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**InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies**

**Title**

Review: *Narrating from the Archives: Novels, Records, and Bureaucrats in the Modern Age*  
by Marco Codebò

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2r86k9x0>

**Journal**

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 7(2)

**ISSN**

1548-3320

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**Publication Date**

2011-05-31

**DOI**

10.5070/D472000705

Peer reviewed

**Narrating from the Archive: Novels, Records, and Bureaucrats in the Modern Age** by Marco Codebò. Cranbury: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010. 160 pp. ISBN 9780838642054.

*Narrating from the Archive: Novels, Records, and Bureaucrats in the Modern Age* attempts to define the archival novel as a literary genre, simultaneously creating its scope as well as situating it within the context of both literary history and archival discourse. Codebò begins by linking the “rise of the novel,” a concept outlined by Ian Watt, with the development of modern archival principles arising out of the epistemological shifts enacted by the social reorganization and bureaucratic necessities that arose during the aftermath of the French revolution. The solidification of the nation-state as both a category and political entity through the systematic implementation of bureaucratic expansion, coupled with the shifting nature of the creation of the individual subject in the modern age in direct relationship to that bureaucratic state structure supported the rise of the novel as a literary genre that reflected a new social reality.

Codebò argues that the novel only became possible within an environment that was accustomed to personal information as discrete, recorded data available for analysis and interpretation. Here, he arrives at the central paradox of the archival novel: the recognition of the novel as fiction, coupled with the recognition of the archive as a body that holds a claim to truth and authenticity, authorized by the nation-state that both relies on and produces the record. The convergence of these two seemingly antithetical discourses produces the archival novel, a novel that utilizes the realities and assumptions of archival principles as a vantage point to explore interiority and the production of self and subject. That is, the use of archives as both sources for material serves to provide context for historical novels as an organizational schema and a critical point of departure. He makes a clear distinction between archival novels that legitimate claims of archival authority and those that challenge those claims and assumptions, essentially falling along the lines of modern and postmodern theoretical stances.

For Codebò, the archival novel has its roots and proto-forms in the works of Daniel Defoe, specifically *A Journal of the Plague Year*, as well as Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. These examples function in the early stages of the novel as art form and utilize “record creation and verification into the fabric of its text” (p. 25). Both of these works make claims to truth based on their fictional depiction of verifiable events, legitimizing their investigation of the introspective individual by transforming him/her into an identifiable record. Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Colonel Chabert* and *Ursule Mirouët* within the broader context of *La Comédie Humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), as well as Alessandro Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*), employ the archive in a functional sense, using archival principles and style to bolster the text, legitimizing both the expansion and modern use of the

archive. While Manzoni's use of the archive is much more structural, Balzac enters into a co-constitutive relationship between the realist novel and the archive: "The realist project of generating truthful documents of individual existences relied on the somehow tautological premise that the object of the novelistic representation, the industrial city-dweller, was already a recorded entity" (p.85). Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet* stands between Codebò's two posited possibilities for engagement with archival practice for the novel. In this instance, Flaubert literally severs the relationship between the archive and its supposedly intrinsic relationship to authority, calling into question its very existence. Flaubert does not quite make the move to subversion but instead stops at the linguistic level and in shifting referents he shifts relationships. George Perec's *La Vie Mode d'Emploi* (Life: A User's Manual) and finally Don DeLillo's *Libra* ultimately represent a move toward challenge. Perec, as an archivist himself, transforms his archival novel into a self-conscious one. Turning the principles of archival discourse against itself and interrogating the process of self-legitimation with which it is engaged, Perec also simultaneously continually assembles and arranges remnants and traces, acknowledging the compulsion to record and to keep even while undermining the assumptions that we should or that we know what we are doing when we do. *Libra* by Don DeLillo makes an additional shift, its relationship to archival practice and principles intimately defined by the transition to the digital database. By setting up the relationship between the archive and its use in novel writing, *Libra* highlights the false sense in which the two are inherently different. While the archive is supposedly rooted in truth and the accurate record of events and is therefore diametrically opposed to a fictional art form, the archive in *Libra* is characterized by "omissions, contradictions, hypertrophy, and intrusions from powerful external agents" (p. 142). In his analysis of *Libra*, Codebò calls the future of the novel as an art form and the physical archive as a bureaucratic agent into question. If his foundational premise holds any credence, then these two forms will necessarily evolve or expire.

While Codebò organizes his argument as historically progressive, he is careful to point out each novel's distinct relationship to the epistemological forces defining its historical context. Each novel has a unique relationship to the history and implementation of archival discourse because of the time period within which it was crafted. Codebò pairs this analysis with outlining the ways in which each novel enacts archival principles to construct and explicate the text. This is a slim volume for such broad subject matter, several hundred years of both literary criticism and archival discourse seem to be absorbed and oversimplified. The time spent intimately linking the development of the novel with the anxieties brought about by the changing social realities of the early nineteenth century is effective, the fixity of subject position needed to be redefined and both fiction and archives have explicit relationships to concepts of individual personhood. Drawing from

DeLillo to predict the future of both the novel and the archive seems a little too late, and the subject for a separate, more well developed volume.

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### Reviewer

Stacy Wood is currently a graduate student in the UCLA Department of Information Studies. Her interests include archival theory, literary studies, gender studies, and the historical and political uses of archives and public access issues.