

Navigating the anarchival landscape of Philippine cinema: Insights from Bliss Cua Lim's *Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema*

Adrian D. Mendizabal

Bliss Cua Lim's book *Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema* (2024) is the culmination of a decade-long research project that examines the historical factors contributing to the absence of a legislated national audiovisual archive in the Philippines, an archive that would serve as the default custodian of the country's historically significant films and audiovisual materials.

Anarchival Condition Defined

In the book, Lim develops the concept of the “anarchival condition.” For Lim (2024), anarchival condition defines the precarious state of film archiving in the Philippines. She situates the anarchival condition within “institutional precarity, scarcity, and circumscribed circulation of Philippine cinematic history” (p. 4). She historically traces such a condition to the lack of support of the government in fully instituting a nationally mandated film and audiovisual archives that can collect, preserve, and make accessible the audiovisual heritage of the country (p. 24). Archival condition is the result of anarchivality, which, for artist-scholars Adami and Ferrini, is a constant state of the archive being thrown to its own destruction, its tendency for subversion, and its potential to be regenerated in a state of unexplored potentiality (Adami & Ferrini, 2014, para. 3). In short, anarchivality is archival precarity, the incapacity for the archives to constitute its own self within institutions for many reasons, resulting to a more general encompassing term—“the anarchival condition.” In this book, Lim analyzes the lines of

archival precarity (anarchivality) in different periods in Philippine history resulting to what she calls the anarchival condition of Philippine film and audiovisual archiving practice in the Philippines.

Theoretical Roots of Anarchival Condition

Lim derives the concept from Derrida's bifurcated and contradictory definition of "archive fever." Derrida (1995) in turn takes from Freud's "death drive" to express the burning desire to archive which is also contradictorily associated with the consuming threat of "destruction, forgetfulness, and loss" (p. 5). To be anarchivic or archiviolithic is to be archive-destroying: "never present in person...[and] leaves no monument...no document of its own. As inheritance, it leaves only its erotic simulacrum...lovely impressions" (Derrida, 1995, pp. 10-11).

The concept of the anarchivality offers both Lim and Derrida a framework for exploring the dual nature of archives—that the **archival** is inherently threatened by the **anarchival** and vice-versa, meaning archives, once subject to the forces of time and the exteriority of space, albeit persevering for preservation, are always at risk of not sustaining themselves. Derrida emphasizes this exteriority, noting that archives, once removed from their original contexts and treated as objects outside human relationships, are simultaneously vulnerable to destruction and endowed with the potential for lasting indefinitely.

Lim delves into the concept of the anarchivality to analyze the state of audiovisual archiving in the Philippines. Rather than adhering strictly to Derrida's philosophical interpretation, she redefines anarchivality as a condition of institutional precarity. She argues that this condition is not inherently archival but rather a consequence of the instability of political will. Due to the lack of legislation, Filipino audiovisual collections remain vulnerable, subject to the whims of whoever holds political power. In the Philippines, political appointments change every six years, and since Martial Law, there have been six presidential administrations. None of these leaders have committed to the institutionalization of archives for film and audiovisual materials. This, to Lim, is the important institutional context that shapes the anarchival condition of Philippine cinema.

The Anarchival Condition as a Marcosian Legacy

Lim contends that the anarchival condition of the Philippines' audiovisual heritage is largely a legacy of Marcosian "edifice politics"—an approach characterized by grand, rapid projects that are quickly abandoned. This anarchival condition is thoroughly examined in the first two chapters ("A Tale of Three Buildings: Marcos Cultural Policy and Anarchival Temporality")

and “Silence, Perseverance, and Survival in State-Run Philippine Archives”). In these sections, Lim traces the provenance of the Philippines’ audiovisual collection within both the Marcos and post-Marcos state apparatuses. She delves into Marcos’s cultural policies and the organizational failures within the Philippine Information Agency to assess the extent of the precariousness facing audiovisual materials. Lim builds on the concept of deprioritized heritage, arguing that the Philippine government “has never regarded film archiving as central to the convergence between statecraft and cinema” (Lim, 2024, p. 35).

In the following four chapters, she examines various lines of flight of anarchivality, or archival precarity: first, in the contradictions of privatized film archives; then, much like in her earlier work *Translating Time*, she reimagines temporality in the context of film restoration and its emerging audiences. In the succeeding chapters, Lim explores potential sites of resistance to anarchivality in two public programs she identifies with informal archiving, or archiving conducted outside conventional frameworks.

The Anarchival Condition as Privatized Response to Institutional Precarity

After the fall of the Martial Law regime in 1986, the Philippine government began allocating a budget for cultural heritage preservation, but this remains an ongoing challenge. For Lim, this persistent issue has made privatization a precarious solution. Private organizations and companies like ABS-CBN have established film archives that have become the most reliable means of preserving the country’s surviving audiovisual heritage. However, this comes with a caveat: private companies must prioritize their own audiovisual assets over others. Lim’s book also highlights how film companies are also participating in this anarchival moment to fill in the gap.

Lim discusses how the anarchival condition manifests as an unavoidable deprioritization by private interests. Companies with limited resources cannot function as de facto national audiovisual archives, as they are also subject to the financial pressures of the local political economy and market competition. This vulnerability was starkly illustrated in 2020 when ABS-CBN’s legislative franchise was not renewed, putting its film archives at risk of closure due to a lack of resources to maintain its facilities. This section of the book is worth digging into, and perhaps researchers of the future can also lay out how audiovisual archiving must be factored into by film producers themselves. Lim’s book touches only the tip of the iceberg of private archiving initiatives in the film industry. Historians of the archive might be interested in uncovering what happened to the collections of LVN,

Lebran, Sampaguita, movie companies of the country's so-called olden era of cinema. It is also high time to ask what the recent closure of CNN Philippines implies for their audiovisual and digital assets.

The Anarchival Condition as a Gendered Discourse

For Lim, anarchival temporality is also a gendered discourse. In all the chapters in the book, this is perhaps Lim's most inventive in terms of looping in the discourse of archiving and gender together. In her analysis of the restoration of Danny Zialcita's classic film *T-Bird at Ako*, undertaken by ABS-CBN's Sagip Pelikula program, she critiques the film's heterocentric narrative. *T-Bird at Ako* tells a coded lesbian story through its characters Sabel (Wilma Santos) and Sylvia (Nora Aunor), but ultimately concludes with a heteronormative "happy ending." Lim links this to the dominant sexual politics of the Marcos era, which prioritized hetero-patriarchal representations of sexual orientation and gender. Through the restoration of films like *T-Bird at Ako*, archives bring these works into contemporary discourse, where they are anachronistically interpreted in light of their original contexts.

Lim argues that the anarchival condition is evident when film archives prioritize the restoration of canonical, auteurist, and heteronormative-themed films. She criticizes archives for their tendency to "reproduce rather than challenge existing expectations about films and their audiences" (p. 168). Lim bluntly points out that while ABS-CBN's restoration project is commendable, it largely favors mainstream films and lacks criticality in its appraisal and selection process—evident in the absence of restored films from regional cinema.

Although discussed only briefly, Lim also underscores the importance of audiovisual archiving "away from the center" (p. 169) which encompasses both non-mainstream and non-heteronormative works. Her re-reading of *T-Bird at Ako* brings to attention critical aspects of the archiving process: selection and acquisition. This core process requires archives to assess and prioritize materials based on their historical significance. Lim's critique of ABS-CBN's appraisal policy highlights the limited scope of films chosen for restoration, focusing primarily on mainstream titles. She challenges the company to broaden its selection to include regional films, non-commercial works such as documentaries, animation, and experimental films.

The Anarchival Condition as Sites of Resistance and Resurgence

In the subsequent chapters, Lim explores the informal responses of private collectors to the anarchival condition of Philippine cinema. She highlights notable efforts such as Simon Santos' Video 48, a private collection of physical

media, the experimental film collective The Kalampag Tracking Agency, and the film *Iskalawags*, all of which reinvent the notion of the archival amidst the precarious status of institutional audiovisual archiving. Lim defines informal archives as “collections that do not call themselves archives or conform to the official policies of organizations like the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) yet nonetheless collect, maintain, and make available swaths of Philippine cinema that would otherwise be neglected and inaccessible” (p. 174). These examples demonstrate the various ways in which informal archives function, challenging traditional notions of what constitutes an archive.

Video 48, often described as the last video rental store in Manila (Pamaran, 2017), has been collecting Tagalog-language, feature-length films produced by the Manila-based film industry since 1988. It functions both as a concept store for film enthusiasts and as a repository for a wide array of materials, including magnetic media, movie memorabilia, posters, film magazines, photographs, and Filipino comics. Simon Santos, the owner, not only curates these collections but also contributes to the Video 48 film blog, where he writes about the golden era of Philippine cinema. Despite its ongoing presence as a blog, Video 48 faced challenges during the pandemic, including economic pressures and scrutiny from the Optical Media Board, leading it to close its rental operations and continue only as a movie memorabilia store (Lim, 2024, p. 178).

For Lim, Video 48’s cinephilia-driven approach to curation, distribution, and promotion resembles a riverine system: it is asymmetrical and contributes to the broader landscape of film preservation. The anarchival condition that once made commercially viable films rare is countered by Video 48’s active collection policy, which keeps these films accessible to the public. Lim’s book positions Video 48 at the heart of the struggle against the anarchival condition: it is where some of the rarest local films find refuge on VCD and DVD discs. In many ways, Video 48 may be our last hope for accessing these films. However, as a privately run initiative, its future remains precarious, potentially leading to its eventual inaccessibility. It is clear in this chapter that private collection is not the answer to the anarchivality of Philippine Cinema.

While Video 48 offers a commercial industry alternative to address the anarchival condition, the film collective and touring program Kalampag Tracking Agency focuses on curating, programming, and promoting experimental cinema (Lim, 2024, p. 181). Experimental films face an even greater risk of being lost or destroyed compared to traditional local commercial films. The Kalampag Tracking Agency’s collection policy, as an informal archive, is dedicated to showcasing this endangered alternative

film heritage, which often challenges the state apparatus (Seno, 2014). Unlike the individual effort of Video 48, the Kalampag Tracking Agency operates as a collective. Both initiatives use anachronism as a strategy to navigate and counteract the state-induced anarchival condition.

The Kalampag Tracking Agency excels in raising awareness of Philippine experimental cinema, revealing its existence and significance. However, as Lim's narrative reveals, the collective lacks the infrastructure to preserve the original formats of these films. Instead, their curatorial efforts are distributed as digital files, which, while convenient, have found greater acceptance and popularity in arthouse spaces. Kalampag Tracking Agency also addresses the broader anarchival condition affecting experimental film archiving in the Philippines. While the initiative has successfully brought together these films in a collective effort, it underscores the absence of a central archive for experimental cinema. Unlike Jonas Mekas' Anthology Film Archives, which has a dedicated preservation program for experimental and avant-garde works, local experimental films, which are often overlooked by private archives, remain at risk of deterioration and loss (Lim, 2024).

From Anarchival Condition to Archival Counterpublic

Lim concludes her exploration of anarchivality by recontextualizing it within the film medium. She identifies a resurgence of archival potential in the film *Iskalawags*. Lim's advocacy focuses on reclaiming the archive by revitalizing the public's connection to the past. *Iskalawags* employs the tropes of Filipino Cebuano action films and features community screenings in places like Bantayan Cebu to reintroduce the public to the lost art of pulp action cinema. According to Lim, this audiovisual expression taps into a collective yearning for an audiovisual archive, rekindling an appreciation for the genre and its historical significance.

Can community screenings of old films or those with nostalgic elements reignite the need to preserve past audiovisual works? Borrowing genre tropes from past works tend to be nostalgic and therefore an insufficient driver for preservation. Nostalgia can indeed foster interest, but it can also foster selective remembering that can potentially lead to historical distortion and disinformation. Nostalgia fails to address the crucial collective memories that are needed to preserve as a nation, especially those that are difficult to keep—the painful, tragic, and dark memories. Lim proposes the concept of an “archival counterpublic” (p. 274) a futural entity which advocates for a legislated national audiovisual archive which can only be fueled when this entity have access to the archive itself.

However, an archival counterpublic cannot be constituted if such a public is still mired in their own class conditions. It is important to talk

about the “archive” and memory work along the lines of class and historical consciousness. Without changing the social conditions of the people, and without educating the public about the importance of archiving, no counterpublic can arise from such a quagmire of problems.

At its core, the book is a landmark study in diagnosing the anarchival condition historically affecting the constitution of a national audiovisual archive. It ultimately challenges the film audience to reconsider the role of the film archive in their own experience of cinema. Lim argues that while archivists can only do so much, it is the responsibility of the public to advocate for the institutionalization of a national audiovisual archive. She emphasizes that the film community, and the broader Filipino public—both present and future audiences—are crucial to this endeavor. Lim urges us, as viewers, to unite in overcoming anarchivality and to support the establishment of a national audiovisual archive as a crucial step forward.

References

- Adami, E., & Ferrini, A. (2014). Editorial – The anarchival impulse. *Mnemoscape*, 1(1). <https://www.mnemoscape.org/single-post/2014/09/14/editorial-the-anarchival-impulse>
- Derrida, J. (1995). *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lim, B. C. (2024). *The archival afterlives of Philippine cinema*. Duke University Press.
- Pamaran, M. D. (2017, December 8). Video 48, the last rental shop in Manila, keeps a bygone era alive. *Esquire*. <https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/features/the-last-video-rental-shop-in-manila-a1664-20171208-lfrm2>

Grant Support Details

Author Contributions: All research activities and writing were done by A. Mendizabal. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The author received no specific funding for this work.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Filipino archivists and memory workers for continually committing to the preservation and access of local documentary heritage.

Conflict of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

About the Author

ADRIAN D. MENDIZABAL (admendizabal@up.edu.ph) is a University Researcher I of the University of the Philippines Film Institute (UPFI). He earned his MA Media Studies (Film) from UPFI in 2023 and BS Chemical Engineering from the UP Diliman College of Engineering, in 2011. As a researcher, he provides support for the collections management efforts at the UPFI Film Archives and Library and contributes to the academic program development of the UP Film Institute. He is also one of the ArtsEquator 2024 Fellows. Additionally, he volunteers at the Philippine Labor Movement Archive, assisting in the management of its photographic and audiovisual collections. He is currently the Project Leader of the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Library – Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP) Planning Grant, a partnership project of the UCLA Library and the Society of Filipino Archivists. Previously, he worked as Head Researcher for the PUP-NCCA Project, the Philippine Documentary Heritage: Archival Collection related to the COVID-19 Pandemic. He is also a film critic, having contributed film reviews and essays on Philippine cinema and the local media industry to various publications such as *VCinema*, *Pelikula: A Journal on Philippine Cinema*, *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Plaridel Journal*, *Kino Punch*, *NANG 2*, *La Furia Umana*, *New Durian Cinema*, *Transit Journal*, *Sinekultura Film Journal*, and *MUBI Notebook*. He is currently working on a research project exploring the relationship of memory, technics, archives, and social movements.

Plaridel Open Access Policy Statement

As a service to authors, contributors, and the community, *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* provides open access to all its content. To ensure that all articles are accessible to readers and researchers, these are available for viewing and download (except Early View) from the *Plaridel* journal website, provided that the journal is properly cited as the original source and that the downloaded content is not modified or used for commercial purposes. *Plaridel*, published by the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>).

How to cite this article in APA

Mendizabal, A. D. (2024). Navigating the anarchival landscape of Philippine cinema: Insights from Bliss Cua Lim's Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema. *Plaridel*, 21(2), 267-274 <https://doi.org/10.52518/2024.21.2-06amdzb>

