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Sémiotiques de l'archive

Introduction

Semiotics of the archive

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Cet article est une traduction de :

Introduction [fr]

Texte intégral

- 1 This issue of *Signata* aims to address the question of the archive from a semiotic and semio-pragmatic perspective. By “semiotics”, we do not mean a single discipline, but rather a plurality of approaches by which to question meaning, forms, and values within the historical, sociological, philosophical, linguistic, media, and artistic disciplines. The aim of this issue is thus the constitution of a cartography that embraces the different approaches that, in the archival field, can elicit reflections pertaining to meaning.
- 2 Between the time when the word “archive” evoked a “dusty past” (*passé poussiéreux*; Chabin, 1996) and the onset of the era of the “all-archive” (Hoog, 2009), a shift seems to have occurred in our approach to the past. At some point between the two eras, the digital transformation of society had come to impose itself in a shattering way. Now a subject of study in all human and social sciences, the archive is currently at the heart of our daily activities and institutional practices. “Save” and “record” are terms that we use every day in our dealings with digital technologies. “Memory” (be it collective memory or digital memory), “data”, “traces”, and “heritage”: such are the key words of our present. Today, we say “archive” rather than “erase”, erasure having even become, for our digital devices, more complicated than archiving, at least as far as the logic of computing is concerned (Manovich, 2001; Hoog, 2009; Fickers, 2012 and 2013). Indeed, in this digital age, we are living in a “recording society” (Ferraris, 2013): any

digital production will be automatically archived (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009), and many of our daily practices are traceable in the form of digital data (Merzeau, 2009).

3 If the role of digital culture seems obvious, it is all the more clear that the latter only gives new vigour to a trend which has been in place for several decades already. According to Pierre Nora, “the whole of society lives in the conservative religion and in archival productivism” (Nora ed., 1984). The massive digitization of originally non-digital archives and documents has directed the attention of society and of scholars towards institutional and academic practices that aim to make accessible data that was once condemned to be consulted in a less efficient manner (Jeanneret, 2014). Digitization thus seems to concretize an orientation already underway since the era of technical reproducibility: the physical proliferation of reproductions across a multitude of media. Archiving is certainly an imperative of “digital culture” (Doueihi, 2008): technically, in the digital environment, any live broadcast involves the downloading of a saved file, as opposed to what occurs in the analog environment (thus Charles de Gaulle’s June 18 appeal was broadcast but not recorded; in analog media, one broadcasts and only then records), which proves the importance of the notion of archiving in the world of digital media (Ernst, 2013). Nevertheless, the onset of the age of the all-archive had already made inroads at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the era of technical reproducibility ensured the accessibility and potential impact of any cultural production (Davallon, 2006; Heinich, 2009). Thus, what seems to be at the heart of the technical developments that accompanied the emergence of digital technology and that renewed the patrimonial trends of society is undoubtedly not conservation, but rather the transmissibility of contents—recording being rather a means to achieve this, as one preserves in order to be able to transmit what one would otherwise risk losing. The dimension of conservation is consubstantial with transmission in the very definition of heritage (Treleani, 2017). Preservation is moreover subject to the uncertainty linked to the durability of new storage media: digital media, which is one of the least durable media from a technical standpoint (the demagnetization of hard disks entailing a potential loss of data within the span of a few years), allows nevertheless for more efficient accessibility.

4 The practices of digitization are thus forms of technical reproduction, and as such, they aim at accessibility on the one hand and involve re-editorialization on the other (Badir and Baetens eds., 2004). In other words, they feed a dynamic of repetition and differentiation, of revival and renewal of what is called “content” and how it circulates among other contents (Treleani, 2014; Stockinger, 2015; Colas-Blaise and Tore eds., 2021). One of the *raison d’être* of the (trans)discipline called the “Digital Humanities” (Mounier, 2010), for example, seems to be based as much on the resources of the available documents as on the digital computations and visualizations they may be subjected to. A certain number of visualizations aim to present themselves as real analyses of archived collections, images, and films, thereby producing new cultural objects (see the case of Lev Manovich’s *Media Visualization: Manovich, 2001, 2015 and 2020; Dondero, 2020*).

5 Faced with such issues, a semiotic approach can be enlightening. Studying the archive involves approaching a field with multiple materialities and practices (devices and interfaces, formatting and reading practices, visualizations and referencing) and with stabilizing procedures and values (conservation and collection on the one hand, attachment to the “original” and to “heritage”, on the other). The archive is based on a paradoxical semiology (a “mythology”): preservation and access. Preserving and making accessible is always redefining, rethinking, and remaking. Each operation inherent to it is indeed a re-semiotization: selection and valorization on the one hand, re-framing and re-editorialization on the other, that is to say, inter-semiotic translation, re-mediation,

and re-enunciation (Day, 2014; Colas-Blaise and Tore eds., 2021). We may simply think of the recent and insufficiently questioned cult of the restored and patrimonialized film, “finally” made accessible in its “best version”, which is often called a “director’s cut”—the latter being actually a “myth” (Marie and Thomas eds., 2008), the version supposedly found and restored being in fact a new version of the film.

6 Semiotics, a discipline traditionally used namely for studying the field of media, is strongly concerned with the link established between the accessibility of documents and their handling by a particular medium. The mediatization of archives is indeed “re-enunciation”. It can also be approached from the perspective of its semiotic performativity: archiving consists less in observing what has been than in generating what one wishes to do. It even involves discarding at least as much as it does preserving, because to select is *ipso facto* to lose what one has filtered out (Landwehr, 2016). The question thus arises as to what are the conditions of felicity of such performativity? And what are the enunciative pragmatics on which archiving depends?

7 Moreover, if we conceive of the digital archive as forming a particular link between materiality and temporality, two other questions of great interest to current semiotics emerge. First, regarding materiality (the “substances of expression” in structural semiotics): how can we relevantly and rigorously link material devices with signifying writings? Secondly, regarding temporality (“diachrony”): how can we triangulate devices, forms, and temporalities? But also: what kind of requirements does such a triangulation involve? Are they epistemic, deontological or even political, or rather a complex entanglement of all of these?

8 In any case, it seems that the most useful concepts for describing the requirements of the archive and of archiving practices are “reliability” (cf. philological necessity: Rastier, 2013) and “authenticity” (cf. putting digitization into question: Bachimont, 2017; Fickers 2020). No doubt, we could, more profoundly, also add “persuasiveness”: should archiving not be accompanied by a meta-narrative allowing us to believe in its own propriety? And should we not go even further, by noting the “power” and the “duty” of the archive, namely its fundamentally political and ethical scope (Foucault, 1969; Farge, 1989; Derrida, 1995)? In any case, one cannot raise the issue of the uses of archives without raising the issue of the practice represented by archival constitution. And this is a situation complicated by digital technology, once again, because, in the digital environment, doing is already archiving.

“Concepts and criticisms”

9 The first section of the dossier establishes conceptual benchmarks that make it possible to grasp the issues pertaining to archives from a semiotic point of view. The “meaning of archives” is then approached from a phenomenological and linguistic perspective. Modifying Pomian’s neologism, *semiophore*, Bruno Bachimont analyzes the role of heritage objects as *mnemophores*, carriers of memory. Material evidence, works, and information, according to Bachimont, are objects that enable a relation to the past, and which participate in different forms of institution of meaning. Now, at the moment a reference to the past is made through the consultation of a mnemophore, a phenomenological tension arises between the adherence to the past such as it is presented by the object and the influence of the subject’s subjectivity, which entails anachronism. But it is historical empathy that should be privileged and psychological anachronism avoided. Now, traditionally, such empathy rested upon a critical distance which served as the bedrock of the three pillars of archival science’s deontology: integrity, authenticity, and reliability. According to Bachimont, this memorial

functioning has been destabilized by the digitalization of mnemophores. Digital technology calls authenticity into question because its capabilities in terms of technical reproduction lead to a questioning of the material integrity of the mnemophore's medium and at the same time to an abolition of the critical distance by immersive devices that claim to offer a first-person memorial experience. These challenges are ultimately issues inherent to documentary memory and to historical consciousness. However, digital technology reconfigures them in an unprecedented way. Ultimately, Bachimont proves that the digital age is simply casting a new light on the archival discipline and to the challenges traditionally raised by archives.

10 More generally, one might ask: from the perspective of ordinary language, what is an “archive”? Marie-Anne Chabin examines the meaning of the word and its different uses over time. She also analyzes the role of the word “archiving”, which designates the practice that leads to the production of archives and which therefore constitutes a prerequisite. Thus, she creates a cartography of meanings, noting the presence of a plethora of media, domains, and contents that are called archives without there being a true common denominator between their characteristics. In the end, the only thing that these elements seem to have in common is the relationship they have with the person who deals with them: an archive is what is considered to be an archive, with the intention of making it a piece of memory, a reference for an action, etc. Gradually, there has been a transition from a strict meaning of the term “archive”, used to designate objects and archived administrative documents, towards a dynamic sense by virtue of which what serves as an archive is that which we preserve in view of a specific purpose. Chabin thus notes the progressive tendency to prefer the term “archiving” to “archive”, which designates the activity that makes objects into archives.

11 The section “Concepts and criticisms” concludes with Laurent Le Forestier's contribution, which presents a set of “reflections on the history of the concept of film editing in the era of digital archives”. Cinema is taken to be the field in which the discipline of history, the practice of archives, and semiotic questioning intersect. The object of study is film editing and montage: an object that is thought and defined in a manner which varies according to the historical corpus. Le Forestier thus points to the methodological problem of not only dealing with a set of technical phenomena (editing practices), which are linked to a historical concept (what is meant by “editing”), but of studying these phenomena through digitized historical documents, where such a link is overall inaccessible. Because digital archives, Le Forestier explains, are in any case partial and biased: they neglect important aspects when one wants to understand historical links and adopt perspectives that are not those of a conceptual history.

“Performances of the archive”

12 Masson and Olesen note the gap, in the access to audiovisual databases, between the means of such access, which are mainly textual, and the contents, which belong to a domain that is often difficult to convert exclusively into verbal language. They propose the use of a technique to overcome the aporia of verbal access to audiovisual contents: “sampling”. Their contribution presents an experimentation using this method: *The Sensory Moving Image Archive* (SEMIA). This project allows the user to explore a database through the characteristics of visual objects, rather than searching for elements through existing labels and categorizations. The interface thus makes it possible to visualize relationships between discrete objects (i.e. fragments of audiovisual content) based on their common visual characteristics. This makes it possible to show links with other contents having similar or highly different characteristics. The text aims

to evaluate the consequences of this reconstitution of the archive through the use of visual descriptors that renew the way objects and archives acquire meaning. Such transformations change the conditions of meaning of objects not only because of their “sampling”, but also because visual analysis reorients the framework of meaning-making along a sensory rather than linguistic axis. The authors then rely on the notion of serendipity as a mode of exploration of digitized databases.

13 D’Armenio’s text also addresses the media component of objects and discusses how to enhance the diversification of formats of visual and audiovisual productions through computerized analyses of archived corpora. To achieve this objective, the author carries out a review of Benveniste’s theory of enunciation while referring to the proposals of theorists of the relationship between language and technique such as Leroi-Gourhan and Latour. Thus, D’Armenio raises important methodological considerations regarding the materials and substances of languages from the point of view of their formation and stabilization in statements. But the author does not limit himself to analyzing the substances of languages (a question which semiotics has long neglected): he also takes into consideration the processes of abstraction and virtualization operated by the digitalization of documents. He thus sets out to contrast *media formats* and *digital formats*. The former integrates, through utterances, the tools, spatio-temporal frameworks, and practices of production, whereas the latter qualify the necessary mediation between the physical devices of production, the encoding, and the discursive dimension of the documents. In this work on the formats of the objects, a very fine analysis is accomplished on the stratified temporalities of audiovisual documents which integrate archived excerpts.

14 Julien Thiburce and Biagio Ursi’s paper deals with the exploitation and exploration practices of spoken French language databases. In particular, they tackle the case of the CLAPI database (Corpus de Langue Parlée en Interaction), which represents the resource of reference for research in interactional linguistics. The authors analyze the path extending from the recording of ordinary and professional situations (work meetings in different settings, interactions in places of business, guided tours, meals with family and friends, medical consultations, private and professional phone calls) to their implementation and exploitation as data in digital environments, including their appropriation in natural situations. Thiburce and Ursi also consider the redefinition and reframing of this linguistic material in the CLAPI-FLE didactic application, created to meet the demands and needs of both FLE teachers and learners, which implies not only a disciplinary crossing, from interactional linguistics to language didactics, but also the formation of a bridge between the field of scientific research and educational practices. The corpora that are made available are syncretic: the recorded interactions are available alongside their transcriptions (which also take into consideration the hesitations, pauses, and bodily gestures of the participants); each corpus is presented through a freeze frame, so that learners can picture the environment of the documented interaction in relation to the future environments of their daily experiences.

“Institutions and gestures of the archive”

15 Marie Després-Lonnet and Maryse Rizza analyze the role of curatorial files in the legitimization process of the museum institution. In particular, the article presents the results of an ethnographic survey conducted at the Musée d’Orsay. Curatorial files are the documents that accompany artistic productions in fine arts museums: they are the

“places” where the documents produced by various departments are materially gathered. The file is thus both a place of “documentary convergence” and a “source of information”. As a result, it is the vehicle for the power struggles that are “played out between the authorities commanded by various parties over the knowledge collected and produced”. The analysis of these objects and of the professional practices in the course of which they are mobilized allows us to see how the musealization and the patrimonialization of works are carried out. Després-Lonnet and Rizza take a close look at the materiality of knowledge practices and analyze how the digitization of these documents can influence them.

16 Andrés Manuel Cárceres Barbosa and Cristina Voto present another example of an archival institution: the Centro Editor de América Latina, which is managed by the National Library of the Argentine Republic. On the one hand, the former is a publisher whose history is inseparable from the political changes of the country (dictatorships and neoliberal shift)—constituting an exemplary case of publishing in Latin America. On the other hand, the National Library, through its initiatives and programs, through its choices and actions in favour of upholding the memory of the Centro Editor, is at the source of a true instance of re-enunciation of the latter’s materials. Not only the documents that remain but also those that have disappeared are made significant. Beyond the informative dimension of such documentation, however worthwhile it may be, it also has a more profoundly theoretical and political dimension (what is it to know and actively share the work of the Centro Editor today?) We can thus clearly see that taking institutions and archival gestures for case studies, however committed they may be to the material vicissitudes of history, has a veritable epistemological scope.

17 Claire Scopsi proposes a reading grid to apprehend a new object that has appeared thanks to the Web and to digital devices: memory collections. These are composite documents, grassroots productions, whose authors are essentially ordinary users rather than institutions. These objects include digital or digitized and editorialized archives relating a fact of the past. Thus, memory collections consist of a psychic dimension, as they are the memory of “something”, assume a documentary dimension, as they are inscribed on a medium that archives them, and possess a narrative dimension, as they tell about the past. They take the form of websites or blogs where archives are editorialized and structured. The website *Histoires de Ch’tis*, where documents and testimonies of life in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais miners’ area are collected, and the blog *Mémoire des poilus de la Vienne*, which commemorates the First World War with the aim of honoring the *poilus de la Vienne*, are examples of this. Claire Scopsi thus highlights these non-institutional, spontaneous documentary productions, but which could be institutionalized by national collections.

“Experience of the archive”

18 The last section of this issue consists of an article that focuses on the outline of a phenomenology of the experience of archives, caught in its shift “from dust to blue light,” as stated in the title. Caroline Muller and Frédéric Clavert propose an update and revival of Arlette Farge’s study, *Le Goût de l’archive*—a key study of what was done in archives a few decades ago. The authors summarize here a collective research that aims to break down what we now do with archives: how we go about it and invest ourselves in them, respectively through “emotions” (to first open up to the archives), through “narratives” (of the practice of archives), and through “gestures” (that construct the archives). The importance of such a phenomenology is, in a way, put forward as a methodological defense against the mechanisms of search engines and algorithms that,

over the course of a few years, have become the daily reality of archives.

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