

In the information age, it can be easy to overlook the impact of the material forms that archives can take.

The materiality of archives is a direct consequence of the technology used to create them in their original context. The technologies of paper, pen and ink; of printing press and letterpress; of typewriter, carbon paper and Gestetner; of telex and wet and dry process fax; of photocopier, daisywheel and laser printer; all determine the material form of the records created using them. With non-textual forms of records, the technology used has determined the material form of the resulting record in even more obvious ways: reel-to-reel magnetic tapes, glass-plate photographic negatives and so forth.

Writing about his recent film of Samuel Beckett's play, *Krapp's Last Tape*, director Atom Egoyan celebrates the physical nature of Krapp's 'personal archiving technology' and of other pre-digital technologies: '...As the play brilliantly chronicles, there was a time when tape was wound, reels of film spooled, and images produced by the physical movement of materials...' (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 December 2002).

The materiality of archives means that they are more than just information resources, more than information with a context, and more than sources of historical or other forms of evidence. They are artefacts: things made by human beings, who are often the actors in the story that the archives relate. They have a physical form and presence. As Egoyan notes, '...From the carved tablets of the Ten Commandments to the boxes of ancient magnetic tapes that Krapp lugs to his desk, there was a cumbersomeness to these archives that related to their human origins... They were handmade. They couldn't betray their origins. They were touching because they were made to be touched...'

In Philip K Dick's 1962 science fiction/alternative history novel *The Man in the High Castle*, historical artefacts are said to possess 'historicity' when they are intimately connected with historical events. To avid collectors (in this case the members of an Imperial Japanese elite ruling the West Coast of the USA who are fascinated with the artefacts of American history and popular culture), the notion of historicity is much more than authenticity (itself a further theme in the novel). While an artefact's authenticity may be proved or disproved — as one character notes: '...I'd have to prove it to you with some sort of document... The paper proves its worth, not the object itself!' — its historicity is a mystical quality which can be felt by someone sufficiently attuned and which may give it immense value.

Without wishing to get needlessly metaphysical, the idea that experiencing contact with an artefact, including an archive, can create a mystical bond with the historical events or actors with which it is associated is an attractive one. The ability to connect to the past through contact with artefacts from that past is part of the magic of museums and was undoubtedly a factor in the astounding popularity of the National Library's recent *Treasures of the World's Great Libraries* exhibition, which proved that this magic can be found in documentary materials as well as in objects.

This is one of the reasons why many archives institutions, including State Records, have breathed new life into their exhibition programs in recent years, at the same time as they have embraced digitisation and online technologies to make their collections more widely accessible and keep them protected from excessive use. It is certainly part of the poignancy of the display of Fiona Kemp's own personal childhood memories in our current exhibition, *The House of Exquisite Memory*.

While most museums can expect to display at least a significant proportion of their collections at any one time, no archives institution can hope to display more than an infinitesimal portion of its collection. The choices of subject matter, specific material to display and exhibition design become even more crucial for archives, because the opportunities to exercise them are so limited. Security issues and the inherent fragility of most archival material make the job even harder.

The information age creates wonderful opportunities for making archives more easily accessible through digitisation and other technologies. It is important, though, that we do not let this cut us off from the magic in the materiality of archives.

David Roberts, Director, State Records

Materiality & Magic

