

Essays

The Spectre (of Knowledge)

The Recordings of the
Cosmopolitan

Shaheen Merali

Recently a couple of friends commented on the use of titles in my essays, which they felt remained specific, if not distinct. I thanked them for their observation. Titles are similar to book covers – like portals that lead to and reveal the destination. A good title is like a short précis, suggesting the subject matter and, more importantly, its emphasis. Titles remain creatively significant as they help foreshorten the vast territory of an essay or a work of fiction. Like a poetic sketch, a good title can create the necessary liminal space whereon and wherein one starts to explain ideas, concepts and notions that remain implicit in the text.

It took a long time to arrive at the particular choice of words for the title of this essay, *The Spectre (of Knowledge)*, as it needed to aspire both to the artistic as well as the informative objective of the

text. In thinking about the title, I wondered how to give the listener and the reader a lyrical, as well as speculative, introduction to the importance of the topic. In contemplation, one word kept recurring: the spectre. Initially, the word suggested that which appears and can easily be forgotten, or that which appears and remains with us for a longer while but does not necessarily remain visible. It was this notion of the spectre that led me to start thinking about the archive as a post-event – a return – but in a different guise and, in certain cases, as a masquerade (a false show, or pretence).



The marked line of the Ghetto Wall, Warsaw.

Courtesy of the author.

When I started to apply the notion of the spectre to the subject of this essay, it suggested two simultaneous readings: the first was of a roaming spirit – of a visible but disembodied entity (which is the state of the archive's discourse) – a motif that would provide a final resting place for my research, which is the sum of many parts. The second, with its distinguishing as well poetic connotations, is of something that haunts or disturbs our mind, like a ghost. It is about a supernatural relationship to the past. Here, I am suggesting how

tricks of the mind and memories play a specific role in re-visiting that which was once real and now remains with us internally and somewhat intransigently. The archive, it seems, has many possibilities and many permeable points of entry, from its resoundingly scientific definition, imbued with a sense of objectivity, to what remains of the subjective elements of the archive, which facilitate a shifting relationship to the archive's contents.

On thinking further on these ideas, the archive does suggest a rescue from abandonment, which resonates well with a literal interpretation of the haunted place. Strangely, archives are haunted places – haunted by material that resonates and vibrates with a past that had been occupied, for archives, like good horror films, manage to make us feel disturbed and unsettled.

One such example of a haunting archive could well be the Ringelblum Archives in Warsaw listed in UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' register as a monument of world heritage. Housed in the Jewish Historical Institute, it is a unique collection of documents that are one of the world's most significant testimonies about the extermination of Polish Jewry. As the story goes, most of the archives creators, including its initiator Emanuel Ringelblum, did not live to see the end of the Second World War, but those who survived made the effort to find the three separate archives which were buried in and around the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto. The first part of the archive was unearthed in September 1946, whilst the second part was discovered by chance in December 1950. Yet, the third part of the archive, reputedly hidden on 19th April 1943 (the night before the outbreak of the uprising in the ghetto) near a former brush-making workshop at 34 Świętojerska Street (today the grounds of the Chinese Embassy), remains undiscovered. Yet, its memory, indeed its absence, lingers like a ghost.

The second part of this essay's title, (*of Knowledge*), puts forth the idea of a spectre bound – one that is held together by knowledge, which, to a large extent, is what we have to arrive at when it comes to the archive and how we relate to it. But what constitutes knowledge and whose knowledge are we foregrounding? Why is this considered knowledge and, most importantly, how, in times that have become both culturally hardened and information-based, does a specific archive remain accessible in the mess we have created with the flow of rapid information that permeates our information networks? When it comes to dealing with the assemblage of information at our grasp, we must be selective, and yet also remain open, especially when it comes to how and why archives are made accessible to the public.

But in this quagmire of information, why should any type of emphasis – and a great deal of energy – be made to opening the archive to the public? These questions, of course, cannot be answered easily, nor can they be answered in any one session, let alone in a brief rumination such as this. These questions touch on seminal aspects of any archive, especially those that have tough traditional requirements and remain in a permanent quest for resources. These are very long-term and expensive undertakings. Also, the initiation of any dialogue towards the formation of an archive, which normally entails access for the public, has immense repercussions, including major political ramifications caused by the issue of monetary management, as well as the necessity for a defined contingency plan needed for an archive's survival in perpetuity.

Again, we have to be careful here, as traditional archives were born out of fame and fortune and from the grandees and the acknowledged who redeemed the greater public by providing access to their life's accumulations. Today, the traditional place of the archive has remained within the institutional framework of study

or research – which itself has changed in the late twentieth century. Yet now, both the notion of study and research has become much more expansive and virtual. With the proliferation of images, there has been a quantifiable rise in image-based archives, which have fulfilled a desire that has arisen from the increased pace at which our accelerated urbanizing societies want to view themselves in what can only be described as a narcissistic abundance.

In these times of smart and nano technologies, the historic models for the constant management of the archive – which focus on conservation and limited access while viewing the archive as a time capsule – has been superseded by twenty-first century requests of nano-second appeasement and attention. These instant facilities are indeed demanded in these contemporary times. These instant combinations of information and misinformation constitute a knowledge pool, often gathered using lens-based digital media, which do not guarantee any agreed or agreeable perspective or standard that pertains to their proper use of information or images.

Here, key questions of knowledge – knowledge as a form and a structure to expropriate, and, more dangerously, types of knowledge that are often unconstructed or verifiable – impact on investigations or explorations based on ethical standards and histories of inquiry-based journalism or investigative reporting. In a recent lecture to a group from the black community in North London, the sociologist Paul Gilroy addressed the issue of reportage in their vicinity, which was also the epicentre of the summer riots in the UK. In his talk, Gilroy suggested the idea of the media coalescing around a 'Golden Hour', the hour that follows any act that is to be reported by a conglomerate of 24-hour news agencies, a volume of gathered 'facts', a hasty culmination of agreed positions on what has just happened, creating a news-worthy narrative.

In the case of Tottenham in North London, there was widespread agreement by the press corps about a lone black man with a gun, Mark Duggan, who supposedly fired two rounds at the arresting policeman, who returned fire and killed him from these wounds. This became, within the first hour – the 'Golden Hour' – the main issue reported, after his family were rebuked by the neighbourhood police station for requesting any further explanation of his death. The family's and community's frustration was reported, but the lingering story of his shooting, which eventually turned out to be the case of a shooting of an innocent black male in London, was proven to be untrue. Yet, if one looked at the footage from television coverage as archival material at what was reported every few minutes, blaming the civilian uprising, the spark of the riot, the grand narrative that the media sensibly organized for its public of the ensuing riots all over Britain for the next few days, then it was based on an unproven but also false narrative of this shooting. It took more than a week of heavy coverage to unravel the real facts of his murder by two policemen – but what remains for the archive is the instant reportage and not the real facts.

Returning to Gilroy's notion of 'The Golden Hour', the twenty-first century's instant archive creates a karmic footprint for its audience. If, once upon a time, the archive was a set of archived documentation allowing a factual base of images, thinking, life histories, and a management of records within a particular bias, it was still an organized genealogy. A record that could be used to create an interface between preserved information. What happened recently in Britain makes the notion of an archive a desperate reality, of all the facts from the field. Who is responsible for condemning the misinformation generated in the heat of the moment and in the style of news media, which is to feed the public what it can, as fast as possible, in an unsubstantiated manner? And in the case of Tottenham, what was gained in this fiery momentum produced by one narrative of a battle between race and institutional

force? How can the reversal of fortune that all parties suffered be re-corrected?



Image of the Chinese Embassy on 34 Świętojerska Street, the alleged site near to where the third part of the Ringelblum Archive is located.

Courtesy of the author.

To end this account of Gilroy's talk, it took many intellectuals, and many more articulations from the angry margins, to open the debate on this lone, focused narrative of a shooting incident and go beyond this spectral reading of the event so as to allow a much less biased understanding of the riotous reaction that took place on the streets of Britain in 2012. In a world getting used to fast, often pernicious headlines, it is understandable that a lone gunman is a much easier narrative to comprehend than the actual states of alienation and mass unemployment which remained the real basis of the ensuing riot and mayhem. In conclusion, it brings to our attention the culture

of fear or blame as it enters with ease into our potentially universal archives. How can we be aware of society's diverse and perpetually changing perspectives? Somehow, we have to remain the guardians of society's very narratives – alert to the editorial work undertaken by mass media under stress while feeding the insatiable appetite of a ravenous public, encased, as it has been shown, by certain kinds of bias?

Of course, for another example of the 'Golden Hour' syndrome, one can study the mysterious killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad. Similar misinformation surrounded his death, with initial reports portraying bin Laden hiding behind his wife and involved in other acts of cowardice, before his body was unceremoniously dumped into the Indian Ocean. These 'Golden Hours' have become mini-archives that fold into the larger archives of history – a sordid ground on which to search for untainted facts amidst the quagmire – which raises further questions in terms of how we collate and what data is collated, not to mention how we represent facts back to the public. In an era of mass media, messy reporting and grandiose narratives that are constantly recontextualized for their emotive, misleading context, how we deal with the real-time and predominately digital unfolding of archives that will inevitably narrate the contemporary moment also has vast repercussions on the training of archivists. At once historians, they must also consider how their approaches might benefit future researchers, students and interested communities.

In an age of 'golden hours' on prime-time TV – from cable, satellite to Internet TV – when the average North American is spending more than five hours daily in front of the television (which is not only portable but also weatherproof and soon to be 3D), home theatres and interactive games – not to name the countless recent ways to log-in and drop-out using live streaming, online reporting, blogs, twitter and the voracious social networks – the plural and multitude

approach to a globalized reality is already a technical actuality. Predominantly still in the first and second worlds, this availability has determined an appetite for the range of ideas, as well as the formations of 'alien' identifications, inferring a surge in the desire to be within and part of as many termini (cybernetic destination as the consumption of difference and part of a lifestyle). Herein, identity can be construed or partially constructed as of great importance and, simultaneously, the least significant, for we are propagating a culture - or cultural values - that have been described as 'lite', as in: a bonsai culture with roots and branches trimmed to further tame and attain a full likeness of form and coherence, but which remains a manicured and dwarfed *spatiality*.^[1] Writers and artists alike influence this understanding in their work, often through their interpositions and by weaving narratives that both acknowledge the traditional virtues of love, kindness, justice and service – virtues that have seemingly given us the very meaning and purpose of our lives – while also acknowledging the fictional realities that are developing as a candid difference, replacing the virtuous with virtuality at a rate unknown in human history. This change in integrity is wholly based on the pressures exerted by the profusion and profuse use of online archives, which have far superseded 'actual' material archives and here we need to re-consider the notion of time in a rapidly exploding mass culture in a domestic space, which was initially tied to the process of industrialization.

Here, it might be useful to recount one of the main ideas that made Walter Benjamin so important for his time and ours: the idea of the montage. And herein lies the biggest asset and secret of the archive. It is, by its nature, a random collation – an experience of distance and proximity, balance and inertia: a montage of experiences, sources, situations, posits, and an environment of inertia, since within the archive much is at rest, apart from the restless minds that seek knowledge from it.

Benjamin's queries were always about 'the heightened presence of the mind' – and, in his search for this state, he talked about the 'regard to montage the ability to capture the infinite, sudden or subterranean connections of dissimilars as a major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology'.^[2] If archives are the watersheds of human experience, draining from various sources, draining from specific sources, a system of thinking or knowledge represented, then the notion of multiplicity – a greater regard for diverse possibilities and probabilities in pursuit and accounting for a globalized, cosmopolitan world – is surely one of its greatest assets. The formation of such assets is surely the way the world is in a montage, compulsively undermining the miscellaneous rather than the historical franchise of the famed, the wealthy, the landed or the over-represented – the archive's traditional keepers.

A fundament – access:

Today, both artists and archives provide an interesting pairing in terms of examining both the recent and historical past – a relationship that navigates and contributes to the understanding of the global upheaval and crisis in values, models and infrastructures. Is it possible then, that, by intervening in the institution of the archive, the artist may turn our attention to other directions, even outside the Eurocentric zone?^[3] It is with this question in mind that I would like to consider how artists find themselves within the constellation of information, documentation and data. Indeed, in their active, creative lives, artists often open doors within and between things; they describe the nameless and the named in what could be seen as an activity or endeavour dedicated to a poetic nurturing of a conversation between the known, the visible and the inferred.

The poet Pablo Neruda describes this constant conversation as such:

I don't know of how and when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silences[4]

It is an apt description of that artistic deciphering of faint lines and questionable facts. The artist's circumstances of thinking, making and unfolding present ways to mediate the world and express in some way its unfolding narratives: its emerging historical archives. This is finely described by Bertolt Brecht as 'an attempt to make gestures quotable';[5] to perform a task within the varied and intemperate languages available to us; of estimating principles and presenting convictions from worldly motions while attempting innovations from within (the interior). The artist, the poet, the musician, or the actor, are all masters of composing form from new and found situations; of producing archives of their own, that express or communicate a certain story.



Installation shot of the temporary exhibition, *Polish Art and the Holocaust*, which includes photographs and filmed recordings of the Warsaw Ghetto collected by Emanuel Ringelblum and most of the Archive's creators, who did not live to see the end of the war.

Courtesy of the author.

Previously, I mentioned the idea of a roaming spirit, of a visible but disembodied entity, in terms of thinking about the notion of the archive. If we are to convey this idea to artistic expression, where it is often described as a journey from a point of inspiration to a point of articulation, what emerges is a relationship between the artistic state and the state of the archive. Both artists and archives are based on a discourse – a word that in its Latin root, *discursus*, implies 'running to and from' – an allowance for research to be made comprehensive. Ultimately, it could be argued that this is the desire of an artist or an archive: to create a discursive formation wherein the analysis of a large body of knowledge based on research, finds a final resting place in its assumed form and the consequent ability to communicate its form while receiving feedback. For an artist, the work remains incomplete without the audience while for an archive, the sum of many parts that constitutes it can only be made comprehensible through a public's relation to its subjects and objects.

Artists' studios, similar to an archive, remain a fertile ground within which the world is silently mediated. This process of mediation allows the distinguishing and poetic connotations to emerge. What is at stake is how human knowledge can keep on haunting us or disturbing our mindset. This can posit new interpretations, make facts further known, alter positions and, by the nature of transient knowledge, address our thinking and actions, leading us to develop expanded relationships with our past while moving, potentially, towards a more inclusive future.

..... the recordings of the cosmopolitan.....

Consider now Foucault's description of the museum as an expression of

...the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all

times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place.[6]

This sounds very much like the idea architect and critic Adolf Loos proposed in his 1910 essay 'Architektur', in which he distinguished between buildings that are for everyday/practical use and buildings made for contemplation. The latter type, he asserts, may be considered as both architecture and works of art.[7] He refers to only two types of contemplative architecture, namely the tomb and the monument; a suggestion perhaps that buildings need not be completely assimilated by the daily, practical and functional needs of an inhabitant.[8] I would hasten to add to Loos' list the archive, for it tends to be, as a construct, part-monument, part-tomb and part-historical. Or, as Benjamin calls it, a *Konstruktion*, 'which is not located in empty time but is constituted in a specific epoch, in a specific life, in a specific work'.[9]

Foucault and Benjamin differ greatly in how they contemplate time in regard to the collection or the museum. Foucault's notion is attractive, for it suggests an indefinite accumulation of time whilst Benjamin's concern remains somewhat academic, in that the location of materials is to be valued within its time. The specificity of Benjamin reading materials within their own epoch and their perpetual and indefinite accumulation as suggested by Foucault, produce differing results of mediation in the sanctuary of an archive preserving the dispersal of its comprehension. It might be interesting here to cite a more cynical model provided by Guy Debord, in his series of two hundred and twenty-one short theses called *The Society of the Spectacle*. [10] In this, Debord binds time to society in total consumption; time as an invention that creates false cycles but, in reality, remains the same.[11] For Debord, time that is broken

outside the agrarian cycles and made to feel 'irreversible' is a disguise. In this last model therefore, time is a construct tied to an economic paradigm of new products and services including seasonal vacations and seasons dedicated to fashion, food and parties. Here, for instance, work, shopping and play render 'time as a commodity, disguised as a pseudo-cyclical time made of homogenous and exchangeable units.'[12]

Through all the above, one thought remains constant in my mind, and that is Benjamin's use of the montage, a model of discordance, with many unanswered questions; it provides, in this age of multiplicities and globalization, a necessary attitude and an alignment for our intellect with a plurality of identities and subjectivities. In turn, when thinking about the archive, we need to evaluate time and its place in our heritage, our memory, and our resources so as to position ourselves alongside as many contrasting concepts in these uneven and shape-shifting times: to cultivate concise thinking and the communication in this context an absolute necessity.

[1] Spatiality combines all conditions and practices of individual and social life that are linked to the relative position of individuals and groups with regard to one another. One fundamental postulate of geography is that those relative positions (or geographical situations) determine, probably or partly, the intensity of social interactions.

[2] Stanley Mitchell, 'Introduction' in *Walter Benjamin, Understanding Brecht*, London, Verso, 1998, p.xiii.

[3] Unpublished letter of invitation from the advisors of the conference.

- [4] Pablo Neruda, 'I like you to be still' in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, Vintage, London, 2004, p.45.
- [5] Bertolt Brecht, 'From the Brecht Commentary' in *Walter Benjamin Understanding Brecht*, introduction by Stanley Mitchell, translated by Anna Bostock, Verso, London, 1998, p.28.
- [6] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias', tr. Jay Miskowiec, 1967, in: *Repository of Texts* written by Michel Foucault at: <http://foucault.info/documents>.
- [7] Adolf Loos, *Architektur*, first published in Der Sturm, 1910. The translation was from *The Architecture of Adolf Loos: An Arts Council Exhibition*, London, The Arts Council, 1985.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Walter Benjamin, 'Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (eds), Continuum, New York, 2005, p. 227.
- [10] Guy Debord (1977) [1967] *The Society of the Spectacle*, translation by Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak, Black & Red, 1970; rev. ed. 1977.
- [11] Ibid., p. 148, Chapter 6.
- [12] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, tr. Donald Nicholson Smith, Zone Books, New York, 1997.

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Shaheen Merali is a curator and writer, currently based in London. Between 2003-8, he was the Head of Exhibitions, Film and New Media at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, Germany, curating several exhibitions including *The Black Atlantic; Dreams and Trauma—Moving images and the Promised Lands* and *Re-Imagining Asia, One Thousand years of Separation*. In 2006, he was the co-curator of the 6th Gwangju Biennale, Korea and in 2012 he curated

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