

***“It’s All Material, Honey”*: Archives as Source of Creative Inspiration in Hacks**

<https://www.hbomax.com/series/urn:hbo:series:GYIBToQrPdotpNQEAAAEa>

Reviewed by Elizabeth Kobert, The Frick Collection

Hacks, a comedy-drama series released on HBO Max in May 2021, tells the story of two comedians who are forced to work together. Deborah Vance (Jean Smart), a has-been stand-up comic modeled on Joan Rivers, needs to update her act to avoid losing her long-term residency at the Palmetto hotel and casino in Las Vegas. Ava Daniels (Hannah Einbinder), a young comedy writer who lost her job in Los Angeles for making an offensive joke on Twitter, is desperate for work. Their mutual talent agent Jimmy (Paul W. Downs) pairs them together, and hilarity ensues. Part odd-couple comedy and part meta-commentary on the entertainment industry, *Hacks* examines the complicated relationship between two women from different generations and their attempts to navigate careers in the male-dominated world of comedy.

One tool cleverly deployed to illustrate their reluctant cross-generational connection is Deborah’s audiovisual archives, housed in an intimidating assortment of boxes and shelves in her capacious basement. In the final scene of Episode 2, after Ava complains that it is difficult to write jokes for Deborah without knowing her, Deborah leads her to the storage space, flicks on the lights, and announces, “This is everything I’ve ever done. Every joke I’ve ever written. Every show I’ve ever taped. Every TV appearance for the last forty years. I want you to digitize it and organize it.”¹

When Ava begins to protest, Deborah cuts her off: “Before you say anything—I know, you’re a writer. It’s all material, honey.”²

Throughout the first season, this project and Ava’s feelings about it evolve. At the beginning of Episode 3, Jimmy asks, “How is it going archiving for Deborah?” to which Ava responds, “So painful.”³ Later in the same episode, Deborah’s chief operating officer Marcus (Carl Clemons-Hopkins) reveals what is likely the real motive for delegating this task to Ava, saying, “I believe you have some archiving to do, and I’d like it done soon. We’re putting together a ‘Best of Deborah’ DVD for the

¹ *Hacks*, “Primm,” Season 1, Episode 2, directed by Lucia Aniello, written by Paul W. Downs, Lucia Aniello, and Jen Statsky, HBO Max, May 13, 2021.

² *Hacks*, “Primm.”

³ *Hacks*, “A Gig’s A Gig,” Season 1, Episode 3, directed by Lucia Aniello, written by Paul W. Downs, Lucia Aniello, and Jen Statsky, HBO Max, May 20, 2021.

anniversary show.” Ava responds, “Sorry, I just don’t love running tech in the basement all day . . . I’ll be by the water heater if you need me.” This interaction is followed by a montage of Ava, appearing extremely bored, as she monitors the digitization of these archival recordings by watching Deborah’s stand-up sets, commercials, and talk show appearances.⁴

Toward the end of Episode 3, inspired by a set of clippings highlighting Deborah’s early career, Ava goes digging through the basement boxes to find a VHS tape of Deborah’s unaired late-night talk show pilot from 1976. The show was never picked up due to allegations that Deborah burned her husband’s house down after he left her for her sister. As Ava watches, she laughs at Deborah’s jokes in the opening monologue, which are notably more feminist than her present-day material. As the pilot concludes, Ava is moved to tears when she realizes how deeply betrayed Deborah was by her husband and sister (who both make an appearance, along with her daughter, in the pilot), and at how proud Deborah must have felt to be so close to achieving her dream, and then so disappointed when the opportunity slipped away.⁵

This breakthrough moment of connection clearly influences Ava’s attitude toward her role as Deborah’s archivist and as her comedy writing partner. In Episode 4, when Deborah’s daughter DJ (Kaitlin Olson) says, “I honestly can’t believe that she’s making you watch all of the stupid shit she’s ever done,” Ava replies with a mild, “It’s a lot, yeah. It’s a lot . . . Though I gotta say, it is crazy she was almost the first woman to host a late-night show.”⁶ In Episodes 5 and 6, Ava references two other jokes from Deborah’s repertoire as examples of material that could be updated (“You know how in the 70s, you had that bit about hanging yourself with your tampon string?”⁷) or that reference specific performances (“Right, you said you hated grass at that Friars Club roast.”⁸). Most significant in representing her shift in attitude, Ava informs Deborah in Episode 6, “I’m almost done digitizing. I stayed late a couple of nights last week. It’s actually kind of fun.”⁹

The final reference to the archives project is at the end of the Episode 10, the season finale, when Marcus tells his mother that he is “just doing some last-minute

⁴ *Hacks*, “A Gig’s A Gig.”

⁵ *Hacks*, “A Gig’s A Gig.”

⁶ *Hacks*, “D’Jewelry,” Season 1, Episode 4, directed by Desiree Ahkavan, written by Joanna Calo, Paul W. Downs, and Lucia Aniello, HBO Max, May 20, 2021.

⁷ *Hacks*, “Falling,” Season 1, Episode 5, directed by Paul W. Downs, written by Andrew Law, Paul W. Downs and Lucia Aniello, HBO Max, May 27, 2021.

⁸ *Hacks*, “New Eyes,” Season 1, Episode 6, directed by Lucia Aniello, written by Paul W. Downs, Jen Statsky, and Lucia Aniello, HBO Max, May 27, 2021.

⁹ *Hacks*, “New Eyes.”

approval of the ‘Best Of’ compilation,” neatly referencing that Ava has finished digitizing the archives.¹⁰

At least a couple of stereotypes and misconceptions about archives are worth commenting on in *Hacks*. The first is the association of basements, dust, and clutter with archives.¹¹ Ava works in the basement “by the water heater,” in an unused part of Deborah’s palatial mansion, surrounded by Bankers boxes and filing cabinets. Though Ava plays against type as a young, attractive woman and not an old, bespectacled grump,¹² the association of archival work with lonely drudgery comes through clearly.

The second is the nonprofessional nature of archival work, which can apparently be done by someone with no archival training, and very quickly. When popular media emphasizes how quickly and easily this work can get done, with the biggest obstacle being how boring and tedious the work is, archivists requesting funding from their institutions or from prospective clients might seem unreasonable. But the work of surveying, inventorying, arranging, describing, and rehousing and/or digitizing (or, if you are a small personal archives for a legendary comedian, likely outsourcing to a professional digitization vendor) are all necessary to render an audiovisual archives accessible for the future, whether it is to study the work of a comedian, produce for-profit creations using archival footage, or exhibit the materials in a gallery or online setting.

Interestingly, *Hacks* subverts common tropes about how archives are used. Often archivists in film and television are depicted helping to solve a crime, research a news story, or otherwise unearth specific information for the protagonists.¹³ While these are valid examples of archival use, *Hacks* demonstrates that organizing and digitizing audiovisual materials not only can achieve material ends, but can also spark creativity and connection. By watching historical footage of Deborah, Ava is able to empathize with her in a new way. Only once she “gets” Deborah, through access to primary source material, can she write jokes in her voice, or perhaps help craft a new voice that authentically merges both of their perspectives (we do not actually get to hear Deborah’s new material in Season 1).

¹⁰ *Hacks*, “I Think She Will,” Season 1, Episode 10, directed by Lucia Aniello, written by Ariel Karlin, Lucia Aniello, and Paul W. Downs, HBO Max, June 10, 2021.

¹¹ For discussions of some of these common stereotypes associated with archives and archivists, see: Arlene Schmuland, “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography,” *American Archivist* 62 (1999): 42–43; Amanda Oliver and Anne Daniel, “The Identity Complex: The Portrayal of Archivists in Film,” *Archival Issues* 37, no. 1 (2015): 57–58; and Karen Buckley, “‘The Truth is in the Red Files’: An Overview of Archives in Popular Culture,” *Archivaria* 66 (2008): 101–102.

¹² Schmuland, “The Archival Image in Fiction,” 34–35.

¹³ Schmuland, “The Archival Image in Fiction,” 54–72; Oliver and Daniel, “The Identity Complex,” 48–70; Buckley, “‘The Truth is in the Red Files,’” 96.

One of the main themes of the show is the relationship between the past and the present. While Deborah has built a career on telling it like it is, she has intentionally avoided using comedy to discuss deeper truths about herself. After getting high on “grass” together in Episode 6, Deborah reveals to Ava that she did not actually burn down her husband’s house, but that everyone believed his accusations.¹⁴ She chose to reclaim the narrative when she told an off-hand joke onstage about it that landed, and never looked back. When Ava insists that Deborah write new material about this and other painful personal experiences, supplementing her argument with a newly informed understanding of Deborah’s accomplishments and tribulations, Deborah resists. But the two eventually do collaborate on an all-new set for Deborah’s final performance at the Palmetto, writing jokes covering difficult and previously undisclosed topics like her divorce, home foreclosures, health issues, and facing sexism in comedy.

When conflict erupts between the two protagonists, Deborah begins to get cold feet about performing the new material. “I don’t need to do a whole show dwelling on the past. I move forward! Always have,” she insists in the season finale.¹⁵ But she does go through with performing the new material at the Palmetto and later invites Ava to go on tour with her to continue improving it, affirming the value of Ava’s archival work that has reached into the past to create something new. Despite the perpetuation of some stereotypes, *Hacks* undoubtedly casts archives in a positive light by depicting a legitimate and compelling use case for an entertainer’s audiovisual archives.

¹⁴ *Hacks*, “New Eyes.”

¹⁵ *Hacks*, “I Think She Will.”