

American University in Cairo

## AUC Knowledge Fountain

---

Theses and Dissertations

Student Research

---

6-1-2016

### On the limitations of the archive: Affective traces, sensible intensities and the humming background noise of the universe

Mohammad Shawky Hassan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds>

---

#### Recommended Citation

##### APA Citation

Hassan, M. (2016). *On the limitations of the archive: Affective traces, sensible intensities and the humming background noise of the universe* [Master's Thesis, the American University in Cairo]. AUC Knowledge Fountain.

<https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/627>

##### MLA Citation

Hassan, Mohammad Shawky. *On the limitations of the archive: Affective traces, sensible intensities and the humming background noise of the universe*. 2016. American University in Cairo, Master's Thesis. AUC Knowledge Fountain.

<https://fount.aucegypt.edu/etds/627>

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact [thesisadmin@aucegypt.edu](mailto:thesisadmin@aucegypt.edu).

The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**On the Limitations of the Archive**

*Affective Traces, Sensible Intensities and the Humming Background  
Noise of the Universe*

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Philosophy

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

**Mohammad Shawky Hassan**

Under the supervision of **Professor Graham Harman**

**April 2016**

The American University in Cairo

## **The Image of the Past:**

### *Between Material Traces and Sensible Intensity*

*“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’”  
- Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*<sup>1</sup>*

After months of navigating dozens of texts and hundreds of images, highlighting segments and jotting down thoughts, today as I attempt to find a first sentence, I find myself asking: Why did I choose this particular topic for my thesis? As I try to remember, my recollection of the initial motivation behind embarking on this project and what seems to be driving the writing process today, with an abundance of quotes, notes and fragmented thoughts in between, seem to be hardly distinguishable. I realize the impossibility of this endeavor to capture a single moment. Comforted by this realization, I surrender to the fleeting moments, thoughts and emotions, and it is in this jumble that I begin.

I have always been a hoarder, habitually saving even the most seemingly trivial things. At a distance from the desk on which I am sitting, I can spot several cabinets, cupboards, shelves, drawer chests and storage units, all filled with boxes: boxes which contain letters, train tickets, movie stubs, receipts, photos, film negatives, dried leaves, drawings, postcards, job contracts, old snippets of newspapers, school records, wine corks, empty bottles, fragments of images cut up and taped back together, and many more random objects. As I generate this list solely from my memory, I am tempted to open them, but just the very thought of going through these boxes, most of which I never really opened, is scary.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 255.

The project, therefore, is driven by a personal quest into the process of collecting, keeping, preserving and organizing, and the potential implications and limitations of this notion of consolidating the material traces of the past into a box. Perhaps the first text that I came across as I was contemplating writing about the archive was Ilya Kabakov's *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, and days before reading this text, to which I will return later in this paper, I was recurrently haunted by this image: What if we *really* never threw anything away? What if we are constantly surrounded by, and entrapped in, the remnants of the past? And what if such remnants became the sole representation of this past?

As I write the word “remnants,” sometimes translated into Arabic as *atlāl*, I am strongly reminded of *Al Wuquf ‘ala al Atlāl w al Buka’ ‘ala al Deyār* (*Standing by the Ruins and Crying over the Houses*), a common theme and a typical formulaic opening of the classical Arabic poem (*qasīdah*), where “the nostalgic references to the deserted encampment and the absent beloved will still occur as reminders of the inherited values of the past.”<sup>2</sup> The nostalgic value of the remnants is, therefore, derived from their representation of “times that are forever gone – of longing, absence, and wistful memories.”<sup>3</sup> The act of crying over the remnants in the classical Arabic poem, however, remains highly symbolic, and is usually followed by a release from the lost past, and eventually leaving agony behind and moving on to a new land.<sup>4</sup>

However, my concern here with the remnants or material traces of the past, taking the form of the archive, is not only because of their potential as objects for nostalgic reminiscence over times that are forever gone, but mostly because of their

---

<sup>2</sup> Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge/ New York/ Port Melbourne: Cambridge, 2003), 88.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

epistemological function in historical knowledge, be it personal or collective or both at once, since identifying a strict dividing line between the two would be impossible. The reason I begin the paper with unpacking the notion of the material *trace*, as opposed to the archive as such, is a desire to investigate the nature of the archive as, essentially, an organization of the material physical traces of the past. According to Paul Ricoeur in *Archives, Documents, Traces*, “That the trace, for historical practice, is such a requirement can be shown if we examine the thought process that begins with the notion of archives, moves on to that of the document. . . . and then reaches its final epistemological presupposition: the trace.”<sup>5</sup>

The primary question that drives this project, therefore, is: Can we resurrect the past from its remnants, the material traces it has left behind? Or more precisely, is it possible to give an honest account of the past in its fullness once it has been reduced to objects, documents and photographic representations, which form the basis of retrospective interpretations? In other words, can we retrieve the immaterial, invisible, intangible, possibly insignificant, fleeting moments, sounds and smells that once constituted an experience in its wholeness and magnitude?

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin writes:

A Chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past.<sup>6</sup>

The task of the historian then, according to Benjamin, is to provide a *complete* account of the past without losing any of its “moments.” Situating this notion of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Archives, Documents, Traces*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, *Time and Narrative Vol. III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 254.

“fullness” of the past within Benjamin’s philosophy and the context within which this text was written, most of the interpretations that I read of this notion and of the *Theses* in general focus on Benjamin’s overarching concerns with the hegemony of the ruling class over the writing of history, the empathy of the adherents of historicism with the victor, his critique of the idea of progress against the backdrop of the catastrophes – or what he calls the debris – of the past, and of course his position as a Jew, which dictated a particular stance towards remembrance, among many other concerns that largely guide his passion for historical materialism and his skepticism of historicism.

But returning to the idea of the past becoming “citable in all its moments,” I am more struck by an earlier passage in the second thesis:

The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us *exists only in the air we have breathed*, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. *The same applies to our view of the past*, which is the concern of history.<sup>7</sup>

How can we possibly remember, or recite events taking into account *the air in which we have breathed*? Or in Chris Marker’s words, “How can one remember thirst?”<sup>8</sup> In his essay film *Sans Soleil*, Marker contemplates images, history, time and memory through the juxtaposition of images filmed between Japan and Africa with manipulated sounds and a text read by a woman, supposedly reciting a letter she received from a man. Early on in the film, he writes:

I'm just back from Hokkaido, the Northern Island. Rich and hurried Japanese take the plane, others take the ferry: *waiting, immobility, snatches of sleep*. Curiously all of that makes me think of a past or future war: night trains, air raids, fallout shelters, *small fragments of war enshrined in everyday life*. He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time, those memories whose only function had been to leave behind nothing but memories. He wrote: *I've been around the world*

---

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 254, emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> *Sans Soleil*, Directed by Chris Marker (1983; Paris, The Criterion Collection, 2007), DVD.

*several times and now only banality still interests me. On this trip I've tracked it with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter.*<sup>9</sup>

The eloquence and precision of the term “fragments of war enshrined in everyday life” for me lie both in its articulation of this intangibility of the experience I referred to earlier, and its resonance with the moment we are currently living in post-revolution Egypt. I highly doubt that any possible “document,” at least in its typical sense, could faithfully depict the sense of loss, frustration, precariousness, fear and speechlessness, among a flux of emotions, not to mention the inexplicable consistent sense of being constantly on the brink of *something* whose nature and magnitude are indefinable.

Like Benjamin, Marker is also not only concerned with capturing what is typically lost in the writing of history, which in Benjamin’s case is the forgotten catastrophes or debris of the past in the name of progress and in Marker’s the fleeting moments of banality and fragments of war enshrined in everyday life, but also with how what is lost is retrieved in memory. In *Sans Soleil*, Marker writes: “We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten,”<sup>10</sup> implying that history is rewritten retroactively, and therefore has its own ontology as opposed to the popular myth that history is a true factual representation of the past as such.

The image of the past, accordingly, is strongly linked to the present moment, or as Benjamin says in his fifth thesis, “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”<sup>11</sup> This notion of the present moment evoking a past experience perhaps explains Benjamin’s fascination with Marcel Proust and his *In Search of Lost Time*, where the latter’s *mémoire involontaire* leads to an account of life that does not

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> *Sans Soleil*, Dir. Chris Marker, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 255.

necessarily correspond to how it *actually was*, but rather “as it was remembered by the one who had lived it.”<sup>12</sup>

Proust’s unorthodox notion of memory, and consequently history, is articulated in this fairly long passage, which I unsuccessfully tried to edit down without losing its nuances:

And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the interval, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks’ windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because of those memories, so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing now survived, everything was scattered; the forms of things, including that of the little scallop-shell of pastry, so richly sensual under its severe, religious folds, were either obliterated or had been so long dormant as to have lost the power of expansion which would have allowed them to resume their place in my consciousness. But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, *still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.*<sup>13</sup>

Proust’s acknowledgement of the vitality and faithfulness of the unsubstantial and fragile “smell” and “taste” of things within the structure of recollection, in contrast with the material “ruins of all the rest,” and his passion for seizing their affect when they present themselves to us as points of entry to the complex past experiences, present us with a unique model not just for remembrance, but possibly for re-writing the past without isolating it from the present. Benjamin’s admiration of Proust, not only as a novelist but also as a historian, is driven by the latter’s reliance on

---

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Image of Proust’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 202.

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way: In Search of Lost Time, Volume I*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (London: Penguin, 2000), 58, emphasis added.



involuntary memory as an infinite sphere that accommodates not only the finite experienced event, but also “everything that happened before or after it.”<sup>14</sup>

What is remarkable about Benjamin, Marker and Proust is their siding with the infinite realm of what is possible, in the face of that which is actual.<sup>15</sup> Their images of the past reflect a deep apprehension of, and concern with, the complexity of the act of recollection, and of the fleeting nature of time and memory, as well as a recognition of the more intangible components of any experience, be it the smells, the tastes, the air in which we breath or the sensation of thirst. Such elements are what constitute what Jacques Rancière calls “sensible intensity.”<sup>16</sup>

In an interview with Rancière titled *Is History a Form of Fiction?*, he critiques the strict separation between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction, which is characteristic of the representative regime of the arts. The aesthetic regime, however, or what he calls the “aesthetic revolution” changed the rules of the game by blurring the border between the two logics, and therefore disturbing the “mode of rationality that characterizes the science of history.”<sup>17</sup> This development revoked “the Aristotelian line between two ‘stories’ or ‘histories’ – poet’s stories and the history of historians.”<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of poetry, or literary locutions in general, in historical discourse redefined the regimes of “sensible intensity,” by “drafting maps of the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and

---

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, ‘The Image of Proust’, 202.

<sup>15</sup> This resonates with Aristotle’s argument for the superiority of poetry over history, since the latter is restricted to what has actually happened, while former opens up the possibilities of what could happen, and it is this distinction which renders poetry, according to him, more “philosophical and more serious than history.” See Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 51b.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘Is History a Form of Fiction?’, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London, New York: Continuum, 2006), 39.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

modes of doing and making,”<sup>19</sup> therefore giving agency to the poetic traces, which are inscribed in reality, and are, accordingly, inseparable from any historical discourse.

But how could this sensible intensity, whether of an event or of everyday life, be taken into account in the historical discourse? Could the archive proper, as raw material for historicizing, encompass not only the physical material traces of the past, but also its poetic traces, its intangible sensible intensity? Is this intensity documentable or “archivable” in the first place? Or are we in need of radically different ways both for recording the present and reflecting on the past, beyond the boundaries of the archive?

This is not to suggest the utter dismissal of the archive altogether or to pretend that it is not *there*, for obliterating the archive or imposing a moratorium on the act of archiving are not only unrealistic prospects - as neither the creation of images and documents nor their preservation will cease to exist - but will also lead to a “suicide of history,” to use Ricoeur’s term<sup>20</sup>. It is, however, possible to acknowledge the limitations of perceiving the past, or the world, through the lens of its archival representation, and seek an alternative and more inclusive notion of the archive – as difficult as this task is – that is not entirely based on representing the world through its material traces.

Such a task requires, first, a careful unpacking of the notion of the archive through an understanding of its etymology, origin, constituents and discourses around it. Second, it calls for a thorough understanding of the process and teleological function of the act of archiving itself, and more importantly, what this act and its historical development reveal about the human condition. Finally, in order to avoid remaining in the purely critical sphere, it demands a questioning of the boundaries between the

---

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Ranciere, ‘Is History a Form of Fiction?’, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *Archives, Documents, Traces*, 118.

physical and the sensible, the factual and the fictional, and envisioning new possibilities for expanding the scope of the archive, and by extension, the role of the “historian” and modes of writing history.

The paper, therefore, aims at defining the limitations of the archive as a reliable source for giving an honest and full account of the past. Instead of simply attacking the archive and its authority, I seek to provide a more nuanced understanding of the archive, by thoroughly engaging with the various interpretations of the archive and its agency in the epistemology of historical knowledge. The purpose is therefore not to abolish the archive, by burning it or with the aid of giant shredders, but rather to understand its special position that has been fetishized by historians and artists alike.

The paper is structured as an introduction, four sections and a conclusion. In the first section *(Re)Imagining the Archive*, I explore the notion of the archive itself, its prevalent definitions and governing principles, as well as the ways it has been conceptualized and imagined in the writings of Derrida, Foucault and Borges. In the second section *Archival Impulse*, I deal with the act of archiving itself, by engaging with three artist texts by Ilya Kabakov, Christian Boltanski and Andy Warhol, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis and Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. In the third section *Beyond Personal Archives*, I examine the implications of the archival impulse in the construction of historical knowledge beyond strictly personal histories, using Paul Ricoeur’s analysis of the epistemology of historical knowledge in *Memory, History, Forgetting* as a basis for my analysis, and engaging with two essays by André Bazin and Susan Sontag to look into the shift that the invention of photography has heralded in the nature of the archival impulse. The discussion about photography leads to the fourth section *Disrupting the Unity of the Archive*, where I give a brief background about how photographic archives in particular have been used and appropriated in

archival art, as well as an analysis of the potential and limitations of this type of art. Finally, in the last section *The Problem of the Archive*, I summarize the main questions, issues and ideas discussed throughout the paper, and end with concluding comments.

## **(Re)Imagining the Archive:**

*The document, the Library and the Background Noise of the Universe*

*“The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”  
- Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*<sup>21</sup>*

Rarely have I encountered a term so widely questioned, debated, negotiated, contested or conjured up as the archive, be it in contemporary art, film and literature, or philosophical, psychoanalytic and curatorial texts. Perhaps I am deluded by the vast scholarship on the subject solely because never in my life have I had to write about something this elaborately, or research a topic with this level of rigor. But in the hopeful case that I am not, it is not only the sheer volume of what is written, said or filmed about the archive that is striking, but rather the paradoxical position it occupies, which manifests itself in the wide spectrum of what is written about the term “archive” from an abstract notion, or even merely an elusive impression, to a rigidly delineated concept that is rigorously articulated and visualized whether in texts, images or text-images. And even those images or articulations range from romantic depictions of the archive as a “house of memories,”<sup>22</sup> or “leaves of the tree of conscientiousness,”<sup>23</sup> to dull images such as “dust,” or rigid mathematical formulae, all the way to apocalyptic representations.

The elusive nature of the archive today is partially attributed to the vast technological developments that heralded a shift in the traditional processes of documentation, collection and archiving, particularly with the advent of digital

---

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 2010), 129.

<sup>22</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>23</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, Ed. Gershom Scholem (New York: Schocken, 1989), 53.

technology and the Internet. The archive is, therefore, no longer restricted to official records or historical documents as it once was, but has grown to encompass family albums, personal collections and eventually “digital files on Google, Yahoo, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, mobile phones, digital cameras, computer hard drives and assorted file-sharing programs,” resulting in a “vast, shapeless empire of images,”<sup>24</sup> that is no longer “archivable” per se.

In order to navigate this vast shapeless empire, I will begin – most conventionally – with the official definitions of the archive in the most traditional source of knowledge: the Encyclopedia. In *Archives, Documents and Traces*, Paul Ricoeur cites and compares two of such definitions:

If we open the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to this term ‘archives’, in the former we read, ‘archives are constituted by the set of documents that result from the activity of an institution or of a physical or moral person. The latter says that ‘the term archives designates the organized body of records produced or received by a public, semi-public, institutional, business or private entity in the transaction of its affairs and preserved by it, its successors or authorized repository through extensions of its original meaning as the repository for such materials.’<sup>25</sup>

Ricoeur’s comparison reveals three common characteristics between the two definitions: the reference to the archive as a “set organized body of documents,” its relationship to an institution in the sense that it is “produced by or received by the entity for which the documents in question are the archives,” and finally the goal of the archive, which is the conservation and preservation of these documents.<sup>26</sup> I will come back to the third characteristic; that of preservation, in the following section, but for now let us stop at the first two. Immediately, qualities of authority and

---

<sup>24</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York, Göttingen: International Center of Photography and Steidl, 2007), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, ‘Archives, Documents, Traces’, in *Time and Narrative* Vol. III, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 116.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

institutionalization are sensed and established, and this sense of authority is perhaps already established in the term's etymology, being derived from the Greek "*arkhē*."

In 1994, Jacques Derrida presented a paper titled *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* to a conference in London convened to discuss "Memory: The Question of the Archives."<sup>27</sup> He began the lecture with unpacking the etymology of the term *archive* itself:

*Arkhe*, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence* – physical, historical, or ontological principle but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, there where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which order is given – nomological principle. *There*, we said, and *in this place*. How are we to think of *there*? And this *taking place* or this *having a place* of the *arkhē*?<sup>28</sup>

Derrida's etymological deconstruction of the archive asserts the archive's authority as the space for *commandment*. But how is this commandment exercised? The archive is essentially constituted of a set of "documents", as the earlier definitions suggest, and the "document" is etymologically derived from the Latin *docere*, which conveys its function of teaching.<sup>29</sup> According to Ricoeur, the accent given to the notion of the document today goes beyond its teaching function to its status as a "warrant," therefore constituting "material proof, what in English is called 'evidence', for the relationship drawn from a course of events." And therefore, if history were a true narrative, documents "constitute its ultimate means of proof," and "nourish its claims to be based on facts."<sup>30</sup>

This power of the archive, rooted in its alleged factuality which is supported by its very being as essentially an accumulation of material evidence or, more precisely,

---

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1, Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Archives, Documents', *Traces*, 117.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

what qualifies as such, explains its importance in the practice of a particular mode of history, namely scientific history. It also justifies the incredible effort and, more often than not, pain and discomfort experienced by historians who spend days in dusty archives in their quest for “original sources that the new practice of ‘scientific history’ inaugurated, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Scientific history remains, until now, the dominant idea of practice among modern, professional, Western historians,” according to Carolyn Steedman in her book *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*.<sup>31</sup>

This assumption of the factuality of the archive, that it holds evidence for what *actually* happened, is what differentiates it from other similar spaces, such as the library, for instance. In the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, as Ricoeur points out, a distinction is made between the archive and the library, since unlike the latter, the archive is constituted exclusively of conserved documents. The *Encyclopaedia*, however, modifies this distinction by adding that “some discrimination is unavoidable,” leading to the obvious question “what should be conserved, what thrown away?”<sup>32</sup> There is, therefore, an inevitable arbitrariness involved in the process of deciding what to be included in, or excluded from, the archive as well as the library. And this is what makes the archive a place “where men and gods *command*...where authority, social order are exercised...from which order is given.”<sup>33</sup>

But who are those imaginary gods of the archive, under whose auspices the archival “institution” dictates what should and should not be included and preserved in the archive? According to Derrida, the archive – etymologically – is the “residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded,” rendering those

---

<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that Steedman’s ‘now’ refers to the year 2002 when the book was published. See Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, 9-10.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Ricoeur, ‘Archives, Documents, Traces’, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1.



archons the “documents’ guardians.”<sup>34</sup> Those guardians, according to Derrida, not only protect the documents, but are also accorded the exclusive hermeneutic right and competence, and therefore the power of being the sole legitimate interpreters of these documents.

How do these gods, archons, commanders of the archive actually decide on which documents to keep and preserve, and which to conceal or ultimately obliterate? Naturally, they would have to impose principles according to which they would ensure protecting their own power, and accordingly the survival of a particular historical narrative. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin argues that such arbitrariness always works for the favor of the victor, as “all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the ruler.”<sup>35</sup>

The power of the archon lies not only in their ability to protect and preserve the narrative of the victor, but also to ensure that the “other” is exclusively represented through the account of that victor. As Edward Said writes in *Orientalism*:

The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be “Oriental” in all those ways considered common-place by an average nineteenth-century European, but because it *could be...made* Oriental. There is very little consent to be found, for example, in the fact that Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and those were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what ways she was “typically Oriental”....Flaubert’s situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, 256.

<sup>36</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 6.

The archive, governed and controlled by the archons, is filled with accounts of *Kuchuk Hanems* told by *Flauberts*. While the documents that make up the official archive might hold evidence or material traces for particular events, or testimonies and accounts of social and political realities, the selection of such documents remains at the discretion of the archons, who naturally side with the victor, and consequently the rulers. And this is where authority and social order are – partially – exercised. But to focus solely on the *commandment* order suggested by Derrida, or the status of the *archon* in the formation and guardianship of the archive, would be too reductive of such an etymologically complex term. Like Derrida, I wish it were that simple, but evidently it is not. The meaning of the archive for Derrida, and its only meaning, comes to it from “the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded.”<sup>37</sup> He, therefore, not only pointed to the inherent authority of the archive, but also established the archive as a *place* where things *begin*, therefore adding two additional qualities to this notion, namely *domiciliation* and *commencement*.

We will come back to the *commencement* order of the archive in the following section, but for now it seems crucial to deconstruct the notion of domiciliation, or to use Derrida’s words *house arrest*, in which archives take place: “the dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently,” which marks this “institutional passage from the private to the public.”<sup>38</sup> While the notions of domiciliation or *house arrest*, at the first instance, suggest the imposition of a rigid physical form on the archive, a closer reading of this notion, paradoxically, expands the concept of the archive and the laws that govern it far beyond the image of the archive as physical documents, file cabinets and endless cupboards covered with dust:

---

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

With such a status, the documents, which are not always discursive writings, are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a privileged *topology*. They inhabit this uncommon place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*. At the intersection of the topological and nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible.<sup>39</sup>

This enigmatic intersection of the topological and the nomological, what Derrida calls the topo-nomology is therefore what constitutes the invisible archontic space in which the archive *really* exists. The function of the archontic power, therefore, is not only to ensure the protection of the documents in one physical *arkheion* per se. Rather, it is a power of consignation, which – through “gathering together signs” – aims to “coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration.”<sup>40</sup> This power of consignation, and not the physical space that the archive occupies, is what truly ensures the homogeneity of the archive and prevents any possible dissociation. And it is this overarching and complex system of signs that significantly expands the magnitude of this corpus, while simultaneously ensuring it remains within the boundaries of this system.

In order to elucidate this convoluted image of the archive, I will resort to a series of images from *The Library of Babel*, where, like Derrida, Jorge Luis Borges paints a complex image of the library as ultimately a structure composed of “an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings.”<sup>41</sup> In Borges’s image, the distribution of the galleries is invariable: “Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except

---

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library*, in *Labyrinths*, Eds. Donald A. Yates & James, trans. Eliot Weinberger (London: The Penguin Press, 2000), 51.

two; their height, which is at distance from floor to ceiling, scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase.”<sup>42</sup>

The structure of the library for Borges seems extremely rigid, authoritative and claustrophobic. Like Derrida’s domicile scene of the archive, which is simultaneously visible – in its arrest within a physical space – and invisible – in its limitation within a predetermined system of signs – the rigidity of Borges’s library is a product of its restriction both physically within a particular physical space that is modeled on one indefinitely repeatable unit (the hexagon), as well as linguistically within the confines of twenty-five orthographic symbols, which constitute the “fundamental law of the library”:

... This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. *He also alleged a fact which travelers have confirmed: In the vast library there are no two identical books.* From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols.<sup>43</sup>

Any book, or anything written for this matter, is therefore confined to this hypothetical predetermined set of elements, and any possible text is nothing but a combination of such symbols. So while Borges is suggesting that *there are no two identical books*, that is to say no books with the exact same combination and order of symbols, there is an overarching linguistic system which any text, or anything, has to stay within. The library’s illusion of *totality* and its invocation of the “certitude that everything has been written”<sup>44</sup> are affirmed by this formula.

Because Borges included in the text what seems to be arbitrary parameters for a book, with each book containing “four hundred ten pages; each page forty lines; each

---

<sup>42</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 54, emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

line approximately eighty black letters,<sup>45</sup> some scholars were actually tempted to try and determine the number of books within Borges's library. In his book *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel*, Mathematician William Goldbloom Bloch uses exponential notation to demystify such calculations and prove the impossibility of any prospect to determine the number of books. Using Borges's abovementioned parameters, he suggested that each book would consist of 1,312,000 orthographic symbols, and using the logarithmic function, he estimated a total number of possible combinations of books to be  $10^{1,834,097}$  books. Given the size of the universe according to current research, and assuming that each cubic meter of it could contain 1,000 books, which is "an exceedingly generous assumption," it turns out that the universe could only hold  $10^{84}$  books, if there was absolutely nothing in it but books, and possibly  $10^{90}$  books, if each book was the size of a grain of sand.<sup>46</sup> There is no wonder, then, that Borges starts his text with "The universe (which others call the Library)..."<sup>47</sup> If anything, the universe is too small to contain his notion of the library.

The image that Borges paints of the library, or that Derrida implicitly suggests of the archive as different as it is from Borges's, further complicates the possibility of imagining the archive, turning it from a corporeal being to an omnipresent concept. The notion of the archive as a set of organized documents, images or objects piled up on shelves, conjures up a particular image, with endless possible variations, but when one thinks of the archive in terms of signs and symbols, or even as infinite hexagons, the construction of its image becomes much harder, if not impossible.

---

<sup>45</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library*, 52.

<sup>46</sup> William Goldbloom Bloch, *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11-23.

<sup>47</sup> Borges, *The Library of Babel*, 51.

This impossibility of imagining the archive confers upon it a certain transcendental nature, which takes it from the realm of the “imagination” to that of the “pure intellection,” to use Descartes’ terminology in his sixth Meditation. According to Descartes:

... When I imagine a triangle, I not only understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also envisage with the mind’s eye those lines as if they were present; and this is what I call ‘imagining.’ On the other hand, if I want to think about a chiliagon, I certainly understand that it is a figure consisting of a thousand sides, just as well as I understand that a triangle is a figure consisting of three sides, yet I do not imagine those thousand sides in the same way or envisage them as if they were present.<sup>48</sup>

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault postulates that the archive constitutes the “historical a priori,” thereby rejecting the transcendental view of the archive as an “atemporal” structure which lies “above events, and in an unmoving heaven” as such.<sup>49</sup>

The rules of historical a priori are, therefore, not imposed from outside the archive, but are rather immanently “caught up in the very things that they connect.”<sup>50</sup> Like Derrida and Borges, Foucault proposes a notion of the archive that is significantly different from its conventional limited image, but unlike them, his notion of the archive is to be found in the archive itself. He defines the archive as first:

.... the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities...<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, Trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 72.

<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, 127.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 129.

Foucault's notion of the archive is no less enigmatic than that of Derrida, but the main difference – it seems to me – lies in the nature of that governing system that constitutes the archive, which in turn delineates all what could be written or said. For Foucault, the “historical a priori” is constituted by a set of discursive relations that are to be found within the archive itself, which resonates with his passion for archaeology as a system of knowledge. The archive, therefore, controls discourses by providing the conditions of the emergence of statements in the first place, as well as “the law of their coexistence with others, the specific form of their mode of being, the principles according to which they survive, become transformed, and disappear.”<sup>52</sup>

All three images painted by Derrida, Borges and Foucault, as different as they are, indicate the complexity of the archive, with its simultaneous rigidity and enormity. Whether it is an immanent set of relations or a transcendental system of signs; whether it rests upon a predetermined topo-nomological system, or a set number of orthographical symbols, or a complex network of discursive relations, all three conceptions of the archive are different formulations of its homogeneous singular impenetrable – almost monstrous – nature, which grant it its extreme power of determining what is sayable and what is not.

Two particular sub-images assert this notion of the archive as a unified body. The first is Derrida's reference to the topological nature of the archive, which suggests infinite possibilities of manipulating, indenting and transforming its structure while constantly maintaining its unity and interconnectedness. The second is Foucault's insistence upon the unity that characterizes a discourse, which goes beyond individual “oeuvres, books and texts,” and suggests that different thinkers or contributors to this discourse were “talking about the same thing, but placing themselves at ‘the same

---

<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 127.

level' or at 'the same distance', by deploying 'the same conceptual field', by opposing one another on 'the same battlefield.'<sup>53</sup>

Let us now again, in light of those two images, try to imagine this symbolic body that is the archive: at once a unified homogeneous body, which ensures everything that is ever said, written, recorded or filmed perpetually remains within its confines; and a conceptual battlefield upon which any future discourse is constructed. And because the archive is not "the welcoming oblivion that opens up to all new speech the operational field of its freedom,"<sup>54</sup> could its enormity, with all the alleged oppositions and differences contained within it, be merely an illusion of diversity and multiplicity, while all its contents are *really* constructed on one predetermined and highly regulated battlefield? Even when the contents of the archive are occasionally transformed, does such transformation remain within a delineated topological sphere that ensures its unity and homogeneity remain intact? And if so, what is it that the archive is pushing away from its sphere? What is it that this enormous body is hiding and whose penetration it is preventing?

In his essay *A Twittering Noise*, Yves Lomax writes:

*"I hear two speaking together, but are they in agreement or tenaciously contradicting each other? Well, let's say, for argument's sake, that the interlocutors are determined to contradict each other. Yes, let's say they are dialectically opposed and thus can be said to be on opposite sides.*

*But are they?*

*- 'As violent as their confrontation may be, as long as they are willing to continue the discussion they must speak a common language in order for the dialogue to take place. There can't be an argument between two people if one speaks a language the other can't understand.'<sup>55</sup>*

*No matter what their argument, the interlocutors are in no way opposed (as in the traditional concept of the dialectic); on the contrary, they play on the same side*

---

<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>55</sup> See Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 7.



*and together battle against a mutual enemy.*

*And what is the enemy?*

*The noise of the world that hums in the background and perpetually threatens to hum between them. To have this noise humming between them would make a nasty interference; it would mess up their argument. And so, this noisy 'third term', which threatens to come between them, must be expelled, excluded."<sup>56</sup>*

The archive, whether its material physical existence or the symbolic and discursive systems that construct it, not only imposes limits on the imagination and thus negating us or turning us into phantoms with its certitude that everything has already been written<sup>57</sup>, but also coopts every possibility of interference or disturbance and molds it with the aid of its rigid symbolic and discursive rules. What the noise of the archive truly leaves out is *life itself* with all its sensible intensity that is not necessarily sayable or capable of articulating itself. This humming background of the universe is consistently excluded from the battlefield on which discourse plays itself out, remaining beyond the finitude of the experience, the event or life itself.

---

<sup>56</sup> Yves Lomax, "A Twittering Noise", in *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time* (London/New York: I.B.Tauris & Co., 2005), 13.

<sup>57</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*, 58.

## **Archival Impulse:**

### *The Act of Archiving and the Human Condition*

“...Because as long as memory exists  
that’s how long everything connected to life will live.”  
Ilya Kabakov, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*<sup>58</sup>

Whether the archive is an abstract topo-nomological system of signs, or a linguistic system that determines the limitations of the library, or a law of the emergence and transformation of statements within a homogeneous discourse, its very existence remains strongly tied to an *archival impulse*. Such a system or law does not exist in a vacuum, and its creation would be futile without being directed towards an archival body, which in turn comes to being as a result of a diligent act of *archiving*. What truly ensures the consistency and continuity of this act of archiving, with all its variations, is not its necessity as an essential condition for the archive’s existence, but rather its being rooted in a deep human desire for recording, documentation and preservation. Archiving is essentially an act of immortalization, reflecting a profound anxiety, an intrinsic fear of death, forgetting and loss of one’s identity. I will start this investigation into the act of archiving with three texts where artists reflect on the act of archiving in various contexts, namely Ilya Kabakov’s *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Christian Boltanski’s *Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood 1944-1950* and Andy Warhol’s *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*.

In *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Ilya Kabakov tells the story of a neighbor, a plumber who none of the tenants has ever seen. One day, a heat problem in the building made it necessary for handymen to break down his door in order to enter his room, only to find it filled with “heaps of different types of garbage. But [the

---

<sup>58</sup> Ilya Kabakov, ‘The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away’, In *Ilya Kabakov*. eds. Boris Groys, David A. Ross, Iwona Blazwick (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 102.

room] wasn't a disgusting stinking junkyard...but rather a gigantic warehouse of the most varied things, arranged in a special, one might say, carefully maintained order."<sup>59</sup> Everything in the apartment was carefully placed on shelves, each of the shelves was accurately labeled, and each item was assigned a serial number.

On a big table in the center of the room, there were some articles and manuscripts, one of them titled *Garbage*, and the chief tenant started reading it. In the text, there was a deep questioning about the value of things, and the process involved in selecting what to be thrown out and what to be kept. Contemplating over the difficulty of such a choice, the author writes:

A simple feeling speaks about the value, the importance of everything. This feeling is familiar to everyone who has looked through or rearranged his accumulated papers: this is the memory associated with all the events connected to each of these papers. To deprive ourselves of these paper *symbols* and *testimonies* is to deprive ourselves somewhat of our memories. In our memory everything becomes equally valuable and significant. All points of our recollections are tied to one another. They form chains and connections in our memory, which ultimately *comprise the story of our life*. To deprive ourselves of all this means *to part with who we were in the past*, and in a certain sense, it means to *cease to exist*.<sup>60</sup>

The desire of preserving one's identity in its wholeness probably explains Kabakov's insistence on the significance of seemingly mundane details or insignificant pieces of paper, as opposed to what is traditionally thought of as *important* or *memorable*. This sense of the completeness of one's identity and the opposition to differentiating what is significant from what is not is echoed in Boltanski's *Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood 1944-1950*. Boltanski identifies the goal of his project as "preserving oneself whole, keeping a trace of all the moments of our lives, all the objects that have surrounded us, everything we've said and what's been said

---

<sup>59</sup> Ilya Kabakov, 'The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away', 99.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, emphasis added.

around us.”<sup>61</sup> He also projects that he still needs to make a great effort in “searching, studying, classifying, before [his] life is secured, carefully arranged and labeled in a safe place – secure against theft, fire and nuclear war – from whence it will be possible to take it out and assemble it at any point.”<sup>62</sup>

The anxieties of both Boltanski and Kabakov and their passionate desires to preserve their entire past by constituting personal archives through objects, could partially be attributed to the political contexts of their work. Born in 1944, Boltanski grew up in the aftermath of the Second World War, so even without directly invoking the Holocaust, his work could be seen as a gesture against its project as a systematic erasure. Kabakov’s work, on the other hand, is reminiscent of Moscow’s communal apartment life, reminding us of “the impoverished environment of the Soviet Union in which even the lowliest thing could be precious.”<sup>63</sup> It could be, therefore, postulated that the act of archiving is merely a response to scarcity, poverty or traumatic events.

This is where Andy Warhol comes in with his “time capsules.” Unlike Kabakov and Boltanski, Warhol’s pop art revolves mainly around abundance, consumerism and excess. Consequently, his position on “keeping stuff” as iterated in his *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* is more ambivalent, as he simultaneously expresses his hatred for nostalgia, and still devises ways to keep everything. He calls a person’s storage their “dump,” and still suggests a complex system for storage that also allows for recycling the objects in this “dump” in his own work, but advises to keep it at a distance from oneself:

---

<sup>61</sup> Christian Boltanski, ‘Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood 1944-1950’, in *Christian Boltanski*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, Donald Kuspit (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 126.

<sup>62</sup> Christian Boltanski, ‘Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood 1944-1950’, 126.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Merewether, ‘Art and the Archive’, in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London, Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006), 11.

I started off myself with trunks and the odd piece of furniture, but then I went around shopping for something better and now I just drop everything into the same-size cardboard boxes that have a colour patch on the side for the month of the year. I really hate nostalgia, though, so deep down I hope they all get lost and I never have to look at them again. That's another conflict. I want to throw things right out the window as they're handed to me, but instead I say thank you and drop them into the box-of-the-month. But my other outlook is that I really do want to save things so they can be used again someday.<sup>64</sup>

The conundrum of deciding whether something is significant or not remains almost impossible to resolve, for it lies not in the difficulty of deciding on what is significant, or exceptional, from that which is not, but mostly in the incommensurability of significance and exceptionality in the first place. This difficult and mysterious task of discerning does not apply solely to objects constituting the archive, but extends to memory itself. As Virginia Woolf writes in her autobiographical text *A Sketch of the Past*:

If I could remember one whole day, I should be able to describe, superficially, at least, what life was like as a child. Unfortunately, one only remembers what is exceptional. And there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not. Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember? Why remember the hum of bees in the garden going down to the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by father into the sea? Mrs. Swanwick says she saw that happen.<sup>65</sup>

The desire for keeping everything, and the resistance to discerning what is significant from a large pool of objects, render the archive a *mnemonic* device, an artificial external aid to memory that reflects an anxiety of forgetting, of losing any minor detail from one's complete life, and consequently identity. One wonders, however, what kind of object, or mnemonic device, could help *truly* remember the hum of bees. For even if it was written down or recorded, does it really help describe the experience in its wholeness? or does it simply offer a trace that helps recall the

---

<sup>64</sup> Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, 1975), 145.

<sup>65</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being* (San Diego: Harvest/ HBJ, 1978), 69-70.

impression of an experience, and not as it was once lived? But because anxieties are not necessarily rational, the impulsive act of archive does not really stop and question itself. It just keeps archiving.

Apart from the fear of forgetting, the act of archiving itself, which entails the collection and preservation of the remnants of the past, reflects an innate fear of, and resistance to, death. Archiving is immanently an act of immortalization, of leaving a legacy, of surviving somehow through objects. This fear is articulated at its best in Christian Boltanski's text, where he is critical of the traditional methods of fighting the "shameful thing" that is death through scientists and doctors who "merely establish a pact with it," fighting it on points of detail and only slowing it down. According to Boltanski, "what we need to do is attack the roots of the problem in a big collective effort in which each of us will work towards his own survival and everyone else's." Thus, by maintaining every possible trace of his life and securing them against any possible destruction, by being assured of never dying, he can finally rest.<sup>66</sup>

To further elucidate the complex relationship between the archive and death, I will resort to psychoanalysis, which is also the basis of Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. In psychoanalytical terms, both Boltanski's and Kabakov's projects would be perfect examples of the survival instinct, which Freud calls the *Eros* drive. But in chapter 6 of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud comes to terms with what he had previously described as the death drive, or the destruction drive, as an essential component of the human psyche. According to him, "In addition to the drive to preserve the living substance and bring it together in even larger units, there must be another, opposed to it, which sought to break down these units and restore

---

<sup>66</sup> Christian Boltanski, *Research and Presentation of All That Remains of My Childhood*, 126.

them to their primordial inorganic state,” which leads him to the conclusion that besides *Eros*, there must be a *death drive*, and “the interaction and counteraction of these two could explain the phenomena of life.”<sup>67</sup>

The death drive, according to Freud, is typically targeting “other things,” instead of the organism itself, but because of the restrictions that civilization imposes on this “outward-directed aggression,” the death drive ends up increasing the degree of self-destruction. The death drive, which partially justifies masochism for instance, is therefore not external to the psyche, and also explains the existence of both God and the Devil, whom the former created with all the evil it embodies. Freud’s development, or what Derrida calls a mutation, in the system of drives shows us the struggle between the forces of survival and those of death, and how it plays itself out in the human race.<sup>68</sup>

But what does all this have to do with the archive? In *Archive Fever*, Derrida argues that the death drive is manifested in the archive in the form of what he calls “archival violence,”<sup>69</sup> but because this death drive is hard to identify since it “always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own,” and therefore it “destroys in advance its own archive.”<sup>70</sup> The death drive, or what Derrida calls the “anarchy drive” plays itself out in the archive in a convoluted way:

If there is no archive without consignment in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that the repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction. Consequence: right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction, introducing, *a priori*,

---

<sup>67</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 70.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-74.

<sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 7.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument. Into the “by heart” itself. The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself.<sup>71</sup>

The archive, intended for preservation and immortalization, is paradoxically self-destructive by virtue of the intrinsic compulsion of repetition that drives the act of archiving behind its very creation. Could the act of archiving, then, be simultaneously a resistance to, and a perpetuation of, death? Could the archive be at once a manifestation of both life and death?

In Derrida’s complex image, the act of archiving, being essentially one of compulsive repetition, does not only destroy the *archon*, but the *archive* itself. The exteriority of the archive, which Derrida argues is what ultimately destroys it, is what denies the archive the possibility of being “either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience.” Instead, the archive “takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory.”<sup>72</sup> The creation of the archive, which is originally intended as an aid to memory and out of fear of forgetfulness, essentially signals the death of memory. I am immediately reminded of the image of the black hole in Robert Coover’s *A Child Again*: “Black holes, which have no memory, are said to contain the earliest memories of the universe, and the most recent too, while at the same time obliterating all memory by obliterating its embodiments.” For the black hole, just like the archive, creation is destruction, death is life and chaos is order.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11-12.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> See Robert Coover, *A Child Again* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s Books, 2005), 11.



**Beyond Personal Archives:**  
*Writing, Photography and the Affective Trace*

“To collect photographs is to collect the world.”  
- Susan Sontag, *In Plato's Cave*<sup>74</sup>

So far, I have focused on the act of archiving associated with personal traces, as evident in the three texts I started this section with. What about an archive whose scope goes beyond the commemoration of a personal life? What about national archives, for instance? In his epistemological analysis of historical knowledge in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur – extrapolating from Michel de Certeau’s essay *Faire de l’histoire* – identifies three stages in the historiographical operation: The “documentary phase”, which is concerned with the establishing of documentary proof; the “explanation/ understanding” phase which has to do with understanding why things happened in the way they did; and the “representative phase,” which offers the readers of history the “literary or written form of discourse.”<sup>75</sup> Such phases, according to Ricoeur, are not necessarily chronological, but rather interact with one another. This last phase, in particular, signals the importance of writing in the construction of historical knowledge, particularly in its being “the threshold of language that historical knowing has already crossed, in distancing itself from memory.”<sup>76</sup>

The moment of the archive is, therefore, the “moment of the entry into writing of the historiographical operation.”<sup>77</sup> While the testimony - which is by origin oral and targeted towards a specific interlocutor - opens an epistemological process “that departs from declared memory,” it finds its fulfillment in a documentary proof, which

---

<sup>74</sup> Susan Songag, ‘In Plato’s Cave’, in *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 3.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 136.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 136.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

is a written proof that constitutes the building unit of the archive and is targeted towards an unknown reader.<sup>78</sup> The archive, therefore, first breaks with the tradition of the hearsay characteristic of the oral testimony. The archival process, according to Ricoeur, starts with the “initiative of a person or legal entity intending to preserve the traces of his or her own activity,” which also emphasizes the indispensability of personal archiving efforts in the process; then goes through “the more or less systematic organization of the material thus set aside”, which is primarily the role of the institution; and finally consults the materials “within the limits of the rules governing access to them.”<sup>79</sup> Until the third step, it seemed to me that Ricoeur’s concept of the archive is merely a physical one, a space for the preservation of collected traces or documentary proofs, but it is this final verification of the materials against their governing rules that brings back the notion of the archive to that of Foucault’s: being a law of what can and cannot be said, an overarching system that either permits or prohibits the emergence of statements. This is echoed in Certeau’s view of the historical discourse, as quoted by Ricoeur, that “it takes priority over every particular historical work.”<sup>80</sup>

But what gets lost in this passage from the tradition of the hearsay to that of writing? In a section in the same book titled *Forgetting*, Ricoeur identifies three types of traces: the documentary trace, the cerebral trace and the affective trace. The documentary trace is to be found in “confessions, autobiographies...diaries, maps, secret documents, and some confidential reports by military leaders”<sup>81</sup>; while the cerebral trace constitutes cortical traces or what he calls “the biological organization

---

<sup>78</sup> The oral testimony, however, can also be documented as an audio recording.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 168.

<sup>80</sup> Michel De Certeau, as quoted in Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 167.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 171.

for the brain,”<sup>82</sup> which would be the concern of neuroscience; and finally the affective trace, which consists in “the passive persistence of first impressions: an event has struck us, touched us, affected us, and the affective mark remains in our mind.”<sup>83</sup> It is the affective trace, which he finds the most problematic, that is my concern in the context of this paper.

The affective trace, Ricoeur argues, remains latent in memory and is only brought up by the phenomenon of recognition:

Recognizing a memory is finding it again. And finding it again is assuming that it is in principle available, if not accessible. Available, as though awaiting recall, but not ready-to-hand... The experience of recognition, therefore, refers back to the memory of the first impression in a latent state, the image of which must be constituted at the same time as the original affection. An important corollary to the thesis of the survival of images of the past in a state of latency is, in fact, that any given present is, from the moment of its appearance, its own past.<sup>84</sup>

This brings us back to the beginning of this paper. How can a testimony, for instance, capture the intensity of the experience since it is intrinsically a result of an act of recollection? And since that is the case, how can one remember thirst? The latent nature of the affective trace is equivalent to Benjamin’s image of the past, which “flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again,”<sup>85</sup> and that which could only be recalled by aid of the present moment, retrieved through the taste and smell as in Proust’s involuntary memory. Therefore, it remains unceasingly outside the jurisdiction of the archive.

Ricoeur’s epistemological analysis of historical knowledge stops at the relationship between the archive and writing as a vehicle for transforming the hearsay of the testimony into documentary proof. It does not deal with a major subsequent

---

<sup>82</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 427.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>85</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 255.

technological development that significantly altered the scope of the documentary proof: the invention of photography. In his essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, André Bazin argues that the invention of photography has freed plastic arts from its mimetic function, or even obligation. According to Bazin, plastic arts have been associated historically not only with representation, but also with preservation. Ancient Egyptians mummified the corporeal bodies of the dead in an attempt to “embalm the dead,” or even to “snatch it from the flow of time.”<sup>86</sup> With time, painting replaced mummification in its magical role of preserving the dead body. The evolution of art and civilization, from Bazin’s perspective, is reflected in Louis XIV’s satisfaction with surviving in his portrait by Le Brun, as opposed to having his body mummified, for instance.<sup>87</sup>

In Bazin’s analysis, the decisive moment in the history of Western painting:

....undoubtedly came with the discovery of the first scientific and already, in a sense, mechanical system of reproduction, namely *perspective*: the camera obscura of Da Vinci foreshadowed the camera of Niepce. The artist was now in a position to create the illusion of three-dimensional space within which things appeared to exist as our eyes in reality see them.<sup>88</sup>

This discovery of perspective is what Bazin calls “the original sin of Western Painting,” from which it has been redeemed only with the invention of photography. The camera, as a non-living object, guaranteed for the first time that the representation of reality would not be tainted with man’s creative intervention.

It could be argued that even with an apparatus, man’s intervention is inevitable and any image would always reflect the photographer’s subjective perspective. However, Bazin does not deny the potential manipulation of reality by the photographer, and therefore his concern is not necessarily with the end results of photography and

---

<sup>86</sup> André Bazin, ‘On the Ontology of the Photographic Image’, *What is Cinema? Volume I*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, LA, London: University of California Press, 1967), 9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>88</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 11. Emphasis Added.

painting, but rather the process itself, i.e. the way of achieving this end result. What matters for Bazin is not the point of view of the painter vis-à-vis the photographer, but rather with the immanent objectivity of photography, by virtue of its reliance first and foremost on the apparatus and its capacity for technical reproduction, which therefore forces us to “accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space.”<sup>89</sup> This suggestion of unquestionability of the subject of the photograph is what grants it a superior status as a documentary proof than writing.

Therefore, while we may question the photographer’s perspective, it would be much harder to deny that the picture is completely invented. Susan Sontag, in an essay titled *In Plato’s Cave* claims that the photographic image might distort, but “there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture.”<sup>90</sup> The reality re-presented by the photographic image therefore is not even a replica of reality, but merely evidence that such “reality” did exist at a given point in time.

Even with the invention of image manipulation software, such as Photoshop, Sontag’s argument would still be valid, as no matter how much a graphic designer can manipulate an image, it would be practically impossible to create from scratch an image that looks completely “real.” What such manipulation tools allowed, however, was a significant alteration of the representation itself, and with the increasing power of images, such manipulation could serve all sorts of political purposes.

The act of collecting photographs, whether in the form of personal collections, national archives, museums or digital databases, not only changed the nature of the archive, but our relationship to the world. The photographic enterprise, in Sontag’s

---

<sup>89</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 13-14.

<sup>90</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1979), 5.

words, gives us “the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads – as an anthology of images.” To collect photographs was, therefore, to “collect the world.”<sup>91</sup> Photographs give us the illusion of knowledge, and also now “provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present.”<sup>92</sup> Our image of the past, as well as that of the present, has become mediated by photographs.

My earliest encounter with a photographic archive that I recall was when I was flipping through a family album that contained images of several typical family occasions, weddings, engagement parties, trips to Europe or the Soviet Union, and an abundance of studio portraits. The photos were neatly, almost obsessively, organized, categorized and labeled. With the innocence of a child, I turned to my mother and asked her if real life, back then, was also in black and white like the images we were looking at, or in color as we experience our lives “today.” I see my question in retrospect not as a whimsical wondering of a child, but rather as a manifestation of the authority of images – and the archive – over the construction of the past in the consciousness, and even more broadly, our perception of this past, as well as that of the present moment.

In addition to mediating our perception of the past, the photograph certifies experience, but while doing so, it also refuses that experience, by “limiting [it] to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.”<sup>93</sup> Just like tourists feel compelled to accumulate photographs - or now selfies - thus putting the camera “between themselves and whatever is remarkable that they encounter,”<sup>94</sup> consumers of photojournalism, as well as historians, put images between them and the event that is captured, reduced to a photograph. It was the invention of photography

---

<sup>91</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

and the consequent abundance of photographs, however, that opened up new possibilities for the sphere of art to use, appropriate, analyze, recycle and manipulate those photographs, and by doing so, contesting, subverting and reconstructing historical narratives.

## **Disrupting the Unity of the Archive:**

*Art between Perpetual Topology and Prospects of Rupture with the Archive*

*“To appropriate the fetishes of material culture, then,  
is like looting empty shops on the eve of destruction.  
It’s the final party before doomsday.”  
- Jan Verwoert<sup>95</sup>*

In a footnote in the introduction of *Archive Fever*, possibly written for the published version and not included in the original lecture, Derrida argues that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.” According to him, no real democratization could ever take place without expanding the participation in constituting the archive and the access to it, as well as relinquishing the hermeneutic power that was historically monopolized by the *archons*.<sup>96</sup> The emergence of cultural history in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by postmodern history, carved a domain for contesting official narratives by excavating the archive, searching within for alternative narratives and therefore contesting the then-prevalent modes of social historiography<sup>97</sup>. Comparably, art has been a sphere not only for “filling the gaps” left by official narratives through appropriating the archive, but also for disturbing its unity and homogeneity, challenging the illusion of its completeness, questioning the basis of its constitution and destabilizing its authority.

But while historians are compelled to contest a fact with another fact, and provide evidence for the alternative narratives they are proposing, the nature of an artwork as affective rather than factual provided a different level of freedom to the artist in the proposition of such narratives, also given the different levels of access that the “artist”

---

<sup>95</sup> Jan Verwoert, ‘Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Today Feels Different’, Ed. Beatrix Ruf, *Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art*, Tate Publishing, London, 2006, 16.

<sup>96</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4.

<sup>97</sup> Paula S. Fass, ‘Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue’, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue (Autumn, 2003), 39.



and the “historian” have, or could ideally have, to the official archive. And while the historian, at least in the traditional sense, is required to prove the invalidity of certain records and provide alternative evidence, the artist is freed from this constraint, which gives art its special status in questioning the authority of the archive as *historical a priori*, and critiquing its selectivity, as well as the prevalent notions of what qualifies as archive in the first place.

Towards the end of what is now known in art history as Modernism, several artworks challenging the form of the archive, in and of itself, emerged in museums and galleries. Such works programmatically engaged not only with the content of the archive, but its concept and form, as well as the museum as an archiving institution. In *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, Okwui Enwezor cites three such works, namely: Marcel Duchamp’s *La boîte-en-valise* (1935-41), where Duchamp miniaturized “his entire corpus into a deluxe edition of reproductions, organized in an archival system cum mobile museum”; Marcel Broodthaers’s *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968), where the artist produced an “unlimited edition of gold ingots stamped with the museum's emblem, an eagle, a symbol associated with power and victory”<sup>98</sup>; and Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* (1968-present) which is constituted of a significantly large number of photographic panels, each with a seemingly heterogeneous of photographs ranging from studio portraits, to landscape images to documentary photographs, among many others, in an attempt to reflect on “the relationship between the photographic and the historiographic.”<sup>99</sup>

These works are only examples of hundreds of artworks that amplify a desire within

---

<sup>98</sup> See the website of the Museum of Modern Art in New York  
[http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/muse/artist\\_pages/broodthaers\\_musee.html](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1999/muse/artist_pages/broodthaers_musee.html)

<sup>99</sup> Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, 14

the artists to destabilize the power of the museum, and more symbolically the institution of the archive, which constitutes the substrate of their own work.

With the Postmodern turn and its “incredulity towards metanarratives,”<sup>100</sup> the archive – with all its variations – acquired a new status as the embodiment of grand narratives and discourses that now needed to be deconstructed. The notion of the archive was therefore expanded from its conventional narrow interpretation as the “official record” to include all cultural production, including but not limited to cinema, literature, and mass media. Rather than critiquing the archive solely as form, artists sought to subvert the archive by producing what Hal Foster refers to as “alternative knowledge or counter memory,”<sup>101</sup> thus rendering archival art “as much reproduction as it is post-production,”<sup>102</sup> and reflecting what he calls an “anarchival” rather than an “archival” impulse.

The contemporary archive was therefore heavily used and appropriated by artists working across various disciplines and mediums. Because it is essentially rooted in the treatment of the past itself, in the broadest sense of the term, as “malleable raw material”<sup>103</sup>, recycling its cultural production and deconstructing its narratives, the appropriation of the archive is mostly recognized for its critical subversive aspect. And as the access to reality itself has become mediated by images, more so today than in the 1960s when Guy Debord wrote *Society of The Spectacle* and proposed that “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation,”<sup>104</sup> the appropriation of the archive deals with these representations as a gateway to

---

<sup>100</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, Geoffrey Bennington, and Brian Massumi, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>101</sup> Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Ed. Charles Merewether (London/ Cambridge: White Chapel Gallery & The MIT Press, 2006) 144.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> David Evans, *Appropriation* (London/ Cambridge: White Chapel Gallery & The MIT Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>104</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1967), Ch. 1.

critiquing reality itself. This critique, thus, takes on the form of destabilizing the modes of cultural production and consumption as a microcosm for the conditions of production in modern society as a whole, and asserts the status of the archive both as a system of consignment and *historical a priori*.

Appropriating the archives, then, cannot be viewed solely as a revisionist approach or a form of critiquing the past, but rather a way of relating to this past, and to the world in general.<sup>105</sup> Given the historical moment where this movement emerged, it could also be seen as reactionary to the demise of modernism and the political stagnation characterizing the cold war era. In his essay *Why Stealing Images Today Feels Different*, Jan Verwoert relates appropriation to “the experience of sudden death of modernism and the momentary suspension of historical continuity,” since “the stalemate situation of the Cold War seemed to bring modern history to a standstill, freezing the forces of progress,” and rendering the “frozen lumps of dead historical time” raw material for artistic appropriation.<sup>106</sup>

Because archive-based art deals essentially with “lumps” of dead historical time, the extent to which a lot of the works within this movement truly and fundamentally threaten the archontic power of the archive as an overarching system, be it a system of gathering together signs or a law for the appearance and transformation of statements, is questionable. This genre of art certainly plays an essential role in re-appropriating

---

<sup>105</sup> The appropriation movement emerged strongly among commercial galleries in New York after the exhibition *Pictures*, curated by Douglas Crimp at the *Artists Space* in 1977, which is still recognized today as “the epochal exhibition that launched a new pervasive art based on the possession – usually unauthorized – of the images and artifacts of others.” The exhibition included the work of five artists whose diverse works share a common interest in representation and revisiting found images in film, photography, television and newspapers. As articulated by Crimp, the works presented reflected an attempt to free representation from “the tyranny of the represented,” heralding a shift in modern art after the “demise of conceptual art and the pervasive media involvements of the seventies.” (David Evans, *Appropriation*, 12)

<sup>106</sup> Jan Verwoert, ‘Apropos Appropriation’, 15.

the archive, analyzing discourses, subverting the notion of the “document,” questioning problematic representations and attracting the viewer’s attention to the illusions of the credibility and the completeness of the archive, be it in the form of official records or cultural production. But while archive-based art could provide a much needed “counter memory” or alternative history, it simultaneously asserts the power of the archive while doing so, by constantly positioning itself in relation to it, by perpetually dwelling within its aesthetic, and endlessly rehearsing its narratives. Archival art, therefore, gets stuck in the same dialectic that forms the basis of the unity of the archive, because even if they are completely opposed they are still capable of arguing over the same battlefield: the archive itself.

By relinquishing its advantage as a vehicle for affect rather than facts, for sensible intensity rather than material representation, archival art distances itself from its true potential to fight an image with another image. Instead, it limits itself to that which already exists, and therefore the scope of its imagination – while still significantly huge – remains confined to the archive itself. If anything, it partially fills the endless gaps within the archive, while staying within its *topological* sphere, endlessly indenting, manipulating and twisting its figure without truly disturbing its homogeneity.

## **The Problem of the Archive:**

### *Revisiting the Position of the Physical Trace in Epistemological Hierarchy*

*“Writing history and writing stories  
come under the same regime of truth.”  
- Jacques Rancière, *Is History a Form of Fiction?*<sup>107</sup>*

As I embark on the conclusion of this paper, I find myself again in a jumble, a more complex one than the one in which I started. Up until now, I have remained fairly critical of the notion of the archive, contemplating its limitations, its association with a deadly archival impulse, and ultimately the death drive. However, my purpose - from the very beginning - was not to abolish the archive altogether. Alternatively, my purpose was twofold: First to acknowledge the limitations of the archive and consequently stop fetishizing it as a reservoir of truth, and second to open up - with this acknowledgement - possibilities for including what it leaves out from historical discourse. What the archive *truly* leaves out is neither restricted to the multiplicity of perspectives it excludes, nor all the disruptions that its intricate system denies entry to, but also to the very aspects of experience that it eliminates. These aspects are what I earlier referred to as affective traces, sensible intensities, the humming background noise of the universe, all the tastes, smells, sensations of thirst, which threaten both its unity and status as a resource for historical positivism.

As I begin to end, I find myself returning back to the beginning, to Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In the famous Ninth thesis, he paints a haunting image of the past, which is centered around Klee's painting "Angelus Novus," which he argues is looking almost as if he is being forced to move away from something is fixedly contemplating:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would

---

<sup>107</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Is History a Form of Fiction?', 38.

like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress.<sup>108</sup>

This image of the past that the illusion of progress is propelling history to move away from, but that will remain constantly present in the form of debris, is what makes the very idea of forgetting the past, or obliterating memory, not only impossible – as echoed in the fundamentals of psychoanalysis – but also highly dangerous. Colonial powers, fascist regimes and autocratic rulers practice systematic erasure of collective memories, in order to oppress their opponents and impose – in a vacuum – their illusory projects of progress.

This is precisely why my question is not one of forgetting the past, but rather of how we speak about this past, of the limitations of the archive as a mediator between this past and its account in historical discourse, and finally of the agency we give to the archive in creating its image. As I had already argued throughout the paper, the archive is not a collection of documents, with all the various types of such documents that range from official records to testimonials, objects, still and moving images, cultural production, tweets and YouTube videos, among many others. Nor is the archive supposed to, or capable of, giving the account of the past “just as it was,” as I have already proven throughout this paper the impossibility of this prospect.

The archive is above all a system, a law of what can be said, one that essentially ensures the unity of historical discourse, and that is limited by the very limitations of language itself, whether as a linguistic system, or visual – or even aural – language. A text or an image - any image - remain merely an account, a physical trace, a partial subjective impression of the event or experience. By understanding the limitations of words and images, we can come to terms with the limitations of the archive that

---

<sup>108</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, 257-258.

comprises them under the umbrella of its overarching discursive and symbolic systems.

Any possible subversion, or even expansion, of the archive would therefore require a shift in dealing with the notion of truth, which is essentially what gives the archive its power, and its relation to representation. We are living in an age of what Jean Baudrillard calls the *simulacrum*, which he distinguishes from representation or mimesis as a notion that embodies the loss of the very ideas of reality and appearance, where there is “no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and the concept.”<sup>109</sup> To represent, or to dissimulate, therefore, is “to pretend not to have what one has,” while to simulate is “to feign to have what one doesn’t have.”<sup>110</sup> Therefore:

...pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’<sup>111</sup>

The notion of the simulacrum already implies the impossibility of the prospect of perfect representation. According to Baudrillard, such would be the successive phases of the image: “it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the *absence* of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is now its own pure simulacrum.”<sup>112</sup> The simulacrum is what distinguishes the aesthetic regime from the representative regime of the arts.

In the aesthetic regime, as Rancière argues, the traditional platonic – or even Aristotelian – lines between what is real and what is an appearance are blurred. For mimetic representations are not only just as real as what they are depicting, but they also produce effects in reality, and therefore become an integral part of it. The task of

---

<sup>109</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the historian, I would presume, would need to move from the mere use and interpretation of the archive to the inclusion of *everything* in their historical analysis, without discriminating between what is thought to be real and what is fictional. Only then can the historian begin to paint a more comprehensive image of the past, or at least constantly strive to do so, even if this image remains unattainable. Embracing the simulacrum wholeheartedly, with all its multiplicity, would open up new possibilities for the archive. Think of an archive that includes, unselectively, all sorts of objects, documents, records, coins, official files, photographs, as well as poems, paintings, insignificant little pieces of paper, and the list is endless. This notion of archive changes not only how we write the past, but also how we record the present, as well as how we understand the fluidity of time between the past, the present and the future. It expands not only the content of the archive, but its form.

More importantly, however, it is necessary for the historian – in the broadest sense of the term – as well as the reader of history, to acknowledge that even this kind of archive, as inclusive as it could be, still cannot render life in its multiplicity and totality available as material for historical discourse as such. Therefore, the epistemological supremacy of the archive, and consequently the status of scientific history and archive-based art, need to be critiqued and revised. For if memory, as Ricoeur suggests, remains in a latent state ready to come to life when awakened by the experiences of the present, how can we possibly think of retrieving the past in its fullness through any possible archive?

It is not a coincidence that this is how I am writing the conclusion of the paper, at a time when sitting at home, locking myself up to finish up the thesis, I am only connected to protests at the Journalists' Syndicate - whose magnitude is reminiscent of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January - solely through an image, an exhilarating image, sensing the



hope mixed up with fear, embezzlement, excitement that what is happening is happening, while maintaining my distance from its patriarchal honor-based rhetoric. But my being here, seeing these pictures, writing this, playing the music I am playing, drinking that which I am drinking, is also part of that image. My question is which part of the image will make its way into the archive, and which will remain concealed, excluded from historical discourse.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Roger. *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Cambridge/ New York/ Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath. London: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1994
- Bazin, André. *What is Cinema? Volume I*. Translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1967.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Image of Proust". In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 201-215. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*. Edited by Gershom Scholem. New York: Schocken, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Theses on the Philosophy of History". In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 253-264. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Bloch, William Goldbloom. *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Boltanski, Christian. "Research and Presentation of All that Remains of my Childhood." In *Christian Boltanski*, translated by Shaun Whiteside, edited by Didier Semin, Tamar Garb, Donald Kuspit. London: Phaidon Press, 1997.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *The Total Library*. In *Labyrinths*, Edited by Donald A. Yates & James. Translated by Eliot Weinberger. London: The Penguin Press, 2000.
- Coover, Robert. *A Child Again*. San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2005.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1967.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.
- Enwezor, Okwui. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York, Göttingen: International Center of Photography and Steidl, 2007.
- Evans, David, ed. *Appropriation*. London/ Cambridge, MA: White Chapel Gallery & The MIT Press, 2009.

Fass, Paula S. "Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue". *Journal of Social History*. Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue (Autumn, 2003), 39-46.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage, 2010.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Translated by David McLintock. London: Penguin Books, 2004.

Kabakov, Ilya. "The Man who Never Threw Anything Away." In *Ilya Kabakov*. edited by Boris Groys, David A. Ross, Iwona Blazwick. London: Phaidon Press, 1998.

Lomax, Yves. *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time*. London/New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2005.

Lyotard, Jean-François, Geoffrey Bennington, and Brian Massumi. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Merewether, Charles, ed. *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London/Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006.

Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time, Volume I*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff. London: Penguin Classics, 2000.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Archives, Documents, Traces". In *Time and Narrative* Vol. III, 116-119. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Rancière, Jacques. "Is History a Form of Fiction?" In *The Politics of Aesthetics*. London, New York: Continuum, 2006. 35-41

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

*Sans Soleil*. Directed by Chris Marker. 1983. Paris: The Criterion Collection, 2007. DVD.

Serres, Michel. *The Natural Contract*. Translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Sontag, Susan. "Plato's Cave". In *On Photography*, 3-24. New York: Picador, 1973.

Steedman, Carolyn. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

Verwoert, Jan. 'Apropos Appropriation: Why Stealing Images Today Feels Different', in Beatrix Ruf (ed.), *Tate Triennial 2006: New British Art*, Tate Publishing, London, 2006, 14-21.

Warhol, Andy. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Publishers Ltd, 1975.

Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being*. San Diego: Harvest/ HBJ, 1978.