



Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression

Jacques Derrida , Eric Prenowitz (Translator)

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In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida deftly guides us through an extended meditation on remembrance, religion, time, and technology—fruitfully occasioned by a deconstructive analysis of the notion of archiving. Intrigued by the evocative relationship between technologies of inscription and psychic processes, Derrida offers for the first time a major statement on the pervasive impact of electronic media, particularly e-mail, which threaten to transform the entire public and private space of humanity. Plying this rich material with characteristic virtuosity, Derrida constructs a synergistic reading of archives and archiving, both provocative and compelling.

"Judaic mythos, Freudian psychoanalysis, and e-mail all get fused into another staggeringly dense, brilliant slab of scholarship and suggestion."—*The Guardian*

"[Derrida] convincingly argues that, although the archive is a public entity, it nevertheless is the repository of the private and personal, including even intimate details."—*Choice*

"Beautifully written and clear."—Jeremy Barris, *Philosophy in Review*

"Translator Prenowitz has managed valiantly to bring into English a difficult but inspiring text that relies on Greek, German, and their translations into French."—*Library Journal*

Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression Details

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Meghan Fidler says

Deeply interested in archives, I enjoyed Derrida's decomposition of the "archive" into a collection of objects which is at once complete and incomplete- to find things within the the archive, we resort to titles. Titles represent bodies of knowledge, but are not full works in themselves (like citations upon which scholarly texts are built). At any given time one can know a full text, or know the archive (through a condensed representation of titles.) Derrida uses this organizational principle to discuss history as a positivist truth or constructivist categories.

He then moves into the main argument on Freud, focusing on impressions as 1) marks upon paper, 2) influences upon oneself, and 3) influences upon many selves. He balanced this with Freud's basic human drives--the genetic force, if you will, which influences many selves for food and reproduction (unconscious), the influence of personal experience (subconscious), and the impression made in ones life (conscious).

While this was tantalizing, I have little interest in Freud's familial religious background, or the impressions he had on his daughter, and I subsequently became disinterested in the argument for the second half of the book.

Eric Phetteplace says

Derrida occupies a paradoxical position for me: I like his conclusions but dislike his language-intensive methods. Few things seem as interesting but ultimately useless as etymology, and he (predictably) begins this book with an etymology (or "deconstruction" if you must) of the word "archive." Repeated puns and word tricks abound, it all feels very circular, and Derrida makes a habit of pointing out the things he won't have time to address, will address elsewhere, has addressed elsewhere, such that the text feels like an empty shell pointing off in a thousand directions, a print version of Google. I'm sorry, but I just do not like his style, nor do I understand almost anything he says, which I would like to think is not for lack of trying. There are a few interesting sentences, and Derrida actually is a great writer, but he never gets around to saying anything.

Katie says

I would have given this text more stars, if not for the fact that I study historical fiction. The majority of Derrida's main ideas on the archive resemble concepts already discussed by those who have written on the historical genre, and who present and state these concepts more clearly, without references to Freud or using phallogocentric ideas and language.

Dave says

This is a dense but brilliant book. It's only 111 pages in my edition but you have to concentrate, as Derrida contemplates on archives, time, Judaism and Jewishness, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis... There's a lot of meat and potatoes in this book!

Madison says

Oh goodness guys, I probably really understood only one sentence out of every hundred in this book. Not only does Derrida expect to you already be well-versed in Freud, but he also expects you to be intimately familiar with his previous work. I am an expert in neither.

aleida moreno says

Derrida poses many good ideas about the archive. I had to read this for a class about archiving a "queer" past and it was, of course, seminal to the class discussion. However, as is expected for Derrida, it was such a challenge to get through, willing myself to sit down and process all of the information was incredibly difficult; at some points I was convinced I wasn't reading in English. The content becomes even more impressive when one think about the fact that this was a lecture.

Derrida was undoubtedly an amazing thinker of our time and I'm convinced that I absolutely must read more of his work, but maybe this time with a glass of wine.

Suzan Alteri says

Yup, that's right I finished the big D. Not nearly as much fun as Foucault, but still as rewarding when you realize you understood a whole sentence or two.

sologdin says

Lotsa preliminary outworks here, which is fitting, considering that this text concerns the significance of the *arche*.

Opening section with no subtitle

Arche—to commence and to order, an ontological principle and a nomological principle. *Archive* as derived from Greek *arkheion*, “initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded” and whereat “the official documents are filed,” giving the archons “hermeneutic right and competence.” We therefore see the commingling of an “archontic dimension of domiciliation” with an “archic, in truth patriarchic, function.” What follows? “a politics of the archive is our permanent orientation [...] there is no political power without control of the archive” (n. 1).

First subtitled section

The following section is an ‘exergue,’ which is described as “to cite before beginning is to give the key through the resonance of a few words,” “to prearchive a lexicon,” having “at once an institutive and a conservative function, as Benjamin has described the 'violence of power' in the ‘Critique of Violence,’” and which we might note bears some similarity to the agambenian state of exception. Two citations, i.e., “places of inscription,” here under analysis: printing and circumcision. There shall be no archive “without a place of

consignation [sic], without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.” Be advised that the “archive is hypomnesic.”

Lotsa Freud stuff here; am accordingly yawning. (However, he recovers with cool observations: “What does ‘exterior’ mean? Is a circumcision, for example, an exterior mark? Is it an archive?”) Apparently “the existence of the Devil can serve as an excuse for God, because exterior to him, anarchic angel and dissident, in rebellion against him, just as, and this is the polemical trait of analogy, the Jew can play the analogous role of relief or economic exoneration assigned to him by the world of the Aryan ideal.”

Not only is the archive “as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique” a place for conserving the past, but the “technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content.” Identifies an “archive drive” to combat the death drive—“no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of forgetfulness,” “no archive fever without the threat.” Regarding circumcision: “it leaves a trace of an incision right on the skin”: “the foliaceous stratification, the pellicular superimposition of these cutaneous marks seems to defy analysis.” Alrighty then!

Second subtitled section

The next section is a ‘preamble,’ which lays out the significance of the term *impression*: “what is the moment proper to the archive”? I.e., “the instant of archivization” is when he “pushed a certain key to ‘save’ a text undamaged” on the computer machine, “to protect marks from being erased, so as thus to ensure salvation and indemnity”? Three meanings here (with attention also, again, (why?) to circumcision): first, “the scriptural or typographic,” with lotsa freudian stuff (inclusive of commingling of *impression* with *repression* and *suppression* (invokes *refoulement* in French); second, “the open imprecision, the relative indetermination of such a notion,” “an unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema”; and third, as to ‘Freudian impression,’ “the impression left by him.”

Third subtitled section

Thereafter comes a ‘forward,’ which imagines a “general archivology, a word that does not exist but that could designate a general and interdisciplinary science of the archive.” This science is paralyzed by a “preliminary aporia” wherein psychoanalysis is included and which always already wants to be the general science of the archive, “of everything that can happen to the economy of memory and its substrates” but also simultaneously wherein it is placed “under the critical authority (in the Kantian sense) of psychoanalysis.”

More Freud stuff (though the main interlocutor is one Yerushalmi), ergo, in this section; cool note that “though human evolution is Darwinian via the genes, it is Lamarckian via language” (n. 5). No archives “without titles [sic] (thus without names and without the archontic principle of legitimization, without laws, without criteria for classification and of hierarchization, without order and without order in the double sense of the word).” (Again, regarding “the singular archive named ‘circumcision.’”)

Some indication that the archive in a sense delimits the future: “An incompleteness of the archive and thus a certain determinability of the future.” Lots more: including passages that evoke focauldian dissymmetry of vision, agambenian ‘survival,’ and so on. Plenty on spectres; more on Walter Benjamin. Notes that “repression is an archivization.”

The text presents quite a bit of meditation on Judaism, including the conclusion that “the most un-Jewish” is not “a lack of Judaism,” but rather “the nonbelief in the future—that is to say, in what constitutes Jewishness beyond all Judaism.”

We also find a parallel with Agamben’s third Homo Sacer text, insofar as the amnesty of the *stasis* is less a forgetting and more a declination to use a memory; here, by contrast: “is it possible that the antonym of

‘forgetting’ is not ‘remembering,’ but justice?” This of course summons other Derridean ruminations on ‘justice’ as found in “The Force of Law” and *Specters of Marx*, say. This text is pleased to solicit (Derridean term of art, recall) its author (who is “trembling before this sentence: ‘Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people’”).

Fourth subtitled section

Outworks done (which preliminaries constitute the vast majority of this text), the ‘theses’ follow: the point here seems to be a solicitation of the archive itself: “if Freud suffered from mal d’archive, if his case stems from a trouble de l’archive, he is not without his place, simultaneously, in the archive fever or disorder which we are experiencing today.” I.e., “nothing is more troubled and more troubling today than the concept archived in this word ‘archive.’”

Whatever do you mean, professor? With Freud, it is apparent, apparently, that “the psychic archive comes neither under *mneme* nor *anamnesis*.” Freud still wants to “maintain the primacy of live memory,” however. Similarly, though the archive is “made possible by the death, aggression, and destruction drive,” Freud nevertheless “claims not to believe in death.” (huh?) Further, though Freud illuminated “the archontic principle of the archive, which in itself presupposes not the originary *arkhe* but the nomological *arkhe* of the law, of institution, of domiciliation, of filiation,” he still as yet “repeated the patriarchal logic” therein. In-Sane!

And a concluding ‘postscript’ — I don’t even know what.

Recommended for those reliant upon mnemotechnical supplements, persons who always hold a problem for translation, and readers caught in the bottomless thickness of this inscription *en abyme*, in the instant of the archio-nomological event.

Lucas Sierra says

Mi primer baile con Jacques Derrida y creo no haberle pisado (excesivamente) los pies.

En el proceso de deconstruir el concepto de archivo (de archivo freudiano, del archivo del psicoanálisis, particularmente) entrega varios focos de análisis útiles por fuera del corpus de su propio ejercicio ensayístico:

- el ejercicio de poder tras el archivo y la figura del arconte como personalización de ese poder (y, por tanto, como válido intérprete, como agente autorizado).
- la idea del cuerpo como documento con registros, y, en cierta medida, como archivo.
- la tendencia constante a la destrucción del archivo, de donde deriva, por vía inversa, la necesidad archivística que da título al libro.
- el archivo como espacio del pasado pero en función de rememoración de un porvenir (esto acá me gustó mucho, no sólo por el juego de palabras).
- el espectro como habitante del archivo, y sean lo que sean las consecuencias de lo que eso significa.

Además de esos caminos, el ejercicio que hace en el *Prólogo* funciona como guía de uso, pues permite, analizando sus procedimientos, imitar el manejo de sus conceptualizaciones previas y aplicarlas, entonces, a nuestros fines propios (guardando las proporciones y el decoro*, por supuesto).

No es una lectura difícil, y a quien le interese el tema del archivo le prestará luces desde perspectivas bien

elaboradas.

*Al diablo el decoro. Las proporciones, sí, el decoro; ¡fuera del baile!

Ed Summers says

A lot of the reading I've been doing lately about archives has included a citation to this...especially some of the essays I really liked in *Controlling the Past*...which meant, of course, I *had* to read it.

It is a short book, so it's a quick read. I had some exposure to the technique of deconstruction back in my undergrad days, so I was passingly familiar with Derrida. But even with this background knowledge I must admit I had to let quite a bit of *Archive Fever* wash over me. The historical context for the writing was interesting, in that it was a lecture that Derrida gave at the Freud Museum in London. The topic was Freud's notion of the archive seen largely through the lens of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's book *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*. Yerushalmi was scheduled to be presenting at the same meeting, but couldn't attend due to illness. It is also seen through the lens of the translator Eric Prenowitz, since the original is in French.

I don't entirely know if it was intended, but the things I came away with from 10,000 feet up above (or should it be below) *Archive Fever* were:

1. The historic dimensions to the word *archive* are truly archaic: simultaneously bound up with the foundations of law while being very much about the present, or where things begin.
2. Freud had some thoughts about the archive and memory which he wrote up in his essay *The Mystic Writing Pad*, which is getting added to the ToRead pile.
3. The archive is as much (or more) about the future as it is the past. When an archive is collected it is done so very much in the hopes that it will get used in the future, if not the distant future then at least some short time from now.
4. The context of an archive is like an unraveling onion, which constantly reveals new dimensions as it is peeled back. Knowing where to draw the line when documenting the context of a collection seems to be terribly important if any practical work is going to get done.

Overall I'm glad I read *Archive Fever*, so when I run across a citation to it in the archivy canon I'll know (roughly) what it's about. But I'm not sure I learned much of practical interest here, that I didn't know already.

Gloria says

Appropriately, I forgot what I learned from this book.

Noora says

It is important to go into this piece recognizing that it is based off of a lecture and therefore is a little disjointed and also that it is a later work of Derrida's and relies on some of his earlier writings and ideas. If you don't have a background in his work, I would recommend reading some summaries online before delving into this piece (Art History Unstuffed is a great website for this). These points aside, this is a very intriguing book which uses Freudian thought to provide a status of the archive. Includes a very useful discussion of the impact technology has on the archive, along with many thoughts about the relationship between memory and the archive. Useful to go into this piece with a theme or question in mind as Derrida's writing is very circular and non-direct, making it easy to get lost and frustrated.

Paulina says

"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. No desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no *"mal-de"* can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, *en mal d'archive*. Now the principle of the internal division of the Freudian gesture, and thus of the Freudian concept of the archive, is that at the moment when psychoanalysis formalizes the conditions of archive fever and of the archive itself, it repeats the very thing it resists or which it makes its object. It raises the stakes."

Read this with Piazzolla's *Concierto Para Quinteto* and Rachmaninoff's *Piano concerto no.2 in C Minor* playing in the background; this text needs rhythm. Feverish and gorgeous.

Youze da Funk says

c'mon dude, level with me here—you wrote all them post-Yale, post-deconstruction books on the can right? Freud's foreskin? Damn man; make me a ladyboy necklace amirite?!?!

the old dogs of metaphysics of presence is tight, etymology too [watch for Arkhonz!!!?], always. but all this quasi-Hebraic theology belongs back on that acid planet with Deleuze and Guattari, year ZERO faciality flying from the Pharaoh, Shiiit. not that Yerushalmi got it wrong or nothing with Moses and Monotheism but that foreskin bible man. GodDAMM.

seriously tho, not bad, but better to get that classic shit—Writing and Difference, Of Grammatology, Dissemination... sheeeeeiiiiit even Ltd inc if y'all can stomach all dem ad hominem bombs lobbed Searleways.

Lobo says

Re-read po polsku. Jakim? cudem t?umaczenie jest mniej zrozumia?e, pewnie dlatego, ?e interpunkcja im le?y i mam ochot? wys?a? do Krytyki Politycznej kosz przecinkami, bo chyba im brakuje.
