

# MARTOR



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# Introduction. Inside and Outside the Archive: the Uses of Archives and Archival Practice

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The ensemble of texts to be found between the covers of this issue of *Martor*, whose subject is archives, might at first sight seem to be a revisiting of investigations that already have a history, albeit a relatively recent one. It is needless to explain this in great detail, since it is part of our daily experience, but we may just say that postmodernity has brought about major changes in regard to the relationship between remembering and forgetting, the act of fixing things in one's memory and the act of recalling these things. Thus archives are now more than ever a *lieu de mémoire*, a concept whose re-evaluation and re-working have come to occupy the foreground of current debates regarding memories, history, power, politics and ethics.

The work of archives, which originates in the relationship between recalling and forgetting, between individual and collective remembering, is today giving a new form to the relationship between contemporary societies and their past. "Memory has been wholly absorbed by its meticulous reconstitution. Its new vocation is to record; delegating to the archive the responsibility of remembering, it sheds its signs upon depositing them there, as a snake sheds its skin," Pierre Nora (1989: 13) wrote. The growing importance of archives in the dynamic functioning of today's archive-dependent societies makes them the guardian and legitimising court of collective memory.

According to the exhaustive definition given by Blouin and Roseberg, the contemporary archive is:

a complex of structures, processes, and epistemologies situated at a critical point of intersection

between scholarship, cultural practices, politics, and technologies. As sites of documentary preservation rooted in various national and social contexts, archives help define for individuals, communities, and states what is both knowable and known about their pasts. As places of uncovering, archives help create and re-create social memory. By assigning the prerogatives of record keeper to the archivist, whose acquisition policies, finding aids, and various institutionalized predilections mediate between scholarship and information, archives produce knowledge, legitimize political systems, and construct identities. In the broadest sense, archives thus embody artefacts of culture that endure as signifiers of who we are and why (Blouin and Roseberg 2006: 1).

The idea for this issue of the Journal sprang from the feeling of unease that is already a recurrent feature of the relationship between individual and archive, a feeling complained of by researchers in Eastern Europe working with various kinds of archives both in existence and in the process of being established. This feeling of unease is in the first place methodological in nature and linked to the defining of archived documents and to their political significance, but ultimately has to do with the meaning the documents yield when interrogated. There is, however, also an unease that stems from the diversity of the practices associated with archives and archiving, practices connected with access to memory; in Eastern Europe, this access is still the object of very strong indirect political interest. The phenomenon is made more intense by the fact that since the fall of communism the importance of archives as a "place of memory" has come to greatly outweigh their content: "The



1) It is no coincidence that this work party could take place during the period of the technocratic government, when the Ministry of Culture was headed by Corina Șuteu (2016-2017), an expert with a civil society background.

archive as a deliberate project is based on the recognition that all documentation is a form of intervention and, thus, that documentation does not simply precede intervention, but is its first step. Since all archives are collections of documents (whether graphic, artifactual or recorded in other forms), this means that the archive is always a meta-intervention” (Appadurai 2003: “Aspiration and Memory Gap,” para. 2).

In recent decades, a number of cases involving archives in Romania have attracted public attention in various ways and given rise to lively debate. The *Securitate* archive was up to a point the resource drawn on by projects inherently designed to recall significant episodes in the lives of individuals who suffered as a result of the activities of this now-defunct political police and so provide them with a measure of moral cleansing within the process of transitional justice. On the other hand, as Stan (2002: 52) highlights: “Romania’s secret police files are used more to fight current political battles than to expiate the sins of the communist regime.” More recently, this archive has also begun to be quarried as a source for the study of practices used in the production of documents; we are referring here especially to two books, *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania’s Secret Police* (2014) and *Viața mea ca spioană* [My Life as a Spy] (2018) by the American anthropologist Katherine Verdery. After reading her own surveillance file, she was in a position to make, through this exercise in historical ethnography, an essential contribution to the understanding of social relationships woven around people under surveillance, of the effects of the logic of suspicion during the Cold War, and of the institutional and professional practices of the *Securitate*. A second noteworthy case is that of the archive of the Alexandru Sahia Cinematographic Studio. The films produced here are now in the National Film Archive, and some of them have come to the attention of the researcher Adina Brădeanu, who since 2014 has been curating a series of thematic DVDs, SAHIA VINTAGE, released by One World Romania; the fifth in the series was released in 2018.

The written materials (plans for stage sets and cut-outs, film scripts, plans for film production, records of state subvention and payrolls etc., dating from 1950 until the 1990s) were discovered in 2016 in the basement of a building belonging to Sahia Film Limited, the successor institution

that followed the privatisation of the Alexandru Sahia Cinematographic Studio. This happened in the course of a work party undertaken by representatives of the working group involved in the project to revitalise the National Film Archive and of the Ministry of Culture.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the articles in this issue are the fruits of a 2018 workshop that addressed issues concerned with collections and archives connected with the period of the communist regime—archives which were either opened or closed or came into existence after the fall of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

The workshop focused on the following topics: informal practices developed by non-institutional actors—akin to “forensic investigation” (Brădeanu 2007, para. 8)—to access a great range of types of archives and collections; methodologies for the reception, interrogation, processing / making use of and (re)interpreting of archived objects/documents; the role of institutional actors who have shown interest in “vehicles of memory” (Confino 1997) and brought them out of the “biographical shadow” into which they had been consigned as a consequence of invisibility-targeted government policies or as a consequence of so-called historical accidents.

Two themes stood out from the discussions that took place at the close of this workshop. The first was the discrepancy between institutional policies and private initiatives with regard to the emergency storage of documents/information as a way of preserving recent memory (since archives would now seem to exist as the sole guardian of a recent history that is plural, heterogeneous and dynamic). This memory has major sociological significance, but nothing currently hangs on it in political or institutional terms. As Iosif Király pertinently notes in this issue, the archives of various socialist organisations (institutions devoted to research, planning, production, food supply, medical care, the media) were lost or destroyed during the process of privatisation “due to the indifference and on occasion complicity of those involved in this process and also to the fact that these documents were not seen as potential sources of income” (see the present volume, p. 173).

The archives of state businesses and institutions of various kinds, together with the private archives of people who were important in public life during the communist regime, do not figure





Andra Tarara; and Rucsandra Pop and Alexandru Iorga. Though written from different thematic viewpoints, all of these texts open up the subject of moving beyond the boundaries of the archive as a place of memory/*lieu de mémoire* that has a pre-defined structure and use. At the interface between the individual-human experience and art, or through a reinterpretation of our understanding of the storing and organising of objects to be archived, the archiving process thus gains the flexibility to transgress its historical and institutional use and become a part of the modern era as a multivalent socio-cultural practice.

The fourth section, *The Archive as Artistic Language*, addresses the theory of museums by presenting two texts, the first by Iosif Király and the second by Miklós Szilárd, that dialogue with each other on the subject of possible relationships between art and document. Both are accompanied by visual (photographic) presentations that complement them and explore the world of the “thing with suitable images” from an angle that is artistic but intersects with the anthropology of the visual. This section is thus a presentation, in artistic-visual and also narrative form, of the concept of an archive.

*Fieldnotes and Dialogues*, as the title suggests, is the section devoted to interviews, dialogues and fieldnotes. It consists of two texts: a transcript of Ionuț Mareș interviewing Adina Brădeanu about the documents held in the Sahia Romania national film archives, and a text by Călina Bâzru entitled *Reclaiming the Visual*

*Archive of the Furniture Factory in Iași*. Both interview and fieldnotes discuss the issue of the abandoning of archives—in fact of memory—and the significance of such an abandoning.

Finally, the sixth section, *Book Reviews*, is a set of three reviews, two of books and one of a collection of CDs; all three texts describe the value of archives and museums and address issues related to them. The first book reviewed, *From Storeroom to Stage: Romanian Attire and the Politics of Folklore* (Alexandra Urdea, 2018) explores the role that material culture plays in the production of value and meaning by examining how folk objects (belonging to an ethnographic collection in London) are mobilized in national ideologies, transmissions of personal and family memory, museological discourses, and artistic acts. The second book, *What are Exhibitions for? An Anthropological Approach* (Inge Daniels, 2019) questions what might happen if people and objects were freed from the regulations currently associated with going to an exhibition.

The review by Andra Petrescu of the fifth DVD in the series *Sahia Vintage 5: Ephemeral Film* regards it as a clear statement in favour of investigating the studio's most *marginal* productions, a selection of ten “utilitarian films” from the 1960s-80s.

All three reviews contribute to the outlining of a historical and theoretical context for the broader topic of debate addressed in this issue of *MARTOR*: access to archives as a way of defining the archive as a place of memory.

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