

**Archive 81**

<https://www.netflix.com/title/80222802>

*Interview with Camila Zorrilla Tessler, Yale University;  
Karlie Herndon, University of Mississippi; and  
Sally Blanchard-O'Brien, Vermont Historical Records*

*In January 2022, Netflix released a new series [Archive 81](#). The streaming television show, based on the [horror podcast](#) of the same name, centers on audiovisual archivist Dan as he begins a project restoring video footage that was damaged in a fire nearly thirty years earlier. This review explores the representation of archives and archivists in Archive 81. **Camila Zorrilla Tessler**, archivist at Yale, listened to the podcast and posed questions about the Netflix series to **Karlie Herndon**, Library Specialist I at the University of Mississippi, and **Sally Blanchard-O'Brien**, roving archivist with the Vermont Historical Records Program.*



*Publicity photograph for Netflix's Archive 81 features the two main characters, Dan (left) and Melody (right). Image courtesy of Netflix.*

**Camila:** In the grand world of horror podcasts, *Archive 81* caught my eye because of the title: Was it about an archives and an archivist, or was the title just a name for a collection of stories? I was thrilled to learn that the podcast was about a young archivist named Dan, who is starting a new term position in a mysterious archives

to stabilize and digitize cassette tapes. Dan is also recording both his work and each tape session as he digitizes them. Each tape is part of the oral history of an apartment building called the Visser Building; the tapes were damaged in a fire and need a professional hand to repair them. What follows is an exploration of psychological horror as the isolation, the fear, and (possibly) the content of the tapes themselves begin to take their toll on Dan. I tried to apply a non-critical lens to the story, but found that as an archivist, there were aspects I simply could not leave unexamined.

### **Was Dan, the archivist in the podcast on which the television show is based, accurately presented as an archivist in the Netflix series?**

**Camila:** The producers of the podcast put archivists front and center in the archives. I wanted to know if the *Archives 81* television show does the same. In the podcast, we hear Dan present his credentials to his boss, Virgil Davenport, and describe the work he is about to do restoring the damaged tapes. He is very specific in the work he details, which means that the listener doesn't question his activities. As an archivist listening to the podcast, I was impressed with the podcast writer's ability to synthesize technical archival jargon into something comprehensible to the layperson listener. I believed that Dan was, in fact, a graduate of an archival science program. Davenport even states that it's important that Dan listens to each tape in full, which eliminated my nitpicky questioning as to why someone would spend processing time listening to an entire tape instead of just listening to sections. This was critical to me, as a listener, because another archives-inspired horror podcast (*The Magnus Archives*<sup>1</sup>) wasn't concerned with accuracy.

**Karlie:** In the first episode of the Netflix series, the audience learns that Dan works for The Museum of the Moving Image, but the show never elaborates on his title or credentials. He is a film buff—this much is clear—and he spends his free time browsing sidewalk sales and shops for interesting VHS tapes and film reels. If he has any archival training, viewers understand it only through his ability to restore the materials he receives. In the first episode, Dan's boss gives him a last-minute assignment to “restore and digitize” a Hi8 videotape before the next morning for an important donor to the museum, Virgil Davenport. The audience sees Dan don white cotton gloves, carefully remove the film from the plastic casing, clean the film with alcohol, and replace the film in a clean, new plastic case. *Et voilà*. He succeeds in restoring what turns out to be around two minutes of film. While film restoration can be a much more complex process, we do get a taste of the precision needed for this kind of task. Even so, we see very little archival work happen.

**Sally:** In the show, Dan only performs some functions important to archival work. He is concerned with the restoration and reformatting of the media but does not undertake any appraisal or description of it. He's concerned with the materials'

---

<sup>1</sup> Sims, J. (2016-2021). *The Magnus Archives*. whole, Rusty Quill.

long-term preservation only in that he's storing them in the archival conditions that his employer, the LMG Corporation and its CEO Virgil Davenport, set up (presumably—the audience doesn't actually know what the environmental conditions are like in the facility). I don't personally know enough about restoration processes to know if what's depicted is accurate, but I can say one thing: it's likely that the tapes, if damaged, would only have one play left in them, and it's unthinkable that an archivist or conservator would rewind the tapes while digitizing them.

Unfortunately, archival stereotypes are reinforced by the show's depiction. Dan loves "old stuff" and has outdated technology in his own house. He's also incredibly solitary, devoting himself to his work, and he is mysterious and unknowable, having no social media presence and deeply protecting his privacy. While there is nothing wrong with any of these traits, this characterization ultimately equates Dan with his work, showing archivists as one-dimensional and inseparable from the work they do. The show also perpetuates archives as mysterious places full of lost things and presents the people who work with these materials as equally mysterious and unknowable.



*Dan works at restoring and digitizing videotapes that have been damaged in a fire.  
Image courtesy of Netflix.*

**Is the sense of voyeurism that the podcast conveys—the idea of watching another person's life, successes, and failures—depicted in the television show? If it is, does this reflect archives as a whole?**

**Camila:** Generally, archivists understand that we are historical voyeurs. We often read intimate materials not intended for the public and make decisions that can make these materials very public or keep them relatively private. This podcast examines privacy by layering Dan’s story on top of the story being revealed in the tapes, but it doesn’t examine the responsibility of archival description. In many ways, this podcast essentializes an archives as a place of secrets instead of a public record of history, and it eliminates how archivists can act as mediators between historical record and public record through the act of description. In that regard, the podcast places the archivist in the role of a historical voyeur but doesn’t take the extra step to demonstrate how archivists contextualize material and handle ethical issues like privacy, historical accuracy, and bias. Can a story about archives be effectively told if it is only about voyeurism and not about description or ethical concerns?

**Karlie:** Camila makes such a good point. Despite the name of the show, I do not think I would call this a story about archives. Without the description, contextualization, or public record of this collection, is it an archives or some eccentric billionaire’s pet project? It could easily be both, but the show seems to lean toward the latter. As the episodes progress, the focus on historic record is all but lost to psychological stressors, occult secrets, and travel through space and time. But to return to the point about voyeurism: the tapes that Dan digitizes are “oral histories,” recorded by PhD candidate Melody Pendras, who moved into the Visser Apartments to interview residents about the building itself. Melody intends for her recordings to be part of her dissertation, rather than publicly accessible, and she doesn’t collect formal consent (i.e., through a form) from participants. The layers of voyeurism in the show are a little dizzying, with Melody recording her interviews with residents, Dan watching this footage of Melody, Davenport (and others) watching Dan, and the viewer watching all of this unfold. On top of that, there is a mysterious presence that is, in a way, gaining power through this voyeurism: the longer Dan watches, the more the presence gains a physical form.

**Sally:** Yes, voyeurism is reflected in the show: Dan is under surveillance while he, in turn, watches the footage of someone else. Dan has unknowingly given up his privacy by taking this job. Melody has also unknowingly given up her privacy because she never thought her footage would be viewed by anyone other than herself. In the final episode, Davenport asks Dan: “You ever think about what it means to capture a moment in time. . . to give it an eternity it was never meant to have?” Looking at historical records gives us insight into the lives of people who may have never wanted to be known; in a way, preserving records can violate the right of individuals to be forgotten. *Archive 81* shows the interplay between the right to privacy and the access to knowledge that lies at the heart of many archival functions.

*Archive 81* thus, in a small way, explores the ethics of acquiring materials when no one is available to grant permission for them. As archivists, do we have a right to “own” and make available the materials of the deceased, who may not have wanted

others to access their materials? Or do we have an obligation to bring the objects and stories of the dead to light, to let those materials tell a story because the dead no longer have a voice?



*Melody, a PhD candidate in history, with the handheld camcorder she uses to record interviews with the residents of the Visser Apartments. Image courtesy of Netflix.*

### **Are archives represented accurately?**

**Camila:** This is *the* question. In the podcast, *Archive 81* refers to a specific collection, the eighty-first in a series. The archives itself is not accessible to the public, nor is it being made accessible; it's being saved for the sake of being saved (and for the sake of releasing an eldritch abomination into the world, but that's neither here nor there). The building that houses this archives is described as a bunker; Dan is the only person working in the space, which is not accessible to anyone else. The shape of the archives—lonely, isolated, and devoid of researchers, users, or educators—would be a bit foreign to archivists who work with users in mind. Do we, as archivists, want to be presented as people who save things just for the sake of saving them?

**Karlie:** I remember getting to the end of the show, remembering its title, and thinking, “What was the 81? Was this really about an archives?” Viewers never get

the information that Camila has noted about the collection and series, and the underlying goals of the project (at least as stated by Davenport and Dan) are not to preserve the materials for researchers to use and study but rather to discover what happened in the days before the fire at the Visser Apartments. I agree that this depiction of archives would be foreign to archivists and researchers alike, and I hope that these working conditions sound just as extreme to non-archivists as they do to those of us in the field.

**Sally:** *Archive 81* perpetuates the common misconception that archives are mysterious places where secrets are buried and information is hidden. The story isn't just about restoring the tapes and building an archives—it's also about solving a mystery. Characters say multiple times that Dan "brings back lost things," which implies that archives are only an institution for dead or irrelevant items. Davenport, Dan's employer, has built a dark archives; materials are kept locked away in a remote, isolated location and are not described for discovery. Furthermore, Davenport does not seem to have done any long-term planning: is he going to keep these tapes forever or only until he finds the answers to his questions about the fire at the Visser Building? As I mentioned previously, Dan is also neglecting crucial archival functions, like appraisal of the materials.

However, *Archive 81* does depict archives as an important place to find information and evidence, as well as to transcend the boundaries between past and present. Although Dan has personal motives for uncovering the truth in the materials, he, in a way, stands for freedom of information; he wants to reveal the truth. And Dan, in the present, is connected to the past; first through the realization that his father appears in the footage, and later when the footage begins to interact with him. Our tangible connection to the past is through archival records and the triangulation of many sources and perspectives that give us the context of who and what came before us. The past comes to life, or, as one character remarks in the final episode, "That's what playing the footage does. It unravels the spell that holds the door shut."



Publicity photo featuring the show's main characters Melody and Dan. Image courtesy of Netflix.

### What are your final thoughts on *Archive 81*?

**Camila:** I'm interested to know what other archivists thought about the show, and how the show reflects—or doesn't reflect—their experiences, whether that be an understanding of the loneliness of archival work, or the strange intimacy that comes out of seeing the life of others in a personal and often solitary way.

**Karlie:** Though the Netflix series was cancelled (and loose ends abound at the end of the first season!), I'm also curious to know other archivists' thoughts on the show or on the podcast, particularly regarding the show's many references to *The Secret of NIMH*. I'd like to thank my colleague Lauren Rogers for volunteering to watch with me, for telling me when I could look again (it got really scary!), and for pointing out that we should have known all along that the true villain of the series would be mold.

**Sally:** People say that there is no such thing as bad publicity, and in this case, in a way, I'm inclined to agree. *Archive 81* promotes the importance of records, the necessity of including many perspectives to get a more complete story, and how much influence the past has on our present. These are ideas crucial to archives' existence. But *Archive 81* does nothing to demystify the archival profession. It sets up the archives as a dark, mysterious place with hidden information and buried secrets, and the archival practitioner as an isolated person willing to give up everything for the work. Unfortunately, like many pop culture depictions of archives, *Archive 81* creates a sensational interpretation of archives and archivists, leaving the public with no accurate sense of the work we do or the role we play in maintaining a democratic, information-literate society.