

**“BABEŞ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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*Archive, discourse, and contemporaneity
From material-discursive practices
to the diffractions of discursivity*

SYNOPSIS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

**Principal Advisor:
Professor Codoban Aurel, Ph.D.**

**Ph.D. Student:
Borş Mircea Sabin**

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This doctoral thesis started with a series of preliminary researches on “musealization” (and the semiotics of museal spaces) and “prosthetics” in contemporary philosophy and visual culture—two complex and widely debated topics of investigation, especially in relation to the notion of *archive*, which has nevertheless remained somehow strange to the strictly philosophical and conceptual oeuvres. Yet this apparent deviation is not accidental, since archives are closely connected to both the topic of musealization and the topic of the prosthetic. Understood as sites of different space-time conservations, archives are co-extensive to the topic of musealization, which influences the social, cultural, and political discourses starting with the ‘80s, marking the passage from a strictly museal regime to the domain of everyday life. Authors like Andreas Huyssen have shown that modernisation lead to the loss of rationality and the entropy of stable life experiences, as the speed of technical, scientific, and cultural innovation has come to corrode affective structures, reducing the chronological expansion of the present. From this perspective, musealization and the archive both respond to the ways in which the present of advanced consumerist capitalism dominates the past and the future within a co-extensive synchronous space, affecting the identity, coherence, and stability of the contemporary subject. Musealization is unconceivable in the absence of the archive, which precedes it. On the other hand, the prosthetic enters culture and becomes a widely used conceptual metaphor—the tropes of extension and augmentation dominate the discourses of engineering, mechanics, design, visual arts, technology, or humanist studies, gradually entering philosophy’s conceptual language. Prosthetics is the figure of a “metaphorical opportunism,” say David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, which can be identified in the writings of an increasingly larger number of authors. At the same time, discursive practices seek to reaffirm the phenomenological, material, and embedded nature of the “prosthetic impulse,” as well as imaginative speculations or the analyses and interpretations that occasion various material and metaphorical figurations of the prosthetic. In spite of the many critiques brought to this way of understanding prosthetic metaphors—which in critical discourses on techno-culture often become reductive rather than extensive, being related to objects rather than ideas presented under the sign of other ideas—, we can undoubtedly speak about archives in terms of primal ‘technical’ prostheses. The archive is a way to set into motion and extend human memory, an instrument of spatial and temporal interference that mobilises constitutive differences and the spectre of human knowledge.

The main argument for analysing the archive does not nevertheless lie with an attempt to formulate discursive bridges between musealization and prosthetics understood in terms

of new technologies, the discursive ‘effects’ produced by the new technologies—it is more important to understand the archive as a way to conceptualise time and mobilise knowledge, to politicise and spatialize time through knowledge. Politics is always a politics of time and archives are the synthetic expression of material-discursive practices that operate such politics. While it is possible to observe an archival and historiographical revival, dictated by the multiple transformations that took place along the past four decades, the archive is still largely absent from the discourse of contemporary philosophies—often remitted to techno-cultural discourses, it rarely constitutes a proper theoretical concept. How can we, therefore, speak about the archive and avoid practice-related terminologies or its remission to ‘current uses’ disavowed of the complexity of relations presumed by archival endeavours? What does the archive mean in a time when technologies reform critical discourses; when the development of networks apparently ‘impresses’ their technical, logistical, terminological, and operational characteristics on the discourse? How can the archive become a productive space where material, practical, and discursive conflict render or reform the political dimension of time and knowledge, which have turned into instruments of the capitalist and globalising economies of circulation?

The topic of the “archive” is not necessarily ‘new,’ but rather radically necessary in the context of capitalist ideologies and the different forms of technological determinism directly impacting social discourses and practices. It engages the way in which the tropes of power and memory dominate not only discussions around contemporary archives, but also the material-discursive practices brought forth within or by means of the archive. The thematic and conceptual urgency of the archive resides in the increasingly variable ways to operate from within the archive through documentary and archival practices. Such practices propose alternative models of history and thinking; transgressions of the linear progressions, of technologically circumscribed operations, normative systems of classification, and administrative-operative taxonomies isolated from specific contexts. The archive never tells the truth of histories—it either retro-constructs the idealised images and scenarios of a presumed collective history, or is itself a fiction, narrative, incertitude, and approximation through which it is possible to confront the projections of administrative or temporal regimes that do not reflect everyday realities. This is important when considering that the archive constantly reproduces pluralities, multiplicities, and differences, yet somehow it often comes to reiterate the idea of singularity; archives can be politicised in order to justify society or the type of society that creates them, thus contributing to a homogenisation of differential practices of knowledge.

This thesis does not seek to consolidate a purely or uniquely philosophical discourse; on the other hand, by appealing to theories from the field of art and cultural studies, it does not seek to constitute a discourse on such theories either. The importance given to the discourses on/of contemporary art resides in the fact that art remains a fundamental means to liberate subjectivity and knowledge, in both the western and non-western spheres—contemporary art confronts the discourses and clichés of modernity by political opposition and aesthetic subversion, proposing what Madina Tlostanova calls “models of re-existence.” As one of the very few domains that searches for various forms of self-historicisation and the conceptualisation of its very “contemporaneity,” contemporary art generates temporal situations that are characteristic to its practices and concepts aimed at transforming time by proposing radically new “re-existences.” Even though the archive is discussed in the writings of some philosophers—most notably, perhaps, Paul Ricoeur, Bernard Stiegler, Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, or Peter Sloterdijk—, it finds its most eloquent articulation in the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Boris Groys. The analysis of these three authors does not seek to simply point out the particularities of each discourse separately—what matters is their potential to open towards new and necessary conceptualisations of the archive that are able to define the various ways to also understand contemporaneity today. In an age outlined by the desire to archive, the dislocation of the singularity of discourses and the opening of material-discursive practices unto interferences from other disciplines transform the conceptual regime within the horizon of which it is possible to discuss the archive. Archives thus come to define useful acts or utensils of knowledge that mark new, experimental, and speculative archival practices which account for the complexity of relations established between the different histories, narratives, practices, or technical and media supports.

Archival documents are not evidence, but rather forms of ‘diversion’ or ‘digression;’ the marginal, peripheral, or silenced histories—which are today reconstituted in order to restore a different geopolitical texture of time and history—can help us to reform our ways of understanding the archive, emphasising the historical uncertainties and those uncertainties that refer to our ways of conceiving the future. The archive does not refer to some sort of history alone, it is also a manner to represent or to imagine the future—and thus, a (political) intervention in the material-discursive practices specific to our contemporaneity. If we are to understand the archive as a form of ‘diversion’ rather than an exact historical registry, then it represents the ex-position of constituents beyond the taxonomic conventions used to

represent history—it is a dispositif based on the relationality of information. In this sense, the archive is neither documentary nor post-documentary, but rather trans-documentary.

By analysing of the notion of archive in Foucault, Derrida, and Groys, as well as the coloniality of knowledge and the necessity to decolonialise the archives, the thesis explores the idea of archive as an inter-relational organisation of information, a means to determine new social and political dimensions to archival practices and institutions. This inter-relational potential reforms not only the trans-historical sense of knowledge, but also the ways in which we remember, accumulate, store, and use information—as (documentary) spatialisation of time and (archival) temporalization of space. The archive reflects a rather a-disciplinary dimension where uncertain or divergent meanings translate evolutionary forms of inter-related knowledge. Interferences between disciplines, information, specific knowledges, alternative constructions, or different historical situations create the premises for a productive ‘tension’ or ‘conflict’ inside the archive. The main objective of the analysis is, therefore, to open the discourse on archives towards a ‘stratigraphic,’ differential, and relational form of knowledge, inherently open to differences and their differentiation.

The first chapter starts with Foucault’s methodological premise of an investigation that allows for the cultural diagnose of the present and the consolidation of analytical fields used to address the syncope of conventional discursive taxonomies. This is helpful in analysing how Foucault conceives the “archive” and “archaeology,” the notion of “historical *a priori*,” and history as a situational field in which the archive accommodates differences and discontinuities that lack anthropological determinations. While showing the way in which critics sought to amend the positivism inherent to Foucault’s arguments or the interpretative ‘negligence’ in what concerns the ‘grammatizing’ modes of history and the materiality of enunciations—, what can be emphasised in *Archaeology of Knowledge* is that, for Foucault, archaeology is closely related to the theoretical conjuncture proper to contemporaneity. The analysis of different ideas and notions of ‘the contemporary’ determines new analytical possibilities to imagine both a “constructive archaeology of the present in which the space of enunciation functions as the archive itself” (Tina DiCarlo), as well as the “operative,” “living,” and “productive” space in which an archaeology of the future can be operated. This holds the potential to mobilise new forms of knowledge and evolutionary enunciative formations that take the form of collectives of consciousness and language.

The second chapter approaches the archive and archivization in Jacques Derrida, for whom archivization records and produces the event at the same time. In the absence of a fix concept of the archive, says Derrida, it must instead be seen as a differential means of

signification. The archive does not necessarily look to the past—it relates to a repressed content that is delivered to the present and the future. The analysis of Derrida’s discourse on archives and psychoanalysis marks a radical difference compared to Foucault’s, especially in what concerns Derrida’s attention to the ways in which writing and inscription technologies occasion the literal transfer from the mind to the machine. The support of materialisation exerts a direct influence not only on the nature of the psyche, but also on the possibility and responsibility of a ‘political resistance’ aimed at ‘defending’ an open future. What outlines the political potential of the archive in Derrida is that the archive remains a radically unstable form of inscription—indeterminate and uncertain—which translates the mutation towards other materialities. This allows us to thematise an ‘ecology’ where documentary interdependences destitute fixed relations between the different strata that compose it.

Boris Groys, who is analysed in the third chapter, theorises the archive in close connection to the economic logics of the revaluation of values. Such revaluation already presumes a hierarchy of values that governs the selection and inclusion of materials in an archive. For Groys, the archive does not represent the past; it is an instrumental frame for the selection and production of the New and the future. Archives translate a form of administrative power; they reference the question of authority and the decisional authority at work within valorising structures, as well as the various forms of economic and political power. Two aspects inspired by his discourse become relevant here. On the one hand, the necessity to continue and expand discussions around the critique of media ontology, by briefly analysing the potential of notions such as ‘interface’—which is absent in Groys’s text, but possible in the logics of his analysis around the notion of the “submedial.” On the other hand, an analysis of the politics of the contemporary system of art, in order to understand how the determination of values takes place, the economic logics behind them, or the value differences and economies that seek to reevaluate them continuously—an aspect continued in the next chapter with a brief discussion of art institutions.

Two analytical lines are developed in the fourth chapter. The first looks at the way in which Achille Mbembe theorises the Postcolony and the archive—a theorisation that references architecture, statute, and the economy of death—, and how colonial archives can be discussed from the perspective of an “uncertain knowledge” (Ann Laura Stoler) that marks the grid of intelligibility by which the colonial administrative apparatus produced an entire series of social categories. Such knowledge reveals the potential of alternative histories sheltered by the archive and how history itself can be interpreted as an

administrative fiction. The second analytical line considers the colonality of knowledge, the alternative forms of understanding historicity, and the necessity of a decolonialization of archives, as premises for a deeper understanding of the need to formulate efficient institutional critiques and practices designed to restore aesthetic means to contest the (institutional) authority of sense. Institutional reform is inseparable from a decolonialization of the archives that define institutions. A closer look at how art institutions work is helpful in emphasising that the politicisation of art is essential to the politicisation of audiences; this contributes to the mobilisation of the imaginary and the restitution of agonistic practices which subvert and destabilise liberal hegemonies and consensus.

In the fifth and most extensive chapter, titled “Archive and chronopolitics,” the redefinition of a possible framework for understanding contemporaneity resumes some of the essential ideas formulated in the previous chapters. The chapter starts with a discussion of how memory and musealization have come to dominate the cultural discourse, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, how new technologies influence the passage from duration—and its specific ‘aesthetics’—to a (globalised) logistics of time, which in turn defines the infrastructural economies of the circulation of information. The ‘regime of contemporaneity’ points to the politics of circulation and the semiotic systems characteristic to what is called ‘cognitive capitalism.’ These capitalist economies and processes of globalization can only be short-circuited by a logics of transversalism and the “re-composition” of the world. Three temporal situations of the contemporary are presented here; they function as scenarios for the rethinking of current times and offer new perspectives in conceptualising the archive: the contemporary as an operative fiction (Peter Osborne) which opens a disjunctive critical gesture; the nostalgia of contemporaneity (following a poetic and literary theorisation of nostalgia formulated by Svetlana Boym) as a means to conceive models of poetic and reflexive extra-contemporaneity that define digressive-derivative movements; and the speculative post-contemporary (as discussed by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik) as a poetic, speculative, and operative practice that reveals its divergent character. Such movements of ‘drift’ and ‘deviation’ from the intensive temporalities of a ‘looping,’ self-generative, and redundant present make it possible to formulate alternative forms of re-conceptualisation, re-imagination, and re-utilisation of the archives. Translating the divergences of the current time, these temporal situations determine non-hierarchical means to structure the archive in terms of thinking and ‘thinking-in-practice.’ The chapter continues with a discussion of social memory and three derivative manners to understand the archive: *the archive as critical practice* (with practice understood as spatial or geo-spatial dissension

and archive as a spatializing structure or structuring spatiality that mobilises situations, conditions, and knowledges), *the archive as speculative overwriting* (meaning a speculative experiment in the multiple and different instances of the ‘now’), and *the archive as dissonance* (according to an idea formulated by Anthony Downey which reflects the ways in which archives do not necessarily produce effective knowledges, but entail a series of gestures that consolidate non-definitive narratives and tentative forms of knowledge). Temporal disjunctions suggest both historical forms of dissonance and forms of cognitive dissonance.

The thesis closes with a proposal that sets the tone for future analyses—to re-think and re-conceptualise the archive through an additional set of notions: *forensics* and *diffraction*. If archival imagination is always profoundly archaeological, humanist, and (re)generative, the forensic perspective highlights additional archival means to instrumentalize material-discursive practices that translate the agency of things, histories, and situations. In this sense, forensic archives are not documentary or memorial deposits, but propositional interventions. Such archives do not reflect a mere documentation or ‘research’ the scope of which continues to serve the repetitive economies of knowledge, but the mobilisation of material-discursive researches—a productive documentary sculpture that transforms archival potentialities into political gestures. Forensics imply a public forum in front of which archival assemblages effect critical practices and plastic paradigms endowed with ethic and aesthetic character. On the other hand, the archive understood in terms of *diffractive* practice and methodology (to read, write, see, understand, and archive diffractively—a re-situated knowledge) references Karen Barad’s notion of “diffraction” to think archivization as a synthetisation of multiple interferences. As a non-hierarchy intimately bound to the entanglement of matters and significations, diffraction can be an active archival expression for new ways to understand and the archive the world itself. This is the sense in which archives materialise the profound meanings of their constitutive differences.

The multitude of discourses reflects both a growing interest in and the imperative to re-conceptualise the archive, especially in light of the latest developments in media technology. An understanding of the archive limited to the cultural funds available today or the technological possibilities that determine new practices, does not fully account for the possibility to imagine the archive as an effective mobilisation of thought (of thinking and the mind). When technology shapes new discursive practices, these practices need to constantly re-materialise technology. Methodologically, the thesis takes the most relevant ideas of each particular discourse to formulate the premises for a re-conceptualisation of the

notion of ‘archives.’ A term such as *overwriting*, which is extensively used throughout the thesis, bears both a ‘functional’ and ‘metaphoric-conceptual’ role. Overwriting is a continuous ‘writing over’ (archives are constituted as the ‘writing over’ of history with particular histories), but also a purely technical procedure of perpendicular magnetic recording (and is, therefore, used here to stress the archive’s inseparability from the mediums that make it possible). Not lastly, inspired by the critiques formulated by Claire Colebrook, who speaks about the way in which proper names operate in theory and function as “territorializing »placards«,” the thesis emphasises an ensemble of ideas that can be mobilised in the spirit of the discourse, avoiding the theoretical determinism specific to philosophical ways of thinking or the subjection of ideas to a particular discursive ensemble.

It was not in the intention of this thesis to analyse the discursive particularities of specific ways of thinking the archive, but to mobilise such ways of thinking and discursive particularities in order to outline a new understanding of the idea of archive—an archive imagined as discursive practice, as continuous materialisation of discourses, as speculation actively engaged in the materiality and materialisation of its enunciations, as dissonance in relation to deterministic theoretical and notional constructions. Only the institution of difference as practice of knowledge—as an engaged form of knowledge-in-practice, beyond the distant theorisation of difference—can revitalise the discursive materialities and re-politicise the aesthetic and affective foundations necessary to alternative ways of making politics. Such new ways of thinking-in-practice determine new conceptual situations and contribute to the imagination, conception, and rethinking of the technical dispositifs that underlie the operation of various actions—from practices of writing and reading, to practices of archivization and distribution. In other words, the archive as material-discursive practice becomes the diffraction of discursivity, constantly differentiating its differences.

What the thesis does not discuss in any particular way, but leaves open to further research, is the very nature of the archival document—the multitude of documentary forms and their material transformations into data and information reflect the numberless ways in which archives operate as sites for the production of knowledge. Studying the particularities of each such site is an endless endeavour; the reduction of such sites to a unique perspective in understanding archives eliminates or homogenises once again not only the differences as such, but the particular manners of their differentiation as well. The archive necessarily remains an open and infinite work—it does not signify material organisation only, but also the work of uninterrupted re-organisation whereby differences are constantly instituted. At the same time, it does not simply reflect processes of production and distribution—the

changes that arise, through its agency, in the regime of knowledge also trigger the necessity for material-affective pedagogies the social, cultural, and organisational character of which capture the complexity of human and non-human collectives. The archive and its discourse remain segmented, fragmentary, differential, and always incomplete. Throughout this thesis, attention is given to operative notions that define and characterise contemporaneity, thus extending and transforming the philosophical discourse on the archive; to the imperative of a decolonialization of knowledge that reclaims difference—and, ultimately, to a manner of reading, writing, and archiving that reflects the discursive particularities of contemporaneity. As such, this thesis is rather an attempt to outline operative terminologies that enable the extension of this interpretative model over other theoretical, imaginary, real, and practical situations or conditions.

Paraphrasing one of Jacques Lacan's famous statements, it is possible to pose the question: *What does it matter how many archives we have, if none gives us the universe?* Any answer to this question is fundamentally open, uncertain, and equivocal. Every interpretation of the archive ultimately describes the theoretical, conceptual, and discursive regime that occasions it, as well as the temporal regime that circumscribes it. The thesis is, therefore, the beginning of further analyses looking more closely at a series of issues such as alternative documentary practices; the archive as social and cultural dispositif; the archive as apparatus of/in mnemonic and biopolitical economies; the archive as aesthetics and economy of contribution; the archive as a conceptual, technical, and terminological infrastructure that generates new forms of political subjectivity; the archive as nexus between technology, matter, and humanism; the different ways in which archives thematise a textual, informational, and visual regime; the archive as pedagogy about the future; or the archive as ecological installation and principle of rethinking media in terms of a philosophy of nature. In conclusion to such analyses, the archive is no longer simply a practice of thinking or a thinking-in-practice—it is a fundamental premise for onto-epistemological and existential design.

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