

Reviving the Archives. The Researcher as Artist and the Artist as Researcher

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Abstract: How to make the archives live again for a contemporary audience? Based on the writings of a famous historian, Arlette Farge, and on my own experience in working with archives I am arguing in this article that the archive researcher should take inspiration from artistic creativity and artists should pay more attention to the scholar dimension of their research, while both need to understand they are accountable to the next generations for which they need to re-write the historical narrative in a responsible way, as close to the truth as possible.

Keywords: archival research, Farge (Arlette), reviving heritage, performing arts, historical narrative

*Motto: The past has no unambiguous meaning,
and nowhere is this clearer than in the archives.
(Arlette Farge, The Allure of the Archive)*

Tempted to spend as much time as possible in the archives, the researcher finds herself trapped in the past, trying to reconstruct its puzzle and sometimes forgetting one of her main missions: sharing her findings with her contemporaries in engaging forms. In contrast with historical writing which avoids to fictionalize the archival findings, when it comes to

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performing arts, one needs to find creative ways to share these results with an audience. The rigour of the historian seems not to have anything in common with artistic creativity, but the latter has certainly proved to be able to reanimate and reactivate the findings of the past, a vital aspect when it comes to performing arts archives. There is a constant struggle to find the best answers to the question “how to share the results of a niche research with a wider audience?” Some interesting comments come from the writings of Arlette Farge, who is a famous historian defending the responsibility of her peers to avoid fictionalizing the historical facts and remain within the strict margins of the truth. In the same time, Farge correctly identifies the urge of the historian to share her findings with a wider audience and draws a vivid image of the historian’s most common dilemma: “The physical pleasure of finding a trace of the past is succeeded by doubt mixed with the powerless feeling of not knowing what to do with it.”²

On the road to solve this dilemma, any historian - and I will refer to historians from now on as “archive researchers” for the purpose of this article - faces a number of traps and dangers, among which Farge enumerates the danger to become too immersed in the archive:

Accumulating an infinite number of precise details about thousands of unknown people who have been invisible for so long can be a source of such happiness that you can begin to forget that writing history is actually a different kind of intellectual exercise, one in which fascinated recollection is just not enough. But let us be clear: even if it is not sufficient, it is at the very least the soil in which historical thinking takes root. The trap is nothing more than this: you can become absorbed by the archives to the point that you no longer know how to interrogate them.³

From my own experience, I would add another danger when it comes to “not knowing what to do with it” (“it” being the findings in the archive):

2. Arlette Farge, Thomas Scott-Railton, and Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Allure of the Archives*, Lewis Walpole Series in Eighteenth-Century Culture and History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 11.

3. Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 70.

in pursuing the academic route, staying too close to the so called “truth” of the archive, the archive researcher is in danger to miss the opportunity to share in a meaningful way what she has discovered.

But the question is how to make the archive live again? Arlette Farge, writing about the archives of Bastille prison, believes there is a risk in fictionalizing the lives of real people who are the subjects of these archives:

In the pages of these documents, thousands of fates crossed or missed each other, presenting us with a multitude of characters who have the makings of heroes or of forgotten Don Quixotes. Even the adventures of the more ordinary characters in the archives still have a tinge of exoticism. For some, there is a novel to be written here. For others, fiction is the ideal way to free oneself from the constraints of the discipline and make the archive live again.⁴

She gives an interesting example, namely a prisoner from Bastille about whom she finds out he managed to write a note to his wife with his blood on a piece of cloth, a detail which makes his story a potential material for a great work of fiction. Farge, as a historian, feels responsible for the story of this person:

The prisoner of the Bastille, whose unique traces rest in the archives, is an autonomous subject, not the fruit of someone’s imagination. His existence, if it is to take on weight and meaning, must not be turned into a novel; rather, it needs a narrative that is able to see him as a historical subject, a member of the society that gave him his words and expressions. If he is to “come alive,” it will not be through a fable, but through writing that illuminates the circumstances of his appearance in the archives and takes into account whatever remains obscure about his existence, *getting as close as possible to that which will always be missing (my emphasis)*.⁵

4. Ibid., 76.

5. Ibid., 96.

But, as Farge herself said in the phrase I chose for the motto, “the past has no unambiguous meaning”, ambiguity is much more powerful than truthfulness in the case of rewriting history, so one cannot exclude fiction from this process of filling the gaps in order to make the past understandable for those living today. There are assumptions to be made and events to be re-scripted and imagination does play a role in capturing the vibe of the times, beyond the official statements found in the documents. In the same time, if something “will always be missing”, why not trying to fill the gaps with artistic content, so that one makes sure to reactivate the archive, to make it alive again for the contemporary audiences, who are not familiar with the past reflected in the old documents? If reading between the lines is not only allowed but also encouraged in order to make as whole as possible the historical puzzle, isn’t the artistic imagination the best tool for drawing the image of the past? Farge writes about the role of the “ruptures and dispersion” and recognizes the importance of “stutters and silences” which need to be interpreted in order to be included in intelligible new sentences. These new sentences are written by the researcher, they are based not only on the past events, but also on the correlation between them made by the said researcher who gives her own account of these events, from a contemporary point of view, informed by her own beliefs and values.

In Farge’s words:

If the archive is to serve as an effective social observatory, it will only do so through the scattered details that have broken through, and which form a gapriddled puzzle of obscure events. You develop your reading of the archives through ruptures and dispersion, and must mold questions out of stutters and silences.⁶

Reviving the performing arts archives is even more complicated than rewriting history. The strangeness and the newness of those first moments when a creative pursuit reached its audience and had a splashing impact upon it, thus contributing to historical innovation in the performing arts field, can hardly be replicated only by describing it in words – no matter how

6. Ibid., 94.

powerful they can be in redrawing the context of that epoch. For that impact to be felt again there is a strong need of a contemporary equivalent of the past creative gesture/contribution, carrying its own meaning in a very different world. This is why I believe that the best way to share the findings discovered in a theater archive with a wider audience is using creative means like *reenactment*, *new experimental creations*, *improvisations* based on archival elements. There is of course a scholarly dimension, writings based on the documents discovered can be shared with academic peers via academic papers, conferences and publications; but if we are to address a non-academic audience, we need to consider the merits of an artistic pursuit.

This is why, given the role of re-construction, interpretation and personal correlation in this process of sharing the findings with the others, I cannot fully agree with Arlette Farge when she introduces a contradiction between “the poet” (the artist) and “the historian”:

A historical narrative is a construction, not a truthful discourse that can be verified on all of its points. This narrative must combine scholarship with arguments that can introduce the criteria of truthfulness and plausibility. The poet creates, the historian argues. He rearticulates past systems of relationships through the representation of the social community he studies, and through his own system of values and norms.⁷

My argument would be that, on the contrary, the historian IS a poet/artist and the poet/artist IS a historian when she bases her new creations on historical archives. They share, of course, a responsibility towards the past and towards the stories of the persons coming alive from these archives. They need to be aware of the dangers of ideological burden these archives carry with them. But they must not be afraid of adding their view of the facts discovered, nor shy away from the creative side of the reinterpretation process.

From what I have experienced as an archive researcher⁸, it is advisable to have the artists involved from the beginning in the research process, so that they can live themselves those moments of discovery and transfer some

7. Ibid., 95.

8. I curated the following research projects: *Comedia Remix* (2014-2015), *Arhiva Remix* (2015), *Teatrul ca rezistentă* (2018-present), *Dictionarul multimedia al teatrului românesc* (2020-2021).

of that energy into their artistic works. That is, of course, if the research process has started from a scholarly perspective. There are artists who start on their own this process of opening the archives with the sole purpose of accessing a new source of inspiration and illuminate a subject they are preoccupied with. This “reverse process” may not in the end be accompanied by a scholarly discourse, but the artistic results would ensure the spreading of the findings, filtered through the artistic vision, to a wider audience. No matter the starting point – a scholarly research for the purpose of reestablishing the truth about the past based on the archival documents, or an artistic research using the archives as a source of inspiration - the scholar should become an artist, and to the same extent the artist should become a scholar, thus ensuring the multiplication of their discoveries for a wider and diversified audience.

A couple of examples of such artistic pursuits based on archival research are coming on the Romanian stage from the artists of what I coined in another article “the in-between-generation”⁹. That means the first generation raised after the 1989 Romanian Revolution: they have the necessary distance to become interested in reconstructing the historical truth via artistic means. The director-playwright Gianina Cărbunariu based two of her most successful productions on her research in the CNSAS – the archives of the former Romanian secret police, Securitate. *X mm from Y km* used as a ready-made the 11 pages transcript of a conversation between representatives of the Romanian Writers’ Union and dissident writer Dorin Tudoran, punished by the state for asking to exercise his right to leave the country. The other production, *Typographic. Upper Cases*, was based on the Securitate file of a 17 years old boy who was brave enough to write slogans like „Freedom” on the walls of public buildings in his town, facing severe punishment from the regime’s representatives. In both cases she used the materials found in the archives with an artistic twist, with the effect of offering various possible interpretations for the documented facts, avoiding drawing her own conclusions and leaving this responsibility to the members of the audience. An audience enlightened by these experiences becomes capable to transfer to it not only knowledge about the past, but also emotions, thus creating a cathartic response.

9. “Gianina Carburariu, the director-playwright”, *Routledge Companion for European Theatre*, due to be published 2022.

Cărbunariu's script for *Typographic. Upper Cases* was also used by film director Radu Jude for his production titled *Uppercase Print*, in which he added footage selected from the Romanian Public Television's Archive. The collation of this pieces of propaganda, illustrating the official narrative of the communist regime in Romania with the real story of an adolescent living in communist Romania, told by intentionally expressionless actors directly facing the camera, has a striking effect in this film. The brilliant juxtaposition proves Jude's high interest in reviving the archives with artistic means.

Another theatre production inspired by a real historic character – the torturer Ioan Ficior - and the journalistic investigations about him, is *The White Horse*, a spectacular one-woman show created by theatre director Ioana Păun and interpreted by actress Ilinca Manolache. Manolache plays all the characters in this true story, male and female, and she successfully embodies the ambiguity of a past who left disparate traces for us to collate and interpret.

These are examples of original creations emancipated as much as possible from prejudice and not impacted anymore by the direct suffering provoked by political trauma. Including the results of the archival research in new vibrant artistic productions meant to stand on their own merits is the sign of a healthy further step towards liberation from a past which has kept the artistic discourse on hold for most of the last thirty years' transition from a political system to another, as researcher Gabriel Andreescu believes.¹⁰

To come to a conclusion, while I believe the artists and the scholars should join forces in "getting as close as possible to that which will always be missing", I also believe that Arlette Farge is right about the responsibilities of the archive researcher – artist or scholar - and I am sure this responsibility, of not contradicting the facts discovered or operate outside the margins of truth, should function not only for scholars but also for artists. The ethical aspects of reviving the archives are essential for whomever is opening this "Pandora box", and this aspect deserves a separate article. But coming back to the artist/scholar dialectics, in order to conclude, Farge herself is quoting Michel Foucault who said in an interview: "I am well aware that I have never written anything but

10. Gabriel Andreescu, *Existența prin cultură: represiune, colaboraționism și rezistență intelectuală sub regimul comunist*, (*Existence through Culture: repression, collaborationism and intellectual resistance under the Communist regime*) Colecția Plural M (Iași: Polirom, 2015), 10.

fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth.”¹¹

“Make fiction function within the truth” can be the marching hymn for the archive researcher, no matter if she comes from the scholar or from the artistic field.

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11. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 193.