On Archives

They are planning a ‘City’ for Moscow in the Nikolaskaya, Varvarka and Ilinka districts, corresponding to London’s belly of capitalism. In the suburbs they are building ‘pleasant estates’ and suchlike for the workers. Where are such paltry Utopias born? In the archives!

When they came to design a new Kemenny Bridge over the Moska River for their projected Utopia … they dispatched a gravedigger to ‘carry out a thorough excavation in the archives, to unearth a historical reference to the Kamenny bridge’ …

Now we have had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the forms resulting from this search in the archives …

El Lissitzky, *The Catastrophe of Architecture* (1921)

Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive’.


In the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus that is delivered in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BC), the former narrates the myth of the Egyptian god Theuth, the discoverer of writing. Theuth enthusiastically approaches the Egyptian king Thamus to share his discovery and to convince him that everyone in Egypt should learn how to write. Theuth justifies his discovery as a *pharmakon* (potion) of memory and wisdom. In return Thamus argues that writing would lead to oblivion. Writing for Thamus would replace the function of memory, as people would depend exclusively on signs, which are external; thus the result would be merely the appearance of wisdom rather than the real thing. In the narration of this myth an ambiguity arises in the meaning of the word *pharmakon*. According to Derrida, *pharmakon* could imply either a remedy or a poison, and this ambivalence is not accidental. Derrida argues that Plato’s discourse is consistent with this sort of ambiguity. Thamus’s response could equally imply the opposite, which is that *pharmakon* is also a remedy.

The ancient ambiguity surrounding writing, intentionally invoked by Plato, can equally be traced in the function of memory. As seen in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, memory operates by inscribing or imprinting the Divine Ideas upon the wax of the soul, though in this case writing is
treated as a remedy. Commenting on the ambiguity produced through the use of the word *pharmakon*, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur notes that ‘Plato’s *Phaedrus* [is] the mythic birth of the writing of history … must we not ask whether the writing of history, too, is a remedy or a poison?’ Archives, the places where written records or the writings of history are sheltered, are similarly coloured by this ambiguity, as they carry within their very substance the notion of *pharmakon* as either a remedy or a poison.

Archives are most commonly perceived as spaces destined for the storage and preservation of records. These records are arranged following the rules of an elaborate classification system, and they are left in a state of stasis until someone accesses them for research purposes. The processes that take place within an archive are complex and sophisticated, faithfully reflecting the narrative about the multiple operations unfolding silently in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris in Alain Resnais’s short film *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1957). Referring to a book in this library that has been suddenly chosen from amongst other records, Jacques Dumesnil, the narrator in Resnais’s film, comments descriptively:

> Before, it was part of a universal, abstract, indifferent memory where all books were equal and together basked in attention as tenderly distant as that shown by God to men. Here it’s been picked out, preferred over others. Here it’s indispensable to its reader, torn from its galaxy to feed these paper-crunching pseudo-insects, irreparably different from true insects in that each is bound to its own distinct concern. 

The selection of records is usually intentional and follows a rational searching process through the long catalogues of the archive. Yet it is not uncommon that records are accessed unintentionally, encountered through a process of serendipity. Likening this to an archival flâneury, the sociologist Mike Featherstone remembers the unorthodox searching methods of the historians Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, who accessed documents randomly ‘‘on the diagonal’’ … so that the unusual juxtapositions they arrived at summoned up new lines of thought and possibilities to radically re-think and reclassify received wisdom’. Archives are therefore sites of potential discoveries where the work of the researcher resembles that of the archaeologist. Both *dig into* unmapped territories, searching for historical clues and interpreting them for credible glimpses of the past.
Reflecting on the digging activities of researchers and archaeologists, the Austrian artist Lois Weinberger employed an innovative method that involved literal archaeological works. He chose the attic of his family house in Stams, Austria, as the site for his research and closely examined the accumulated waste found under the floorboards. Through an exhaustive sifting of every piece of waste, he categorised 2000 objects dating from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. Every object that was brought to the surface became a component of Debris Field, an installation of found objects, drawings, photographs and notes (fig. 2.1) that was presented in the Documenta 14 exhibition at EMST, the National Museum of Contemporary Arts, in Athens in 2017.

In this installation, Weinberger’s attic is an archive, a site of potential discoveries, and the excavated objects form the records of the archive, which await the arrival of the artist/archaeologist to assess their historical significance in the present.

Today, a time of boundless archiving, this task of interpreting and judging the archive’s content is profoundly significant. What material is important or relevant to somebody’s research? Is there an end to this research? Does the material found in an archive reflect the truth? These are just some of the dilemmas one might come across when browsing through records in an archive. The same confusion with regard to archives

Figure 2.1 Lois Weinberger’s installation Debris Field at EMST, National Museum of Contemporary Arts, Athens in 2017. © Studio Weinberger – Mathias Völzke.
is expressed through Ilya Kabakov’s character in the installation *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988). Throughout his life, the character collects useless objects and hangs them from the ceiling with a string. At the end of the string, a small piece of paper explains where the object was found, in an attempt to connect it back to his memory.

[T]his is the memory associated with all the events connected to each of these papers. To deprive ourselves of these paper symbols and testimonies is to deprive ourselves somewhat of our memories. In our memory everything becomes equally valuable and significant. All points of our recollections are tied to one another. They form chains and connections in our memory, which ultimately comprise the story of life.

Later in the story however, he finds himself amongst all these useless objects and exhausted questions:

Does the dump and its image summon my imagination over and over again, why do I always return to it? Because I feel that man, living in our region, is simply suffocating in his own life among the garbage since there is nowhere to take it, nowhere to sweep it out – we have lost the border between garbage and non-garbage space.

The confusion of Kabakov’s character eloquently reflects the ambiguity attached to archives, which, either as a remedy or a poison, can be beneficial or problematic respectively.

The perception of archives as static depositories of ordered records has prevailed since Hilary Jenkinson’s publication of *A Manual of Archive Administration* in 1922. For Jenkinson, archives ‘themselves state no opinion, voice no conjecture; they are simply written memorials, authenticated by the fact of their official preservation, of events which actually occurred and of which they themselves formed a part … [and provide] an exact statement of facts’. Archives are understood as passive, disinterested and fixed entities that reveal one truth. The temporal dimension of their existence is unique and linear, as they rise from stillness to movement until they return back to their original place for storage. More recent debates on archival theory, however, disregard the idea of a sole truth behind archives. In the light of postmodernism, the world cannot be adequately explained and justified in a single, unified approach; thus this one truth must become ‘a series of contingent truths’. Roland Barthes’s *Death of the Author*, for instance, accepts that the author’s intention is
detached as soon as writing begins, and comprises one of the first postmodern texts that clearly confront Jenkinson’s one truth. Yet the most influential person to determine the future of archives is the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.\textsuperscript{12}

The Derridian archive

In \textit{Archive Fever}, Derrida produced a critical and intense study of the notion of the archive drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis. \textit{Archive Fever} is a translation from the French of a lecture that Derrida gave at an international colloquium called \textit{Memory: The Question of the Archives} that took place at the Freud Archives in 1994 in London. In this book, Derrida revisits topics that he had long been preoccupied with, especially in \textit{The Post Card}. That book, published in 1980, starts with \textit{Envois}, which narrates the story of Derrida on a day in Oxford accompanied by Jonathan Culler and Cynthia. On that day Derrida enters a bookshop where he comes across a postcard with an image from Matthew Paris’s thirteenth-century fortune-telling book. This postcard depicts an image of plato, whose name is spelled with a small \textit{p}, and of Socrates. Being extremely impressed by this postcard, Derrida buys every copy the shop holds and starts sending them to a person very close to him. During the reading of \textit{Envois}, the reader gradually understands that these postcards are sent to a woman Derrida is in love with, and the postcards are thus in essence love letters. Derrida recommends that the reader considers these postcards ‘as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence. Destroyed by fire or by that which figuratively takes its place, more certain of leaving nothing out of the reach of what I call the tongue of fire, not even the cinders there are [s’il y a là cendre]’.\textsuperscript{13} Derrida suggests that these postcards/love letters comprise a type of archive that carries the memory of a broken-up correspondence, which appears to be of a confused and heated nature. On 6 June 1977, a section of an envoi reads:

If you had listened to me, you would have burned everything, and nothing would have arrived. I mean on the contrary that something ineffaceable would have arrived, instead of this bottomless misery in which we are dying. But it is unjust to say that you did not listen to me, you listened closely to the other voice (we were already a crowd in that first envelope) which asked you not to burn, to burn in order to save. Nothing has arrived because you wanted to preserve
(and therefore to lose), which in effect formed the sense of the order coming from behind my voice, you remember, so many years ago, in my first ‘true’ letter: ‘burn everything’. You had answered me the next day, and this is how your letter ended: “[...] The letter ends on the exigency of this supreme pleasure: the desire to be torn by you’ ... I am burning. I have the stupid impression of being faithful to you ... I am waking up. I remember the ashes. What a chance to burn, yes yes.\textsuperscript{14}

Throughout \textit{Envois} Derrida exposes a peculiar aspect of archives which he expands upon a few years later in \textit{Archive Fever}. This aspect deals with a contradiction inherent in them according to which memory is not only preserved in archives but also burnt and destroyed. By their nature therefore archives can be considered as carrying this trauma, which gives one a feverish compulsion, an \textit{archive fever}, to look into and find the origin of memory.\textsuperscript{15} Commenting on the relationship between \textit{The Post Card} and \textit{Archive Fever}, Herman Rapaport describes the former as the ‘phantom limb, something important that has been cut off and that haunts’.\textsuperscript{16} The difference between them is that \textit{The Post Card} deals with an archive of a private correspondence, between lovers, whereas \textit{Archive Fever} deals with Freud’s public archives.

Following \textit{The Post Card} and having traced the problem of an inherent contradiction in archives, Derrida elaborates his thoughts further and develops a consistent theory in \textit{Archive Fever}. In the opening note of \textit{Archive Fever}, Derrida discusses the etymology of the word archive, referring to the Greek word \textit{arkhe} (\textit{αρχή}). This word has two meanings, \textit{commencement} and \textit{commandment}. Commencement refers to the origin, or as Derrida says, it has sequential implications, whereas commandment, or giving orders, refers to the law. Both commencement and commandment take place simultaneously under one word, \textit{arkhe}. The word archive derives from the Greek \textit{arkheion}, which refers to the building where the \textit{arkhons} resided. Part of the \textit{arkhons’} political power was to give orders, to command, and it was at their residences, in the \textit{arkheia}, where documents were kept safe and in order.\textsuperscript{17} It is thus through the very physicality of the archive, that the archive itself comes ‘[t]o shelter itself and, sheltered, to conceal itself’.\textsuperscript{18} Derrida approaches the notion of the archives from a novel perspective and deconstructs a central function of it, which is the one of inscription. Initially, he discusses the entirety of Freud’s work on psychoanalysis as an archive of his legacy. During his career as a psychoanalyst, and even after his death, Freud’s archive provided ongoing evidence that could be used to defend his reputation.
Derrida also comments on printing processes that take place in archives and associates them with Freud’s ‘Mystic Writing Pad’ (Wunderblock) and the unconscious.

In the 1926 paper ‘A Note about the “Mystic Writing Pad”’ Freud draws parallels between our perceptual apparatus and the Mystic Writing Pad (Wunderblock). He explains that the Wunderblock is a small apparatus, which is different to paper and slate in the sense that it ‘can really deliver both components: an always ready receptive surface and lasting traces of the notations made’. For Freud, the function of the perceptual apparatus involves an internal printing process on some external, virtual substrate, or as Derrida explains, the perceptual apparatus ‘integrates the necessity, inside the psyche itself, of a certain outside’. Commenting on this function, Derrida adds that ‘the theory of psychoanalysis is not only a theory of memory but also a theory of the archive’. Derrida does not restrict himself only to this archival understanding of Freudian memory but also examines private inscription. Specifically he discusses Freud’s circumcision, as an inseparable aspect of his Jewish inheritance, and a gift that Freud was given by his father Jakob on his thirty-fifth birthday in Vienna in 1891. This gift was the Bible that Freud studied as a child with a new leather binding. Derrida explains that Freud’s circumcision and his father’s gift comprise the original archive, as they carry the mark that is both exterior to him and inscribed on his body and thus permanently with him.

One of the characteristics of archives, Derrida explains, is violence. Violence occurs as soon as something is archived, for this act implies the establishment of a law and also its enforcement, which is the same as ‘the violence of power (Gewalt) which at once posits and conserves the law’. An archive is thus the place where power is exercised. A visit to a library, for instance, demands acquaintance with a certain protocol. One needs to know how books are categorised and where they are stored, what books can be borrowed and what books are for reference only. Some parts of the building may not be accessible to the public and others may have limited accessibility. A visit to the library will reflect the archive’s institutional function, its law. The moment of preserving the past is violent in the sense that certain aspects relevant to the archive are only then revealed. The archive decides what is worth remembering. And this selection process automatically determines what is to be forgotten. On the one hand therefore, this violence can be perceived as positive, as it opens up the ground, broadens the boundaries and gives freedom to the archived material, to memory. On the other hand, the same violence can be perceived as negative, as it restricts memory by ignoring part of it. This is what Derrida
refers to as an archontic quality of the archive, which is always followed by the anarchontic. Derrida makes a further association between archives and political power, reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s understanding of the archive, claiming that ‘[t]here is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.

In the earlier reference to The Post Card, I mentioned one of the archive’s intrinsic qualities, which is archive fever. Derrida elaborates further on this quality in Archive Fever: ‘It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.’ He draws parallels between this desire to return to the origin, to the primordial memory, and the Freudian death drive, a focal point in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that is often neglected or disputed.

The Freudian death drive

Freud introduces his theory of the death drive in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, his most philosophical essay, written in 1920. This essay examines the reasons why the mind impels us towards unpleasant and often painful experiences. He focuses on the dreams of shell-shocked veterans from World War I who suffered from traumatic neurosis. Their dreams were ‘characterised by their reintroducing the patient again and again into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he awakens with renewed fright … fixations … familiar to us in hysteria’. Freud’s main interest is why these dreams repeat themselves on a daily basis and he assumes that they ‘seek to master the stimulus by developing anxiety, the lack of which was the cause of traumatic neurosis’. Through the re-enactment of a traumatic event in dreams, he explains, the mind tries to create the anxiety that was lacking during the original event. During this process, the mind ignores the emotional stability and wellbeing of the person in the present and goes beyond pleasure, to the core of the traumatic event. This compulsion to repeat a traumatic event, known as a ‘repetition compulsion’, has an inherent quality always to point towards the past, which is something that fascinated Freud as ‘new and radical’ and applies to all drives in general. Freud remarks that, whereas drives are commonly perceived as urges that point towards change and development, in actual
fact they do the opposite. Organic drives point towards the restoration of previous states: thus they are conservative and regressive.\textsuperscript{36} Commenting on the nature of organic drives, Freud adds that if ‘every living being dies for internal reasons, returning to the inorganic, then we can only say that the goal of all life is death, and, looking backwards, that the non-living existed before the living’.\textsuperscript{37} The drive that pushes a person towards extinction, towards an inanimate, inorganic state, is therefore the death drive (\textit{thanatos}), which, through repetition compulsions, appears in opposition to but also in balance with the life drive (\textit{eros}), the drive that is concerned with the creation and preservation of life. The life drive is topographically different from the death drive. The former is situated within living matter, whereas the latter operates silently from outside.\textsuperscript{38}

When Freud first introduced the concept of the death drive in \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, he had doubts regarding its theoretical validity as a ‘false profundity or mysticism’\textsuperscript{39} but later, in \textit{Civilisation and its Discontents}, he admits: ‘[my views of the death drive] have taken hold of me so strongly that I can no longer think in any other way’.\textsuperscript{40} Based on the theoretical hypothesis of the death drive, Freud proceeds further, giving an explanation for certain clinical illnesses. He argues that the death drive can be expressed in two ways: one that is outwards as a sadistic aggression and another that is internal and expressed as masochism. He further suggests that the necessity for externalising aggression is imperative, as the same aggression can be directed inwards and cause self-destruction.\textsuperscript{41} This implies that sadistic behaviour is normal and also beneficial for the organism.\textsuperscript{42}

Returning to Derrida, the archive fever, or else the desire to return to the first memory, to the absolute beginning, is fundamentally linked to the Freudian death drive that points towards an inorganic state, towards the destruction of memory. This association implies that the death drive, through repetition compulsions, operates as a self-contradictory force that simultaneously generates and destroys the archive.

\section*{Archives and the city}

The concept of the archive can extend beyond the physical boundaries defined by its walls and can include an entire city. This thought is shared with the British historian Patrick Joyce who, responding to Derrida’s statement that the archive is a place where power is exercised, makes a fascinating enquiry into how archives are adjusted to accommodate changes that take place on national and social levels. In
his essay ‘The Politics of the Liberal Archive’, he focuses on the key role
of the public library and the way it embodies and reflects the idea of the
public in nineteenth-century liberalism. He explains that the first truly
public library appeared in the United Kingdom only after the Library
Act of 1850 was enforced. The Public Record Office founded in 1938
or the British Museum’s Reading Room established in 1753 cannot be
considered public archives due to their limited access.43 Following the
Library Act of 1850, the concept of the public library was redefined: the
public library was for the first time open to everybody, to the demos,
and its mission was to ‘civilise the working class by giving this class
access to the public realm’.44 Nevertheless the concept of the public
library expanded further during the post-war period when an ‘accessi-
ble network of well-stocked public libraries was celebrated as an impor-
tant buffer against totalitarianism – a vital organ of democracy, which
exemplified Britain’s essential historic traditions of individual liberty
and social empowerment’.45

Joyce makes a noteworthy observation on the centrality of the
library in nineteenth-century liberalism. Following the 1850 Act, the
organisation of libraries started to develop an interest in the centre, and
this has various interpretations. Firstly public libraries followed the
example of the British Museum Library, applying a balanced cultural pol-
icy between the capital, that is the centre, and the rest of the country,
that is between the local and the national. In terms of the internal design
and layout of libraries, there was a change too. Libraries adopted the con-
cept of Bentham’s Panopticon and thus the public was supervised by a
centrally located member of staff.46 The British Museum Reading Room
built in 1857 features a centrally raised platform from which the staff
policing the public. In this way, the notion of the Central Library comes
to reveal ‘the local dimensions of liberalism’.47 Further, central libraries
occupy the physical centre of towns and cities to ensure equal accessibil-
ity to all patrons. Closing his essay, Joyce expands further on the concept
of the archive, claiming that in essence it embodies something broader
and more diverse, which is ‘the street and the built environment’,48 the
city itself.

Joyce’s understanding of the archive, which is not spatially restricted
within the walls of the library but includes the whole street, the city and
its everyday life as a repository of memories, is not novel. In literature,
Marcel Proust’s In Search of Lost Time (À la Recherche du temps perdu) is
a powerful attempt to ‘recapture through memory traces, the richness of
that everyday life’.49 Equal to Proust is Walter Benjamin’s famous Arcades
Project (Passagenwerk) in which he narrates his memories of flânerie in nineteenth-century Paris, or in his essay ‘Naples’ (1924), written with his lover Asja Lacis. For Proust and Benjamin, both the city and its everyday life function as archives. They provide material to be retrieved and then carefully assembled into textual form.

Archives, historiography and monumentality

In her discussion of archives, the architectural historian Beatriz Colomina reflects on the production of history. She perceives archives as fragmented entities that hide in a private and ‘messy space’. The task of the historiographer, she explains, is to bring these entities out of this private, disordered world and expose them to the public in a carefully assembled way. This orderly displacement of archival material from the private inside to the public outside is what the writing of history comprises.

Similarly, for Paul Ricoeur, the archive signifies the moment when the historiographical process is written, following the stage of the testimony. The testimony, for him, opens up the historiographical process and archives come to capture it. In Memory, History, Forgetting, Ricoeur ponders that if writings are the main material held in a library and written testimonies the main collection of it, then everything can be archived. He has doubts, however, about the transition between the first two stages of the historiographical process, from testimony to archive, or from oral to written history. Such doubt relates to the transition from a living memory to a written record, which, like a pharmakon, can be either poison or remedy. In another essay, Ricoeur remembers the French historian Jacques Le Goff, who asserted that in past centuries archives were associated with monuments, such as the Monumenta Germaniae Historica of 1826. He explains that monuments, which are in most cases created by the state, express an ideology and embody collective memory. Archives, on the other hand, which are associated with documents, have different intentions; they are independent of ideology and therefore more subjective. For Ricoeur, however, the association of archives with the notion of the document was never really made in this sense. For him documents ‘attack against the conditions of historical production and its concealed or unconscious intentions … we must say with Le Goff that once its apparent meaning is demystified, “the document is a monument.”’

Ricoeur’s equation of the document with the monument is reminiscent of Theodor Adorno who, reflecting on Paul Valéry’s statement that
in museums we ‘put the art of the past to death,’ advocates provocatively that the museum and mausoleum are not just phonetically linked. He suggests that a museum, which is an archive in a broader sense, is like a mausoleum, a monument built with the intention to convey a specific meaning and ideology.

**Digital and dynamic archives**

Contemporary archival discourse does not only scrutinise traditional archives, namely the physical documents found in libraries and the collectible objects displayed in museums, but also a more recent type of archives, the digital ones. Digital archives refers to magnetic storage media (CDs, DVDs, hard drives etc.) that have the ability to store data effortlessly and quickly. Today information technologies are so advanced that digital archiving is possible and easily accessible, to the extent that ‘we [all] are miniarchivists ourselves’. According to Mike Featherstone, ‘to be is to record’, whereas for Adrian Mackenzie ‘to die is to be disconnected from access to the archives, not jacked-in or not in real time’. The data stored in digital archives is encoded in the form of 1s and 0s, and can be transmitted through network channels locally, such as a home or office computer network, or globally through the Internet. The Internet itself is not an archive in the traditional sense. As Jussi Parikka explains, the Internet is a *dynamic archive* that is open-ended and perpetually updating itself in real life. The distribution of digital data around the globe takes place instantly. This instantaneity has a direct impact on the traditional understanding of knowledge dissemination. The physicality of the traditional, static archive has dissolved and the centrality attached to it is somewhat undermined. Instead, digital archives are fluid, dynamic and decentred.

Digital archives appear at first to overcome the fragility of traditional ones, yet their increasing use raises concerns of a different nature. Digital archives are susceptible to invasion, erasure and overwriting. Their protection is a matter of national security with data centres being fortified and often hidden away in remote locations, like the Green Mountain data centre in Norway that is embedded in the rock of a mountain or the CyberBunker in the Netherlands that is located in a former nuclear bunker. Digital archives are commonly equipped with anti-malware software to avoid remote hacking activities that can erase or overwrite their data.
Individual memory: An archival reading

An archival process unfolds in three stages. The initial stage is the writing of archival material. The second stage deals with the storage of this material and the third stage is the stage of retrieval. This three-faceted operation of archives – writing, storing, retrieving – is to be found in the function of memory too. This is confirmed by Pierre Nora, who suggests that “[m]odern memory is first of all archival. It relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image.”

The archival understanding of memory follows a long tradition in Western thought, which is usually approached from the point of the individual. This tradition stretches back to the dawn of philosophy with the introduction of the Platonic universe of ideas in the fifth century BC. In Theaetetus, Plato likens memory to a block of wax that exists in our souls. In processes of perception through our senses, we imprint our thoughts and perceptions on this block of wax. Knowledge is something already possessed. There are forms of ideas in our memories, which the soul has been acquainted with since time immemorial, yet everything is forgotten as soon as one is born. Birth indicates forgetting. True knowledge is achieved by fitting the imprints from sense impressions, which themselves are reflections of a higher reality, onto the prime mould or imprint of this reality. Knowledge can thus be re-attained from within. In Phaedrus, Plato sets out to convince his readers that all knowledge is an attempt to remember the things that all souls once witnessed. Attaining knowledge is therefore remembering something forgotten, which gives this inquiry a recollective character (anamnesis).

Later in the history of philosophy, Aristotle (384–322 BC) offers a treatise that brings about the complete secularisation of memory, yet memory still appears to operate archivally. His theory of memory and reminiscence is developed in his work On the Soul (De Anima), according to which imagination is initially aroused by the five senses. Imagination acts as a catalyst between the stage of perception and the formation of thought. Perceptions are manifested in the form of images, and all knowledge that one acquires stems from sense impressions which are functions occurring in the soul. Aristotle denies the possibility of human thought without the employment of mental images (phantasia). In On Memory and Reminiscence (De Memoria et Reminiscencia), he further relates imagination to memory. The difference between them is traced to the element of time. Whereas imagination is a sense impression of things in the present, memory deals with sense impressions obtained in the
past. Aristotle likens mental images to paintings and, in a similar fashion to Plato, the formation of mental images is perceived as a movement, like the movement of creating a seal on wax. Regarding the differences between memory and recollection, Aristotle states that recollection is the recovery or recapture of sense impressions that one perceived in the past and that this is a conscious effort on the part of the inquirer.

In ancient Rome memory was perceived as an art. It was called mnemonics and mainly practised by trained orators. This art of memorisation did not simply lead to a blind recitation of a prefabricated speech. Instead, orators had the ability to assemble their speech and deliver it eloquently ex tempore. Mnemonics was therefore not a static art but rather a compositional one, which relates to what we call today imagination and creativity. This art of memory is a spatial art. Memorisation is accomplished through the placement and storing of mental images (imagines) within certain mental places (loci) that were very familiar to the artist, such as remembered versions of his house or part of a city. The retrieval of a stored memory image is a matter of strolling within this mentally constructed building or landscape in an attempt to locate this image. Since memory images hold distinct positions within this construction, their recollection can be delivered without forgetting and in the correct order. Mnemonics was practised up until the early modern period, after which there was a notable change.

During the early modern period, memory was not solely conceived as a blind reproduction of a memory from the past, it was also coloured by the individual’s engagement in the process. John Locke, for instance, introduced a new concept of memory based on empiricism, according to which remembering is highly affected by the interests of the inquirer. Memory, for Locke, develops through an accumulative process. In An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Locke draws parallels between an infant’s mind and a white piece of paper that is empty of characters and ideas (tabula rasa). Memories are imprinted on this blank paper (the mind) through empirical processes, during the individual’s life. In this sense memory is still conceived of as following an archival process.

The archival function of memory is equally predominant in discourses of late modernity. Freud’s psychoanalytic work on memory is reminiscent of the Platonic model. It relates both to the Socratic method of accessing knowledge, an innate recollection attained by the soul of the inquirer through a dialectical process, and to the Platonic model, where in unconscious records memory is not stored in a physical part of the brain or elsewhere in the body – instead it is registered in consciousness through external stimuli and eventually imprinted in the unconscious, like the imprints on Plato’s block of wax.
Collective and cultural memory: An archival reading

The first person to coin the term collective memory was the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. The Durkheimian school of thought evidently influenced Halbwachs, as he understood memory as a social phenomenon. His theory of collective memory also carries resonances of Henri Bergson’s philosophy, one of his early mentors, whose theory of memory is approached from an individual’s point of view.

Bergson intended to give new dimensions to the metaphysics of memory, and his project opened up new horizons in contemporary thought. One of his most innovative contributions was his attempt to establish a philosophical worldview that reflected the climate created by Einstein’s *Theory of Relativity*. Philosophical thought until then had been preoccupied with space rather than time, for space was regarded as a conceivable prerequisite inherently native to our senses. Bergson considers that there are two main types of memory: *habit memory* and *representational memory*. Habit memory refers to the automatic behaviour of the body acquired through repetition. As with forming a habit, one has to deconstruct an action into parts, memorise them individually through repetition, and then reconstruct all parts in a whole and put it into action. In the instance of learning a text by heart, the memory of each reading constructs an individual image. When the text is finally memorised, it emerges as a composite of all previous recollections, which is the habit memory. The other type of memory, representational memory, refers to a function that stores all personal experiences to something external. Representational memory, Bergson explains, ‘records, in the form of memory-images, all the events of our daily life as they occur in time; it neglects no detail; it leaves to each fact, to each gesture, its place and date’. As opposed to habit memory, representational memory does not have a utilitarian character and it manifests itself spontaneously.

Halbwachs’ theory of memory, which was formulated as a reaction against psychological treatises of that period that treated humans as isolated units, depends upon the social environment in which it is created. For him, society is the medium through which memories are made. Recollection takes place in society, through which memories obtain a locale. Whereas for Bergson recollection occurs as a mental leap of the individual in the past, for Halbwachs it demands a leap in the social framework of the society.

Halbwachs’ book *On Collective Memory* begins with a chapter on dreams. Dreams are composed of random images containing mixed-up memories that do not correspond to the essence of real memory.
Dreams are different, as they do not relate to a social context. This approach is diametrically opposite to Bergson’s approach, in which representational memory finds its ultimate manifestation in dreams. As Anne Whitehead notes, Halbwachs’ detachment of memory and dream implies that “individual memory” … represents … a paradoxical formulation, because memory itself collapses once we enter into a state of isolation.71

The past according to Halbwachs is not preserved in a sense that it can recur, but it is reconstructed in the present. In this sense, as memories of the past refer to social contexts of previous times, they come to appear different in the present, lacking their original essence. He illustrates this argument with a parallelism between past memories and the stones of Roman houses, according to which ‘their antiquity cannot be established by their form or their appearance but only by the fact that they still show the effaced vestiges of old character’.72 So, as the reconstruction of past memories takes place in the present, the present social framework affects the process of recollection too. In a later discussion, he comments that memories can be classified in different periods of our lives not because they happened to occur in these specific periods, but because at that time we participated in certain social groups. Effectively there is no difference between recent and old memories, because recollection relates to a particular social framework as opposed to a specific time. A social group can be the family, school, work, social class, religion etc., and each of these groups has particular memories that belong to them alone. Life is an open repository of memories that the mind reproduces constantly in the present. Through this ongoing process of accumulating memories, ‘a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated’.73 Regarding the elderly and their gradual failure to remember certain memories from the past, Halbwachs argues that this is because the social group to which these memories belong starts to disappear. As members of this social group die, the memories that are associated with it die too. In this respect Halbwachs’ idea of collective memory relates to the span of a social group’s living memory. After that, history comes to replace collective memory.

Reflecting on the fact that collective memory fades as the members of a social group disappear, Paul Connerton in How Societies Remember questions how collective memory is transmitted from generation to generation. To answer this question, he focuses on what Halbwachs fails to clarify, which in turn reflects the common ground between Halbwachs’ theory of memory and Bergson’s. Connerton explains that images and
knowledge from the past are transferred to the present through the practice of commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. The repetition of commemorative ceremonies, as forms of rituals, establishes continuity with the past. What is crucial is not the form of the ritual but the content it carries. In effect the repetition of a ritual in the present leads to the re-enactment of actions that are rooted in the past. Rituals transmit knowledge from the past through specific language, postures, gestures and movements that take place during their practice. In general, bodily practices carry habitual memories within their very substance. As Connerton claims, ‘[m]any forms of habitual skilled remembering illustrate a keeping of the past in mind that, without ever adverting to its historical origin, nevertheless re-enacts the past in our present conduct. In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body.’ Therefore the conceptual gap between Halbwachs’ collective memory and its ability to pass from generation to generation can be filled in with Connerton’s clarification, which in essence reflects the Bergsonian model of habit memory. For this reason, as Whitehead points out, the notion of collective memory cannot stand alone, independent of the long tradition of individual memory.

Halbwachs’ collective memory does not only reflect the mental space of a social group. Memory is also associated with the material space in which it is produced. In *The Collective Memory*, he explains that in the social framework of a family, the objects of a house recall the family’s members. When individuals live on their own, the objects found in their houses recall the very fact that there are no family members to associate with and thus reflect what distinguishes them from others. In this way material objects are themselves unique elements of a society, as they circulate within social groups recalling notions of the past. The form of material objects is exceptionally important, as this is what conveys meaning to the present. Objects are motionless only in the way they appear, and this appearance of stillness lasts for long periods, which is what gives the feeling of stability and consistence to the social group. As material space is intimately associated with the social group that inhabits it, a spatial investigation can reveal aspects and give clues about the structure of the society as a whole. In regard to his urban views, Halbwachs proposes that in small cities, where tradition is strong and the social structure stable, while social groups evolve in time, the material composition of the city changes very slowly. However, if the material composition of the city happens to change drastically, this will have an unavoidable impact on the social group.
The idea that collective memory fades as social groups gradually disappear has been criticised by Jan Assmann. Assmann recognises two types of memory. One is communicative memory, which deals with everyday communication and is closely linked to what Halbwachs calls collective memory. It relates to social frameworks and has an expiry date of 80–100 years (three to four generations). The second type is called cultural memory and is ‘characterised by its distance from the everyday …. Cultural memory has fixed points; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance).’ Assmann termed this new type of memory cultural memory, to overcome the paradox arising in Halbwachs’ theory, according to which collective memory from the distant past can still be alive even after the disappearance of the associated social group.

Both Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory and Assmann’s theory of cultural memory involve archival functions in the sense that processes of inscribing, storing and retrieving still take place. As discussed previously, individual memory functions like an internal archiving process. Memories are externalised into a repository realm (wax tablet, memory places, unconscious etc.) to be used later, upon recollection. This function, however, is just as external as the function of collective and cultural memory, as both demand objects and practices to refer to. And so the distinction between individual and collective memory seems to disappear, which supports Connerton’s earlier association between Halbwachs’ collective memory and Bergson’s habit memory.

Notes
3. *Toute la mémoire du monde*, directed by Alain Resnais (France: Film de la Pléiade, 1957), 35mm.
5. In the *Documenta 14* exhibition catalogue Harald Stadler, the director of the Institute of Archaeologies at University of Innsbruck, explains that the roof is not a conventional site for archaeological excavations and proposes a re-evaluation of its potential for research. Being very different from a waste field, the attic is a storage space in which the inhabitants dispose and often forget a range of objects. These objects, when found, can give valuable clues in archaeological works. See Lois Weinberger, *Debris Field: Explorations into the Decrepit 2010–2016* (Kassel: documenta and Museum Fridericianum, 2017).
6. Kabakov’s installation was set up for the first time in London between 1985 and 1988. Now it is part of the permanent collection in Nasjonalmuseet for Kunst in Oslo, Norway.
7. Sven Spieker explains that the “stringing up” of objects was one of the most ancient forms of filing, and the English word “file”, which is derived from the French fil (string), originally meant
17. Derrida, Archive Fever, 2.
22. In his writings, Freud makes use of the term ‘archive’ only once. The most common association that he makes is between psychoanalysis and archaeology. In Constructions in Analysis (1937), Freud writes: ‘[the psychoanalyst’s] work of construction, or, if it is preferred, of reconstruction, resembles to a great extent an archaeologist’s excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed but something that is still alive – and perhaps for another reason as well. But just as the archaeologist builds up the walls of the building from the foundations that have remained standing, determines the number and position of the columns from depressions in the floor and reconstructs the mural decorations and paintings from the remains found in the debris, so does the analyst proceed when he draws his inferences from the fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis.’ (Sigmund Freud, ‘Constructions in Analysis’, The International Journal of Psycho-analysis, 19 (1938), 379.) In the same paper, however, he points out the fundamental difference between archaeology and psychoanalysis. If an archaeological object is destroyed, there is no way that we can get hold of it. On the other hand, when it comes to the psyche of the person ‘[a]ll of the essentials are preserved; even things that seem completely forgotten are present somehow and somewhere, and have merely been buried and made inaccessible to the subject. Indeed, it may, as we know it, be doubted whether any physical structure can really be the victim of total destruction.’ (Sigmund Freud, ‘Constructions in Analysis’, 380).
24. Schwartz and Cook point out that archives have been associated with power since the mnemon of ancient Greece. See Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, ‘Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory’, Archival Science, 2 (2002), 3. The mnemon was a person trained to memorise and keep track of the proceedings in law courts, as writing had still to be invented. In mythology, the mnemon represented a servant of heroes whose mission was to remind them of the divine orders. For example, Achilles was constantly accompanied by a mnemon who was assigned to make sure that the former would never kill a son of Apollo, otherwise he would lose his life. However, the myth unfolds in such a way that the reminder fails to function and the mnemon himself is put to death. In this sense ‘[m]emorisation in the Archaic period was … more than a mere device for keeping facts straight – more than an efficient storage and retrieval system. It was a way of getting (and staying) in touch with a past that would otherwise be consigned to oblivion; it was a fateful fending off of forgetfulness.’ Edward S. Casey, Remembering: A Phenomenological Study (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 12.
26. In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault makes the first attempt in archival theory to dissociate the archive from its spatial dimensions and the common definition as a static repository of memories. Foucault’s theoretical approach to the archive is abstract and deals with
the first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events’. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972), 129. The archive reflects the system of discursivity and thus decides on the limits of what can be said. Therefore the archive does not reproduce but rather produces meaning and so it can be perceived as an instrument of power.

29. In post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the concept of the death drive has received major criticism. According to the theorist Duncan Barford, there are three categories of critics of the death drive, who perceive it as simply redundant, immaterial or morally objectionable. Duncan Barford, ‘In Defence of Death’ in *The Death Drive: New Life For a Dead Subject?*, ed. Rob Weatherill (London: Rebus Press, 1999), 12.
31. Freud's initial understanding of neurosis was inspired by his studies of biology. He perceived neurosis as a conflict between ego-instincts (self-preservation) and object-instincts (preservation of the species), when the former overrides the latter. As a result, ‘the neurotic was engaged in a futile effort to repress the sexual demands of nature’. Barford Duncan, ‘In Defence of Death’, 17.
34. Freud used the concept of repetition compulsion for the first time in 1914, in an article entitled ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’, and referred to the acting out of some memory that the patient had forgotten.
50. Featherstone explains that the flâneur ‘is not just the stroller in the city ... Flânerie is a method for reading texts, for reading the traces of the city. It is also a method of writing, of producing and constructing texts.’ Mike Featherstone, ‘The Flâneur, the City and Virtual Public Life’, *Urban Studies* 35: 5–6 (May 1998), 910.
51. This city portrait depicts the unfolding of vivid memories and experiences that both authors obtained in the city and is presented to us in the form of a very rich, enjoyable and highly descriptive travel reportage. It consists of a series of snapshots or, as Benjamin calls them, flashes of light [*Aufblitzen*] from this trip. In ‘On the Concept of History’, he gives an example of the image of the flash. ‘The true picture of the past flits by. The past is held back fast only as an image that flashes up at the moment of recognition, never to be seen again. David S. Ferris, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 6. The flash is not an image of the past, but rather the moment that refers to the cognition of that image. For Benjamin, images have a *historical index*. This historical index refers not merely to a certain point in time to which an image belongs, but also the point in time when the image enters into legibility, when it first becomes readable. This moment of recognition is what Benjamin calls the *now of recognisability*. This event establishes a particular relationship
between the past and the present. History cannot belong to the past but belongs, rather, to the present. It becomes legible and readable through a relation of ‘what was’ with ‘now’.


55. Adorno, Prisms, 175.


59. Parikka, Digital Memory and the Archive, 84.

60. Although digital recording technologies have developed immensely, their long-lasting archival qualities are not yet confirmed. In fact, Jeff Williams explains that digital archives have ‘already shown significant levels of decay’, in Nicholas Cullinan, ed., Tacita Dean: Film (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 1.


62. Timothy D. J. Chappell, Reading Plato’s Theaetetus (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 172.


68. Anne Whitehead, Memory (London: Routledge, 2009), 94.


71. Whitehead, Memory, 127.


73. Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, 47.


75. Whitehead, Memory, 132–3.

