The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene

El archivo como aparato creador de mundos en el Antropoceno

L'arxiu com a aparell que fa el món a l'antropocè

Gabriela Galati (0000-0002-6126-9455)
Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti, Milan, Italy

Abstract

This text aims to explore the archive as a powerful force that shapes life. Consequently, it seeks to develop an ethical framework for the archive from a feminist perspective. De-extinction can be linked to the archive as a stabilizing apparatus and a scene of responsibility (Wolfe 2018) that entails our ethical commitment to acknowledge the radical passivity of those who no longer exist in this world, both as individuals and species. This scene of responsibility is intertwined with the agency of the archive. In other words, the archive acts as a life-creating apparatus by shaping the conditions for reading, the future, and, to some extent, reality itself. By establishing the foundations for an ethics of the archive as a practice that creates life, this text aims to reframe the discourse surrounding extinction and de-extinction.

Keywords

Archive-de-extinction; Anthropocene; precartity; counterapocalypse.

Resumen

Este texto tiene como objetivo explorar el archivo como una fuerza poderosa que da forma a la vida. En consecuencia, busca desarrollar un marco ético para el archivo desde una perspectiva feminista. La de-extinción puede vincularse al archivo como un aparato estabilizador y un escenario de responsabilidad (Wolfe, 2018) que implica nuestro compromiso ético de reconocer la radical pasividad de aquellos que ya no existen en este mundo, tanto como individuos como especies. Este escenario de responsabilidad está entrelazado con la agencia del archivo. En otras palabras, el archivo actúa como un aparato creador de vida al dar forma a las condiciones para la lectura, el futuro y, en cierta medida, la realidad misma. Al establecer los fundamentos para una ética del archivo como una práctica que crea vida, este texto tiene como objetivo reformular el discurso en torno a la extinción y la de-extinción.

Palabras clave

Archivo-des-extinción; Antropoceno; precaridad; contraapocalipsis.

Resum

Aquest text té com a objectiu explorar l'arxiu com una força poderosa que dóna forma a la vida. En conseqüència, busca desenvolupar un marc ètic per a l'arxiu des d'una perspectiva feminista. La de-extinció pot vincular-se a l'arxiu com un aparell estabilitzador i un escenari de responsabilitat (Wolfe, 2018) que implica el nostre compromís ètic de reconèixer la radical passivitat d'aquells que ja no existeixen en aquest món, tant com a individus com a espècies. Aquest escenari de responsabilitat està entremesclat amb l'agència de l'arxiu. En altres paraules, l'arxiu actua com un aparell creador de vida en donar forma a les condicions per a la lectura, el futur i, en certa mesura, la realitat mateixa. En establir els fonaments per a una ètica de l'arxiu com una pràctica que crea vida, aquest text té com a objectiu reformular el discurs entorn de l'extinció i la de-extinció.

Paraules clau

Arxiu-des-extinció; Antropocè; precaritat; contraapocalipsi.

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
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Introduction

Focusing on a series of topics which range from 'the animal question' and *mal d'archive* (Derrida, 1996) to more recent discussions on extinction and de-extinction, the present work proposes that the archive be considered as a 'a life-shaping force' (Zylinska, 2017, p. 2), advancing an ethics of the archive from a feminist perspective. The central question to this work is: if we consider the archive as an apparatus that creates life—at least in part—can it then be a tool for understanding and changing our actions towards the living? In other words, would it be possible to advance an ethics of the archive?

This question acquires particular relevance in relation to recent and pressing discussions on the Anthropocene, the current geological era characterised by the irreversible effects of human action on a geological scale.

There is no universal consensus in the academic community about the term Anthropocene (Parikka, 2015, p. 17), and several alternatives have been suggested[1], nor is there consensus about when exactly to locate its inception[2]. However, there is scholarly agreement regarding the fact that 'the human's impact upon the geomorphological and biological setup of planet Earth has become both momentous and irreversible, via processes such as excavation, deforestation, urbanization, and globalization. It is also a period that is experiencing a mass extinction of various species as a result of anthropogenic factors' (Zylinska, 2017, p. 93).

In fact, the most tragic and characteristic event of the Anthropocene is to be in the midst, or at the beginning, depending on one's point of view, of the Sixth Mass Extinction. What could make the difference, then, is the way one intends to cope with it and, eventually, find, if not solutions, ways of doing less harm to other species as well as our own.

As Stefano Mancuso and others have pointed out, our time as a species on the planet is quite limited, just 300,000 years, compared to the average life-span of all living species on the planet that ranges from 3 to 5 million years (Mancuso, 2018, p. 29). Thus, to start considering that the planet has existed long before us and will continue to exist afterwards is a good way to try to move away from an anthropocentric view, to begin thinking in geological, non-human time as a first step toward perceiving human existence as just a tiny moment in the planet's long history (Parikka, 2015; Zylinska, 2017).

This does not mean in any way adopting empty and aestheticising attitudes like that of MoMA curator Paola Antonelli who has repeatedly stated that 'humans will inevitably become extinct due to environmental breakdown, but we have the power to design ourselves a "beautiful ending"' (Pownall, 2019), or, in another version, 'we can design a more elegant extinction in order to make sure that the next dominant species will remember us with respect'. It is hard to think of a more superficial way of saying it: talking about elegance or beauty in relation to the death and suffering of millions of species, including humans, seems like a lack of respect and, above all, a lack of intellectual and critical depth. Furthermore, when it comes to being 'remembered with respect' by future 'dominant species', Antonelli's example compares the human species with the dinosaur: 'we talk about how small their brains were, so we talk about them with fear but not with respect' (BBC, 2020). It is precisely this type of anthropocentric vision of other species—in which the idea of the human species as the superior one is evidenced by the fact that the proof we would leave of our exceptionality is

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[1] For example, as Joseph Masco notes, 'Donna Haraway has recently critiqued the Anthropocene, suggesting that it naturalizes a specific historical–political formation—capitalism—as the only human mode. She suggests, along with Jason Moore, that instead of *Anthropocene,* it should be *Capitalocene*—to mark the specifically destructive qualities of a petrochemical-based capitalist system, or perhaps the *Chthulucene*' (Masco, 2018, p. 77).
[2] According to Joanna Zylinska, it could be located in the eighteenth century, with the second Industrial Revolution, or by the mid-twentieth century (Zylinska, 2018, p. 4); or, according to Stefano Mancuso, the impact of human action on the environment began with the development of agriculture (Mancuso, 2019).

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

not addressed to all future species, but only to the 'dominant' ones—which has brought us to the present situation in the first place.

This is the kind of apocalyptic, masculinist posture when confronting the Anthropocene that Zylinska criticises in her short book, *The End of Man. A Feminist Counterapocalypse* (2018). Drawing on the work of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, Zylinska proposes considering the concept of relationality as a more solid and compelling way to understand subjectivity. What relationality considers is a 'prior existence of relations between clusters of matter and energy that temporarily stabilize for us humans into entities—on a molecular, cellular, and social level' (p. 53). This approach avoids the typical masculinist view of the subject that 'disinterestedly looks at the world as its possession and playground' (p. 53). And, it can be added, to continue with Haraway's ideas, it is a view from above, as a disembodied drone (the bird's-eye view) which controls its property without physically mingling with it. In fact, Haraway's idea of situatedness implies that, from a feminist stance, all knowledge and all vision are embodied and situated: 'I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges.' (Haraway, 1988, p. 581)

In opposition to the 'masculinist posture' explained above, Zylinska proposes a 'counterapocalypse' which poses an alternative and feminist approach to extinction, in particular, to move away from anthropocentric exceptionalism—the sort of view, like Antonelli's, that considers humanity's ability to go extinct 'beautifully' as an aesthetic choice that other living beings would not have. An alternative concept to thinking of a counterapocalypse could be Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's idea of precarity as 'the condition of being vulnerable to others', a 'life without the promise of stability' (2015, p. 20). I think precarity shares an evident point of contact with Jacques Derrida's ideas of finitude and passivity. Both finitude and passivity are what all sentient beings share and constitute the ground for rethinking humanity's relationships with other animals and the foundational basis for a new ethics in this regard (Derrida 2006). Precarity, or passivity, introduces a common ground between all living beings on the basis of which a non-anthropocentric ethics, one of responsibility towards others, can be developed and shared. This common ground is the 'feminist counterapocalypse' that 'promises liberation from the form of subjectivity pinned to a competitive, overachieving, and overreaching masculinity. It also prompts us all to ask: If unbridled progress is no longer an option, what kinds of coexistences and collaborations do we want to create in its aftermath?' (Zylinska 2018, p. 59).

Extinction

Discussions of extinction inevitably lead to contemporary discussions of de-extinction and its relation to the archive.

When asking what kind of event extinction is, Cary Wolfe asserts that it is both the 'most natural thing in the world' yet, [and] at the same time, it can never be natural (Wolfe, 2018, p. 107): if it is true that 99.9% of the species that have lived on the planet have become extinct, there is also hardly one thing we can still call 'nature'. And this is due not only to the fact that 'nature' is already a cultural, an often human-centred idea, but also because the machinic apparatus through which 'nature' is conceptualised, namely language, is always already technological, at the same time that it is inherently 'natural' to humankind: this is the second kind of 'passivity' which, together with finitude, puts every living being on the same ontological plane: there is no nature/culture divide. (Derrida, 2006; Wolfe, 2009, p. 88). In Wolfe's words: 'The first type (physical vulnerability, embodiment, and eventually mortality) is paradoxically made unavailable, *inappropriable*, to us by the very thing that makes it available—namely, a second type of "passivity" or "not being able," which is the

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

finitude we experience in our subjection to a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language, a technicity that has profound consequences, of course, for what we too hastily think of as "our" concepts, which are therefore in an important sense not "ours" at all' (2009, p. 88).

So, Wolfe asks, 'when a being, human or nonhuman, dies, what goes out of the world? When an entire species becomes extinct, what world leaves the world, the world we are left with? To begin to answer these questions is to realize that extinction, whatever else it may be, is never a generic event' (2009, p. 88). These questions have twofold interest: Firstly, they make evident human responsibility in extinguishing a world that leaves this world—namely the world of the extinct species. Secondly, if de-extinction is going to be considered, conversely asking which worlds should be brought back has also an ethical valence. And, equally important: 'What do beasts and men have in common?' (Wolfe, 2018, p. 108). Derrida's first answer to this question is very well known: they share the passivity that is made evident through the repositioning of Jeremy Bentham's question 'Can they suffer?', namely being sentient beings, and sharing the same finitude of death (Derrida, 2006). But there is a further level of this passivity which Derrida explains in the seminar published as *The Beast and the Sovereign I* and *II* (2009; 2011) and that is briefly analysed in Wolfe's article: Death is something that is not given to us to know—it is always something that happens to the others[3]. Derrida points out that to be dead means 'to be delivered over' to someone who will decide what to do of my remains. This is the scene of responsibility of the ones who remain: The responsibility towards the radical passivity of the dead (Derrida, 2011, p. 113).

De-Extinction

So, what is de-extinction? Christopher Preston, in *The Synthetic Age*, defines it is as follows:

> Located at an extreme end of the interventionist spectrum, deextinctionists—or *extinction reversalists*—embrace the possibility of not just reorganizing ecosystems by moving species around but recreating extinct species so that lost biodiversity can be regained. It turns out that the same techniques now available in synthetic biology for building genomes can be put to use reconstructing the DNA of extinct animals. Extinction, these biologists propose, need not be forever after all. (2018, p. 94)

Ursula K. Heise analyses three very different yet significative fiction projects in light of these de-extinction processes, including Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), based on the novel by Michael Crichton (1990), and its sequel, *The Lost World* (1997). The author sees de-extinction, and the fantasies regarding it conveyed in these projects, as sophisticated 'techno-fixes' which, however, do not imply thinking critically about the factors that led to these circumstances in the first place—the most obvious being anthropocentrism (Heise, 2003, pp. 59–73).

In fact, other authors, such as Wolfe, have related de-extinction to the archive (2018, p. 118) and, as I will argue below, de-extinction also seems to be closely related to *mal d'archive*, 'archive fever', full of destructive drives without which the archive would not exist, but which simultaneously threaten the archive constantly from within (Derrida, 1995).

In 'Biocapitalism and De-extinction', Ashley Dawson addresses the question: 'What is to be done in response to the Sixth Extinction?' (2018, p. 174) and, perhaps more interestingly, what is *not* to be done. Analysing science journalist Elisabeth Kolbert's conclusions on the Sixth Extinction, Dawson deeply criticises Kolbert's universalist view regarding responsibility for the Anthropocene. Kolbert's account seems to assume that 'the world's flora and fauna cannot adapt to the

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[3] As the epitaph Marcel Duchamp wrote for himself, inscribed on his gravestone in Rouen, says: '*D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent*' [Anyway, it is always the others who die].

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

accelerated rate of change human beings are imposing on the world' (Dawson, 2018, p. 174). Thus, granting responsibility for this event to all humanity at the same level: 'Humanity is represented as unified and undifferentiated, as if we are all equally culpable for the current wave of extinction' (p. 174). The result of this kind of reasoning is that, if everyone is guilty, no one is actually accountable. According to Dawson, this universal responsibility is at the base of the scapegoating, for instance, of indigenous people in Amazonia who are attributed the same level of responsibility for the climate crises as, say, oil extraction companies.

In this context, extinction emerges as a 'new opportunity to capital for a new round of accumulation' at the same time that it is 'the leading edge of contemporary capitalism's contradictions':

> If capital must expand at an ever-increasing rate or go into crisis, 'development' is now consuming entire ecosystems and thereby threatening the planetary environment as a whole. The catastrophic rate of extinction today and the broader decline of biodiversity thus represent a direct threat to the reproduction of capital. Indeed, there is no clearer example of the tendency of capital accumulation to destroy its own conditions of reproduction than the sixth extinction. (Dawson, 2018, p. 176)

In other words, when consuming and destroying complete ecosystems in the name of 'progress', capitalism is also destroying the resources necessary for its own reproducibility. Extinction, then, becomes another possibility for capital accumulation through de-extinction or, as Dawson prefers to call it, re-genesis (2018, p. 177). The new developments in biotechnologies are, in fact, increasing humanity's godlike capacities, as Freud anticipated long ago (1929). At the same time, they are adapting life to the 'dictates of corporate profit' (Dawson, 2018, p. 178)—because these new capacities not only include the re-genesis of extinguished species

but also the engineering of new forms of life—which, as US lawyers have already begun to anticipate, 'should be eligible for patenting' (Dawson, 2018, p. 179). Thus, 'de-extinction provides a mouthwatering opportunity for a new round of capital accumulation based on generating, and acquiring intellectual property rights over, living organisms' (Dawson, 2018, p. 179).

On top of this, an obvious issue is how problematic it is to re-insert extinct species back into the same ecosystems in which they became extinct in the first place.

De-extinction and the archive

I would like to propose a complementary vision to Dawson's on de-extinction by considering the archive's agency or, in other words, the archive as a life-making practice. The questions that need to be asked, then, are: what kind of archive(s) do we want or do we need? What kind of archive(s) are we creating?

To better analyse this, I will refer to the conception of the archive proposed by Derrida in two brief but dense articles which are instrumental for thinking about this topic: 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in *Writing and Difference* (1967) and, more specifically, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995).

To summarise Derrida's conception on the archive, I will only point out to two central ideas from the aforementioned texts. There are two contradictory tendencies regarding the archive in Freudian theory. The first considers the archive as a prosthetic, technological and external memory. In this sense, there is a metaphysical return to the origin or original, which would be kept in this external prosthetic memory. This is exactly what Derrida intends to avoid. The second tendency has its root in the concept of 'original repetition', which turns the archive into 'the origin exposed to the outside' (Vergani, 2000, p. 109); it is thus 'the non-origin that is original' (Derrida, 1967, p. 303). This last conception indicates that the question of the archive is not only a question regarding memory and the past but it is more

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

importantly about the future. The archive links past experiences and mourning with the possibilities of what is yet to come (p. 110). Mourning here is intended in the sense that what is kept in the archive of the unconscious—which the subject would not be able to access if not by metonymic traces, through psychoanalysis or in the form of trauma—is the repressed Oedipus Complex, and thus it is the mourning of the acceptance of castration, of the impossibility for the subject to blend with her object of desire, the father or the mother (Laplanche-Pontalis, 1967). This intense love is the non-origin of a first time that will repeat in different, more or less neurotic forms throughout the subject's entire life, but that is not the real first time, it is already a trace, an absence, a repetition. Past experiences, sometimes traumatic, will create future ones, which is the reason for the recursivity of the archive/unconscious. In this sense, the archive is alive, it is neither fixed nor determined and allows for creation and unpredictability. Its repetitions are not controllable because they are traces, they are pure *différance*.

Almost thirty years later, in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida offers a slightly more literal reflection on the topic of the archive. The publication is based on a conference lecture that he gave at the Freud Museum in London in 1994, and the issue that Derrida actually addresses in *Archive Fever* is the implication of Freudian theory for the conceptualisation of a new archive, namely, the one enabled by the computer and digital technologies—and also of Freud's Museum as an archive—, of the unconscious as archive, and archive fever (*mal d'archive*) itself.

Mal d'archive is described, then, as the (unconscious) double tendency, guided by the death drive inhabiting any subject to a greater or lesser measure, to save, register, remember, keep everything—every trauma— in order to repeat it. Yet, somehow, hidden in the desire to hold onto things lies a second tendency towards erasing, losing, forgetting and destroying everything that was supposed to be kept safe. Thus, *mal d'archive* menaces

the archive from within as the same impulse to conserve is ultimately the drive that will try to knock down everything from within. What permits the archive to exist, its very conditions of possibility, are the seeds of its own destruction: the archive always works, *a priori*, against itself (Derrida, 1995, p. 14).

Derrida dedicates the first half of the conference lecture to conceptualise the characteristics of the archive in detail. In the first place, he establishes that the only meaning of the word 'archive' has to do with its 'domiciliation':

> As is the case for the Latin *archivum* or *archium* (a word that is used in the singular, as was the French archive, formerly employed as a masculine singular: *un archive*), the meaning of 'archive,' its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. (1995, p. 2)

So, in this sense, the archive takes place in a clear location, in a home, in a certain address. This permanent address is what signs the passage from private to public: the possibility of finding the archive, of acceding to it, of knowing that it is in that place and not in another, of its becoming public, or shared.

In the second place, Derrida stresses what he calls the 'power of consignation', not in the sense of depositing or consigning something, but in the sense of 'gathering together signs':

> Consignation aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner. The archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation, that is, of gathering together. (1995, p. 3)

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

Interestingly enough, this aspect of the archive implies that an archive should have a certain coherence, follow a certain taxonomy. Yet this suggested guideline to order and read the archive, is nonetheless not a call to complete it, as it should not dissociate (the user?) 'in an absolute manner'. The relatively thematic looseness of the archive must also leave room for a great deal of creativity in both its creation and its actualisation.

Derrida questions the limit of the archive's exteriorisation: if the archive, beginning with the print, is an externalisation of memory—a prosthetic memory in Freud's terms—where does it begin? The archive is never completely external, even if its exteriorisation is determinant: 'There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside' (Derrida, 1995, p. 11).

Most importantly, Derrida asks if the structure of the psychic apparatus, of the mind, of the unconscious as well as the conscious, and its relationship with memory and the perceived events or things, such as Freud had studied it, is different, better or worse represented, or influenced by the current techno-sciences of storage and reproduction (Derrida, 1995, p. 15).

In part, the answer is yes; not in the sense of a better or worse influence, but in the sense of a definitive change in what the archive produces. As a prosthesis of memory, the archive is not only the place of its storage of the past, but it is also a projection to the future, there is no doubt that the archive gives shape to its object of storage, with its different structures, its different techniques and technologies: 'The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media' (Derrida, 1995, p. 17). Derrida remarks that it is not so much that the archive determines what is conserved, 'but rather the very institution of the archivable event' (p. 18). Here again, it is possible to think about the archive as a construction of the future: one lives a present event according to how it is archived, and its meaning, its 'archivable meaning' is also structured, modified and determined by the archive's logic, characteristics and structures (p. 18).

In a certain way, and of course with a very different vocabulary, Derrida already foresees what is going to be theorised as the advent of the posthuman, that is to say, the emergence of a different subjectivity—different from the 'self-regulating subject of liberal humanism' (Hayles, 1999, p. 86)—that has co-emerged in her interaction with digital technologies:

> Neither of these hypotheses can be reduced to the other. Because if the upheavals in progress affected the very structures of the psychic apparatus, for example in their spatial architecture and in their economy of speed, in their processing of spacing and of temporalization, it would be a question no longer of simple continuous progress in representation, in the representative value of the model, but rather of an entirely different logic. (Derrida, 1995, p. 16)

Even more interestingly to Derrida, the archive has a hypomnesic sense; it is not just memory, an external and auxiliary memory, but it is creative: it implies reflection, comments in the margins and constant possibilities of modification—it works, in fact, as a notebook. Moreover, Freud's famous *Wunderblock* (the

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

'Mystic Writing Pad')[4] (Derrida, 1967; 1995) seems also valid in this case as, even when it is 'erased' on the surface, traces are left on deeper layers:

> I asked myself what is the moment proper to the archive, if there is such a thing, the instant of archivization strictly speaking, which is not, […], so-called live or spontaneous memory (*mneme* or *anamnesis*), but rather a certain hypomnesic and prosthetic experience of the technical substrate. Was it not at this very instant that, having written something or other on the screen, the letters remaining as if suspended and floating yet at the surface of a liquid element, I pushed a certain key to 'save' a text undamaged, in a hard and lasting way, to protect marks from being erased, so as thus to ensure salvation and indemnity, to stock, to accumulate, and, in what is at once the same thing and something else, to make the sentence thus available for printing and for reprinting, for reproduction? (Derrida, 1995, p. 22)

In this sense, the archive can only exist as an event, as a constant actualisation and modification, as a block of notes on which one can comment, contribute, alter and consult, but which is continuously modifying one's experience of it, and of its contents, as Derrida says, not only of its contents of past events, but also of the future. This is partly a risk, but also the main interest of an archive as event, of an archive that is, somehow, alive.

This is the power of the archive as a life-shaping force, thus its ethical valence becomes apparent, as it is further explained below.

Art, Extinction and the Construction of Counter-Apocalypses

Wolfe has recently addressed the topic of de-extinction and the archive—albeit with a different focus. He analyses an artistic project by Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson called *Trout Fishing in America and Other Stories* (2015), in which the bodies of California condors—a species that has been de-extinct and reintroduced to its original habitat—are the protagonists of the work[5], and are part of an archive. His focus in this analysis is on the archive as a 'stabilizing apparatus', as Derrida called it, on its legal

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[4] In the very short article 'A Note upon the "Mystic Writing Pad"' (1925), Freud compares the relationship between memory, perception, and the psychic apparatus with the Mystic Writing Pad, an ancestor of the more contemporary Magic Slate. In the article Freud states that prosthetic memory devices such as sheets of paper or slates either are emptied too soon, or are not permanent. This is not the way human memory, perception and the unconscious work, because they work in a more similar way to the *Wunderblock* (in German), or Mystic Writing Pad: 'It claims to be nothing more than a writing-tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand. But if it is examined more closely it will be found that its construction shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it. The Mystic Pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet, the top end of which is firmly secured to the slab while its bottom end rests upon it without being fixed to it. This transparent sheet is the more interesting part of the little device. It itself consists of two layers, which can be detached from each other except at their two ends. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin translucent waxed paper. When the apparatus is not in use, the lower surface of the waxed paper adheres lightly to the upper surface of the wax slab. If one wishes to destroy what has been written, all that is necessary is to raise the double covering-sheet from the wax slab by a light pull, starting from the free lower end. […]. The Mystic Pad is now clear of writing and ready to receive fresh notes. […] If we lift the entire covering-sheet–both the celluloid and the waxed paper–off the wax slab, the writing vanishes and, as I have already remarked, does not re-appear again. But it is easy to discover that the permanent trace of what was written is retained upon the wax slab itself and is legible in suitable lights. Thus the Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad: it solves the problem of combining the two functions by dividing them between two separate but interrelated component parts or systems. But this is precisely the way in which, according to the hypothesis which I mentioned just now, our mental apparatus performs its perceptual function' (Freud, 1925, p. 209–210).

[5] See: *Trout Fishing in America and Other stories* (n. d.). snæbjörnsdóttir / wilson. https://snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/projects/trout-fishing-in-america/trout-fishing-in-america-and-other-stories/ [accessed November 2023].

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

aspects which are inevitably linked to questions of power:

> What better way to mark this fact [that the archive is linked to questions of power], in these images, than the strange cohabitation, within the same frame, the same 'place', of these singular dead animal bodies, subject to the laws of chemistry, decay, rigor mortis, and the like—'ultra-natural' objects, in that sense, whose decay we try to control through technological means—and what Derrida has called the *machinalité* of any semiotic code whose epitome is, of course, mathematics, here represented by the 'anonymous' numbers that mark each bird's wing tag but only to become, in time, a kind of emotionally charged "proper name" for this particular creature—all of which redoubles and accumulates in the seriality of the photographic series itself. (Wolfe, 2018, p. 118)

And then to the question of *adestination*: for whom is the archive? For whom are we preserving the traces of the ones we are responsible for? (Wolfe, 2018, p. 120). This is our scene of responsibility, our ethical commitment to the radical passivity (that we share) of those who are not here anymore, namely, what we decide to do with their memory and remains.

Derrida also notes how the biblical commandment 'thou shalt not kill' seems not to apply to nonhuman animals (2011, p. 104-105), and 'does killing necessarily mean putting to death? Isn't it also "letting die"?' (Derrida, 2003, p. 108). Thus here, another fundamental question emerges, as Wolfe suggests: how do we decide which are the 'extraordinary animals' who deserve to be part of the archive, to be preserved, to be de-extinct, to have and create a future, and which do not? Which are the animals that we will 'let die', and which are the ones worth de-extinguishing?

What is our responsibility regarding the animals we breed on an industrial scale, as commodities, to feed on? Why do these deserve to be tortured, anonymised, forgotten? And the 'extraordinary' ones do not?

> [The] animals who are deemed 'killable but not murderable'—the animals that sustain these carrion feeders—and those who, like the condor, are 'rare,' 'threatened,' and 'protected,' with the full backing of scientific and political apparatuses. The archive, in other words, may record the 'official story' of body weight, reproductive rate, legal status, and so on, but it also actualizes something more, and in that other space, that other scene, we discover that the world is not given but made. We thus discover, in short, a scene of responsibility. (Wolfe, 2018, p. 120)

Thus, this 'scene of responsibility' is twofold. In the first place, there is the one that Wolfe proposes, namely, our responsibility related to the memory we are preserving of those who are no longer with us, of the killable animals, of the exceptional ones, like the California Condor, and of the living at large. In the second place, I would like to propose that the scene of responsibility is also related to the archive's agency, that is to say, to the archive as a life-creating apparatus because the archive produces its conditions of possibility, of reading, of the future, as explained above; in simpler words, it shapes (a part of) reality. So there is a responsibility also regarding which kinds of archives we are creating: what kind of future will they construct, at least partially? This question is fundamental to the issue of de-extinction: what kind of future will the seed banks, or the DNA of extinct species help form? And again, for whom?

I consider that an artistic project that analyses most of what was exposed above (with an ironic twist) is Axel Straschnoy's *The Permian Projects*, 2020.

The Permian period, which derives its name from the Russian city of Perm, spanned approximately 300 to 250 million years ago. This period concluded with the occurrence of

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

the largest mass extinction event ever recorded. Notably, up to 96% of marine species and 70% of terrestrial vertebrate species faced extinction. Additionally, this event stands as the sole documented mass extinction of insects. Owing to this historical association, the local Regional Museum of Natural History predominantly showcases Permian fossils.

The Permian Projects consists of two research projects: *The Permian Collection* and *The Dioramas from the Perm Regional Museum* that are the results of a residency program at the Perm Regional Museum in Russia, in which the artist was invited to participate in 2019.

Taking the Museum's natural history collection as a point of departure—a collection that ranges from paleontology, geology, botany, zoology, and entomology—Straschnoy's intervention reflects, and invites the viewer to do so too, on the *Permian Mass Extinction* and, more broadly, on the complex yet topical issue of the Anthropocene.

The *Dioramas from the Perm Regional Museum* consists in a series of lenticular, three-dimensional photographs showcasing some of the taxidermised animals of the Museum's collection, now in storage. Dioramas usually represent the animals in their natural habitats, most of which no longer exist because of extinction. As the dioramas were dismantled, different storage rooms and offices have now become the animals' natural biome.

The second project, *The Permian Collection,* was inspired by the extermination of live insects that the Perm Museum conducts twice a year to protect the already dead insects of its entomological collection. At Straschnoy's request, the Museum has now started collecting the insects it kills to protect its entomological collection and has created a new collection called the Perm Regional Museum's Insect Collection. These insects have been archived and catalogued like the other collections in the museum. Straschnoy has taken portraits of each of the insects producing a series of prints, and a book.

Despite focusing on nature, the museum fails to acknowledge the presence of living beings within its premises, some of which may contradict its mission.

As Yulia Glazryna, Head of the Natural History Department of the Perm Regional Museum, put it in her text for the book that accompanies the exhibition:

> I believe that this could also establish a global precedent: creating a new collection of insects without leaving the museum's building. Axel's idea of assembling the 'victims' of the museum's pest extermination program within the walls of the museum itself may seem somewhat odd and even questionable: is it really acceptable for 'surplus' insects to reside in the collection? But the idea also presents the museum with very important questions. For example, are we really aware of our 'neighbors' and, in a more general sense, is it possible for anything on this planet to be 'absolutely sterile' (with the exception of the Large Hadron Collider, of course)? Where does the museum set the boundary between life and death, and what does it value: insects as display items or insects as living things? And what does it mean to organize today's world within the conditions of an urban ecosystem?

> We are eternally grateful to Axel for challenging us to consider these issues, and in doing so to conceive of new doorways and paths for the future. (Glazryna, 2020, p. 12)

Conclusions

It is in a work like Straschnoy's that we can also clearly see the double logic of the *mal d'archive*, for which the very drive that spurred the museum's desire to maintain its impressive entomological collection is the same one that leads them to kill all other living insects in the museum.

The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research, 9th Issue (2024)
www.revistes.ub.edu/matter / ISSN: 2604-7551(1)

In a broader sense, and regarding de-extinction, would it be far-fetched to advance the idea that the same logic that caused the destruction of entire ecosystems (the one cited above, as explained by Dawson, in terms of capitalist extractionism) and which has caused the extinction of millions of species, is the same one that now wants to de-extinguish them all using archives (of seeds, of animal DNA and the like.)?

To conclude, I want to propose that one possible way of assuming the responsibility that this double 'scene of responsibility' implies is to consider the ethical valence of the trace: for Derrida, 'life protects itself by repetition, trace, *différance* (deferral)'; moreover, 'life must be thought of as trace before Being may be determined as presence' (Derrida, 1967, p. 254–255). In order to start building an ethics of the archive, it is necessary to recognise that what mobilises our actions and the archive's agency is an absence, *différance*, a recursive inscription whose sense is in constant revision and creation. As in the archive of the unconscious, what gives life and sense to the archive is something that is not there and has never been, pure *différance*. And, at the same time, this sense is actualised retroactively, recursively, it is in constant creation, undergoing revision, parts are erased (though not completely) and rewritten, others remain, however partially, exactly as in the *Wunderblock*. Therefore, the trace, an absence, points to a shared responsibility in front of the ones who are no longer here: to the ways of preserving their memory, and for whom. Moreover, part of this responsibility implies being aware of the instability and impermanence of memory in an archive that is somehow alive, an archive with a logic of its own.

And then, there is still the 'radical finitude' shared by all animals (Derrida, 2006), which at the beginning of this article was also called 'precarity' (Tsing, 2015; Zylinska, 2018)—a trait inevitably linked to the archive and *mal d'archive,* and one that goes beyond the simple forgetfulness of repression because it is based on the inevitability of death shared by all living beings: '*there would indeed be no archive desire without radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to a repression*' (Derrida, 1995, p. 19).

Because the desire to archive, to preserve is not only linked to the phenomenon of oblivion caused by repression, but is ultimately linked to vulnerability, to the precariousness of life which represents the awareness of the inevitability of death in which precisely oblivion will be total.

It is therefore also in this sense that I propose to rethink extinction and de-extinction through the framework of an ethics of the archive, as briefly put forward here, with the aim of contributing to relevant previous and ongoing efforts to build counter-apocalypses; namely, to be engaged in a critical work that, even though it is incapable of avoiding a situation of extinction, is at least able to take responsibility for the archives that will survive it.

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The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
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The Archive as a World-Making Apparatus in the Anthropocene
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Author information

Gabriela Galati (0000-0002-6126-9455)

e-mail: gabriela.galati@icloud.com

Dr. Gabriela Galati is professor of Theory and Methodology of Mass Media and Media Art Theory at NABA, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano and at IED, Turin, and of Aesthetics of New Media, Phenomenology of Contemporary Arts II and of Digital Cultures also in NABA. In the past she taught Research Methodology at the University of Buenos Aires, the University of the Argentine Social Museum and Media Art Theory at Domus Academy, Milan. She has published *Duchamp Meets Turing: Art, modernism, posthuman* (Postmedia Books, 2017), and (as Editor) the volume *Complex ecologies: Thinking art beyond the human* (Meltemi 2021). She writes reviews on art, philosophy, science and technology *for Leonardo Reviews / Leonardo Journal (*MIT Press), and regularly collaborates with *AdVersus*, Leonardo Journal, *Acoustic Space Journal* and *Mimesis Scenar*i with scientific publications. She edited for *Mimesis Scenari* the issues # 10 and # 11 dedicated to art and posthuman theory, and the first Italian translation of the book *The End of Man. A feminist counter-apocalypse* by media theorist Joanna Zylinska (Rogas edizioni 2021). Galati is co-founder and director of the contemporary art gallery IPERCUBO.