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What would have remained of the past? The “archive effect” and the political negotiation of effacement

Abstract: The archive is an indispensable tool for knowledge. At the same time, the “archive” is one of the most frequently invoked, negotiated, and contested concepts. The elusive nature of the notion of “archive” is due, in part, to advances in digital technologies and the Internet, which have brought about transformations in the processes of collection, documentation, and archiving. Given the premise that new archiving technologies have contributed to the proliferation of archives, we consider it necessary to revisit the concept of “archive” in order to redefine it in accordance with new technological, social, cultural, and political realities. From a methodological standpoint, we will ground our theoretical approach in both Jacques Derrida’s deconstructivist method and his writings on the concept of “archive”. In light of this, I argue that the archive comes into being only through not only through an exclusion of the living memory, but of an originary exclusion, that of the lived experience, of the lived memory. Thus, I aim to redefine the „archive” from a dynamical and political perspective by deconstructing its mechanisms of establishment (on the one hand, selection, classification, and interpretation; on the other hand, access and democracy).

Keywords: Jaques Derrida, archive, memory, deconstruction, place, power, hermeneutics.

Introduction

Our concern for the techniques of preservation, indexing, circulation of traces, archiving is an old practice, but one that has always influenced us. In this digital age, our capacity for archiving, that is, of appropriating traces, of externalizing them, is continuously growing. We are in an undeniable need for archives, as Derrida puts it (Derrida, 1995, 142; 1997, 91). CDs, DVDs, HDDs, USB memories, cloud storage: today, we have all become avid creators of documents, of archives (Parikka 2013, 2)¹.

The “archive” is one of the most evoked, questioned, debated, negotiated and contested concepts in so many areas, from history, literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, to film, contemporary art and curatorial texts. The elusive nature of the notion of “archive” is

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due, in part, to the advance of digital technologies and the Internet, which have determined transformations in the processes of collection, documentation and archiving. The archive is no longer limited to official documents, but has come to encapsulate photo albums, personal collections, e-mails (digital correspondence) and other heterogeneous types of files. The “archive ” seems to be an aquatic concept (unstable and imprecise), like the “greased pig” that cleverly slips away, that does not let itself be caught, of which Julian Barnes speaks when he raises the problem of the past, of memory (Barnes, 2006, 151). Therefore, we consider it necessary to re-interrogate the concept of archive, without losing sight of this new archiving capacity of our time. Thus, we shall ask once again: What is an archive? Why do we archive? What is the connection between archive and memory? What political and cultural devices are involved in the constitution of archives? How do archives influence cultural, social, political realities etc.? What mutations do new technologies determine regarding the archive?

Since the theoretical discourse on the concept of “archive” has experienced a great boost with postmodern thought, especially with Jacques Derrida, we will align our theoretical approach with his deconstructivist method, and with his writings on the concept of the “archive”. Drawing on Derrida’s thought, in this article I aim to achieve the following objectives: 1) to rethink the traditional concept of the “archive” as a fixed location – a repository of physical documents, of endless files and dust-covered cabinets – from a dynamic, active, and, *sine qua non*, political perspective; 2) to reveal the fact that the archive comes into being only through an originary exclusion, that of primordial experience, of lived sensation, of living memory; 3) to deconstruct the political implications of the archive’s constitution (on the one hand, selection, classification, and interpretation; on the other, access and democracy).

1. The Archive: A Question of Power?

In *Mal D’archive* (1995), Jacques Derrida begins his analysis of the process of (de)construction by first interrogating the etymology of the term (Derrida 1995, 11-14; 1997, 1-4). The archive still retains something of the etymon *arkhē*, which denotes both “commencement” and “commandment”. *Arkhē* designates the “origin”, the “beginning” – whether in a physical, metaphysical, or historical sense – but also the “law”. *Arkhē* possesses, therefore, the value of a double principle: ontological (where things commence) and nomological (where men and gods command). Consequently, the concept of the “archive” retains, to some extent, the ideas of origin, order, authenticity, and authority.

However, the archive is not the *arkhē* as such, but rather the trace of the origin, the vestiges or remains of the *arkhē*.

The term “archive” (*archivum* or *archium*, in Latin) also originates in the Greek *arkheion*, which represented the “house”, “domicile”, “address”, “residence” of superior magistrates, the archons, those who *commanded*. On the basis of their publicly recognized authority, official documents were deposited at their domicile (whether a private home, family residence, or office). Thus, documents (which are not always discursive) were preserved and classified under the title of “archive” solely by virtue of a privileged *topology* (Derrida 1995, 13; 1997, 3). The archive dwells in this unusual space at the intersection of the *topological* and the *nomological*, between *place* (domicile) and *law* (political power). The archons represented paternal archival power, the patri-archic power. The archons were not only those who guarded or supervised the documents, but also those who enjoyed an exclusive right over them – the right to interpret them. The archons, so the arch-interpreters of the archive, were those who held the power to be recognized as the sole legitimate interpreters of those documents. This archontic power concentrated the functions of unifying, identifying, and classifying documents, a privilege that must be associated with the power of consignment (*le pouvoir de con-sign-ation*), which entails not only depositing in the *arkheion*, of assigning a domicile, but also of *gathering the signs together* into a unified, ideal configuration, sheltering the archive from possible dissolution. According to the archontic principle of *gathering signs together*, within the archive, there can be no dissociation, heterogeneity, or secret that separates or divides in an absolute manner (Derrida 1995, 14; 1997, 3). Synthesizing the points stated above, we understand that documents – the archive – required both a guardian and a (permanent and fixed) place. At the same time, the residence of the magistrates, the archi-domicile, also marks an institutional transition from the private to the public. Consequently, the archive, once constituted by political power, is already public – there are no secret archives (Derrida 1995, 34-35; 1997, 17). The archive is a matter of *res publica*, of the public sphere. Defining the archive as the product of a topo-nomic institution, there is always the danger of a “politics of the archive” (Derrida 1995, 15-16; 1997, 10-11) and an “ethico-politics” (Derrida 1995, 38; 1997, 19), which reveal that the feverish governance of the archive is exercised by an institutional and institutive authority, by no means neutral from an axiological standpoint.

Memory is not merely preserved in archives; it is also destroyed, burned to ashes. The archive is a product of finitude and destruction, for the trace is finite (Derrida 1998). The trace can be erased, lost, destroyed, or forgotten at any time. As a result, we desire to preserve traces, or we are seized by “archive fever” (*mal d’archive*), as Derrida calls

it, because the possibility of forgetting, loss, and destruction looms over us (Derrida 2021, 77). Fragility is inherent to the trace and archiving is the only way it can be preserved – that is, reappropriated, even if not in an absolute manner and certainly not in an axiologically neutral one. The desire to conserve everything makes the archive a mnemonic device, a hypomnesic crutch that reflects the anguish of forgetting and the fear of (the) death (drive), for “there would be no desire to archive without radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetting that is not limited to repression [...] beyond or within this simple limit we call finite or finitude, there would be no fever of the archive without the threat of this death drive, of aggression and destruction. However, this threat is *in-finite*; it overcomes the logic of finitude and simple factual limits” (Derrida 1995, 38; 1997, 19). Archiving is an act of immortalization, of the survival of memory in the face of death, destruction and oblivion. Thus, the archive becomes a place of *hypomnēsis*, of memory through lack, of re-collection, of gathering, and of consignment.

The archive fever involves not only a compulsive desire to preserve traces, but also a compulsive desire to *master* them, that is, to *interpret* them (Derrida 2021, 77). Being an irresistible drive, we cannot restrain ourselves or refrain from selecting, interpreting, and safeguarding traces, that is, from gathering traces into an archive. Archiving involves an active, selective and productive interpretation through re-production (Derrida 2009, 65). As we know from Nietzsche, interpretation is always active and selective; it is an expression of the will to power and an instrument of domination. In every act of selection and interpretation, there is a victory, a mastery over foreign elements, which dictates a new mode of interpretation (Nietzsche 1999, 412). Interpretation does not merely entail a moment of elucidation or revelation, but above all a moment of imposing meaning. The archivist shapes what can be known from archival materials, actively producing knowledge through acts of selection, elusion, and interpretation.

The archive fever becomes all the more acute as we become aware of the extent of destruction, the force of the death drive and the desire for memory that results from (the fear of) it. In the case of the archive, this death drive manifests itself in the form of “archival violence” (Derrida 1995, 19; 1997, 7). To ensure the survival of memory, one must kill, select, and allow certain traces to be subjected to destruction. The archive is exposed to a violence inherent in the act of selection, an act grounded in the finitude of memory, of the trace. The archive occupies the perimeter delineated by a political gesture, circumscribed by the private-public transition, which calls for a new deconstructivist heuristic to highlight the violence of its establishment, of the institution itself. As soon as “something” has been archived, violence arises, since the act of

archiving involves the establishment of a law and, furthermore, its enforcement. In fact, the work of archivists is marked by the death drive: “Archivists are fierce conservatives who claim to know what must be destroyed and who, in general, are rather good at it. And one will never know, by definition, what they were right to destroy, because they destroy so well that it leaves no trace! But one knows that they will have destroyed” (Derrida 2021, 78). This gesture of filtering archives is terrifying, as it targets not only public or official documents but also works of art, for example. There are, undoubtedly, works of genius that have been destroyed, deemed unfit to be “remembered”, suspected by some political regime, or censored due to counter-hegemonic visions. Let us also consider the canonical corpus of philosophy – Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and so on: around these masters, there must have been brilliant disciples, perhaps more brilliant than their “teachers”, but whom, for various reasons, society, political authorities and archival labor have caused to disappear (Derrida 2021, 78). The archive fever is, therefore, both a matter of selection – that is, a political gesture *par excellence* – and a matter related to the death drive: for a few masterpieces to survive, countless others must be condemned to death.

Yet in all this work of selection and interpretation carried out by archivists, there is an imminent danger. The archival overbidding lies in the fact that, under this archival fever, the act of archiving always tries to return to the living origin – that is, precisely to the very thing the archive loses in its attempt to preserve it across a multitude of places (*topoi*). The archaeologist aspires to efface the archive in order to attain the primacy of the originary experience, the lived moment, the living memory. Nevertheless, the past cannot be reanimated to speak to us “in flesh and bone”. Consequently, we must make our way through ruins, vestiges and traces, grapple with the spectres of the past and evoke their memory, all to reconstruct the story as best we can; we have no other option: we will have to learn that “stones do not speak” (*saxa non loquuntur*) on their own, that archives must be compiled, read, and interpreted. Thus, we argue that the archive can only be conceived from the perspective of exclusion, of what is left out, of what cannot be recovered, that is, from the perspective of traces and spectres.

We claim that the archive is marked by an insurmountable and inaccessible residue, namely the primordial experience, the lived experience, the living memory of the origin. The archive, in its phantasmatic attempt to capture and gather the totality of life, ends up mummifying it into a series of signs. On a formal level, the constitution of the archive entails the following structure: the originary experience of something is brought back into the presence through an intentional act of the second order, namely memory, which, in turn, is sometimes externalized in the act of depositing testimony as an act of self-

attribution of the remembrance, an antepredicative and self-designating act of the subject. That is why Paul Ricoeur says that it does not all begin with the archive, but with testimony (Ricoeur 2006, 177), that is, with traces (Derrida 2002, 101). Traces constitute the essential core of archival collections. However, this formal structure that I have proposed to delineate the (pre-)processes of archival formation already reveals a series of problems. First, we all experience difficulty when trying to communicate our most intimate experiences to others and herein lies precisely the structural problem of testimony as an intentional act that alters the originary experience, that destroys it. Consequently, the archive is constituted through the exclusion, destruction, and forgetting of an unarchivable residue, namely life – lived and singular experience, affect and sensory intensity, that is, the unspeakable, the unsymbolizable. The exclusion is not merely of living memory (*mnēmē*), but above all of the originary experience, that is, of something that cannot be testified to, of something inexorably lost. The burden of the archive is oppressive, just like the passage of time and the certainty of the impossibility of restoring the pure and living origin of experience and memory. Thus, from the analysis of what we might call the *a priori* conditions for the constitution of the archive, it follows that experience always remains in a relationship of exteriority to the archive. There is no archive that merely preserves (Derrida 2021, 229).

In its most virulent form, archive fever refers to the neurotic desire that overtakes us when we establish an archive as authoritative, normative and nomological, confusing the archive with the *arkhē* (a universal law that exercises absolute control over the other's archive) (Caputo 1997, 265). Under these symptoms, the “archive fever” manifests itself when we establish ourselves as the exclusive depositories and custodians of memory, equating, in a secondary gesture, the archive with Truth. In this sense, John D. Caputo observes that this pathological form of archive fever underlies any racist, nationalist, sexist, fundamentalist discursive system (Caputo 1997, 265, 273). The act of archiving, as it involves processes of selection, organization, and presentation, can reinforce certain contemporary social, cultural and political constructs or stereotypes which, in turn, shape the way we understand the past. *Le mal d'archive* as the “evil or illness of the archive” infiltrates everything (*engageant l'in-fini, le mal d'archive touche au mal radical*; Derrida 1995, 39) and, by virtue of its nomological dimension, affects the very discursive conditions of possibility of the sayable and the unsayable within a discourse (Foucault 1972, 129). In doing so, *le mal d'archive* approaches a radical evil, the root of all evils (Caputo 1997, 265).

Although the documents that constitute the archive encapsulate the evidence and material traces of specific events or testimonies regarding

social, political, and economic realities, their selection and interpretation remain at the discretion of the archons, who side with the victor, as Walter Benjamin puts it: “And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers” (Benjamin, 1969, 256). This fact was exposed in pages that have since become famous in *Orientalism* by Edward Said (Said 1979, 5-6).

2. The Archive: A Matter of the Future?

To avoid these schematic representations and interpretive delusions, we must not forget that the fetishization of the archive as a supposed (objective) repository of truth is undermined by the very impossibility of rendering the past “as it was”, since the sensory intensity of the event, life in its flow, always remains external to the archive (external to the document). However, today, with the advancements of new technologies in general and especially new archiving technologies, it seems that everything can be archived, that we can record every trace. In other words, we are saturated with archives! The “digital turn” has led to the dematerialization of documents, to the ubiquitous possibility of consulting them, to changes in their conditions of preservation and access, to the ease of transferring them and so on. The archive ceases to be merely local, that is, a simple accumulation of documents in a specific repository, conforming to the static framework of a stock (such as a patrimony, a bank, etc.) (Derrida 2002, 69). The definitive example in this regard is the Internet, an archive *par excellence* – dynamic, decentralized, open and perpetually updated (Ernst 2013, 84).

Even though the digital age has opened up the possibility of archiving an ever-wider range of traces – letters, writings, images, vestiges, ruins, sounds, and in a future that does not seem very distant, even tactile, gustatory, and olfactory sensations – there can never be an absolute capacity for archiving, that is, an archive as a total duplicate of life. In other words, even if new archiving technologies make a more faithful or “vivid” reproduction of the trace possible, the originary experience will always elude this fever of the archive. Thus, what new archiving technologies retain and record is not the trace of a living present, but rather the death of a supposedly living present (Derrida 2002, 51). Indeed, new archiving technologies multiply the spectres, increase the capacity for reappropriation of the trace and, consequently, the capacity for archiving. However, archiving represents work undertaken with the aim of organizing and arranging a relative survival of (selected) traces, within given political and legal conditions. The archive does not, therefore, allow for a lasting or eternal preservation of what was, of memory, of traces, but rather expresses the inevitability of

disappearance, of forgetting: any archive can be destroyed (Derrida 2021, 77).

As we have seen so far, archiving is possible only through death, through the reduction of life and lived experience to traces and ruins, to specters and ashes, as we claimed. But the archaeologist suffering from archive fever wishes to reach the root of truth, the original perception; he believes he can exorcise those ghosts, believes that the act of letting “the stones speak” is sufficient to bring forth the original experience of ruins and traces (Caputo 1997, 275). “We are in need of archives”, says Derrida, since the problematization of memory inevitably leads to the archive. But therein also lies the possibility of emancipation from the tutelage of the patriarchal architects who control and govern the archives, the chance for liberation from the discursive hegemony established by those who have conflated the reading of the archive with the *arkhē* itself, under a guise of Truth. This “evil”, this “illness” (*mal*) of the archive has not only a negative connotation, but also a positive one, in which a horizon of agonistic interpretations is gained, “a certain salutary radical hermeneuticizing, in which we dream with passion of something unforeseeable and impossible” (Caputo 1997, 277). Thus, we are not dealing merely with a loss, but also with a passionate and idealistic impulse toward knowledge. We must not lose sight of the fact that memory has to do with the selection of traces, with competing archives, with an clash of interpretations, and that no one possesses access to the *arkhē*. Therefore, instead of the traditional image of the archive as an inert, passive, disinterested, and fixed repository², intended to establish a unique regime of truth³, the archive must be redefined as a dynamic, processual, protean entity.

Consequently, the “archive fever” is characterized by a dual injunction: on the one hand, that of memory, of a burning passion for the past, for questioning the traces or ghosts of the past, and, on the other hand, a call from the *future-to-come* (*l'à-venir*), from all those who deserve justice. What must be archived and what must be forgotten? Or, in other words, what will we repeat and what will we abandon? The answer does not (seem to) come from the past, but from the future: “The archive doesn’t deal with the past, it deals with the future. I violently select what I consider has to be repeated, kept, repeated in the future. It’s a gesture of great violence. The archivist is not somebody who keeps, he’s somebody who destroys. [...] He’s somebody who claims to know what must be destroyed, or let’s say what must be scrapped” (Derrida 2021, 116). As soon as an institution emerges, the archons are appointed and tasked with its governance. Thus, the archons of the archive are the ones who govern the selection, as well as what, when and to whom access is granted (Derrida 2021, 76). Archives are always created for a specific purpose, through an act that is

invariably political. If the archive is structurally linked to destruction and violence, if the constitution of the archive by the patri-archons of traces is a political matter, then the question of the right of access to public archives becomes an issue that reverberates through our lives, as access to archives becomes a matter of democracy.

Access to archives, as well as to the methods of selection, interpretation and handling that have governed their creation and circulation, is a citizen's right. Consequently, the state must ensure the right of access to public archives, as well as the conditions and technical support for accessing them. Furthermore, this right should not be the exclusive prerogative of a particular citizenship or nation-state, but should be a right accorded to every human being. Likewise, the proliferation of new archiving technologies is generating a major shift regarding the “sharing” and “distribution” of archives, which is inherently linked to the issue of democracy, for “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation” (Derrida 1995, 15; 1997, 4).

Since archiving involves selection, prioritization and interpretation, we must ask ourselves what authority or criterion will decide what has value, what is worth preserving and what must be discarded, concealed, or forgotten. Thus, we see both the need for “a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida 1994, xviii), as well as the need for vigilance regarding it: archives must be established and researchers' access to them ensured, and we must keep a watchful eye on the political authorities that decide what should be preserved and what should not. The danger looming over this politics of memory lies in delegating decision-making responsibility regarding archives to an apparatus of power, and thus to only one part of the state (Derrida 2002, 60). Therefore, there is a need for a political awareness of selectivity, for a critical movement within the politics of memory (Derrida 2002, 60-61).

The archive has always been a pledge and, like any pledge, a sign of the future. The drive of the archive (or the drive to preserve) is, therefore, also a „spectral messianic” promise, an opening toward the future, an anticipation of the event to come and of what we will preserve from it, calling it forth in advance (Derrida 1995, 36; 1997, 60). The absence of archives cannot be demonstrated; hence the spectral nature of the archive (Derrida 1995, 68; 1997, 108). As Derrida also states: “The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never” (Derrida 1995, 36; 1997, 60). The incompleteness of the archive – the fact that new archives may be

discovered and subjected to fresh interpretations – represents a certain determinability of the future that historians, sociologists, philologists and archivists must take into account (Derrida 1995, 51; 1997, 83-84). In turn, the archivist produces the archive and thus contributes to its scope (Derrida 1995, 68; 1997, 109). The future of the archive that is to come is marked by the possibility of the parricide of the archive's archipatriarchs, of the patri-archival killing, of the deconstruction of the archive's archontic (nomological) principle: "We'll have to reread, reinterpret, dig up the archives, displace certain perspectives" (Derrida 2002, 16). Therefore, we have a duty or a debt to do justice to all those whose voices have been suppressed by dominant ideological forces, denouncing all those sordid dogmatisms, negationisms, and historical revisionisms that seek to repress and distort the archives and, consequently, the memory of what would have been (Caputo 1997, 265, 273; Derrida, 1994).

Conclusions

Memory can be suppressed, documents can be lost and archives can turn to ashes. For this reason, the archive serves as a supplement to memory – an instrument that supports living, spontaneous memory –, but cannot replace it. Consequently, the pharmaceutical nature of the archive must be emphasized: the archive is, on the one hand, a massive corpus constituted through the discovery, collection, selection, interrogation and interpretation of traces, and, on the other hand, incomplete, fragmentary, flawed, political, even imaginary. The archive cannot be merely a harmless "remedy." The archive is a "memory through absence", a hypomnesic prosthesis, an exteriority (de)constructed through archiving techniques, and a site of authority, of law. The archive is a complex phenomenon where *tópos* and *nómos* meet, where ambiguous power is exercised, a equally mnemonic, conservative, pedagogical, traditional, and revolutionary violence. I argued that the archive arises through an original exclusion – that of the *arkhē*, of the original experience, of the event, of the lived experience – no matter how much we are able to record/represent using new archiving and storage technologies. I also showed that the archive is established through a series of political mechanisms (selection, classification, hierarchization, interpretation). Thus, the archive is always actively produced: it is the result of a selection process (memory, traces are gathered, chosen, invested) and then performatively interpreted by various instances, which become so many instances of power over memory.

Contrary to the notion of the archive's neutrality, the archive is not a vast repository of diverse objects, but a dynamic field in which

knowledge, desire, memory, power, and truth are continually negotiated. The archive is, therefore, a site of tension between preservation and erasure, marginalization and recovery, oppression and emancipation. The archons that control the archives exercise an epistemic authority that extends to memory, historical knowledge, and truth. Last but not least, the archive is marked by a twofold messianic injunction: one coming from the past and another from the future-to-come (*l'avenir*). By transcending the image of the archive as a mere repository of the past through its circumscription from the perspective of the future-yet-to-come, the archive becomes a promise, a (ethical-political) responsibility at a distance, for future generations.

Notes

¹ Parikka, Jussi, ed.. 2013. *Digital Memory and the Archive*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2: „we [all] are miniarchivists ourselves”.

² Traditionally, an archive has been defined as a collection of documents or various objects piled up on shelves. This image of the archive, with its “n” combinatorial variations, is problematic because it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of. This approach confers a transcendent structure upon the archive. We, on the contrary, consider that the archive is marked by historicity and immanence.

³ Jenkinson, Hilary, 1965. *A Manual of Archive Administration*. London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co, 4: “themselves state no opinion, voice no conjecture; they are simply written memorials, authenticated by the fact of their official preservation, of events which actually occurred and of which they themselves formed a part [...] [and provide] an exact statement of facts”.

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