

## THE ARTISTIC USAGE OF ARCHIVES THROUGH THE BENJAMINIAN LENS

O uso artístico dos arquivos pela ótica benjaminiana

El uso artístico de los archivos por la óptica benjaminiana

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### ABSTRACT

From Walter Benjamin's thinking on history, and the usage of archives by artists such as Sara Angelucci, Christian Boltanski, and Angela Grauerholz, we demonstrate that the archive is not a fixed whole, nor an essentially open object but a dynamic aggregate reconfigured at each use. In other terms, it is when a user and archives meet that the archive reveals an access to reality.

*Keywords: Walter Benjamin; theory of history; dialectical image; artistic usage of archives.*

### RESUMO

A partir da concepção de história de Walter Benjamin, e da forma de uso dos arquivos proposta por artistas como Sara Angelucci, Christian Boltanski e Angela Grauerholz, sustentamos que o arquivo não é nem um todo fechado, nem um objeto aberto em sua essência, mas sim um agregado dinâmico, reconfigurado a cada uso. Em outras palavras, é no encontro entre usuário e arquivo que este revela um acesso ao real.

*Palavras-chave: Walter Benjamin; teoria da história; imagem dialética; apropriação artística dos arquivos.*

### RESUMEN

Desde la concepción de historia de Walter Benjamin y de la forma de uso de los archivos por artistas como Sara Angelucci, Christian Boltanski y Angela Grauerholz, sostenemos que el archivo no es ni un todo cerrado, ni un objeto abierto en su esencia, sino un agregado dinámico, reconfigurado en cada uso. En otras palabras, es en el encuentro entre usuario y archivo que este revela un acceso al real.

*Palabras clave: Walter Benjamin; teoría de la historia; imagen dialéctica; apropiación artística de los archivos.*

*Archival research starts off slowly and steadily through banal manual tasks to which one rarely gives much thought. Nonetheless, in doing these tasks, a new object is created, a new form of knowledge takes shape, and a new "archive" emerges.*

*As you work, you are taking the preexisting forms and readjusting them in different ways to make possible a different narration of reality. This is not a question of repetition, but of beginning anew, of dealing the cards over again.*

Arlette Farge

In an archival perspective, it is possible to conceive the "usage" of documents as a transformation of the archive into a new object through the displacement of the meaning, which is the result of an encounter between a user, his/her field of knowledge, his/her culture, his/her universe to a certain extent, and a document, its materiality, its context, its content.

Furthermore, the current society is a place where archives have gained more visibility. In 1985 already, the importance of the past, archives, and memory for the entire society was noted (Berche, 1985). Today, uses aimed at the general public are multiplying as technological developments evolve. Thus, archives are used in domains as varied as cinema, publicity, journalism, documentary films, Internet, etc. (Charbonneau; Chouinard; Fontaine, 2008; Lemay; Klein, 2012).

In this general background archives are not only perceived as administrative documents or as raw material for historians, they acquire a new status while the word itself tend to encompass more and more varied realities, adopting its singular – the archive often understood as a large abstract notion and seldom referring to archives as archivists know them – and its plural refers to a precisely defined documentary material. This diversification in the understanding of the archive(s) is particularly highlighted by the artistic field where numerous artists create their works both from archival records and around the archival structure, or reflecting on the concept of archive itself.

This context of artistic "usage" of documents allows a materialistic comprehension of the archive as a concept, supported by Walter Benjamin's thinking. Questions about the temporality of the archive as a dialectical image – emerging at the encounter of a record and a user – are conceivable in the artistic and Benjaminian double perspectives. Indeed, Benjamin's thinking on history, underlined by the idea of the non-linearity of time and the concept of the dialectical image, seems to find an expression in the archive, in as much as in archives are recorded the past of the action laid during the creation, the present of the "usage" and the signifying future potentialities of documents. In this, the archive can constitute a whole, reconfigured at each use. We therefore suggest demonstrating how we can understand the archive with the help of a critical analysis of the "usage" of archives by artists such as Sara Angelucci, Christian Boltanski, and Angela Grauerholz, while addressing first the question of the temporality of the archive and secondly of its nature.

## THE DIALECTICAL IMAGE: TEMPORALITY OF THE ARCHIVE

It is primarily against the traditional historiography that Walter Benjamin suggests a renewed vision of historical materialism (Klein, 2013-2014). He offers a non-linear concept of temporality that leads to think about history in terms of memory, remembrance and reminiscence.

### Dialectical image

Firstly, Walter Benjamin distinguishes on one side the relations between past and present, and on the other side between what has been and now. The first of these relations is temporal. It is “a progression” (Benjamin, 1999, N2a, 3, p. 462) and the comprehension of the past is then a matter of causes and effects. The second type of relation is dialectical, figurative (*bildlich*). It is “an image, suddenly emergent” (Benjamin, 1999, N2a, 3, p. 462) that can be related to the Benjaminian comprehension of the technique of cinema editing. Nonetheless, this image does not present itself to the senses but finds its place in language (Benjamin, 1999, N2a, 3, p. 462). Consequently, what is the nature of this image?

The concept of the dialectical image is exactly “wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (Benjamin, 1999, N2a, 3, p. 462) which belongs to the now and allows to give today’s thinking a new run-up. In fact, the historical object becomes a dialectical image when it is “blasted out of the continuum of historical succession” (Benjamin, 1999, N10, 3, p. 475). It is not recorded in a linear temporality but breaks it up because it has recorded in itself its own anterior and posterior possibles. History as a whole, as a finished object is then potentially present to us at the heart of the dialectical image, which is a form of condensation of time, a standstill as said by Walter Benjamin. But the dialectical image is submitted to the conditions of actualization of the possibles carried by the object. It is a continuous mutation.

The archive is conceivable in terms of a dialectical image because archives carry within themselves their past and present possibilities, but also because the constellation in which these possibilities are reconfigured opens onto a “to come”. The work of photography and video artist Sara Angelucci allows us to understand the question of the link between archive and dialectical image. The *Lacrimosa* series (Angelucci, 2010) shows personal pictures of the inhabitants of an Italian village. The artist takes pictures of “these older villagers holding their favourite or most important photograph” (Angelucci, 2010).

The staging of the record within the work, of which it is only a part, supports the idea of a meeting: the grasping of the now by the what-has-been. The people are represented by the image of a bygone moment in their life and at the same time by a part of their body, revealing the present time. The temporality is then both past and present. But it is also noticeable that the future, as an evocation of death, is implicit in this collision of temporalities – of the what-has-been as a possibility and the now that fetches it towards the present while evoking another. The device materializes the fact that the record carries in itself the different temporalities it is linked to. Finally, if the dialectical image is

submitted to the conditions of the actualization of the past potentiality, the artistic “usage” of archives highlights the fact that the place of actualization is the usage of documents. It is indeed in the meeting of a user and archives that the archive and, with it, the what-has-been accesses reality.

### **Historicity**

Furthermore, for Benjamin, the historicity of objects is situated less in their context of emergence than at the moment of their actualization. According to him: “What distinguishes images from the essences of phenomenology is their historical index [which] not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time” (Benjamin, 1999, N3, 1, p. 462).

There is consequently a movement of the historicity of objects, of their context of emergence (the what-has-been), in the moment of their encounter with a now, only capable of recognizing itself as targeted by them (Benjamin, 1999, N3, 1, p. 462-463). It is a radical change in the conception of history and the relation to the past. “History is the subject of a construction which site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 395). Time “homogeneous and empty” is the one, linear, of traditional history, while the saturated present time is the one, dialectical, of actualization. For Walter Benjamin “no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, though events that may be separated from it by thousands of years” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 397). A fact does not become historical because it is taken in a cause-effect development, but through the grasping of the now through the what-has-been within a constellation.

The notion of encounter is then fundamental because knowledge of the past can only come in “lighting flashes”, as said by Walter Benjamin, at the intersection between the what has been of an historical object and the now capable of a reading that reconfigures the possibilities. Walter Benjamin then talks about:

The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in “what has been”; and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal – the flash of awakened consciousness (Benjamin, 1999, K1, 2, p. 388).

It is a radical reversal in the link to the traditional perspective of the past. It is indeed the what-has-been coming to strike the now of knowledge, not the knowledgeable subject in the present that wants to get closer to the object in the past in an effort to apprehend it. Following Walter Benjamin: “everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing” (Benjamin, 1999, K2, 23, p. 392). In this way an historical object is potentially more readable in a now far from its context of emergence than in its own time.

Finally, the conditions of knowledge of the past are necessarily situated in the present, in the now grasped by the what-has-been. From the archival science point of view, it is possible to say that it is in the “usage” that resides the capacity of actualization of the possibilities of the past. The first condition of actualization that allows the creation of the archive as a dialectical image is then the context of use.

Artists, playing with the contextualization of archives, make tangible the displacement of historicity. Christian Boltanski, for example, brings a new look to Nazi propaganda. *Signal* (Bénichou, 2009-2010) is a decontextualization of the plates taken from the magazine of the same name published between April 1940 and March 1945 by the Nazi regime. Never disseminated in Germany, the magazine was nonetheless edited in twenty different languages and sold as far as Great Britain, the United States and the Middle-East. In every issue, beside photo stories in black and white, two pages were printed in color. These are the pages isolated by Christian Boltanski.

Through a minimal manipulation, by simply disassembling the copies and keeping the double pages with the color images, he gets an immediate juxtaposition of the themes contained in the issues: war, military technology and industry, mixed with entertainment, sports, culture, etc. “These iconographic associations summarize the conception of Goebbels’ propaganda” (Bénichou, 2009-2010, p. 30).

Contrary to what is prioritized over in archival science, it is not only the context of the records production that makes sense, but its articulation to a reflection that is present through the action of the user. The archive maintains a discourse situated at a point of the political field that is exactly opposite to the one originally carried by the record. It makes legible the initial statement of the records masked by the arrangement implemented by the propagandists while questioning our present. Boltanski actually sees in these diptychs a question asked to contemporary media which deliver information the same way as the propaganda magazine: without hierarchization. This issue directly reflects Walter Benjamin’s words about historicism that only happens posthumously, when the past is captured by a specific epoch. The archive can be here understood as a way of representing the past to bestow another conception of the same past.

The periodical was a great success<sup>1</sup> particularly because it represented images anchored in the imagination of progress at the time, then closely related to the ideas of technical optimization and military iconography. What seems to us the sign of Nazi violence was only a representation amongst others of the modern society back then. The clash that we feel is only possible in a different context from that which created the records. Archives, as a mode of representation, reach “a higher grade of actuality” (Benjamin, 1999, K2, 3, p. 392) fifty years after their creation.

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1 More than a hundred million copies were printed/sold the first three years, with a maximum of 2,5 million copies every two weeks in 1943 of which eight hundred thousand addressed to France. In 1941, one million issues were printed/sold in which half were in France. See: Boltanski; Jussen, 2008.

The archive is therefore always read through the prism of the now of “usage” and its understanding depends on the present state of its knowledge. Its reality, thought from Benjamin, is located at the same time on the what-has-been side of the creator’s action and on the side of the now understood as a moment of readability of the historical object.

## **THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF THE ARCHIVE**

According to us, two visions lead archival science as a discipline regarding the nature of archive. The first, traditional, conceives archives as organic objects, the authentic reflection of the producer’s actions, and meaningful in itself: archives, as a group of records, are a whole. The second, postmodern, considers them as means and result of a social construct: they are objects in the making which meaning is always dependent on subjectivities at work within them. In this second perspective, archives become the archive, an abstraction, and their meaning is self-fragmenting, becoming fluid.

### **Traditional archival science: archival fonds as a whole**

Establishing the founding principles of the discipline, archivists imposed the principle of *respect des fonds* that prescribes on one hand the basic unit of traditional archival science, the fonds, and on the other hand, the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the links between the records in the fonds, the archival context.

The archival fonds is defined as “the whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator’s activities or functions” (Canadian Council of Archives, 2008, p. D5). In this perspective, the first characteristic of archival documents resides in the fact that they are the result of a natural process: “an archival fonds spontaneously arises as the result of a documentary sedimentation; it is composed by documents linked together because of their origin, through structural connections” (Duchemin, 1993, p. 23, our translation).

In fact, as a unit that is the sum of the documents from a creator, the archival fonds is determined by the interdependence of its components, the archival context. Therefore, “each document of the fonds has to be placed in the fonds in which it belongs and, in this fonds, at its original place” (Conseil international des archives, 1964, cited in Rousseau; Couture et al., 1994, p. 64, our translation). The archival fonds is then considered as a whole insofar as it is “essential, for the assessment of any document, to [know its context of creation]. Such a knowledge is only possible insofar as the whole of the documents that accompany it are kept intact” (Duchemin, 1977, p. 73, our translation).

Finally, “archival documents do capture a moment in time, fix and freeze it, as it were, in order to preserve some sense of it for future reference, some sense of the unique character of the actions and events from which the documents arose” (Eastwood, 1993, p. 112). Archives are then understood as “the faithful reflection of the activities of a person or legal entity, as an official memory that bears witness as much of the past than the

present and as an organic, authentic and convincing source of information” (Rousseau, 1994, p. 30, our translation).

### **Postmodern archival science: abstraction and fluidity**

Against this vision of archives as a “faithful reflection” of their creator and the idea of documents as objective and transparent image of events that led to their creation, archivists claiming postmodernism as an intellectual framework consider them as a result and a means of social construct: the result, because documents are preserved depending on the history they might tell, the means, because they underlie narratives that will structure the collective identity through the construction of history. Thus, archives maintain a privileged link with the future because they are the traces we leave for the future generations and their meaning depends on the subjectivity that interprets them. With this in mind, archives essentially are an open object because they have to be reactivated by the users. Indeed:

Reference is not so much about helping people to retrieve records and knowledge that already exist, or are frozen in time, but about assisting users to create them anew, by guiding users to records with contextual descriptions about how records were created (including the archival contribution to their creation) and in learning from researchers their contribution to understanding this contextuality (Nesmith, 2005, p. 266).

The question of actualization of archives by users is clearly stated by Verne Harris, for whom “[archival records] do not speak by themselves. They speak through many voices” (Harris, 1997, p. 135) and especially through:

[T]he voices of the researchers who use the file. Each one brings to the reading a unique perspective, and each one adds his/her own voice to the many others through which the file speaks. So there can be no closing of the file, no closing of the archive. Each new user voice, indeed merely the possibility of a new user voice, will keep it open, as, of course, will the constantly changing archival context (Harris, 1997, p. 136).

Eric Ketelaar (2001) names this meaning coming from the reading of documents “tacit narrative”. Coming from Derrida’s concept of “archivization” and going beyond it, he suggests a vision of archival science partly linked to storytelling. Indeed, according to him, the archivist, and not only the user, performs a certain reading, influenced consciously or not by social and cultural factors, that he or she transmits despite him or herself through professional actions.

### **The archive: a dynamic whole**

In archival science theory, archives are sometimes understood as an objective reflection of past events, sometimes as the object of an actualization by users. Walter Benjamin’s conception of history allows us to stage these two positions in dialogue. If archive is understood as a means of transmission and maybe of knowledge of the past, its temporality

is not located in the object itself, as traditional archivists think, neither in the subjectivity of the user, as considered by the proponents of postmodern thinking. The temporality of archive is located in the now of the actualization of a possibility located on the side of the what-has-been of the document as a record.

It allows to nuance Derrida's position claimed by postmodern archivists, which consists in seeing in the archive "the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (Derrida; Prenowitz, 1995, p. 27). For if we can consider the archive from the future and see in the document this "headstone of the event" that it documents or think that "the archive is made possible by the death, aggression, and destruction drive" (Derrida; Prenowitz, 1995, p. 59), archivists cannot ignore that documents have an existence that necessarily ties them to the past. Indeed, what every potential user looks for in archives is a form of representation, even a materialization, of the past that allows to apprehend a real-life event.

Yet, according to Walter Benjamin, "For an experienced event is finite – at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 202). This distinction between experienced and remembered event is essential to understand the archive because it arises under both. Archives, as a set of documents – the fonds –, present themselves as a device allowing the reconfiguration of these documents – representations of experienced events – in a constellation allowing the recollection in specific conditions.

With *At work and play* (Grauerholz, 2008), Montreal artist Angela Grauerholz offers a transposition of her work *Reading room for the working artist* (2003-2004) in the form of a website. More than four thousand documents of all types (photographs, texts, maps, drawings, book excerpts, posters, objects, films, etc.) are gathered in an organization that forms the artist's work. Documents are sorted by the domain of activity (to collect, to write, to exist, to create, to disappear, etc.) that defines the fields of knowledge and are linked to each other. Referring to the palace of ancient memory the artist selects and "[evaluates] the different kinds of documents and [envisions] their possible presentation keeping in mind this notion of linked and traversable rooms and spaces" (Doyon, 2008-2009, p. 82). Each of the fields constitutes an entrance to access the database gathering the complete document set. The structure is not fixed because the archive is reconfigured by each "player".

Indeed, the work is intended for "participants" and "players"; more than for an audience. Angela Grauerholz builds on the interactivity of the medium, the website, that makes the participant a co-creator of the work. Thus, navigating the heart of the archive, the user consults the documents, connects them always following new links, creates a "path of varied and sometimes unexpected meanings" (Doyon, 2008-2009, p. 80, our translation) necessarily unprecedented. At the end of the browsing, the links become tangible during the step of the "construction" that gives a cartography of the performed path and allows to discover the origin and the nature of the documents. The relational nature of the archive is here what allows its permanent reconfiguration. This work shows how, whatever the initial links between the documents, new relations are created during each "usage" that transforms the

archive. Furthermore, *At work and play* reveals the comprehensive potential of the archive which, fragment by fragment, may be (re)built as a whole by the creation of novel links.

In other words, the very structure of the archival fonds, fixed by requirement, lends itself to, in fact, through the notion of context, multiple reconfigurations. The fonds is not an unalterable unit but a shifting ensemble, a dynamic whole.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, the Benjaminian theory of history allows us to understand the relation between past and present as an encounter. The past is not presented to knowledge as a given, but as the dynamic temporality of a historical object. In the light of this vision, and with the support of works such as the ones by Sara Angelucci and Christian Boltanski, the archive can be thought as the sudden emergence of a possible, what has been in the heart of the now. It is the representation of a past made possible by the “usage” understood as actualization.

This means that if archival science sees the archive either as a fixed whole, or an essentially open object, the Benjaminian thinking allows to see in it a dynamic whole, as the one build by Angela Grauerholz, insofar as it is simultaneously linked to the “actually experienced event” recorded by documents and the “recollection” as an operation of reconfiguration of the whole through actualization. The archive can then be understood as this “key” unravelling access history.

However, the question of the relation between the experienced event and recollection raises that of the relation between archive and memory. This relation has been, for the last ten years or so, a privileged research object for Derridean archivists who sees that “archives are the manufacturers of memory and not merely the guardians of it” (Brown; Davis-Brown, 1998, p. 22). Once again, the ideas of Walter Benjamin and the work of artists prove to be fertile insofar as, for the philosopher, memory is both recording and actualization and, for the artists, also shows the contradictory relations between memory and archives.

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