

# THE IMAGINARY OF INTELLECTUAL KNOWLEDGE IN READING GESTURES AND AUTHORIAL GESTURES OF ARCHIVES

## memory, digital archives and metallic memory

BETHANIA MARIANI  
UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL FLUMINENSE

**Abstract** – This article aims at discussing the notion of archive in relation to the notions of memory and metallic memory. The materialist Discourse Analysis is the theoretical framework for this reflection. The discussion proposes the shift from the traditional assumption of archive to the notion that is conceived discursively, in other words, archive in its infinity and incompleteness, and memory in its hole-making process. Reading archives is to come across symptoms of an era: archive as a material record of hegemonic gestures of interpretation, either contradictory or silenced. Currently, with the advent of the digital medium, electronic archives create the illusion that it would be possible to find and read everything. The concept of metallic memory (Orlandi 1996) is crucial to understand the effects that these archives produce, especially in the academic environment.

**Keywords:** archive; discourse analysis; memory; digital archive; metallic memory.

## 1. Conversation scenario

The notions of archive and memory, when side by side, can generate the illusion of the transparency of language, of the completeness of the subject, and of a flawless memory. Nowadays, this illusion is enlarged when we think of digital archives, which imply new ways of reading and inscribing the subject. The digital mode points toward other ways of organizing evidence of what should be rememberable, of what should be seen, accessed and given meaning.

The starting point of this article is the theoretical field of materialist Discourse Analysis. I speak from a conceptualization of discourse that, according to Michel Pêcheux (1969 [1990]), is defined as “the effect of meanings between interlocutors”. This theoretical position implies considering: 1) language as a material basis in which the processes of meaning production are inscribed, and meanings are conceived as a ‘relation to’; 2) language, as a material basis, is constitutive of historical-ideological processes and vice-versa, that is, there is no language without historical-ideological processes, without power relations, and there are no power relations outside of language; 3) memory, as a condition of the readable (Orlandi 1992), is constituted by the oblivion of what one does not want to remember; therefore, it is a memory full of holes, with pits through which other meanings, censored or not, can leak; and finally 4) the subject as interpellated by ideology and divided by the unconscious. It is a theory of discourse established in relations with three fields of knowledge production: linguistics, historical materialism and psychoanalysis.

This is the starting point for the reflection on the notions of archive (digital) and memory, considering the theoretical field of Discourse Analysis. This presentation will be divided into three parts (or moments).

At first, I will address the archive as discursivity. For this purpose, I will make a distinction between the concept that derives from archival science and the notion of the

treatment of archives from a discursive point of view, which leads us to another concept, that of discursive memory (Achard et al. 1983 [1999]; Payer 2020).

The second part will focus on a discussion of the notion of archive in an electronic environment. We will work on the possibilities and impossibilities that the digital medium brings, especially when we think about intellectual work and technical work.

At last, as a provocation, I would like to bring some of the reflections I have been developing in terms of what I call “impossible archives”.

## 2. Archive, discourse, memory

In a neighborhood in Paris named Marais, there is a street called *Rue des Archives*. With a denomination that clearly demonstrates the singularity of a literate culture so marked by writing and the need to preserve its memory, the *Rue des Archives* highlights and materializes the illusion and desire to ensure the presence and completeness of the past in the urban space of Paris, as the plural noun archives expresses. ‘Preservation’ is a term used by those who deal with archives, which already points out an exclusion from what is at stake in this article: there is no archive in itself, or a priori, without the act of reading from which it has emerged.

When I read *Les Archives*, a simple and dense book written by Jean Favier, published in the late 1950s, part of the *Que sais-je* collection, I managed to have a better understanding of the historical, constitutive process of acts of reading aimed at preserving the ‘traces’ of man. According to Favier, “since men knew how to record in durable materials the acts necessary for their social life, for their economic activities, for their private life, in short, for utilitarian purposes, they have conserved these documents, thus creating archives, confused most of the time with the collection of literary, religious or documentary texts that made up the early libraries.” (Favier 2001 [1958], p. 7, translated to Portuguese from the original in French, later translated into English).

According to this archival science’s constitutive conceptualization, the notion of archive points to the possibility of storing public or private facts produced in the past and, therefore, points to the possibility of recovering origins or, in other words, recovering a remote history. Such history, once revealed and conserved, could placate this desire to preserve everything, to keep everything in memory. A memory without forgetting, or rather, as Derrida remarks in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, archives could find the solution to “*the absolute impatience of a desire for memory*,” so characteristic of humans. (Derrida 2001 [1995], p. 9).

Favier presented a definition not far from what an educated person without much critical reading on the topic may adopt about what an archive is. “Archives are the set of documents received or created by an institutional or moral person, or by a public or private organization, resulting from its activity, organized as a consequence of such activity and preserved for the sake of an occasional use.” (Favier 2001 [1958], p. 3) As the author himself points out, the target of the notion has been expanded in contemporary times, especially due to technological innovations. As a result, just as handwritten texts (old or modern) and printed texts (originals or copies), images (photographic or cinematographic) and sound (as sound production of different human activities) have also turned out to be considered archives.

In his long timeline on the ways archives are constituted, a history told from the formation of archives in Egyptian temples following to contemporary days, Favier emphasizes the great internal effort of archival science to define its boundaries, to establish criteria, and, ultimately, to delineate a work aimed at effective self-organization for the sake

of these “human traces”. The act of cataloging, distributing and classifying leads to the production of archival guides, inventories, repertoires, indexes, etc., instruments produced in the illusion of completeness and transparency, as if cataloging could make it possible to totalize an archive. An archive without flaws, without faults... in such a project of an archive without faults, one seeks to domesticate the fact of language, a fruitless attempt to control its equivocal materiality, and, by doing so, to erase the gestures of the one who operated the cataloging, etc.

The historian Elizabeth Roudinesco, in her book *Analysis and the Archive* (2006), discusses “this crazy idea according to which we can archive everything” pointing out, precisely, to the fact that, according to this belief, “blind obedience to the positivity of the archive, to its absolute power, leads both to an impossibility of history and to a refusal of the archive. In other words, the excessive cult of the archive ends up in accounting (quantitative history) devoid of imagination (...)” (Roudinesco 2006, p.9). It is exactly by the use of great imagination that Borges, in his short story *Funes, el memorioso* (1944), offers us clues to think about the tension that establishes the supposed power of the archive, producing this kind of cult, and the oblivion that necessarily constitutes it.

This enormous work of building archives with this quantitative characteristic, this gigantic volume, is supported by some central pillars, which deserve important criticism: the very act of cataloging and a certain conception of language, which produces an effect of evidence of what documents are. Regarding those two pillars, there is silence on what is at stake both for the one who archives, and for the one who will ‘operate’ on the finished archive. In other words, silencing of what I have designated, based on Pêcheux, gestures of reading, or rather, gestures of interpretation practiced by the subject who acts in the position of organizing the archive and by the subject who will work with the archive.

Anyone who has worked with archives has already “felt firsthand” how each classification/cataloging engenders opaque and unifying systems, constituted according to their historical conditions of production, and focused on themselves, enigmatic to someone who is uninitiated. In fact, archives, in this organization of a mass of text, are subject to pre-existing cataloging and codes. A cataloging record follows specific procedures to create a description, such as the author’s name, title and subject. The topic must be framed in key terms that are based on prior evidence of what the possible subjects would be. This intense technical work is carried out under the illusion of autonomy of codes and transparency of language. When I applied for a catalogue record for my master’s thesis, I was not able to include any of the words which, from the author’s point of view, would be appropriate. I was advised to “choose” from a set of words previously selected by the librarian.

The concept of a document in archival science is strongly linked to a certain way of dealing with History, which assumes the possibility of reconstructing the past from an inert material, the documentary text. This technical procedure, which supports the historian’s work of exegesis, in turn, is consistent with a concept of transparency of language. Consequently, we can suppose that researchers reach an archive and manages to exhaust a set of documents, that is, to have access to, read and interpret the set of documents relevant to their research. Does this mean that they have exhausted their research topic? Or does it mean that they have read the gesture of the archivist who selected what should belong to that archive?

The organization of an archive results from gestures of interpretation carried out under the illusion of the researcher's autonomy. To this extent, an archive results both from historically produced administrative determinations, which politically regulate what should be remembered in a social formation, and also from ideological and unconscious determinations that operate by challenging the researcher’s position as an archivist. An archive is not a closed and autonomous entirety. An archive is inexhaustible. The

assumption that an archive is complete means that one is captured by the gesture of those who organized the archive<sup>1</sup>.

In *To read the archive today* (1982), Pêcheux discusses the work of organizing archives, the control of utterances, and the selective erasure of historical memory as practices that go hand in hand. In discursive terms, we understand that, if, on the one hand, when we enter an archive, we read the archivist's gestures of interpretation, on the other hand, we can introduce a labyrinthine aspect into what is being read there precisely to prevent us from getting lost in evidence constructed elsewhere. And this is the interesting point: we construct an archive that is possible for research. Actually, when we begin to research a given topic, and open the first drawer (or the first electronic file) of a cataloging system, we are merely beginning to establish a series of interrelations between the materials that make up the archive. Associations are made in such a way that the researcher can be carried away by them, but not get lost in the tangle of manuscripts and printed materials and websites that he or she comes across. If such associations are made, pointing to the dynamic and incomplete nature of any archive, it is fundamentally caused by an opaque perspective that the researcher must have as well.

By handling the text, that is, by reading the textual signifiers the researcher has the opportunity for the accomplishment of this game of references, allowing the researcher to understand that in an archive there is nothing more than discursivity in a latent state, in fact, processes of production of meanings in the relationship between language (in the game between what is said and what is not said), historical-ideological processes and memory/oblivion. In other words, in the set of archived texts, and in the set of readings that the researcher accomplishes, from a discursively theorized position, he/she comes across a spreading of processes of production of meanings, and it is up to the researcher, in function of his/her questions and objectives, to cut out and organize the networks of utterances relevant to the focused theme.

Consequently, in an archive the researcher comes across texts that intertwine when exposed to his/her reading look along the research. And if this gaze is not deceived by an apparent transparency and by the construction of evidences, if it is a look that does not allow any deception, also supported by the amount of material available, it will find other texts, it will have the opportunity to be caught by utterances; in short, it will make discoveries, associations, notes and afterwards, occasionally, forget them, or start over again with new discoveries, associations and notes successively. By casting a look that is not only determined (in its double meaning: determined by its objectives and with the determination – tenacity – of someone who stands in a researcher's position) but also wandering, the researcher will approach other texts, and will select them, often without even knowing exactly the reason for such selection.

In short, I understand that when the researchers face their archive, based on their objectives, they are doubtlessly supported by theoretical mediation, but they are also affected by readings marked by the place from which they speak, with all its implications, because this place from which one speaks is also the place where one forgets. Thus, working with a reading of archives – dealing with institutionalized memory – is also working with our own discursivity, with our own failures and desires.

At this point we want to highlight the fact that in the act of reading an archive for research purposes, we go beyond what is supposed to constitute the archive itself. As the

<sup>1</sup> As an example, we can mention the administration of archives in the Social and Political Order Department (*Departamento de Ordem Política e Social - DOPS*) in force during the dictatorship in Brazil. Liberation (always partial) of the archives by DOPS that has been happening in the last two decades was out of the question thirty years ago, when censorship prohibited interpretation of the military dictatorship period.

philosopher Luiz Orlandi states, working with an archive “allows us to glimpse that, at each present moment, at each current instant, we are taken by an intersection in which what we believe we know about ourselves coexists with what we are becoming, although we do not know yet what it is. It is as if each current situation, as if each space-time configuration were a complex place of clashes and simultaneous emissions of signs that we seek to decipher, either as signs of our retentions, our restraints, our blockages, our insufficiencies, or as signs of resistance or differential assertions announcing solutions.” (Orlandi 2006, p. 151)

This reflection becomes even deeper when we include the inescapable theoretical fact, as Pêcheux states, “that constitutes language as a specific materiality” (Pêcheux 1982, p. 61). A materiality that constitutes our unconscious thought and that, consequently, is at the root of the intersection mentioned above: in the labyrinth and in the opaque look there emerges the game between remembering and forgetting, between what is familiar and what is strange, between what one imagines one is reading and the disconcerting mistakes that send us into what we do not know in ourselves. The mistake is structural, it constitutes the language and constitutes the subjectivity of the researcher.

The materiality of language is in the archive, constituting “the contradictory plurality of historical affiliations” (Pêcheux 1982). That is the reason why I mentioned the researcher’s look should be non-totalizing; it should be an opaque and wandering look, a look that allows itself to being caught by the signifying networks that circulate in an archive, and allows itself to be interrogated by its own signifiers.

## **2.1. The social division of reading labor and the present day**

Pêcheux, in his abovementioned article, discusses how throughout the history of ideas, two *cultures* were molded and went on establishing antagonistic traditions. Written in the 1980s of the 20th century, he refers to the French school-university environment, but I think we can extend the reflection to the academic environment of Letters in general, within the scope of the 21st century.

According to Pêcheux, the two cultures or traditions have produced an antagonism. On the one hand, there are “professionals in reading archives”, such as “historians, philosophers or professionals of letters” who practice their own readings and build their own congregations with their research archives. On the other hand, there follows the development of methods aimed at managing huge textual archives. The latter group, constituted in relation to the former, is linked to the growing studies on artificial logical languages – the dream of a language devoid of ambiguities and mistakes – which subsidize the development of the digital world with the creation of *software devices* increasingly sophisticated to deal with textual masses. Pêcheux calls the former the *literary*<sup>2</sup> trend, that is, the group which includes those who can legitimately make interpretations. The second trend, which presupposes a mathematics-oriented reading, carried out by machines, is denominated *scientific* by Pêcheux (Pêcheux 1982, p. 60, 61). Both trends characterize “a social division of the work of reading” – some responsible for the operations of the machines

<sup>2</sup> This first trend, called “literary” culture by Pêcheux, is subdivided into ways of reading, organized around “founding proper names” and struggling (producing antagonisms or alliances) in debates on themes and working methods. In general, in this trend, the archive is understood as a set of factual documents produced with transparent language, and reading as a way of literal apprehension of the document. But, as we have seen, there is no literal reading when we consider language in its opacity. And, furthermore, an archive is not complete in terms of apprehending a set of documents. For Pêcheux, what is at stake are “underlying reading gestures in the construction of archives” as well as the reading gestures of the researcher him/herself when reading the previously constituted archives.

and some others entitled to the noble right to interpretation. According to Pêcheux, the gap between the two trends widens because of the *literati's* inability to understand the *mathematics-oriented scientists' work*.

By criticizing both approaches, Pêcheux introduces the “theoretical fact that constitutes the existence of language as a specific materiality”; it is a theoretical fact ignored by both. In other words, in both approaches, the illusion of the transparency of the senses and the forgetfulness that, whoever the reader is, he or she is affected by the division of the unconscious and by ideological interpellation that produces effects leading to the dissemination of meanings that are more accurate than others. Pêcheux tells us that there is a risk of producing “patrolling of statements, an aseptic normalization of reading and thought, and a selective deletion of the historical memory (...)” (Pêcheux 1982, p. 60).

Considering this ‘cultural divorce’ between the two trends, Pêcheux points out the need to establish “*a polemical space between ways of reading*”. If we consider that archives constitute “a contradictory plurality of historical affiliations” and co-related understandings, reading the archive is to carry out “a description of the work of the archive as a relationship between the archive and itself, in a series of conjunctures, work of historical memory in everlasting confrontation with itself” (Pêcheux 1982, p. 57).

Consequently, from a discursive viewpoint, we understand that when researchers read archives, they deal with reading gestures that manage political, technical, legal and ethical aspects of processes of signification related to their historical period. Such gestures include the manipulation of software devices that simulate scientific objectivity in the organization of the archive.

In any archive, the inscription of what can and cannot be said/read is a result of the historical and ideological conditions of its institutionalization and its insertion in memory networks. Thus, in the organization of any archive, there are reading gestures of those who organized it with or without the help of technology. A researcher copes with meanings placed to be read and repeated (whatever is canonical, hegemonic) at the current constitution/selection/administration of what enters the archive, and which, to that extent, can be repeated in the future; repressed, silenced, prohibited meanings are also there. Here is an example from personal experience: computerization is also available in the Torre do Tombo and the National Library, in Lisbon. This procedure means that researchers can look up “whatever they want” on the computer, with a librarian’s initial assistance. Different ways can be used to carry out the search, using: the author, the title of printed work, archive collection and keywords. However, for a researcher interested in the keywords ‘language policy’, ‘Brazilian language’, ‘Brazilian Portuguese’ and in models of keywords of this nature, the search will be fruitless, since such possibilities are not registered as possibilities of meanings previously inscribed in the program used.

Considering the inescapable fact of language materiality in understanding the archive as discursiveness implies understanding that no archival administration is infallible. Something will always be out of control. Some other reading gesture can always be inscribed without the institution's knowledge, producing contradictory, unexpected effects. Meanings always leak out.

Based on Pêcheux, we propose that the gestures of organizing archives carry the symptoms of the time when they were organized, and the researcher comes across these symptoms in order to read, analyze, and interpret. Reading the symptoms is reading the prohibitions, or, in other words, the ideological gesture of the archive organizer, as in my case when searching the National Library of Lisbon for the keywords ‘brazilian language’ and ‘brazilian portuguese’. When I was there (Mariani 2016), I decided to test this illusion of completeness effect and, by looking up ‘brazilian language’ and ‘brazilian portuguese’ as keywords in this digitalized collection, all I had as a reply was “nothing found”.

A researcher does not proceed to read documents taken in themselves with a transparent language, but instead, he/she will come across the reading gestures of the archiving processes, the selections, the inclusions, and the exclusions. Furthermore, he or she will encounter the specific materiality of language.

### **3. Archive, metallic memory and digital media: discursive perspectives**

With the advent of electronic cataloging and digitalization, the ways archives are constituted and circulated start a new historical movement, with an expansion of the effects of evidence, completeness, omnipotence of the gesture of the archiver, and transparency of language. As proposed by Dias (2018, p. 18, 2020), understanding the digital medium as something that is not restricted to a form of technological production, the digital represents “a condition of political-ideological production of discourse, as a condition and means of production and reproduction of capitalist forms of existence”. Pêcheux, in the abovementioned article, written in 1982, already warned about the irreversibility of the digital medium and about the “reductive risks of information technology” (Pêcheux 1982, p. 57).

In the electronic archives available in libraries and various collections, there is an illusion of organization according to an apparently unequivocal logic, which would allow everything to be found in terms of memory. What the digital produces as an effect of this illusion of organization is a saturation for certain meanings. As it has already been remarked, what is at stake is a political issue inscribed in the constitution of any archive. And gestures of resistance by the researcher also come into play.

If whoever can be regarded as an instance of the exercise of public power (the authorized readers) is the one entitled to command, organize and decide what can be read and how it should be read, there are also the reading gestures by the researcher, who can always ask about what cannot be found, about the absence that also signifies.

Dealing with newspapers and periodicals (such as *Veja* magazine and newspaper *O Globo*'s website *Memória*, in Brazil), which build digital collections under this illusion of completeness and transparency, the researcher can always ask him/herself about what was determined to be read as memory and what was left out. (Romão *et al.* 2011). One other example: At the same time (2014), in another search, when trying to access the Jesuit archives in the Vatican Library, I discovered that most of them are computerized in Latin, which produces an initial opacity for those who do not know this language.

Ideology operates on this effect of transparency, as if it were obvious that some documents should be digitalized, that some words should function as keywords, that a certain language should be the only one for access. It is up to the researcher to ask about the contradictions, the silences, the absences, the gesture of interpretation that determined what can be digitalized and how it should be digitalized. It is up to the researcher to ask how was the process of fixing certain meanings, certain knowledge, and certain memories took place.

In 1996, Orlandi proposed naming ‘metallic memory’ the memory that results from the functioning of technical and electronic constructs. Metallic memory, according to her, operates horizontally, by accumulation, by quantity. In fact, metallic memory in the functioning of metallic files in the constitution of the electronic archive, resulting from the computerization of archives, produces infinite repeatability, and more illusions about the stability and transparency of the senses and a very effective policy of local silencing.

In addition to accumulation, “metallic memory also concerns the functioning of the media itself, a technical construct that also has its filters and works with the volume of information and its global repercussion by means of repetition and reproduction.” (Orlandi

1996). And she goes on: “The excess, the volume, meanings of serial repetition, empty the utterance, subjecting it to a technical existence, replicable on the axis of circulation itself. Hence, we use the expressions most often appreciated, most often shared, the trending topics, which are formulated by the replicable number of utterances. The meaning is related to the order of number, not to the historicity of these utterances.” (Orlandi 1996).

On the other hand, the digital medium can provide the availability of silenced archives, marginalized archives, previously invisible archives. The digital medium opens up as another space to make utterances about oneself and about the other. A good example are the websites and blogs of Brazilian *favelas*, such as those of Complexo da Maré (<https://favelastoriesbr.wordpress.com>). In any case, in this vast world that makes up the Internet, the imaginary of completeness expands under the illusion that ‘anyone can say everything’, establishing an abundance of utterances, indiscretions, gossip. Consequently, other questions arise, always linked to the gestures of interpretation considered legitimate by the power instances: which archives would be more respectable, more serious, more truthful? And I will not even get into the topic of the circulation of misinformation (fake news, *fausses nouvelles*).

#### 4. In conclusion: digital archive and academic (im)possibilities

With the advent of information technologies and the arrival of desktop publishing in the early 1970s in the last century, this irreversible movement produced impactful changes in the way science is produced and in the way it circulates. Science and technology have gone hand in hand in a development linked to capitalist consumption practices. Regarding specifically scientific journals, the computerization of all stages of the editorial process, initially announced as the possibility of reducing production costs and increasing speed, democratization and access to the circulation of knowledge, ended up by generating excessive productivism. However, large publishing platforms, such as Elsevier, have been buying libraries and journal collections. Such practice establishes a commercialization of knowledge: one pays to publish; one pays to read a scientific article. Opposing movements, such as those of open access and open science, keep on resisting this commercialization.

Metrics, such as those that measure the performance of researchers and journals, such as the Google Scholar H-index or websites that measure the citation index, generate data that feed university rankings and increasingly encourage the ideology of productivity, false transparency and integrity. Currently, the idea of transmitting knowledge is linked to these indexes and metrics. And in these new archives built on the production of knowledge - archives that measure indexing, the number of citations - we find in Scientometrics<sup>3</sup> the current gestures of knowledge management.

The more often it is said, cited and replicated, in a short period of time (let us remember the H5 index, for example, which measures the latest five years of scientific production), the greater value is attributed to the researcher or to the journal. As E. Albano mentions, “the university has been surrendering to a global publishing market” that feeds “the transmission of orthodoxies and fuels inequalities.” (Albano 2021). Competitiveness and scientific impact indices ended up by generating *fast science*, which, as Zoppi Fontana (2012) states, affects “the social [and academic] legitimacy of scientific practices”.

If, on the one hand, our academic environment is immersed in the digital

<sup>3</sup> “Scientometrics” – the new discipline that aims to systematize academic evaluation metrics – absolute rigor and impartiality in the analysis of academic production” (Albano 2021)



environment, which feeds *fast science*, on the other hand, professors build their websites, publish their scientific articles in digitalized academic journals and, acting as bloggers and on social media, they disseminate their own research to society. Thus, other gestures of resistance are created, enabling a differentiated use of the technologies.

**Bionote:** Bethania Mariani is a full professor of Linguistics in the Department of Language Sciences and the Postgraduate Programme in Language Studies at the *Universidade Federal Fluminense*, Brazil. Her theoretical field is materialist discourse analysis and her research focuses on political discourse, the discursivity of memory and testimonies. She is a researcher at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNPq, with a level 1B grant) and the Rio de Janeiro State Research Foundation (FAPERJ, with a Scientist of Our State grant). She recently published ‘*Langue de pierre: l’offense dans le discours politique*’, in *Discours, langage et pouvoir* (2024, Éditions Makunaima); ‘*Écoute discursive*’, in *Dialogues avec analystes du discours* (2023, Editora Pontes, [https://www.neplev.com.br/files/ugd/9e9c35\\_41a6156a40fd477d900a1a0d42b13aa6.pdf](https://www.neplev.com.br/files/ugd/9e9c35_41a6156a40fd477d900a1a0d42b13aa6.pdf)) and *Testemunhos de resistência e revolta* (2022, Editora Pontes). <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3869834050601414>.

**Author’s address:** [bmariani@id.uff.br](mailto:bmariani@id.uff.br)

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