The concept of archive

Introduction to the contemporary archive

Archive episteme and common sense

The archive has become an extremely popular interdisciplinary subject of study over recent decades. *"An intensified discussion on the archive, which takes place not only in archival science, but also in art, philosophy, media archaeology, after the so-called "archival turn" in the human sciences, brings out different dimensions of the archive in its affinities with constructions of memory and knowledge, the system of law, power relations and reproduction technologies (Kouros and Karaba, 2012)."* Archive is a central to both the development of academic research as well as democracy. Political theorist Irving Velody believes that the archive is the background for every field of research (Manoff, 2004). Velody argues that archive *"[a]ppeals to ultimate truth, adequacy and plausibility in the work of the humanities and social sciences rest on archival presuppositions (Manoff, 2004)."*

Sociologist Thomas Osborn describe archive as a *"centre of interpretation"* (Manoff, 2004). Archive offers all previous records of current knowledge and is based on the history of past innovations. Every new element added to the archive is a development, extension or re-interpretation of previous element(s) which the archive has sorted in the past. Thus, the researcher or observer actually takes the information belonging to the archive and combines them with the results of other interpreted collection, either recorded or not. In this way, the assumption is that archive is timeless and is never complete, but rather a living developing organism, a system of collective interaction and re-(in)formation.

However, archives are commonly interpreted today without taking into consideration their openness nor the qualities that intellectuals and researcher give to the archive. In addition, the archive has been cleaved from its original meaning and has a much broader definition than that found in the dictionary, that is, as a place where records are kept[1]; while it is only at the beginning of this century that the term archive refers to museums, libraries and records which are related to the historical record (Manoff, 2004). The evolution of the concept of archive from its origin and definitions to the approach by Derrida and Foucault is discussed below and defines the departure point for illustrating the production of the archive and its qualities today.

The origin of "archive"

The word "archive" comes from the Greek word *arkeion (αρχείο)*, which originally referred to the residence or office of magistrates or *archon*, similar to the contemporary idea of a city hall. Important documents and records related to the city and its citizens were saved and safeguarded here. More specifically, the word *arkeion* comes from the verb *arko (άρχω)* which means government or beginning; similarly, the noun *arcke (αρχή)*, which is interpreted

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[1] The Oxford Dictionary describes archive as *"a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution or group of people", "as a place where historical documents or records are kept"*. Moreover, the definition of digital era describe archive as a *"complete record of the data in part or all of computer system, stored on an infrequently used medium"*.

as beginning, origin or authority (among other more specific interpretations) depending on the context (Liddell, 1889).

Derridean and Foucauldian approach to the concept of "archive"

Despite the origin of the word "archive" and its relation to law and authority, Derrida and Foucault create a new archival era which releases the archive from the authority of its creator; on the contrary, the authority (law) which governs the archive exists under conditions which connect the archive's peculiarities and create unique interpretations.

Derrida begins to develop the context and concept of archive through the word's origin, with particular focus on *arcke* and its interpretations/meanings. Words like "commencement" and "commandment" summarise the meaning of *arcke,* both its origin and the qualities which it represents. The existential interpretation of the word *arcke* (beginning)–which we can assume means the starting point of everything/anything–implies the "physical, historic, ontological sense" which describes "commencement", but also the law that the superior, god or authority exercises, which is summarised by the world "commandment" and presents the "nomological principle" that archive implies (the law). (Derrida, 1996, 1) These two aspects combine in the etymological dimension of the archive.

"Archive is the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statement as unique events (Foucault, (2008): 136)".

Foucault uses the word archive to describe the possibilities of discourse to characterise its "unity throughout time (Foucault, 2008:142)". Foucault uses "positivity" to define those small places that discourse generates, where individual subjectivities meet and communicate. Thus, discourse as a whole does not identify the truth but carries changeable equalities of sub-truths. From this initial approach to discourse as a place/space of relationships between subjectivities and individualities, the topological but also temporal aspect of discourse takes root in positivity or as an historical *a priori*. The individualities are part of a network of discourse and communicate with each other without extending to the discourse as a whole.

The archive seems to be the operating system which leads to the choice of a word or statement which fits a particular way of thinking for a particular story or sentence used by a particular person in a particular moment. According to Foucault, "archive" is never complete. This can be interpreted as the need for participation to have a moment of fulfilment; however, this moment or this fulfilment ends with individual use or reading. Thus, the archive is a living, incomplete organism which depends on a viewer or user and the conditions that historical *a priori* sets, a framework for creation and interpretation. Foucault describe this mechanism as the halfway point between "language" (as system of potential sentence formation or word choice) and the "passive collection of spoken words", and thus archive is the performativity of discourse (Foucault, (2008)).

"The archive cannot be described in its totality; and in its presence it is unavoidable (Foucault, (2008):147)".

"Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word "archive" (Derrida, (1996):90)".

The archive has no specific form and is an abstract concept; it cannot be defined. The archive is the source of evidence, creating probabilities of interpretation which are related to memory and history. However, its relationship with memory and experience is bipolar/dual, since it does not directly relate to these concepts save only through the moments when it is used and with results which are not permanent (but related to individual reading or usage). Thus, a binary pair of meanings emerge as a paradox: *mneme* (memory) and oblivion (as well as *a priori*/experience, as Foucault defines archival discourse not with a pair of words but with the same word that changes meaning depending on the condition of discourse). The archival concepts of both Derrida and Foucault require forgetfulness and oblivion so as to promote the democracy of the archive through temporal law. Memory exists only to develop the archive at the moment when the small places of communication in the network are functional. On the other hand, oblivion take the place of memory when the archive is stable, inactive. Obviously, as much as these concepts seem to be polar opposites, in essence, the archive cannot fulfil its characteristics and create probabilities with only half of this pair of meanings: the interpretation can be functional only if it first has the stability which presupposes oblivion *a priori* (without experience at this moment) in order to develop the interpretation (the memory interprets the non-mnemonic existence of the non-activated archive).

The person who controls the archive has the power to interpret it, thus, the archive confirms and conveys the power of authority. The law and the *topos* (space) are always present at the same time and compile the "toponomology" which governs the archive.

Topo(nomo)logy (the site deterministic character of the archive)

The topology of the archive is an extremely important aspect, since it is within this framework that archive is activated. Derrida uses the word "domiciliation" (Derrida, 1996:2) and Foucault describes it as the place of communication defined by "positivity" (Foucault, 2008:142). Thus, the archive needs a place to thrive; this place can be created by the archive itself and connects the private with the public. This transaction does not mean that something new is revealed in the public sphere, since the private is not equivalent to the secret (Derrida (1996), 2). The place where the archive exists can be also be interpreted as the specific form of its public condition, which is not always interpreted in the same way; on the contrary, except for a superficial first glance it always differs. The topology of the archive is more abstract and does not literally point to a physical place, but rather to a condition, even though some aspects of the archive need a location in order to be displayed. Additionally, this characteristic–of a more abstract rather physical space–makes the psychological, linguistic (see Foucault), and social interpretation possible along with other readings and research of archival activation and sets the archive free in terms of its potentialities and probabilities. The topological aspect of the

archive is an "uncommon place", "a place of election", that is, a place of interpretation, both "visible and invisible", as Derrida argues (Derrida, (1996), 3). The visibility or invisibility of its toponomology is related to the concept of private and public and could refer to the paradoxical relationship between memory and experience or the "invisible" process of networking before and during the interpretation; individualities with or without (obvious) links can be classified and unified under this archival "domiciliation", since the archive is inclusive and does not exclude or discriminate.