Archive

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‘Being past, being no more, is passionately at work in things. To this the historian trusts for his subject matter. He depends on this force, and knows things as they are at the moment of their ceasing to be.’ (Benjamin 1999, 833) The trust in ‘things’ and their historicity, the meaning and interpretation of things through historiography, are contained in Walter Benjamin’s aphorism, which highlights the intrinsic life of things – but also the indeterminacy of matter, the individual perspective, the arbitrariness of their interpretation by historians and other people who seek access to different times via the objects, be it the present, the past or the future.

Who owns History? Whose present may one day become historic/al? What is worth remembering? What will never find its way into cultural memory? Who decides what enters the archive and what does not?

This article is not intended as an all-encompassing classification of what constitutes an archive. The semantic plurality of the term and concept does not permit this in such a short space. Rather, the following is a critical reflection on the archive against the background of the sovereignty of knowledge and the double-faced nature of globalisation understood as both cultural entanglement and division. This ambivalence can also be demonstrated in the idea and institution of the archive. Archives may enable the storage of information, but cataloguing and access are not granted on an equal basis. Economic disparities between countries, as well as within individual regions and archives, result in unequal archiving opportunities. The holdings of a collection – be it an archive or a museum – may, in fact, belong to a different culture (looted art, colonial cultural artefacts), etc.

The term – and its limits

The late Latin word *archivum*, ‘filing cabinet’, initially (and literally) suggests the simple storage of files in a piece of furniture. The ancient Greek origin of the word, ἀρχεῖον (archeíon), understood as a ‘government building, authority, official building’ (OED), conveys the impression of a solid institution or repository that, for an unlimited period of time, stores, indexes and preserves relics and documents of the present. The supposed neutrality of the term is blurred by a glance at the localization, practice and global perspective. Archives are never just neutral storage locations; rather, they determine which stories and perspectives are preserved.

An archive is an institution and a space in which documents, records and other materials are systematically collected, stored and made accessible. It serves to preserve knowledge and history and sees itself as a link between the past, present and

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future. Archives preserve documents that have cultural, historical or legal significance. They are central to the culture of remembrance and help to shape collective identities. (Lepper and Raulff 2016; UNESCO 2023).

Archives are not just about housing disparate multimedia records; they are always accompanied by a specific systematization and classification of the material. Evaluation, selection, indexing and categorization as well as cataloguing are processes that users must always be aware of when searching or working with archival materials. The founding of archives is always closely linked to the development of (national) identity, certain contemporary historical understandings of history or of a specific person whose legacy the archive houses. (Lepper and Raulff 2016).

An archive can be walked through, visited, used (physically) or experienced, retrieved, listened to, or embodied (mentally and physically). In addition to the architecturally tangible meaning of the term, the knowledge of a culture, a group or even the mental or physical memory of a person can also be referred to as an 'archive' (Taylor 2003). In cultural and media studies contexts in particular, one frequently encounters a metaphorical concept of an archive, especially in respect to the contexts of information or knowledge or the (collective or individual) remembering of structures, references, cultural habits, etc. Archives are understood as institutions of memory; as cultural or individual 'temples of remembrance'. The process of archiving is read as a cultural practice and as such is subject to political and ideological perspectives, which also make the act of archiving, including the selection and mediation of archival records, a political issue.

Archives often focus on regional historiography, local communities and their identity. They preserve materials that are important for a specific community or region und support the formation of local identity and research into local history. Archives may contribute to the globalisation of knowledge, provided, however, that users have access to the material. Local archives can be more responsive to the needs of the immediate community, while national archives often offer standardized access that can overlook local specificities. For example, knowledge of language, culture and context is essential to be able to classify archival material from an archive in a country whose language and history are unfamiliar to users/researchers.

Over the past decade, the question of the provenance of objects or documents has increasingly led to discussions about the restitution of cultural goods within the archive and museum landscape. (Stahn 2024; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2016). In particular archives (and museums) of former colonial states include materials in their holdings that actually belong to the colonized region. Dis:connectivity occurs here in post-colonial contexts when the archives are not located in the countries of origin of the collected works. The system of the archive imposes a classification

on the foreign object that can never do it justice. This realization and the need to rigorously question the provenance of objects make the power structures of the archives manifest and must be taken into consideration when working with archival material.

Temporality

The criterion of 'longevity' is intrinsic to all archives. On a technical level, this initially means that materials of different mediality should be preserved in the archive over a long period of time. However, this long-term nature allows a relational approach when it comes to the temporality of archival work: The same material will be subject to different patterns of interpretation by a person from the 1950s than by a person who has access to the same source in the year 2000. This historicity of archives and their use is crucial to understanding the dynamics that the archive is inscribed with.

An archive is therefore also a 'temporal tentacle': with its focus on the different pasts, its location and administration in the present and the forward-looking maintenance and preparation of the holdings for the future. This is preceded by an awareness of the value and lasting significance of the past and present for future generations, which in turn leads back to the question posed at the beginning of this entry as to who 'owns' history and who decides what is remembered and what is not. Lack of access and fragmented knowledge are certainly the decisive parameters of the asymmetry and dis:connectivity of archives. It goes without saying that they have an impact on research, society and collective memory – locally, but also worldwide.

Accessibility

Although archives are places and institutions that promise access to information, they also entail asymmetries. Supposedly accessible to everyone, admission and permission to work with archival materials can be subject to strict regulations and premises. Archives are not 'places of passage', but places of appointments and agreements that make accessibility difficult or even impossible. This may be due to physical distance, political restrictions or technical barriers, or even language barriers or illegible fonts. These markers of dis:connectivity make comprehensive historical research more difficult and promote inequalities in access to knowledge.

Like other sites and knowledge repositories for the preservation of cultural memory, archives are also exposed to political unrest, the effects of revolutions or austerity measures. Looting and closures, loss of holdings due to war damage or natural disasters can displace archives or leave deep wounds in the archive and thus in the transmission of cultural heritage (e.g. in Iran, Syria, etc. but also after

WWI and II (Lowry 2017)). Economic constraints can also hinder the acquisition or processing of archival records. A lack of archival and cataloguing expertise can lead to the loss of materials, be it because documents are not processed properly or because the material physically deteriorates due to incorrect storage. Researchers who are dependent on working with archives are regularly confronted with these problems. Within global or transnational contexts, considerable asymmetries in the quality and accessibility of archives and their holdings are apparent. In areas of conflicts, access for outsiders can be prohibited, heavily regulated or even dangerous. Surveillance measures are a natural part of archival practice there.

Technological change and digitization

The mediality and materiality of archival records as well as the provision of archives are subject to radical and unstoppable technological change. More and more archival materials are genuinely digital. They require appropriate technologies for archiving. So-called 'born digital' documents largely follow traditional systems; however, they place different demands on preservation, indexing and provision. Like analogue source materials, they are closely tied to their medium (usually paper, canvas, tapes, film, etc.) and require specific software and digital processing. Digital availability offers new access to the archive that is not tied to a local presence. Archives are continuously being digitized and thus made accessible to a broader, non-local or national group. However, this development is accompanied by a new asymmetry, as the digitization and digital opening of archives is heavily dependent on economic premises and decisions. Even if digital archives or platforms theoretically enable 'global' access, it is essential to consider that not all countries or regions have the same infrastructure to either build or use these resources.

Digitization also allows previously impossible operations at the level of indexing and use: archives can be linked together (provided that their database systems are interoperable); relational databases enable searches that transcend archives, whether local or translocal; users can find objects or documents more easily through annotations and tagging – or are themselves involved in assigning keywords and descriptions; archive holdings that were previously only accessible physically in one location, are also made accessible to non-local users including users with physical disabilities. Global-historical research in particular benefits enormously from this linking of archives, newspapers and databases across national borders (e.g. Gallica, World Digital Library (WDL), Europeana, Trove).

While the greatest dangers for paper are fire and decay, digitized archives are subject to obsolescence because of the speed of technological change. With digiti-

zation, the field of activity of archivists or documenters will increasingly have to adapt to this change.

Even in the field of digitization, there is no parity or neutrality in terms of accessibility and indexing. What is digitally indexed and made accessible is what is often requested or otherwise prioritized. At the same time, personnel and financial resources determine progress in the digital archive landscape. As a matter of fact, there are considerable asymmetries in the digital processing of archival records within industrialized countries as well.

Archive as a 'knowledge' repository?

Although archives are commonly referred to as 'knowledge repositories', they do not store knowledge, but rather hold various documents of different mediality, materiality, language and information. Materials are often intended for other purposes in other contexts before they become archival material due to curatorial decisions. This is particularly the case with archives of artistic and cultural material, i.e. photography, art, theatre, dance, literature, music or architecture archives. Director's books, costume sketches, or stage design models, for example, are documents of a creative process prior to a theatre performance (Mayer, Rothenberger and Thurmann-Jajes 2024).

The cultural studies approach has also productively generated the idea of the body as an archive: Memories, body knowledge, cultural anchoring, etc. make the human body itself an archive, a 'seat of memory' (Baxmann 2007). Oral history, interviews and their audio recordings and transcriptions have now become equivalent 'repositories' for gaining access to traditional knowledge or cultural heritage (Leonhardt, Jones and Majeswka 2024; Mayer Rothenberger and Thurmann-Jajes 2024; Taylor 2003).

In terms of epistemology (→ **Epistemologies, alternative**), it can be said that the archive always provides different answers: although it can answer direct questions to a certain extent, it raises further questions. This cycle of research is also conditioned by the systematics of archives, their cataloguing principles, collection philosophies and ideologies and their contribution to the formation of canons in each specific field. Even if archives appear to be located locally or culturally, it is advisable to view them in relation to the time of their creation, their location, the political context of their establishment, the collection mandate (e.g. public or private), and in relation to the present. In this relational perspective, archives can be allies for their users, but they can also reveal a disparity – temporally, geographically, politically, ideologically, etc. This shows that the material is not, and cannot be, neutral.

The aforementioned power structures and asymmetries in the archival sector, i.e. the control or dominance over knowledge and memory, the political instrumentalization of archives, and their vulnerability during times of political and economic crises, can indeed be countered with a positive perspective: over the past two decades, there have been efforts towards the decentralization and democratization of archives. These approaches enrich the understanding and structure of archives, particularly from a relational perspective, and can contribute to transnational or transcultural connectivity. With increasing digitization, a paradox arises: on the one hand, there is the technical simplification of recording and reproducing artefacts or documents; on the other hand, digital technology enables interoperability between archives. Archival databases can be linked beyond the walls of individual archives, allowing cross-referential searches. Specialist information services or union catalogues offer the possibility of diagonal searches across different catalogues. Initiatives such as Open Access, which have been promoted in the academic publishing landscape for several years, foster free access to knowledge and attempt to dismantle barriers. It is hoped that archives will also become more inclusive in the future, not only through digital technologies but also by returning documents to their communities of origin, who have the right to preserve and manage their own cultural heritage.

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