

# ARCHIVE AS CATASTROPHE

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*Abstract:* This article proposes a radical take on what an archive should be: catastrophe, the overturning of property. By way of James Clifford, Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, Clarice Lispector, Jorge Luis Borges, and Cildo Meireles, we seek to pinpoint the conceptual difference between a collection and an archive, positing that what makes an archive radical is precisely the fact it is not a collection. A collection is concerned with the accumulation of property and the preservation of the status quo. It is an aspirational – or, to use Benjamin’s words, *bourgeois* – endeavor: it seeks to protect and preserve itself. An archive, on the other hand, is catastrophic: it should disturb – the archivist most of all. We understand archive here not as an institutional practice, but as an intellectual and artistic method. An archive asks of the archivist: What are you going to do with this? The archive asks the defining question of our capitalist age: why are you accumulating property?

*Keywords:* archive, arbitrariness, accumulation, property, teleology.

Where do archives begin? We could, for instance, begin by a language we are not speaking: Chinese. Having opinions on languages is a terribly amusing activity. Having opinions on languages equates to saying: “Grammatically, I would have done things differently”, which equates to thinking one’s opinion would have any sway on hundreds if not thousands of years of embodied history. Every time a foreigner starts offering me their opinion on the Chinese language, I scream and run away.

Here’s my opinion on the Chinese language: measure words (量词) are perfectly reasonable. By which I do not mean they are not arbitrary – they are reasonable because they are arbitrary, in the same way that gendered nouns and ornate conjugation and mindboggling declination are arbitrary in other languages. Measure words are

ISSN 2283-7949  
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION  
2021, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2021.2.5  
Published online by “Globus et Locus” at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



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reasonable because they are conceivable – I can understand their function even if I do not understand their logic.

A measure word is a word used to count nouns. In Chinese, a person and a sweet potato are both *ge* (个), while dogs and ears are *zhi* (只), pigs and elephants (but not horses) *tou* (头), rivers and streets *tiao* (条), tables and sheets of paper *zhang* (张), knives and umbrellas *ba* (把), coats and pieces of luggage *jian* (件), and so forth and so on (there are hundreds of these classifiers). If I squint really hard, I can perhaps see what some of these sets have in common, even if it will forever elude me why a person should share the same measure word with a sweet potato and not a dog. Foreign students learning Chinese will spend countless coffee breaks rallying against the randomness of it all, when their time could be better spend using *zhi* to refer to a random person on the street and seeing where this fruitful linguistic encounter would take them.

Measure words are the way the Chinese language archives itself. Not only do they add a valuable extra syllable to a sea of homophones, but they also categorize nouns according to certain relevant criteria. It is the apparent arbitrary nature of the criteria which stumps non-native speakers – but if arbitrariness were an insurmountable problem, we would never leave our beds for fear of what the day might bring.

We deal in the arbitrary. Economics and psychoanalysis have turned the arbitrary into disciplines. We archive ourselves arbitrarily. Which photos do we choose to keep in our cellphones – which ones do we delete? Which emails and messages do we archive, which ones do we mark as spam, which ones do we reply to? A poet friend of mine once told me he archives all our email conversations. “For posterity”, he explained, and I’ve had trouble writing to him since.

I often think of Roland Barthes buying tubes of paint based solely on their names (“*jaune indien, rouge persan, vert céladon*” (Barthes 1975: 133); “*jaune d’or, bleu lumière, vert brillant, pourpre, jaune soleil, rose carthame*” (Barthes 2002:80)). “The name,” writes Barthes, “is the promise of a pleasure, the program of an operation: there is always a certain future in complete names” (Barthes 1975:

133). What makes these colors beautiful and desired is uncertain – as uncertain as why both light and dark blue are grouped together in English (but not, for instance, in Russian, where they represent two distinct colors). It is not so much how these colors sound or look or the places they refer to, but rather the movement they set off, the thrill of a future praxis: “I am going to do something with it”.

A collection, then, is a promise, or at least a plan. A collection is aspirational. It is as much about what we keep as it is about what we don't. An empty plastic bottle we absent-mindedly throw in the trash can means: “I am not going to do something with it”. An old photograph of a loved one which we choose to keep means: “I am going to do something with it”, even if this thing is to remember. For millions of people in this planet, collecting empty plastic bottles is a means of survival. Collecting empty plastic bottles is aspirational in the same way that an art collection is aspirational: it is an attempt to make the world their own. A collection is a response to the arbitrary nature of existence – why does it befall to some to collect empty plastic bottles and to others to collect art? Both objects – say, Coca-Cola bottles and Ming-dynasty vases – fetch a going market rate contingent on supply and demand, the difference being the speed of their turnaround times: the bottle collector cannot weather the recession. The bottle collector aspires to move away from his collection, while the art collector aspires to keep his (or at least to transfer it to a museum wing with – preferably – his name on it).

Writing about the history of collections, James Clifford speaks of “appropriation” in its Latin acceptance of “property” – to make one's own by way of an uneven system of value: “This system finds intrinsic interest and beauty in objects from a past time, and it assumes that collecting everyday objects from ancient (preferably vanished) civilizations will be more rewarding than collecting, for example, decorated thermoses from modern China or customized T-shirts from Oceania” (Clifford 1988: 222). A Coke bottle is not traditionally collectible unless it bears an inscription. Time is an inscription, and thus old, discontinued Coke bottles can be collected not for

resale, not for survival, but for the sake of property (it is upon entering the realm of property that the word “old” is transmuted into “vintage”).

An inscription is also an inscription, and therefore the Coke bottles stenciled by Cildo Meireles in his 1970’s seminal piece *Insertion into Ideological Circuits* can also be collected for the sake of property. What was once an indictment of Brazilian civilian-military brutality (some of the stenciled bottles provide detailed instructions on how to turn them into Molotov cocktails) is placed, when collected, “on a shelf or a in special box” (Clifford 1988: 219) which appropriately highlight what they have become: propriety. They have been appropriated.

“I am going to do something with it”. Perhaps, then, a collection says something else. Perhaps a collection says: “Someone else has done something with it”. The art collector and the collector of bottles both say: “I am safekeeping it”. But time is only on the former’s side. Time is an inscription for which only few can afford to wait. Survival cannot afford the temporality of vintage.

An inscription is a form of accumulation. Property is cumulative but its inscriptive power is weak. Property describes – “this is mine” – but it doesn’t inscribe. It doesn’t add layers; it removes them. “Mine”. It erases all traces (Brecht, Benjamin, Goffman). It hides and then forgets something has been hidden. It suffers from amnesia. It plays dumb. It maintains. It avoids, at all costs, catastrophe – “the disturbance of one system by another”, as Barthes puts it. To inscribe is to welcome catastrophe; it is to leave something behind (which Barthes would call “desire”): “the other is inscribed, he inscribes himself within the text, he leaves there his (multiple) traces” (Barthes 1978: 79).

If a collection is aspirational, then an archive is catastrophic. An archive disturbs – the archivist most of all. An archive is neither survival nor appropriation: it is obsession. An archive asks: “What am I to do with this?”. It asks the very question (swept under the rug by property) of why am I accumulating this material? Why am I uploading these photos to the cloud? Why am I holding on to

these old work emails? Why am I transcribing passages from books written by mostly dead (and, shamefully, male) authors?

The archive and the archivist are to be understood here as polysemous terms: slippery notions which resist being catalogued, and in this resistance lies their conceptual value. Informally speaking, the words “collection” and “archive” are often used interchangeably, much like the words “jealousy” and “envy” – when in fact there is a fundamental difference between them: “collection” and “jealousy” are defensive (they seek to protect the status quo; they fear all which can ruin its stability), while “archive” and “envy” are offensive (they desire a lack, and, as such, are instable – or, shall we say, catastrophic). “Collection” and “jealousy” require a third party to operate (the collector, the collection, and the status quo; the jealous subject, the partner, and the partner’s object of desire), while “archive” and “envy” require only two: the archivist and her lack. The desire, in the case of the archivist, becomes self-destructive: it does not affirm itself as something to be protected (catalogued, appropriated), but as an impulse (envious, perhaps) towards something you wish you had.

Barthes died before he could turn his *Preparation of the Novel* into a proper book, and that is probably for the best, ironically enough, as perhaps the internet (and streaming services) would have made him revise the question (or the *fantasme*) that seemed to propel his courses at the Collège de France: is our world to become one in which fiction plays a progressively smaller role and readers of fiction fewer and farther between? *The Preparation of the Novel* is a massive, obsessive archive of Barthes’ own infatuation with fiction and his struggle – desire, disgust – with writing a novel of his own. “Attention,” he warns us from the very beginning, “the great writer, like Dante, is not someone to whom one can compare oneself [...], but whom one can, and wants to, more or less partially, identify with” (Barthes 1980: 157-158).

To identify with someone (be it Dante or a sweet potato) is to ready oneself for inscription – Dante inscribes something within each of us who desire him, who lack him, who archive him. And

yet, Dante does not belong to us. His presence is catastrophic: it disturbs Barthes' own system in the same way that Barthes' disturbs mine. I don't collect Barthes as much as I archive him. This text here is, if nothing else, proof of me being disturbed by (and perhaps even envious of) him. Catastrophe cares not for what it disturbs. It prevents reification: the vintage Coke bottle firmly placed on a shelf, in a box, waiting to be over (*kata*) turned (*strophē*). In the parlance of Greek theater, catastrophe means climax, release. An archive, in other words, is an obsession in search for release.

The archive, then, as catastrophe. The work of Jorge Luis Borges is fraught with overturned archives, disturbing notions of authorship (which is another form of property), obsessive typifications. In *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins* (1937), Borges turns an encyclopedia upside down by proposing a different set of arbitrary taxonomy:

these ambiguities, redundances, and deficiencies recall those attributed by Dr. Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge. On those remote pages it is written that animals are divided into *a*) those that belong to the Emperor, *b*) embalmed ones, *c*) those that are trained, *d*) suckling pigs, *e*) mermaids, *f*) fabulous ones, *g*) stray dogs, *h*) those that are included in this classification, *i*) those that tremble as if they were mad, *j*) innumerable ones, *k*) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, *l*) others, *m*) those that have just broken a flower vase, *n*) those that resemble flies from a distance (Borges 1993: 103).

It is not that the taxonomy he is mocking in his text is any less arbitrary than the one supposedly advanced by Dr. Franz Kuhn – it is just that the one we are most used to – *a*) domain, *b*) kingdom, *c*) phylum, *d*) class, *e*) order, *f*) family, *g*) genus, *h*) species – has come to seem logical to us, even if we'd be hard pressed to explain what is the difference between domain and kingdom, or what a phylum may be. Borges is the master of a radical kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, one which, instead of positing that the opposite scenario would lead to absurdity, posits that it is rather this scenario,

our reality, which is mired in contradiction. In his 1939 essay *The Total Library*, a precursor to his celebrated *The Library of Babel* (1941), Borges dives further into this idea by imagining a universal library organized by “chance” (“*al azar*”). In its infinite shelves would lay all thinkable and unthinkable human knowledge, and the one device that would connect all these books together – the method behind the library, so to speak – is randomness: “I have tried to rescue from oblivion a subaltern horror: the vast, contradictory Library, whose vertical wildernesses of books run the incessant risk of changing into others that affirm, deny, and confuse everything like a delirious god” (Borges 2001: 216). Borges’ obsession with archives (see also *The Aleph*), untenable from an institutional point of view – and here I once again remind the reader I am not concerned with institutional archives –, reveals the arbitrariness of convention in ways that are inventive, thought-provoking, and humorous – three attributes not commonly shared by foreigners offering opinions on the Chinese language.

An archive, then, should exist beyond convention. A collection affirms (it believes in completion), but an archive affirms, denies, and confuses. As such, an archive is a method, and all method, as both Borges and Barthes would say via Mallarmé, is a fiction (Barthes 1979: 14). The distinction I am establishing between a collection and an archive is also a fiction – but how unsufferable wouldn’t our lives be without a touch of the arbitrary dressed in the *haute-couture* of narrative.

Walter Benjamin opens his beautiful *Unpacking my Library* by noting how arbitrary it is to collect at all, to own these but not those books, to grow attached to them and the memories they evoke: “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories. [...] For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?” (Benjamin 1986: 60). The juvenile, almost carefree tone of Benjamin’s text masks – the *haute-couture* of narrative – the obsessive nature of his relationship with books. This is a man who kept track of the 1712 books he read

throughout his adult life (Benjamin 1989: 476). Some he deliberately sought after – Balzac’s *La Peau de chagrin*, for example, as retold in *Unpacking my Library* –, while others fell on his lap in the way that serendipity has of freeing us from fate.

Arbitrariness scares us children of the Enlightenment. We wish to believe in final causes, in the redemption of completion, in a cause which perfectly lines up with a purpose (hence the horde of students who now flock to degrees in Data Science – the overlap between study and profession appears seamless). A collection – if narrow enough – can be completed, since (Barthes, again) the “equilibrium of a semiological system comes from the arbitrariness of its signs” (Barthes 1972: 133). A collection can be completed provided we arbitrarily estipulate its limits: Coke bottles produced in Brazil in 1970, stenciled or otherwise. An archive, on the other hand, cannot be completed unless it archives itself, which immediately triggers the opening of a new archive – and so forth and so on until meta-language do us part.

An archive is catastrophic, an archive overwhelms. “What am I to do with it?”. In his essay, Benjamin speaks of a possession that is not utilitarian but “tactical” (Benjamin 1986: 63): collectors strike when the moment is right. We should note here that Benjamin is speaking of collections, not archives, and while these two modes of organization may be propelled by a similar obsessive behavior, only an archive overwhelms – only the archive, as it is being posited here, brings into question the very idea of possession: why am I keeping these Coke bottles on a shelf? Why am I going into the wild to observe birds and then writing down which ones I have seen? Why am I keeping my clipped nails in test tubes labeled with the corresponding dates of their clipping? Why am I keeping track of my steps and climbed floors? Why am I hording this catastrophic material that will die with me, that will lose its meaning the moment I lose mine? Benjamin again (and how I wish he had used the word “archive” here instead): “the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner” (Benjamin 1986: 67). Why are these things speaking to me? What am I to do with it?



Jacques Derrida would remind us that the word “archive” (Arkḥē) “names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*”. An archive both inscribes a beginning and speaks the law, a catastrophic law, to be sure, as it marks “the passage from the private to the public” (Derrida 1998: 1-2), which is necessarily catastrophic. This passage produces a *bouleversement* (again: an over [*kata*] turning [*strophe*]) of our own systems. This is why I no longer reply to my poet friend’s emails, or only reply tersely: I resent and avoid the inscription, my words to him are not yet ready for publication. These emails are not part of my archive, I am not obsessed with them, I do not desire them. To desire something, in catastrophic fashion, is to let go. Catastrophe is the release of obsession, the climax of tragedy, the *bouleversement* of property. Property mediates the passage from private to public, but an archive can only belong to its owner, it cannot belong to anyone else (in the same way a collection can – any library, museum, or university will attest to that). Like a faithful dog, the archive lives and dies by its owner. The moment of publication is the moment of catastrophe: I make my archive public and, in doing so – copyright notwithstanding –, relinquish its property. Inscribed in the public sphere, the archive is no longer an archive but a thing, a system made up of arbitrary signs, an object glued together by a fictional methodology.

An archive dies either way: either because its owner died, or because it was made public. Clarice Lispector famously reiterated that, once published, her books were dead to her (Lispector 1977). When an archive is forced to remain alive, like a terminal patient on life support, it becomes a collection – special shelves and glass boxes in lieu of tubes and oxygen. An archive overturns. Perhaps these are its non-utilitarian tactics: it disturbs both the private and the public, the self and the institution. It defies – even if for a second – property and logic. There is a second of institutional panic with each book published, movie released, song composed, game designed: how shall it be catalogued? There is a delicious – climactic, catastrophic – second of panic – is it a memoir or an

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2021, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2021.2.5

Published online by “Globus et Locus” at <https://glocalismjournal.org>



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autobiography? an RPG or a roguelike? – which is immediately quashed (the sound of the archive dying) by a competent public servant filing it away under its proper taxonomy. There is a delicious second of catastrophe before appropriation. The climax of tragedy is short-lived.

Clifford, again: “To tell these other stories, local histories of cultural survival and emergence” – in other words: to inscribe – “we need to resist deep-seated habits of mind and systems of authenticity” (Clifford 1988: 246). That resistance is catastrophe: the negotiation between the private and the public, the questioning of deep-seated taxonomies – for what is a taxonomy if not a system of authenticity we publicly swear by.

An archive remembers so that the archivist can forget. The very image of the collector of bottles – their presence, their lot – could stop this text dead in its tracks. How does one come to terms with it – how does one propose one kind of catastrophe in the face of another? Does this archive, turned into a text, help the cause of the collector of bottles? But also, by the same token, does its absence? Here I must bow to Foucault: the collector of bottles does not need my edification – the collector of bottles does the best that can be done in an unfair system, and their embodied experience of this system cannot be compared to the archivist’s obsession for it. The archivist, then – “the intellectual,” says Foucault –, is the person “who is plugged in to the information network, not the production network. He can make his voice heard. He can write in the newspapers, give his point of view. [...] His role is therefore not to shape a working-class consciousness, as that consciousness already exists, but to allow that consciousness, that working class knowledge, to enter the information system” (Macey 1993: 317). An archive remembers so that the archivist can be forgotten. Posteriority is a trap; it is the inscription in the public consciousness that counts, the entrance in the information system. “This is called remembering,” writes Susan Sontag, “but in fact it is a good deal more than that” (Sontag 2003: 68).

An archivist must let go – of themselves most of all. A tall order: to tame an obsessive ego. An archivist is an impossible figure: they must be narcissistic enough to become infatuated with their own worldview, and radical enough to – when catastrophe comes – let go of property and ego and their own provisional taxonomy. When faced with institutionalization, the archivist screams and runs away. They can now forget and be forgotten and obsess about something else.

But how does one forget or is forgotten? How does one kill an archive or an obsession? How does one kill desire? Well, if Lispector is to be believed, by making it public, by relinquishing property. The archivist kills desire by inscribing. To inscribe is to say: “I do not wish this archive anymore”. To inscribe is to celebrate the effacement of oneself, even if – especially if – one is inscribing in the first person. To inscribe is to overturn oneself: “here is what I have seen, now please take my eyes away from me”. “Writing makes knowledge festive,” writes Barthes (1977: 7). What writing is celebrating is the passage of time, the dissolution of permanence. The archivist can help with the cake and the decorations, but this party is not for them.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article derives from a class co-taught with my colleague, Dr. Stephanie Anderson, in the spring of 2021. I am indebted to her for the conversations we had on and around the topic of archives and collections.

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ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

2021, 2, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2021.2.5

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