ARCHIVE ON FIRE: SPECTRAL MEMORIES AND DIGITAL PHANTOMS

Ramon Guillermo

ABSTRACT

In this brief essay, the author reflects on his experience of loss due to the destruction by fire of the University of the Philippines Diliman Faculty Center on April 1, 2016. This experience is described in terms of the so-called "spectrality of archives" which is a constant reminder that "what is now left is not everything there was." The spectrality of physical archives is then counterposed to the increasing digitization of information storage, taking off from Walter Benjamin's prescient ruminations on the difference between the informational and experiential relationship with the world. It ends with speculations on the possible future spectralization of digital phantoms.

KEYWORDS: *Archive, Digitality, University of the Philippines (UP) Faculty Center*

The destruction by fire of the University of the Philippines Diliman Faculty enter was a veritable disaster for academic and intellectual life in the Philippines.

UP professors, staff, and students woke up in shock in the early morning of April, 2016, to news that the building on campus many of them

considered their academic home was no more. Even in this country of typhoons, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, the FC, as we called it, seemed to be an indestructible feature of the UP Diliman's landscape. As if tempting fate, it was not at all equipped with any smoke detectors, sprinklers, or fire escapes. In service since 1969, the FC was made up of three floors packed with the offices of hundreds of faculty members. It housed the sediments of feverish intellectual activity of several generations of some of the best post-war nationalist scholars in the social sciences and humanities in the Philippines. The personal offices of historians, linguists, political scientists, and scholars in the humanities were packed with valuable, unique materials collected from painstaking decades of research on Philippine history, culture, and society. All went up in smoke. The fire also wiped out materials of inestimable importance for research on the lives of individual Filipino scholars, as well as the intellectual milieux they lived in.

Despite not being technically an archive, the tragedy illustrates the problem of maintaining underfunded and unprioritized archives and repositories in the Global South.

I myself had a rather large collection of books, papers, and personal effects in my office. Quite a few of these were rare, irreplaceable, or unique. Many of these also had personal stories attached to them. For example, there is the story of when I bought a very cheap and almost brand-new set of the three thick volumes of Marx's *Das Kapital*, known affectionately in German as "die Blauen Bände" (the blue volumes) from a young man selling them on a sidewalk in Hamburg. As I was walking away, the young man loudly told another bookseller on the pavement, "There goes another lost son of God!" and they laughed in seeming celebration. And I, "ein verlorener Sohn des Gottes," smiled to myself. Tragically, several books and valuable unpublished manuscripts and papers by my parents who were themselves UP academics and writers also happened to be stored in my office. Several days after the

ten-hour fire had been put out, faculty members and staff were allowed to enter the premises to sift through the ashes and look at what was left of their offices. Some of them posted pictures of the blackened remains of their former workplaces on social media. It seemed like only the twisted and half-molten forms of metal objects, like chair frames and typewriters, remained.

My own way of dealing with it was different. Despite having a morbid interest in how the fire started, I couldn't bring myself to go up to see my fire-gutted room on the third floor.

Why, unlike many of my other colleagues, didn't I want to see what was left of my library and papers? I found this hard to explain. There was a feeling much stronger than curiosity that held me back. I think that, more than the fear of finding nothing left, I was afraid of discovering among the ashes the burnt traces of things precious to me. I feared finding something which would be the final and unequivocal evidence of my personal archive's total destruction. One should admit that it was also some kind of cowardly refusal to face this loss. But even then, perhaps the bitter pill of closure was ultimately unnecessary.

Instead, I preferred recalling that warm March evening before the fire, when I perhaps fondly passed my hands over my books on the shelf and opened the door to go home. It still feels as if I had just left it, locked the door behind me for the last time, and never gone back. In this sense, it is not unlike many other places I used to inhabit but have never returned to. In my mind, everything remains where they were, like a room untouched many years after the departure of its occupant. Except that in this case, it is the room which has departed. It is a place which will never return. I still remember the placement of some of my books and papers on the shelves. I could imagine reaching up and taking a particular book and opening its pages. I may even see the words on the page, smell the paper, and feel its

texture. In my imagination, the print sometimes seem so vividly clear, as if I could read pages and pages if I just earnestly tried. Perhaps I could even see my own scribblings and illegible marginalia.

My incinerated library has thus become for me a spectral archive. It is like a ghost limb of a now irreversibly truncated mind. It is a reminder that what is now left is not everything there was. One could say that all archives have their spectral doubles. But it is only I who could intimately know, or more accurately, feel, what was lost. And even then, after a long enough period of time, one begins to doubt that there ever was significantly something more than what now remains with me.

A short analogy could be made with the experience of colonialism.

As opposed to the narrow colonial concept of the archive, every culture, even those persisting in the most inhospitable environmental conditions, would necessarily have ways of organizing, preserving, and transmitting its knowledge. Archivization is not necessarily a single event, but may be a continuous and partly contingent process. Everywhere it has gone, colonialism has meant a holocaust for indigenous archives. This is why a common image in many national historiographies has been the supposed burning of indigenous manuscripts and texts. In the Philippines, one reads of the supposed burning by Spanish friars of written materials in traditional scripts like *baybayin*. One of the main objectives of colonialism has always been to disrupt the cultural transmissibility of indigenous archives. The living archives of the colonized peoples were to be replaced as a whole by colonial archives, strictly governed according to purportedly scientific and positivistic principles. These colonial archives which are housed in the colonial metropolises are not meant for the colonized peoples. These contain mostly accounts of the exalted process of civilization, that is to say, they are accounts of the destruction of non-European civilizations. The necessary initial step

for the decolonizing intellectuals was to go through these colonial memories of destruction to reconstruct an image of what was destroyed. They had to go through the history of disarchivization to achieve a certain speculative rearchivization. They had to go through the colonial archive in order to get a glimpse of their own spectral archives. Though much more difficult to access, where indigenous archives have almost been completely destroyed, the spectral archives of colonized peoples continue to exert a dynamic regulative force on the subsequent post-colonial construction of properly national archives.

What then are spectral archives? It is that part of the archive which has been lost but lives on, supported in the belief that what has been left is not all there was. It may be that part of the lost archive that we know has been lost, or that part which has been lost but that we do not know. The former pertains to experience of loss, the latter to the structuring of experience around loss. As Jose Rizal once wrote in *Noli me Tangere* (1887), "imagination peoples the air with specters" (Derbyshire translation).

Like most of my other colleagues engaged in intellectual labor, I have, since the fire, once again begun the unavoidable process of rearchivization. Even against my will, my library and my papers are once again expanding. In light of past experience, eBooks seem to be a good option overall, but I decided that the books most important to me and my work should have physical copies aside from the digital ones. Above all, all important books and papers should have multiple digital copies, with the most important ones being stored in the cloud. It's worth mentioning that my previous office was also a sort of scanning station with quite an advanced machine for the time. However, a lot of my scanned data also perished in the hard drives, CD-ROMs, and other storage devices which also got burned.

A rational response to the threat of fire and other potential catastrophes is thus the increasing digitization of archives. This is the case today on a global scale when digital information is considered a more resilient

and reliable storage format. This is not because digital archives cannot be destroyed; it is simply because the increasingly dense and high-resolution information they contain is, by its very nature, replicable over numerous storage facilities situated in different locations with minimal to no loss.

My proportionally shrinking physical archive now traverses a path between the spectral one of memory and another one of immaterial digital phantoms. (One notes that while it is true that the physical storage of digital information is undoubtedly material, the digital objects conjured up from this information, like images of handwritten manuscripts or three-dimensional renditions of artifacts, must still be distinguished from actual physical objects themselves. It is only in this sense, that digital objects are considered "immaterial.") What then is the relationship between these different archives?

Following Walter Benjamin's formulations in the essay "The Storyteller" (1936), one could say that my relationship to the spectral archive is now a purely experiential one, while that with the digital archive is purely informational. With the former, there is a sense of lived experience combined with an almost complete lack of access to useful informational content. In contrast with this, a digital archive may provide purely informational content, but hardly any sense of directly lived experience with its objects as conventionally understood. Finally, the increasingly marginalized physical archive, in proportion to the digital one, still presents the older possibility of both an informational and experiential relation to its objects.

These two kinds of memory are also distinct. The spectral archive is not distinct from life. Here, life and archive both mutually shape and reshape each other. It operates like human memory, where inexplicable reminiscences arise at inconvenient moments, and things thought thoroughly mastered, like a foreign language, are slowly forgotten. In contrast with the former,

the digital archive is, in principle, a more stable and unshifting entity. Like an external memory card, it can be inserted and removed at will. The spectral archive is essentially personal, and will inevitably break down as the individual ages. On the other hand, the digital archive is, in theory, infinitely replicable and transmissible, and can therefore theoretically persist and survive through time without any deterioration. However, once thoroughly scrubbed and wiped clean, data from digital archives are practically rendered instantly irrecoverable. There will be no traces left even in the most forgetful of human memories.

As physical archives contract in comparison with digital archives, what will be the fate of spectral archives?

Lacking an experiential dimension, pure information cannot attain spectrality by itself. For this, it is necessary that the data of information come into an experiential relationship with a human subject.

Benjamin wrote in his essay "Unpacking my Library" (1931), that it is not the objects that he or she has collected which live in the collector, but it is rather the collector who lives in them. This is perhaps another way of saying that the collector or archivist lives in his or her own spectral archive. However, unlike physical or spectral archives, digital archives have no interiority that one can figuratively inhabit. There is no gap in the space of seamless binary information that one can enter. In terms of space, one can imagine digital archives as a vast completely flat surface stretching out in two dimensions. One can lose access to digital archives, but one cannot literally enter them. Indeed, the ubiquitous "Enter" key on computer keyboards is quite an interesting topic. It is something like a metaphor for a three-dimensional object entering a two-dimensional space, suddenly appearing as if from nowhere. As there is no "up" or "down" in this Flatland, there is no inside or outside in digitality.

Nevertheless, given contemporary advances in virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and human-machine interfaces which can increasingly produce better simulations of three-dimensionality, one cannot discount the possibility that a sense of interiority in digital spaces can be generated experientially. However, such an experiential relationship with digital objects would certainly be quite different from one obtained through objects in physical archives. For one thing, while experiences with physical objects always point to their innate inexhaustibility or to a certain unsounded depth, infinitely replicable simulated digital objects, no matter how large and rich in information, always contain no more and no less than their currently assigned file sizes. The strange thing is that even after the last digital copy of an image has been deleted, our relationship with it has already been irreversibly structured by the principle of its theoretically infinite replicability and not by its purported uniqueness. We encounter it as one copy of a potentially infinite number of copies and not as something that appears to us only once in this world.

Due to future technological advances, our emerging experiential relationship with digital objects will most likely eventually enter into spectrality. But this will definitely be a different kind of spectrality. When digital objects are lost in massive future electronic conflagrations, by nuclear holocaust or cyber warfare or other catastrophes, will the immaterial infinitely replicable digital phantoms in their turn become faint specters in human memory? Faced with the spectralization of phantoms, will we still feel that there was really something more than what now remains? Would it still be possible to feel this sense of heart-rending loss?

(This essay was read as the keynote lecture for the Ateneo de Manila University - Chinese University of Hong Kong Academic Exchange Program held last May 8, 2024.)