate reliability, trustworthiness, authenticity and genuineness of archival materials, whose probative nature is given by the specificity of its procedures.

⁴⁷ Ibidem

⁴⁸ Duranti, L. “The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory.” p.343

Conclusion

“If I could reach from pole to pole or grasp the ocean with a span, I would be measured by the soul; The mind’s the standard of the man.”⁴⁹

My inquiry has tried to prove, through the relationship between primary and secondary sources, as the correct understanding our heritage need to be continuously renewed in order to create new meanings at the present time. Appraisal practices are thus necessary actions to preserve the documentation produced by our society. In this regard, what must be avoided is applying methodologies and practices which do not take in consideration the theoretical framework of archival knowledge because, as every discipline, it has a remarkable heritage of own theories and investigative tools. The archival science is, indeed, based on history, law and philology.

If the mind is the standard of the man, what he produces is necessarily related to his ability to engage creatively and rationally in reality. An irrational society produce a knowledge heritage irrational, therefore, correcting interpretative distortions is a hard but necessary work for the future generations, which though our knowledge heritage, our actions, our values will be able to build creatively tomorrow’s society. Joseph Merrick’s life and his challenge to the time’s conventions are the demonstration of an untiring spiritual force, a goodness of spirit that has never left him, even in the hardest moments of his short existence. His monstrosity was certainly an obstacle for all those which could not engage with his profound humanity but it proves that the inner beauty overcome the time and shines where someone is able to gather it.

⁴⁹ “Joseph Merrick.” Wikiquote. Accessed January 13, 2018.
https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Joseph_Merrick

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