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The Archives: Centre and Transmitter of Memory

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This session explores the role that archival institutions serve in the preservation and the utilisation of memory. It will be demonstrated that archives are facilities of societal memory and that archives and the archival staff are essential transmitters and the effective voices of that memory. The recorded word embodies memory and hence cultural identity and political and economic power. The records of the archives have been metamorphosed into neurological functions of remembrance. When archives are ignored, or are destroyed, the transmission function is altered and the result can be cultural, or societal amnesia. The study of archives, as institutions of memory, is essential in the fuller philosophical discussion of memory. The world's archives provide an extensive body of recorded data which serve as a foundation of memory and hence archivists must be recognised as persuasive and active agents contributing to the preservation and enhancement of memory and in the development of knowledge.

“We live in a palimpsest of memories, says Valeria.”¹ This is an *apropos* reflection of archives, as voiced by the renowned English writer of literature, Margaret Drabble in her novel *The seven sisters*. The palimpsest, as we know, is a record, or series of records, written upon one single medium, be it vellum or parchment. In the European Mediaeval period, the valuable medium was reused. Original writings were scrapped away and the medium was recycled by inscribing new writings on its surface. Over a period of time many inscriptions, or memories were recorded on the one surface, thus the creation of the palimpsest. Drabble is acknowledging that the palimpsest, the archival document, is a series of memories, be these unified or not, partially laid one upon another. Life is a series of memories positioned one a top the other. Drabble is supporting the idea that life or memory is likened to the archival document. We appropriate ideas. We reinvent ourselves. Archival institutions define civilisation. They make available multi-leveled layers of knowledge, invoking inspiration and providing the tools for analysis, in essence, archives are building blocks of civilisation. Memory can then be equated as an essential structure of civilisation which transmits its ideas to contemporaries and to future generations.

Memory has recently materialised as a focus of questioning amongst historians, philosophers, popular culturalists, writers of fiction and others. The focus of this universal discussion addresses the questions:

What is memory?

and

What is the significance of memory?

These questions have become a philosophical interest of the archivist, and hence the reason for this conference. Memory is an ability by which events are remembered. It is a method of retention of things past. It is a capability of manifesting and perpetuating our very being. Recollection provides us with the ability to construct knowledge and perhaps endow us with wisdom. Memory defines us as human beings. The knowledge, or the wisdom that the goddess Memory dispenses to all is a divinatory omniscience.² Memory is *the* tool which provides us with a linkage between our universe and understanding. The construction of an accurate definition of memory is a very complex one, indeed. Although the term and study of memory has become very fashionable among a number of disciplines, the study of memory must have a more articulated theoretical basis and undergo a systematic evaluation of its objectives of study.³ I am confident that we, as archivists, can and will make a contribution to this discussion.

Maurice Halbachs and Henri Bergson provided the first over-all philosophical investigation of memory. Scholarship in the later part of the twentieth century has renewed interest in the question of memory. The

¹Drabble, Margaret. *The seven sisters*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2002, p. 203.

²Martin, Henri-Jean. Trans. By Lydia G. Cochrane. *The history and power of writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 90.

³Confino, Alan. “Collective memory and cultural history: problems of method.” *The American Historical Review*. vol. 102, no. 5. Dec. 1997, pp. 1386-1403. p. 1387.

investigation of memory, is in essence, the investigation of human identity. Without memory, be it individual or societal, we are left with a *tabula rasa*, or erased memory. Memory is a format of tracing bits of perception and is one coherent means of defining identity. LeGoff argued a generation ago that history is as accurate or subjective as is human memory. All the more reason to respect history!

Paul Fussell's *The Great War and modern memory*⁴ was a seminal work which questioned the significance of memory. Published in 1975 Fussell was instrumental in the reformulation and reinterpretation of memory. Fussell analysed the diaries and narratives of those soldiers in the rank and file during World War I; he made extensive use of archival records at the Imperial War Office and other archival institutions⁵. He added another and distinctive voice in the transmission of societal memory.

This talk examines the parallels between human memory, societal memory and the archival institution. It is a series of personal reflections based upon nearly thirty years of employment within the archival community. Underlying this discussion of memory is the continued necessity that the archivist must focus on the care and nurturing of archival institutions, so that society and civilisation do not suffer from collective amnesia, but continue with the *modus operandi* of transmitting memory. The archivist, with each professional decision, is involved actively in the preservation of information and most importantly of "memory" itself.

Human memory is fragile. It is susceptible to damage and malfunction. It is a formation of the individual experiences of the person who is engaged in the creation, storage and dissemination of memories. In the same way, the human species has actively maintained societal memory through the creation and use of many media, not only of archives. These institutions are as fragile as human memory itself. These are susceptible to damage, be it outward destruction; internal factors of poor, or lack of preservation activities, and by the destruction due to ill-informed and non-professional staff. The destruction and mismanagement of archives may result in neurological seizure and breakdown.

The Archives is an instrument of communication. Writing is a continuation of the transmission of oral communication.⁶ Thoughts and ideas are recorded and stored in the archives and act as the transmitters of the human voice. The archival institution is truly a mnemonic device interplaying in the role of social memory. One function of using memory is to make sense of the past. Tools within the archival institution assist in the interpretation of order. Not all memory is stored within archives, but it is one technological tool to assist in interpreting and in comprehending former events. Accessing memory assists in the process of perceiving the past. All awareness of the past is founded on memory. Through recollections we recover consciousness of former events, distinguish yesterday from today, and confirm that we have experienced a past.⁷

Memory grounds us in our identity. A dearth of memory results in a separation of meaning; it results in a formulation of personal and societal amnesia; it is a form of death. But, memory confirms personal experience. When we have loss of identity, we have loss of awareness. Memory inspires us. It brings us recall. Archives also ground us all in our identity. We need only to view the national archives of the majority of the countries of the planet to know that these institutions are respected places of cultural and national significance. These are memorial institutions which provide identity and confirmation of identity for the nation. They provide inspiration. They provide recall. Even if a citizen has never undertaken active research within an archive, this same person is likely to acknowledge that the archives contain and preserve the written treasures of one's collective group.

Memory is pervasive. Most human and social action is underlined by memory. We need other

⁴Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and modern memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

⁵Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and modern memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 337-353.

⁶Martin, Henri-Jean. Trans. By Lydia G. Cochrane. *The history and power of writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 332.

⁷Lowenthal, David L. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 193.

people's memories both to confirm our own and to give them endurance.⁸ The records of the archives do provide affirmation of past events and the capacity for long-term protection. The conceptual examination of memory is pervasive among *homo sapiens*. Our identity is expressed in systematic terms based upon our ability to maintain and utilise memory.

Archival records speak and echo a voice. Research, interpretation, writing and publishing allow the records to speak and broadcast. Exhibition provides another voice. Active engagement of individuals and archival records can result in transmission of ideas. One such example is the programme, Project Naming, at the National Archives of Canada which has successfully brought together the Inuit, of Northern Canada, who have examined and identified thousands of photos taken from the 1920s to the 1940s. By identifying ancestors, context and geographic locations of images on archival photographs, contemporary people have been actively engaged in speaking their own cultural voice. The archives are echoing and transmitting another memory.

We archivists convey the key concepts of memory. The public release of records within an archival institution triggers societal memory, both by the reading and the transmission of the opening and the news releases. If the focused event or memory had been experienced or remembered by living individuals then the memories of these individuals are enhanced, as well.

We treasure connections with the wider past. Gratified that our memories are our own, we also seek to link our personal past with collective memory and public history. People widely recall their own thoughts and actions at moments of public crisis because they jump at the chance to connect themselves with a meaningful cosmos. People are so eager to be part of 'history' that they falsely 'remember' their responses to, or even having been present at, some momentous event.⁹ Investigation of archival records confirms clarity of memory towards the past. We are provided with a resource to link ourselves with an antecedent event. The archival record can confirm our own identity with a former phenomenon, or we can also have our personal memory altered, or even shattered with the revelation of the truth. The written word maintained in the archives has power to confirm and to transform that which we believe to be accurate and substantive memory.

In the literary world writers are focusing on the post-modern relation with the past. Personal memories and remembrances are examined and scrutinised and balanced by using manuscripts, photographs and the other offerings of the archives. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* is such an example. Her novel focuses on a nineteenth century Canadian woman enmeshed in a murder. Atwood made extensive use of government, religious and legal archives to enlighten strengthen and memorialise her narrative of Canadian social life a century and a half ago. Atwood conjoined with the archival record have become active agents in the transmission of memory.

The archives is not the only institution engaged in the preservation of memory; museums are active agents, as well. Contemporary art installations in museums, which take historical consciousness as their theme, similarly can raise contentious issues about public knowledge and personal interest in the past.¹⁰ Memory in the museum operates at several levels; as a resource and a product in perpetual stages of flux; memory is no more static in the fixed space of a museum than it is in the fertile depths of our brains. Each memory, rather than being a single artifact of the past or unique imprint, is a production that emerges over time and in the present, in response to and through the integration of memory cues and memories.¹¹ We can draw parallels with the archival institution for every memory in the archives is in continuous change responding to new interpretations of thought and integrated with new and enlightening informational cues.

Archivists respect the conceptual idea of knowledge. Even if an idea is not recognised by the current

⁸Lowenthal, David L. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 196.

⁹Lowenthal, David L. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 197.

¹⁰Crane, Susan A. "Memory, distortion, and history in the museum." *History and theory*. vol. 36, no 4. Theme Issue 36: Producing the past: making histories inside and outside the Academy. (Dec. 1997), pp. 44-63. p. 44.

¹¹Crane, Susan A. "Memory, distortion, and history in the museum." *History and theory*. vol. 36, no 4. Theme Issue 36: Producing the past: making histories inside and outside the Academy. (Dec. 1997), pp. 44-63. p. 49.

generation, it may have utilitarian brilliance in another time period. The insight of some individuals is so revolutionary that it is not understood and appreciated by contemporaries. It is the archival institution which maintain this memory and is capable of transmitting it to future generations who are better educated and advanced and more receptive to interpret and accept these ideas.

One of the prime purposes of memory, as well as sustaining the past, is to adapt it to cultivate and rethink the past. Archives must adapt its resources in the enriching and manipulating of memory. Historians use the same body of records, but may interpret these in differing ways. In different time periods we use differing bits, dependent on the questions or the particular memory we wish to enliven and broadcast. Archives relive and revive the past. Archives hold relics and recorded information. Our individual memories are fractious, destructible and malleable. Hence the need to maintain a recorded memory.

Commemoration is a form of individual and societal recognition of memory and manifestation. Public commemoration acknowledges those events which some have deemed important: war, people, peace, political leaders, etc. Archival institutions thus serve as public monuments to this social and collective memory.

Archival memory is a collective concern with the capacity to recollect lives. The archives defines the social group. The extent and breadth of archival collections determine the structure and ability of recall. The archives provides a foundation for social communication. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation made innovative use of archival resources with its thirty-two hour series *Canada, a people's history*. In the same way, The British Broadcasting Corporation recently broadcast *Peter Ackroyd's London*, utilising text, prints and other highly prized archival items. Users of archives culturally appropriate archival resources and develop an image of things past and unknown. The accuracy of memory is limited to the skills of the researcher. However, in the process imagery is created. The Archives become a cosmology of the self and the archives, once again, is viewed as a transmitter of memory.

Archivists are entrusted with the responsibility of the safeguarding of memory. The written word and all the media upon which it is inscribed is susceptible to destruction. This is an interruption of the transmission of memory. It leads to a form of societal amnesia, or societal Alzheimer's Disease. We, as professional archivists are charged with the maintenance and preservation of memory and the transmission of that memory.

Societal memory is susceptible to external and internal forms of aggression. There have been deliberate and non-deliberate attempts to remove the written word from our grasp. Devastating acts contributing to the destruction of manuscripts have assisted in the eradication of social memory. There have been many occasions of annihilation and removal from the planet of institutional archives. We have shared in the initial horror of learning of the destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo in 1992; the State Archives in Prishtina, Kosovo in 1999; and only last year the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad. These acts of extirpation can be likened to cultural genocide. Cultural genocide is broader than the mass killing of people and removal of property. Cultural genocide is also the directed destruction of a culture's written documentation. The destruction of archival records is a blatant destruction of the transmission of ideas and the obliteration of memory. Archivists must safeguard their institutions against a multitude of attacks, both from within and from without. The one common goal of all information keepers is the preservation of their collections.

Archivists are agents of memory and accountability. Accountability results in a collective or societal memory. Responsible record-keeping leads to a fuller and more complete memory. Irresponsible records-keeping leads to partial societal amnesia. Through thorough planning and engagement of many different people in facing archival disaster, we provide a voice and an active role to citizenry; this is symbolic of hope and of memory.

Archival records are kept against the lapse of memory and devouring time. Despite the prevalence of forgeries and copying errors many manuscripts remain reasonably veracious accounts. Memory is seldom consciously revised, historians deliberately reinterpret the past through the lens of subsequent events and ideas. Both history and memory engender new knowledge, but only history intentionally sets out to do so.¹²

¹²Lowenthal, David L. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 214.

Memories can also be altered by revision. Contrary to the stereotype of the remembered past as immutably fixed, recollections are malleable and flexible; what seems to have happened undergoes continual change. Heightening certain events in recall, we then reinterpret them in the light of subsequent experience and present need.¹³ This is certainly relevant in contemporary scholarship. One notable example has been the advancement of women's history in the past generation. Archival records have been revisited and reinterpreted by feminist scholars. Facts and events, which had been ignored by generations of male scholars, have been reformulated and have resulted in a renaissance of historical insight. The archives has been an agent of preserving memory and when the time was ripe the transmission of new ideas was possible. The retrieval of memory is seldom sequential. We locate recalled events by association, rather than by working methodically forward or backward through them.¹⁴

Archives do have such incredible power endowed within them that whole cultures and histories can be created from them. Archives recovered and read *in situ* in Ebla, Syria, by an Italian archaeological team, under Paolo Matthiae have reconstructed a Middle Bronze Culture which had not been known beforehand. This intellectual possibility, in which researchers are able to reconstruct ideas and former civilisations from the archival record, is yet another testimony to the efficacy of archival memory transmission.

Archives cannot provide the full solution to recovering memory. We confirm sets of recorded information against the canons of accepted facts, on philosophical theories and upon personal, social and biases of the time period in which we use archival records. However, the archival institution provides some account of the past. There are limitations of memory, but combined with publications, oral accounts, etc. we have a multiplicity of tools for the reconstruction of remembrance, or of memory. And of course, memory can be interpreted variously, depending upon the perspective of the narrator, or the historian. Memory is not static, but malleable and will change through successful generations. For example photos assist us in seeing memory. We use these to contextualise and to confirm and to verify memory.

Manuscripts are authoritative and fundamental transmitters of human culture. Manuscripts give voice to human acts and thoughts. The elimination of books and manuscripts is a means to mute human culture and silence the acts and thoughts of individual peoples. These acts have led to a systematic elimination of the written word, alongside the eradication of distinct cultures. We need only refer to these acts as being one and the same: genocide.

Failure or lack of memory results in neurological disorder. The same can be said for a collective identity, failure of erasure of the written archival word results in societal disorder. We who are archivists believe our institutions have great significance in terms of providing memory data. Our great handicap is that many educated skills are required to locate and interpret the data.

In times of social, political and technological metamorphosis there occurs a ravaging upon archives. There is an active attempt to create an amnesia of social and knowledge memory. In contrast, during times of calm and stability, social memory also remains stable and archival institutions reflect this stability.

We archivists gloss over our importance in the preservation of societal memory. We need to construct a firmer foundation and understanding of the role which we play in the transmission of memory and in turn we must educate the public as to our function and service. Capricious forces that threaten the existence of social memory must be thwarted. The facilities of archival institutions contain a myriad of images of the past. Archives can participate in shaping new realities. We can recast new ways of memorialising and remembering. We certainly assist in the construction of new traditions. Post-modern scholarship has opened new discussion and debate on the use and thinking, based upon the recorded information maintained in our archives. The loss of records is egregious and we must prevent this from happening. The Archives is indeed a facility and a tool of societal memory. It plays a complex role in transmitting its abundant resources. The archives is a prized institution of the preservation, the utilisation and the transmission of memory.

¹³Lowenthal, David L. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 206.

¹⁴Lowenthal, David L. *The past is a foreign country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 208.