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Glitches of the Archive: On the Relation Between Memory and the Commons

Abstract: The paper inquires whether the concept of the archive is still relevant for our (post)historical times and can open a new thought on community in the aftermath of its long and convoluted history. By concentrating on the glitches of the archive (the crisis that constantly put it into question), we shift the emphasis from communities to *commons*, a term more relevant to our times due to its re-enactment of memory and the possibility of history.

Keywords: Archive; Community; Commons; Memory; History.

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Every particular study is a many-faceted mirror (others reappear everywhere in this space) reflecting the exchanges, readings, and confrontations that form the conditions of its possibility, but it is a broken and anamorphic mirror (others are fragmented and altered by it).

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

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The double debut (because of course the text is made of two columns) of *Glas*, one of the most inventive and still relevant works of theory from last century, already enacts a questioning of the possibility of archive. On the left column (concerning Hegel) it questions the very relevance of philosophy – because if it does not endure then what is the legitimacy of philosophical thought: “what, after all, of the remain(s), today, for us, here, now, of a Hegel?”¹ On the right column (concerning Jean Genet) it starts with a citation from the French author which itself questions the possibility of the archive and of the



conservation of meaning and value: “what remains of a Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares and rammed down the shithole.”² Two answers (or better two lines of thought) are suggested in the following paragraphs. On the side of Hegel, a strong affirmation (or definition): “for us, here, now: from now on that is what one will not have been able to think without him.”³ On the side of Genet, another statement that alludes to Derrida’s book’s own mechanism(s): “the incalculable of *what remained* calculates itself, elaborates all the *coups*.”⁴ It is in a way always a question of the remains of the remains and the way they expose contagions, circulations or acts. *Glas* questions (and challenges) the mechanism of an archive that tries to arrest what otherwise would be lost and speculates on the possibility of freeing objects or facts (but also events, meanings, etc.) from their parasitical dependence on the order inflicted by canons, institutions and obviously archive(s).

Two more Derridean references can be inserted here and they come from two decades later when in a study on Freud and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi the problem of the archive presents itself again. The starting hypothesis of *Archive Fever* is that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.”⁵ And if the archive is not neutral, detached and objective as the scientific dogmas of the last century (but also the legitimating narratives of historiography) would try to make it look like, then its use and the effects it produces are part of what defines us, here, now. “Every archive is at once *institutiv*e and *conservative*.”⁶ We are thus faced – in relation with memory and the ways of recording facts, events and decisions – at once with the

problem of institutions and the identity of a community. How much of the latter is given/made possible through institutions? How much of the first is actually created through the work of the archive? These are questions that need to be followed, for they could expose deeper assumptions and reveal essential consequences. If an archive is institutive, this first of all means that it puts in motion the strategies that build (or protect) an established order: a place of reference (a *proper* place), a mechanism of dividing (in Gilles Deleuze’s words a State apparatus)⁷ and a regulation of flows and movements (including within the field of semiotics). An archive is not only a legitimating background or even an original myth: it works the field, it is active like a military power that does not hide or work in the shade, but openly pretends that its justification is natural(ized). Conservation relates to the *use of the archive*. It is based on what is known. It builds the façade of the power of institutions: museums, educational places, a set of recurrent themes and keywords. This way conservation is a method of control. It permits fewer unknowns and most of all it protects against radical breaks. No Events in and according to the Archive. Any symbolic order is in essence a protection against surprises, breaks, events or ruptures of any kind. The community it permits is the ordered flow of the masses, the controlled noise of voices, the policed multitude of gestures and even the objectified relevance of certain meanings and (academic) values against the ridiculed, marginalized and unprotected irruptions of new or different meanings.

Can Education avoid being conservative? As a place that works with the archive (it helps its production and it assures its



protection), it is thus caught in the same web of producing or legitimizing institutions and thus being the main element in the act of conservation (order, hierarchy and what can be said, made visible or allowed to happen). It was already the diagnostic of Friedrich Nietzsche in *Le Gai Savoir*. It has been pointed repeatedly by authors of the Marxist tradition or in the follow-up of Michel Foucault's analyses on the production and regulation of discourses. It – most interestingly – was already asserted at the beginning of the 19th century by (former revolutionary) Joseph Jacotot. According to him, as revealed by Jacques Rancière in his excellent book *Le maître ignorant*,⁸ education is in fact a form of reducing an individual to the state of a brute, because it is based on the assumption of inequality. The only way to make education work for (and not against) the community is to base it on emancipation, that is on the assumption of equality.

History (as historiography) is part of the educational web, so its functioning moves between the same two characteristics: being *institutive* and *conservative*. Can or could a humanist historian act differently? As a (contemporary) historian, he is most likely to be convinced by the positivist mantra of the possibility of neutrality and the objectivity of recorded facts. As such, he would be guided by a cumulative instinct, even if her object is to build/ protect a heritage. In the case of art or literary history, such a heritage gets the form of a canon: a set of works, a number of organizing methods and a group of reading procedures. One way in which the hegemony of the canon has been challenged in the past was through focusing on the evolution of forms rather than the set of

works. In the opening enacted by Russian Formalism (although not always understanding it quite that well) structuralism tried to reorganize the whole literary spectrum through a hoped-for scientific and stable construction of types, understanding of mechanisms and revealing of structures. In the recent years, after a heavy post- and even anti-structuralist reaction, the scientific path has been revisited again in what authors like Franco Moretti defined as quantitative analysis and later digital humanities. The Italian theorist has tried to counteract the apparently inevitable selection made by the literary archive (with its producing canons and thus inequality) through a mutation from close reading (bound to prefer, to cut, to select and thus to throw other zones into margins or oblivion) to distant reading (capable again to scientifically deal with the entire mass – or close to it – of data).⁹ Distant reading would thus question the process of elimination, by moving the responsibility from the (subjective) point of view of the researcher to the (objective or at least neutral) point of view of the process of analysis itself. The archive would decide through its own laws, but – and herein lies the main difference from the structuralism behavior – taking into account history, its passing, the difference between contexts, etc. As such, however, one has to deal with what makes the archive possible, what assures – in it – its functioning and how what it excludes remains outside of it or haunts it from within. Jacques Derrida was aware of this complex status of the archive. He remarked that it “always works, and a priori, against itself.”¹⁰ The structure of the archive is in fact spectral. It paradoxically produces the ghost, the noise that restricts



its hegemony and assures its failure to naturalize any order.

How does that affect us? Us, here, now, as *Glas* put it. The question also regards the possibility and the form of community. We can sketch three areas that need to be investigated. First of all, it is a question of property and sovereignty. Of the *proper* place from which an interpretation can begin and on which its findings can be based. Of the tendency of the archive to institute and expand sovereignty upon larger and larger spaces. It does this through a topography of inequality in which certain parts conserve the center and others are relegated to the margins or even excluded. The works of Michel Foucault were the first to establish the rules of this game, the methodical and so-called scientific construction of similarities and policing of what is perceived as different.

It is also a question of point of view and of time. The point of view is usually constituted in two steps: it is assigned to the *proper* place (the neutrality of the scientist or historian, or the wished-for post-ideological space of the neoliberal dogma) and this place (and the belonging to it of the judge/ analyst) is then naturalized and so it functions, of course, as ideology at its purest. Roland Barthes was already suspicious in the 70s of sciences and methods who are systems of signs but do not recognize each other as such.¹¹ In the so-called post-theory world after 1990 (in which the death of Theory was supposed to make science and expertise – but also methods and objectivity – reign again undisturbed) this is exactly the blind-spot that allows ideology to function. The mechanism is essentially the Hegelian one alluded to by Derrida at the beginning of *Glas* or described by

Slavoj Žižek in his works (including his convincing deconstruction of the much advertised difference between liberalism and totalitarianism by proving that the totalitarian dogmas of our present are in fact the liberal ones).¹² The problem of time is much more complex and important because it challenges archival procedures at their core. It concerns the relation between archive and memory, but also between what is gathered in the form of tradition (and thus hopefully preserved from disappearing) and what breaks this tradition. Could archives allow eventual breaks? How are Events possible and what is their relation with archives? These are all questions that lead to the problem of the irruption of community and the reorganizing or rebirth of the commons.

Finally it is a question of identification and legitimation. In the light of the same dependence on the idea of the *proper* (place, system, vision, etc), archives tend to permit, institute and conserve *proper* identities and these are invoked or resorted to each time an inequality or hierarchy are questioned.¹³ To return at this point once more to *Glas*, we can read not far from the beginning (and inside the Genet column): “Of the remain(s), after all, there are, always, overlapping each other, two functions. The first assures, guards, assimilates, interiorizes, idealizes, relieves the fall into the monument. There the fall maintains, embalms, and mummifies itself, monumemorizes and names itself.”¹⁴ The remain(s) thus become(s) a monument. And this tomb (for each monument is possible only as a tomb, because its ability to differentiate itself from itself must be assured) is the legitimation on which systems and orders are built.



And what about the second function of the remain(s)? *Glas* puts it succinctly like this: “the other – lets the remain(s) fall.”¹⁵ We will return to this. Or, put differently, *fall* back to it.

1.

What is garbage in culture? Is there such a thing? In front of these questions, we first of all have to notice that the assumption of relevance/ value is made. In a way, there is culture because we assume there is garbage. Not everything is considered to belong to culture, so a landscape with different focuses and forms or relationship is presupposed. The assumption seems to be everywhere in the history of Western thought. Immanuel Kant, for instance, considered¹⁶ that there is a difference – unbridgeable – between beauty/ sublime and disgust/ ridiculous. A *cut* that cannot be moved, because it does not depend on perspective or on the passing of time.

What is overlooked and why, when we make this assumption and thus make the *cut* between the sublime and the ridiculous? The reason that is behind the judgment can be minor, circumstantial. It could however be due to local blindness/ short-sightedness. It could also be intended, programmatic, methodical. The issue cannot – of course – be thought outside its political dimension. The archive is *always* political and as such it cannot be treated but as an operation. “The *glas* of *Sa*, *glas* as *Sa*”¹⁷, as Derrida points out at the beginning of his book in the space of the column where he is going to deal with Hegel’s view on family, religion and signature. And, of course, to the attentive reader, the other column (on

Genet) continuously interferes, cuts and reorders what seems to reach a signification: “is not all work a work of mourning? (...) a violent operation of class and classification? A decollation, an ungluing, of what keeps the singular for itself? This work of mourning is called – *glas*. (...) The *glas* is first of all (*clas*, *chiasso*, *classum*, *classicum*) the signal of a trumpet destined to *call* (*callare*), convoke, gather together, reassemble as such.”¹⁸ Everything an archive does (or is made to do) is a work of mourning that simultaneously cries for what is lost (left-overs) and yet gives rise to the possibility or at least the gesture of enlivening the remains. It lets the remains fall and yet – in Derridean idiom – the fall remains inscribed in the operation of the archive.

The archivization produces as much as it records the event.¹⁹ There is on the one hand the *cut* as an act – it belongs to a decision, it redistributes what can be said and what can be thought. On the other hand, the techniques of archiving (and the technologies through which the archive comes into being or enacts its power of constructing identities) influence and even modify what is archived. The democratization of the visible performed by Soviet cinema or street photography would not have been possible, in Walter Benjamin’s view from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,”²⁰ without the advent of cinema or photography as new technologies that not only allow different perspectives on and of the visible, but produce different realities.

From this perspective, the archive needs an interpretation that can be best defined as critical displacement. It is actually what Jacques Derrida announces he will do in *Glas* at least on the side of



the Hegel column: “verily a critical displacement (supposing that is rigorously possible) (...) however preliminary, such a deciphering cannot be neutral, neuter, or passive. It violently intervenes.”²¹ This critical displacement makes clear why the archive is opposed to archetype (who negates and can only negate the archive in a continuous effort of recuperating the origin). An archive is not recuperated or simply gathered under the protection of stable identities: it violently cuts. It – paradoxically – invents. Therein lies the chance of the commons.

2.

At the end of his *Antinomies of Realism*, part of his projected trilogy of social forms, Fredric Jameson offers an insightful interpretation of David C. Mitchell’s 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas*. Among other lines of analysis that do not interest us here, the theorist emphasizes how the ingenious structure of the book in which stories intermingle in a complex montage is based on aspects of communicational technology that, for our perspective here, are in fact archiving techniques: the handwritten seaboard journal of Adam Ewing used in one fragment survives in the next segment of the book; the composer’s Sextet is played later on; the manuscript of the reporter is submitted to a publisher in the fourth segment, etc. In Jameson’s words, “the heterogeneity of narratives has been revealed to be a multiplicity of informational and communicational technologies.”²² What is essential however is that each of these archiving techniques is more than a simple gathering and conservation of information and meanings. Each time

the nature of what is read in one segment is revealed only in the next segment, and it is thus constituted *après coup*. It is – for Fredric Jameson – “a serious defamiliarization of the whole ideological thematics of information and communication which has been omnipresent today and a virtually official philosophy of the postmodern. This intrusion of technological consciousness into the reading process at once demotes the official philosophy to a conceptual reflex of the mode of production and in its own way rewrites the history of the alleged break of the newer technologies with the older modern ones.”²³ The *montage* of the novel critically displaces the possibility of constructing the present as anything other than a *historical* stage: “*Cloud Atlas* stages our own present as historical.”²⁴

Any consideration of the archive stages the present as historical. In this way it doesn’t allow its (desired) distance and it questions its neutrality. As in *Cloud Atlas*, the *proper* perspective would be to imagine what the present will imprint on the archive of the future. How it will thus be constituted in a new light, that is difficult or even impossible to imagine now. On the other hand, the work of the archive is also an attempt to influence the future, to trace its limits and to control as far as possible its movements. “The archive has always been a pledge, a token for the future. Let us say, a pressuring of the future, a way to control it.”²⁵ Hannah Arendt, following Kafka, defines the present as a conflicting point of encounter between the forces of the past and those of the future.²⁶ Both forces act against humanity: this is why the present exposes not only the crisis of history or history in crisis (its always possible and in the best case delayed catastrophe), but



also the crisis of what is human. The archive (its work and all that is built on and through it) acts in this very spot. Its spectrality allows the present to surge through (and in a way any archive is terrified by the possibilities open by a present that it does not control), but its force to structure the future as a continuous and non-dangerous (that is, non-evental) phenomenon recaptures the present as a simple stage in a well-controlled mechanism. One of the solutions for the present in such a scenario in the view of Arendt would be to rethink history as memory (which involves inheritance, deconstruction, meditation and remembering). In the case of the archive, one of the tactics of any present would have to be the constant delaying and the deconstruction of closure. An example is *Archive Fever* itself as a text that wants to talk about the archive, to define its game, its limits, but chooses (or it is forced) to constantly introduce frames. Several introductions delay the (what would be) *proper* text: an exergue, a preamble and a foreword all come before the announced theses and in fact occupy much more space than the latter. The discussion of the archive is continuously delayed, laboriously prepared, endlessly promised. Every discourse about/on archive may very well be just a long preface, drawn, sucked into a concept that is both ultimately unattainable and always presupposed. This long, multiplied preface and building of frames is however not the sign of a failure. Perhaps on the contrary it is what makes archiving (and the understanding of it) possible. It is true that the archive (perceived as a closed canon, a stable set of rules, methods and values) pressures the future by trying to limit its possibilities. But if we perceive the archive

as always open, always haunted by the impossibility of closure, its relation with the future is different. Derrida's text points to this possibility: "the archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future."²⁷

We are thus faced with a problem that deals with temporality. Any archive demands a change in the understanding of time. Perhaps only through it can the complex temporality that permits an understanding of history emerge. The archive produces a *special temporality* related to the series of encounters with it. Contrary to what would appear normal, no archive exists without an act of making contact, a dialogue or even a dialectics (in the limits of what *Glas* writes by reading Hegel).

3.

Archivization should not happen. But it does all the time and more so with the emergence of the new technologies. As Walter Benjamin already observed in 1935, in his famous essay referred to above, any technology comes not just as an addition to the procedures of knowledge already existing (and thus becoming a way to improve their efficiency), but it changes the modes of perception. It is important to note here that this change comes, at first, through the invention of new forms. It seems to deal mainly with gestures, framings, techniques, cuttings, insertions, etc. It is however the symptom of much profounder changes and Walter Benjamin points to the necessity to expose the social transformations (or the necessity of such transformations) revealed by the changes in the modes of perception.

We seem to live in an age in which the ever-changing technologies, fashions or



techniques of control herald a post-historical time in which innovation is admired precisely because it limits itself to the surface of things and – more importantly – it does not touch the social (and economic) system. Everything points to the need of the new. The “everything-is-up-to-date-in-Kansas” syndrome²⁸ is perfectly coupled with the search-for-new rule of capitalism. Archives are changed, margins are included, garbage is reused, value judgments are overturned and rereadings make the merchandise valuable again. All this process (that can reach hysterical levels especially in countries that desperately try to implement what they perceive as the great Western model) paradoxically leads not to disorder and the possibility of events, breaks or even revolutions, but on the contrary to a question of order. Michael Löwy notices that in his study on Walter Benjamin’s theses upon the concept of history: “the whole of modern society, dominated by commodities, is subject to repetition, to the *Immergleich* (always the same), disguised as novelty and fashion.”²⁹ Order is maintained at the social level where the system of privileges is protected by deflecting the need for change to areas that are far away from it. Archive plays a key role here. It is constantly re-energized so that each present that looks into its mirror perceives itself as its perfect, natural correspondent. Moments from the past become justifications for the present (either through confirmation or through the need to avoid errors) and what is not within the frames of thought of the present is put to death/oblivion.

But, in the end, there is also an (im)possibility of order. Of stable meanings and values or the understanding and acceptance

of their failure to be so. An archive speaks the law; in fact it makes law possible in its many avatars: rituals, canons, rules, etc. But in its gathering together, its legitimation principles are also presupposed, as is the (non) existence of what is not archived. It is interesting that no archive pretends to cover all; in fact it is by definition a non-totalizable strategy. It is a cut, a decision. It disturbs because it has – even if this is well dissimulated in the normal functioning that society allows in its case – the potentiality of an Act.

Thus the idea of the Act needs to be discussed. What authorizes it? No Event is actually authorized, its arrival is what makes any authority impotent. It redistributes the procedures of thought and the forms of judgment.³⁰ Precisely because the archive never succeeds – and it cannot succeed due to its inherent spectrality – to cover everything, it acts like a cut. Eric Prenowitz observes this in his “Translator’s Note” to *Archive Fever*: “for while an archive may not be an end, it is only a beginning.”³¹ We must however avoid focusing too much on the idea of the beginning. Strictly because it is a constellation that relates the past with the present within the act of imagining a future, the archive is never an origin. Eric Prenowitz is well aware of this: “It is not *the* beginning, and it never contains its own beginning. It can only be a translation of its own conception.”³² It is always already a translation of its own intent (or idea). This is not (just) some usual Derridean play-on-words, it is actually what should (already) be read in Hegel, as *Glas* makes it clear from the start and Slavoj Žižek does so too in his convincing rereadings of the German philosopher, most clearly in *Less Than Nothing*.³³



The key is therefore not in the *cut* itself, or in the remnants of it, but in how archive is related to the commons. How does an archive build a *we*? There is no Event without (at least) the possibility of the commons and of course the existence of an Idea. This is often forgot in our times drunk on the obsession of individuality, on the so-called sovereignty of the person, and the constantly inflamed fear of Ideas (accused predictably to be utopian). It is however not the utopia that generates totalitarianism (affecting, in this scenario, the freedom of individuals), but the absence of any Idea or utopian narrative does in fact lead to a totalitarian society because it is “caught up in the dangerous illusion of completion.”³⁴ We have constantly witnessed this in the years after 1990, with the whole brouhaha of post-history and the fact that what this ideology has produced is far from the free and tolerant society it pretended to create, but the increased hatred of the other and the growing proliferation of new forms of drastically reducing freedom.

In spite of what would appear to be the case, the archive is always for the future. It has to be critically examined in terms of what its effects are and how the *cut* or *incision* it enacts opens or closes the possibility of the commons. We will investigate this by delineating a few axioms.

4.

The Foucault Axiom

Two points from Michel Foucault’s work are important for us here. First, we must revisit a conclusion he reached as early as 1967 that “every painting now belongs within the squared and massive

surface of painting and all literary works are confined to the indefinite murmur of words.”³⁵ This change of the perception on art dates as far back as the first appearance of the idea of the museum or at least to the advent of modern art. The space of the museum becomes the institutionalized form of memory that coagulates the community. Just as the order of things is created through words and their structural power (and does not exist in nature itself), so (aesthetic) forms tend to engulf singularities in procedures of knowledge. Art became a matter of discourse analysis that allowed the focus on style, form or the linguistic and theoretical turn of modernity. It is not by chance that Aby Warburg’s epochal invention in the 1920s was the Mnemosyne Atlas. It made possible an archival shift in the field of art history that was understood only much later, one that made clear that there was no art without its theory/ philosophy and, even more important, that there was no understanding of humanity without the theory of forms or images. Warburg’s study of pathos formulas and his notion of art as an anthropological document (the reason why the study of the rituals of Pueblo Indians could be related to early European Renaissance in a *montage* revealing for the idea of what is human) are part of a shift in understanding history that not only resonates with us but it is most likely the horizon within which we think.

There is another area in Foucault that deserves attention here. The famous introduction to *The Order of Things* revisits a text by Jorge Luis Borges in which the Argentinian author imagines a Chinese encyclopedia in which things are ordered through what a European could only perceive as a monstrous dis-order. The age-old Western



relation between the Same and the Other is confused to the point of catastrophe. Foucault's book (as well as his studies on madness, clinic or prison) points to how this relation is produced historically (for example the Classical Age invents internment not only as a procedure to deal with the sick or the poor, but mostly as a way to ground reason and normality outside the walls of enclosure). Communities are thus created and legitimized through a complex and institutional play of rules of protection or supervision and gestures of exclusion and imposition.

If we take these two points together, we can however glimpse a different possibility. Archival shifts can lead to breaking up confined areas and allow the possibility of different forms of gathering. It could be that the interstices allow the perception of alterity. The commons are not enclosed communities (these latter define fascism or the wished-for controllable masses of liberalism and multiculturalism), because they always act in relation to otherness, to what is at one point or another excluded. Perhaps we are on the threshold of an important moment in regard to not just how we perceive archives, but also how we think about the commons. There is a growing tendency today towards replacing the (modernist idea of the) museum with electronic or digital archives. This happens in close connection to the ideology of post-history and the mechanism of capital, as Hal Foster justly observes: "more and more the mnemonic function of the museum is given over to the electronic archive, which might be accessed almost anywhere, while the visual experience is given over not only to the exhibition-form but to the museum-building as spectacle – that is,

as an image to be circulated in the media in the service of brand equity and cultural capital."³⁶ Perhaps the Chinese archive that Borges imagined has now become the norm in the new digital and market-driven mode of relating everything to anything. Michel Foucault perceived this Borgesian example not as a sign of the exoticism of the Other, but as an indirect exposure of the catastrophe and limits of our own thinking. There seems to be nowadays an acceptance of the catastrophe and a dilution of the archive in the ungraspable and uncontrollable abyss of the digital world that allows the existence of communities (because they are structured according to certain particular and often identitarian choices), but not the commons we search for (because they demand a relation to universality).

The Kant Axiom

Such a relation to universality was of course envisioned by German Idealism which is more and more revisited today mostly in the field of critical theory. There is an important difference in the way philosophers as Kant and Hegel are read today. While even as recent as the texts of post-structuralism had a tendency to read Kant or Hegel as (still) proponents of metaphysical thought (logocentric, even violent and pretending to hold and offer stable truths), today's re-readings (in the case of Slavoj Žižek or Fredric Jameson) tend to interpret them as on the contrary authors that transcend the opposition between an idealist thought (closed and dated) and a relativistic play of (always) fictional and tolerant significations. There is a Kantian turn that seems again relevant to our times, namely



the way he relates the finitude of the subject to the ability to reach/ produce universality through her (ethical and aesthetical) judgment. In the first part of his *Critique of Judgment*, the central idea of Kant's analysis of beauty is the freedom (but also the huge responsibility) of the subject to relate her particular context and identity to the (necessarily) universal validity of her judgment. This can be done especially through a process of de-particularization of the subject, something that has seemed impossible in the post-1990 ideological world of private individuals cynical to the idea of public perspectives. It is becoming more and more clear that no understanding of art (and in fact no understanding of the archive) can function without the possibility of enacting such a relation. To be true to him (again), Jacques Derrida was well aware of this. In *The Truth in Painting*,³⁷ an entire section (*Parergon*) is devoted to the third Kantian critique. Derrida discusses the problem of the frames while constantly meditating on the relation between subjectivity and the entirely-other without whom "there would be no universality, no requirement of universality."³⁸

Knowledge is not just a set of procedures or an archive of information. It is also not just a gathering of documents, values and significations that belong together solely through a process of addition or collating. Archives (as does art) function through contamination, intersections, re-enactments, debts and returns. That is way an area of the archive is never completely dependent and reducible to a well-defined and rigidly confined community. The moment we accept this, the problem of universality re-enters the scene. Not as a uniform erasure of differences, but on

the contrary as a series of (historical) processes that relate particular things to universal relevance.

The Duchamp Axiom

There is however the problem of the urinal. It (apparently) taught us that everything can be archived as art, as long as one believes in it. So why isn't everything? Why – if everything should and must be equal – not everything is? Marcel Duchamp's aesthetic shift has been discussed again and again and a good reference is no doubt Thierry de Duve's *Kant After Duchamp*. The Belgian author investigates the smart strategies that Duchamp adopted in order to produce the break-up with the old paradigm and – even more important – to produce a new understanding of what the judgment of art should be: "to arrive at a critique of aesthetic judgment that is not necessarily an aesthetics of taste."³⁹ The hypothesis is "that the sentence 'this is art,' though not necessarily any longer a judgment of taste, remains an aesthetic judgment."⁴⁰

Granted, the urinal was not a leftover, not even a leftover of reality invading the museum. It was the *cut* that completely destroyed the illusory difference between an area of art and a zone of reality. It was not aesthetic (or less aesthetic than its usual neighbors inside museum rooms), because it represented an invasion of aesthetics itself in the up-to-then legitimized procedure of ordering what belongs to art and what does not. It did not add itself to the archive of art. It *cut* through the archive and therein lay the scandal. It showed that an infinite archive of art is not possible as long as art is based on the axiom of inequality



(this object that would be more beautiful or more important than the other, etc). Such an archive would always be finite and would be based on exclusion. However, if the axiom of inequality is challenged (in the name of R. Mutt), an archive of a different kind is possible: instead of the idea of an archive (or Art) that is based on the constant growing and accepting of different styles, individuals or values (like a museum or our current definition of liberal democracy) up to – but never actually reaching – the point of including everything and everybody, the idea of an archive in constant motion (always open to the effect of a new historical *montage* made in the name of what is at that point excluded) is possible. To be sure, in a world turned upside down, the king should be treated with more violence than a citizen. This has to be done in order to bring equality about and because violence is inherent in every Act.

The Moretti/ Marx Axiom

The archive based on the axiom of inequality lives within the utopia that everything is (or will be) archived. Liberal politics are caught in the same utopia at least in two ways: the hypothesis that if the level of living improves at a statistical level, the level of those on the bottom will also improve (they will thus also be part of the prosperity of a community); the idea of progress is to be preferred to a history cut by Acts and violent events. Franco Moretti's quantitative analysis and later his take on digital humanities can be included in the same model: the gathering of data can or could permit the scientific order and the comparing of everything to anything. In a way it is the new *order of things* and a return

of structuralism at a moment when humanities are more and more excluded from the privileges of academic and political power. The Italian theorist (contrary to some of his followers or critics and in an ironic similitude with what he perceives as his great nemesis, namely Jacques Derrida)⁴¹ is nevertheless aware that the limit and simultaneously the point of interest of his method lies somewhere else: what can be done with the noise around clear data and order? The specters, the remnants, the *revenants*? How does one archive that? Or deal with it. Or succumb to it. Herein lies the most interesting point (and also - so far – the central flaw, although *The Bourgeois* seems to point to a way out of it)⁴² of the Morettian doctrine.

There is a Marxist answer to this conundrum: the idea is not to enlarge the archive, to pretend that it can ever be scientific. As in the case of maps (which in fact do not record anything), the idea is on the one hand to think in terms of volumes - similar to paintings - and on the other hand to meditate on what the lines and reference points allow one to do. Not everything will or should be archived. It is only the noise that matters. It allows history, knowledge and ideas of order to be put in a different and ethical perspective. And only through this the commons become once again possible.

The Benjamin Axiom

According to Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* (1940), there is a connection (in essence a constellation) between the citable past and the present that recognizes itself in it. History is not an ever-growing archive, nor a more and more scientific and stable method of dealing with the collected data. It is the possibility



of a different *cut*. As in *Glas*, the question is double: how much of *what has been* allowed us to be the way we are (the Hegel column in Derrida's text) and how much of what is possible can be enacted in the present (the Genet column). Walter Benjamin knew very well that new technologies not only make old ones obsolete, but they modify the perception of time, history and the understanding of the commons. In the same way, Stan Douglas considers that "obsolete forms of communication become an index of an understanding of the world lost to us."⁴³ Archives are not simply instruments to deepen or re-affirm the understanding of one and always the same temporality. In Benjamin's view, technologies are not in themselves good or bad. The use we put them to can be fascist or ethical. It is essential to understand what our time demands, what an ethical understanding of the present (or the future) demands from the archive. Hal Foster, for example, considers that it is essential "to restore a mnemonic dimension to contemporary art to resist the presentist totality of design in culture today."⁴⁴ In the neoliberal world that we live in, the mnemonic dimension becomes in itself an ethical form of resistance.

5.

The archive is the illness that it thinks it cures. In Derridean language – and we played with it above – the remains fall and the fall remains. In the terms that our text has reached at this point, mnemonic loss is on the one hand a crisis *and* yet, on the other hand, it is foundational to the archive. This is the necessary gap for narratives and identities to function, even if their functioning is never decisive or decided. It is

the relation between memory and the crisis in the archive that opens the door to the commons. Just like for Walter Benjamin it is in the fissures of the traditionalist historiography (the purified narrative of the winners) that lies the chance for an ethical memory that connects, for example (and it is his example), the Spartakist rebellion of 1919 with the revolt of Spartacus or the Paris Commune and thus offers the possibility of a history that is not closed (objectified), but open to the *cut* of memory and the act or surge of the commons.

Crisis are then essential. A crisis occurs at particular pressure points in history. For Hal Foster in fact "art history is born of a crisis – always tacitly assumed, sometimes dramatically pronounced – of a fragmentation and reification of tradition, which the discipline is pledged to remedy through a redemptive project of reassembly and reanimation."⁴⁵ However the problem is not to solve these crises: "precisely because they are actual, art history cannot solve them but only displace them, suspend them or otherwise address them again and again."⁴⁶ Crises can, of course, be traumatic. That's why – for Aby Warburg – an art historian should act as a seismograph of the soul on the borderline between different cultures.⁴⁷ She should be aware that history is "porteuse de forces et transformatrice de formes plus encore que transmetteuse de significations."⁴⁸

We have to displace the simple opposition between what is archived and what is lost. Between remnants and leftovers or between what is arrested and what slips away. Edward B Tylor's *survival* concept – which Warburg adapts as *Nachleben* and later Didi-Huberman focuses on as *survivance*⁴⁹ – can help us here. It announces



that everything is/ can be threatened, but it is never totally (actually) lost. In order however to properly perceive how such a perspective changes the coordinates of the discipline (art history) but also the definition of concepts such as archive, remnants or leftovers, we would have to displace the understanding of temporality from memory structure (based on preservation, conservation and the dependence on the procedures of order) to dialectical images (in the sense of Walter Benjamin),⁵⁰ who have a historical index: “for the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time.”⁵¹

This passage from conservation to dialectics is a framework through which Hal Foster understands the metamorphosis of art history. He contrasts the view of Erwin Panofsky⁵² (humanities are not arresting what otherwise would slip away but enlivening what otherwise would remain dead) with Walter Benjamin’s theses: humanities should emancipate things from their parasitical dependence on the archive and pledge them to the purposes of a present (materialist and radical) politics. Such a politics relies on points of crisis in the archive and the construction of a different understanding of history. Hal Foster offers examples of artists that combine the archive of a personal past with those of public pasts. Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* is such an example: a project based on a collection of photographs, newspaper cuttings and artist sketches that cover more than four decades. The 1997 edition contains 783 multi-image sheets that constantly relate personal ideas and processes with the documentation of a larger history as this has been visible in mass-media or other forms of

public archiving. History (of an epoch or a community) is viewed here through the history of one individual who is simultaneously a private and a public individual. It is this point of tension that guides – in different ways – Derrida to the same problem of the signature, and we will limit ourselves to *Glas* in this respect: “the stake of the signature – does the signature take place? Where? How? Why? For whom?”⁵³ The French author emphasizes a question that is even more relevant for us here: “What remains of a signature?”⁵⁴ He investigates this problem in relation to Hegel’s private letters, but also his philosophy of religion and Jean Genet’s explicit or implicit presence in his own (that means, signed) texts. Richter’s *Atlas* is relevant at the juncture: it is, beyond the collating mechanism and because of the Atlas form (which reminds us of the montage of Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas), a conceptual narration of the relation between memory and archive which is important from the perspective followed or traced here because it opens history to possibilities that have to do with the commons.

Hal Foster also invokes W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* as an example of a possible solution in rediscovering a relation between memory and history that does not succumb to the fashions of the day. In 2001, these latter ones were already questioned by the author: “the recursive strategy of the *neo* appears as attenuated today as the oppositional logic of the *post* is tired.”⁵⁵ Compared to them (and they include neoliberalism as much as post-history), in Foster’s view, “all of us need some narrative to focus our present practices – situated stories, not *grands récits*.”⁵⁶ A situated story, like all the little stories that appear out of each other in *The Rings of Saturn* can be described as “a



making-do with what-comes-after, a beginning again or elsewhere.⁵⁷ In the terms expressed in *Glas*, our situation is one that comes after, *for us, here, now* (and we should not forget that *these words are citations, already, always*), in the aftermath – or to use Sebald’s term *vertigo* – of archives of all kinds as well as of the procedures of knowledge that permit them. The remains are so many that Sebald’s *vertigo* defines a “melancholia that, paradoxically, is detached from its lost object – because there are too many lost

objects to track, so many that it makes one vertiginous.⁵⁸ And what happens in such a context is that, through a work that relates personal archives to public pasts, memory is once again possible after its *cutting* off from the archive. A cut that allows the commons to be – and, why not, the commons can (also) be defined or their understanding can start with a rethinking of these citations. They come from the archive and are what one would not have been able to think without the archive: *for us, here, now*.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, English translation by John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 1.
2. *Ibidem*.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. *Idem*, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz, The University of Chicago Press, 1995 p. 4.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 7.
7. See Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translation and foreword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, especially chapter 12.
8. Jacques Rancière, *Le maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle*, Paris, Fayard, 1987.
9. The main arguments and concepts are described and revisited in Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London and New York, Verso, 2013.
10. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 12.
11. See Roland Barthes, *Le Grain de la voix. Entretiens 1962-1980*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1981, especially his 1970 interview “Sur S/Z et L'Empire des signes”, pp. 77-96.
12. See Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*, London and New York, Verso, 2001.
13. Just as the identitarian narratives of Western Civilization, Capitalism or Liberalism are repeatedly justified through the archive that in fact their presumed superior positioning makes possible. Again, the mechanism is Hegelian.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, p. 1.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 2.
16. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, Clarendon Press, 1952.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, p. 4. *Sa* represents at the same time the French pronoun and the Hegelian term for *Savoir Absolu*.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 86.
19. *Idem*, *Archive Fever*, p. 17.
20. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Prism Key, Lexington, 2010.
21. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, p. 5.
22. Fredric Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p. 309.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 311.
24. *Ibidem*.
25. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 18.
26. See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Jerome Kohn, Penguin Books, 2006. The definition is offered in Arendt's own preface to the book.
27. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 68.
28. Jonathan Culler points to this syndrome active in the way capitalism has heavily transformed academic education in *The Literary in Theory*, Stanford University Press, 2007.
29. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm. Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, London and New York, Verso, p. 64.
30. The relevant reference here is of course Alain Badiou's monumental *Being and Event*, translated by Oliver Feltham, London, Continuum, 2005, originally published in French in 1988.
31. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 109.
32. *Ibidem*.
33. See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London and New York, Verso, 2012.



34. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, p. 136.
35. Michel Foucault, *Language, CounterMemory, Practice*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 93.
36. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)*, London and New York, Verso, 2002, p. 82.
37. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1987.
38. *Ibidem*, p. 47.
39. Thierry de Duvé, *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 1996, p. 178.
40. *Ibidem*, p. 304.
41. The similarity between Franco Moretti's dissatisfaction with Digital Humanities, obvious for example in an interview from 2016 given to Los Angeles Review of Books (*The Digital in the Humanities*, accessed in July 2017: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-digital-in-the-humanities-an-interview-with-franco-moretti/>) with the way Jacques Derrida deals with the problem of Marx in *Specters of Marx* is almost uncanny and proves once again that theory should be read through its profound intersections and less in relation to what the surface pretends to put in order. In other words, theory is the way to deal with the noise around data.
42. Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, London and New York, Verso, 2013.
43. Stan Douglas apud Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, p. 141.
44. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, p. 130.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 72.
46. *Ibidem*, p. 73.
47. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, Minuit, 2002.
48. *Ibidem*, p. 182.
49. Tylor's concept appears in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*. The key concept for the entire Warburg work is *Nachleben der Antike*.
50. The definition of a dialectical image is given in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 462: "image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill."
51. *Ibidem*.
52. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, p. 74. For Panofsky's ideas, see Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955.
53. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, p. 3.
54. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
55. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime*, p. 128.
56. *Ibidem*, pp. 128-129.
57. *Ibidem*.
58. *Ibidem*, p. 169.