Stirrings in the Archives: Order from Disorder

Wolfgang Ernst is professor of media theory at Humboldt University of
Berlin. He is heavily associated with the media archaeology movement
that has gained currency in European, British, and (increasingly) American uni-
versities, especially following the collection of his most important essays as the
book *Digital Memory and the Archive* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). The
short work here under review, *Stirrings in the Archives*, was originally published
in German in 2002; it was in fact Ernst's first book after his doctoral thesis. It
is now available for English-speaking audiences thanks to the translator Adam
Siegel.

Though trained as a classicist and historian, Ernst has built his academic
career in the manner of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others for whom
"the" archive is a site of ongoing temptation and allure. (Like those other
writers, his interest is primarily in juridical and state archives.) His style is
aphoristic, occasionally cryptic, and generally given to pronouncement rather
than exegesis, exacerbated here by the division of this already short book into
two dozen essays each just a few pages in length. (Arguably, the book is instead
one long essay that has been subdivided into twenty-four named sections.)
Taken individually, each essay is an exercise in triangulating the idiosyncrasies
of Ernst's style (in translation), the contours of the philosophical traditions he
is writing in, and the particulars of the specific interventions he seeks to make.

Broadly speaking, Ernst's eponymous stirrings consist of the emergence of
new forms of what he terms "recording" technologies, specifically digital media
and the internet. Here, their significance lies not only in whatever day-to-day
challenges they may present to the archivist, but in the way they foreground
what Ernst several times calls "the texture of the archival apparatus itself" (p.
67). For Ernst, the historiographical work performed in an archives is always
doomed to be a betrayal—a fiction—of the truth of *the* archive, which consists
not in an elusive objectivity but in the way in which systems of organization
function as present and persistent remainders of the conditions of knowledge
production. "The archive . . . is not so much what is left behind so much as it
is an already extant screen for an indexed reality" (p. 14). By "extant screen,"
Ernst means something like a net whose woven strands—and textures—function
like a sieve filtering our access to the past. In this he indeed follows Foucault,
but whereas Foucault works at the level of discourse and what is sayable, Ernst

seeks to isolate discrete pulses of the media signal, what he figures as the *anarchive*, playing on anarchy.

The anarchive takes the form of storage technologies, like the magnetic core memory whose mesh would be the literal embodiment of the aforementioned screen. The "order" of the book's subtitle, meanwhile, is the historian's encounter with this material substrate as a systematizing artifact that contains a deeper truth than the scraps of paper from which he or she spins literary fictions of a past that is always "in retreat, lost in an endless flight" (p. 36). Eventually (in its final chapter), the book seems to come to rest on the proposition that the digital archive is thus the ultimate (and the truest) archive: for archives (like the digital) have always been selective and discrete in their representations, the peregrinations of historians and their stories ("prosopopoetic phantoms") notwithstanding.

The preceding is but a partial view of the book's internal operating system, which depends upon not only Derrida and Foucault but also (especially) on Arlette Farge and Michel de Certeau. Stephen Greenblatt and the New Historicism are treated as the apex (or nadir) of the historian's fall into textuality, an ouroboros wherein the foundational desire to speak with the dead cannot escape the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. Indeed, the book has an ensemble cast of sorts—also making appearances are Hayden White, Carlo Ginzburg, Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Musil, Günter Grass, Paul Celan, Bram Stoker, Richard Nixon ("the tapes!"), Ridley Scott, Oliver Stone, Claude Shannon, Charles Babbage, and more. Yes, mostly men, and little engagement with North American archival theory.

While this operating system can occasionally feel as ponderous as Windows itself, it doesn't preclude the regular display of deft command line operations in the form of standalone statements that function as brief but powerful executables. A sampling: "Archives are places of temptation" (p. 17); "The grooves of the record are traces, scars left by the vampire fangs of every system of organizational memory" (p. 25); "Freed from semantic control, documentation can be electrified, and the *statistical engineer* can take the place of the archivist" (p. 47); "Every archive may also be read against the grain" (p. 59); and "Memories whose addresses are unreadable remain speechless" (p. 71). Likewise, the book offers its share of breakout episodes that can be productively decoupled from the surrounding architecture: that we owe a large measure of what we know about West German television broadcasting during the Cold War to the archives of the East German *Stasi*, for example (thus: "Paranoia is the energy of the archive" [p. 54]); or the irony that Derrida's friend, Paul De Man, was undone by the archive fever of a biographer who uncovered the written evidence of De Man's National Socialist sympathies.

Ernst moves freely over all of this terrain and more, yet he returns over and over again to the book's core contention, which is that the truth of the

archive is not locatable in its content (always imprinted by narrative) but only in the technologies of its material systems. "The power of memory lies less in the past than in its undeceivable storage," he writes at the mid-point (p. 42). Again, I would emphasize that what he has in mind here is not any naïve sense of documentary fidelity to an absolute past, but rather the present reality of a storage system (termed "cybernetic" by the second half of the book, a word that becomes his stand-in for the digital) that pitilessly registers gaps and silences and unintelligible intervals of all sorts—hence the cameo by Nixon. For Ernst, the recording media of the twentieth century—first audio tape, and then digital formats—are ruthless and omnivorous in a way that written documents, always the product of motivated human agency, are not. Automation or mechanization allows the historiographical narrative to be supplanted by statistical analysis and operations; he quotes the following approvingly and hyperbolically: "The historian of tomorrow will be a programmer or nothing" (p. 84). Such transitive practices are what may show us the "way out of the archive" (p. 5) he seeks from the beginning.

In our latter-day *paragone* between database and narrative, Ernst comes down wholly on the side of the database. In this he also seems to anticipate the big data or distant reading techniques now commonplace in the digital humanities. Missing, however—sacrificed to the hyperbole—is balance and criticality. The language of this book, just barely into the twenty-first century, is fully millennial, as Ernst himself acknowledges in its final pages: "The universally feared Y2K bug, like all catastrophes, offered an opportunity" (p. 95). That opportunity, couched in the chronological rewind from 2000 to 1900, consisted in a reminder of the underlying medial logic of memory. The anarchive is thus a project only just begun: "Archival techniques are therefore also a prehistory of the computer, which has inherited its stacks, files, and indices from Old World administrative practices" (p. 94). In 2002, Ernst saw an alternative in Eric Freeman and David Gelernter's then-state-of-the-art Lifestreams, which sought to reimagine the interface as something more akin to the aperture of a microfilm reader, a fleeting view onto the information reeling by in cyberspace. Today, fifteen years later, we are still stuck with stacks, files, and indexes, to say nothing of Windows on our desktops; but we also have streams and feeds, what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has productively termed the "enduring ephemeral" of the digital, whose cultural life seems to operate according to its own strange loops and eternal returns. In this Ernst's instincts prove sound.

Stirrings in the Archives is (willfully) provocative, always bracing, and unarguably challenging. It can (and should) be read alongside key statements from Derrida, Foucault, Farge, and Friedrich Kittler (his notable absence is an archival silence here). But the aforementioned *Digital Memory and the Archive*—which includes an excellent introduction by Ernst's foremost exponent Jussi

Parikka—remains the best and most comprehensive entry to Ernst's thought (it's also half the price). *Stirrings in the Archives* is recommended for those already energized by Ernst who want an opportunity to further examine a critical early phase of his career.

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Diversity, Dialogue, and Sharing: Online Resources for a More Resourceful World

By Francine Saillant. Paris, France: UNESCO, 2017. 129 pp. Open Access PDF. Freely available at unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002487/248717e.pdf. ISBN 978-92-3-100217-5.

"We probably know much more about wars and conflicts between communities and nations than we do about the forms of life which foster rapprochement, dialogue and cohesion," notes Canadian anthropologist Francine Saillant in her open access book, *Diversity, Dialogue and Sharing: Online Resources for a More Resource World* (p. 18). The book seeks to counter this imbalance by promoting online resources on intercultural dialogue and cultural rapprochement, building on earlier United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) regional mapping initiatives that assessed the state of digitization of intercultural resources. I wholeheartedly agree that there is a need to talk about not only conflict and war, but also about the many ways in which a constellation of people, institutions, and societal structures work to build solidarities and foster peaceful and respectful relations of mutual benefit between people around the world. We are daily bombarded with a barrage of news about war, hate, and conflict, which ultimately serves to normalize and maintain these violences as much as to expose or compel action against them. Realizing social change, ending war, embracing diversity, eradicating racism and patriarchy, overcoming colonialism—all these require not only the ability to identify and analyze the problem, but also the perhaps more challenging capacity to imagine and model new approaches and alternative futurities. According to its author, this short (a mere 129 pages), easy to navigate, and accessible book seeks to inspire and inform further efforts aimed at realizing greater understanding and rapprochement between and within societies and groups.

Published by UNESCO, *Diversity, Dialogue and Sharing* provides a selective mapping of online resources that promote intercultural dialogue by a variety of organizations from different spheres of life. As the foreword by Nada Al-Nashi,