

**IMAGES OUT OF TIME:
ARCHIVAL SPECTRES IN DANIEL BLAUFUKS' AS IF**

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Resumo: Despite the “structuring absence of Derrida within film theory” (Brunnette and Willis 1988) diagnosed a few decades ago, recent inquiries on the notion of “spectrality” have been steadily unearthing the French thinker’s contribution to the theoretical study of film. In his sparse considerations on the subject, Derrida declared the cinematic experience to partake of ‘spectrality’, the materiality of film projection to be a ‘phantom’, and the cinematic image as being ‘through and through spectral’. Similar formulations arise in his seminal *Archive Fever*, where he claims that “the structure of the archive is spectral”, and that through the archive “the phantom continues to speak”. This common spectrality of film and archive, couched in their capacity to reproduce a moment of inscription, becomes a critical issue within the current archival economy of memory in which filmmakers and artists increasingly turn to the archive. This paper will discuss the relation between spectrality and the archive through Daniel Blaufuks’ installation film *As If* (2014). Drawing from Derrida’s considerations, the paper will argue that the film foregrounds a reconceptualization of the archive in a digitally networked world, wherein memory is increasingly shaped by appropriation, recursiveness, and the uncontrollable reassembling of the old into the new.

Palavras-Chave: Archive; spectrality; visual memory; Jacques Derrida; Daniel Blaufuks.

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It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life
occupy the same space, as if future events already existed
and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at
last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly
arrive in a certain house at a given time.

W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Amongst the manifold ways the past keeps bearing effects upon the present, the archival image has certainly gained momentum. While a growing concern with the epistemological operations of the archive can be traced back at least to the post-war period, the archival image – both photographic and filmic – has attained a renewed and unequivocal significance in contemporary visual practices, from film to television and video art. If the “archival turn” has indeed

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become widespread in cultural production, distinctive and hitherto neglected implications for filmic creation must however be borne in mind. Defined by Ann Laura Stoler as a “sustained engagement with archives as cultural artifacts” (2002, 87), the archival turn implies a critical reflection upon the archive as a site of knowledge production and not a mere extractive source of information. The archival turn thus presupposes a shift from the archive-as-source to the archive-as-subject, an approach to the archive that moves beyond its storing functions to consider its discursive and epistemological implications.

More than a reproduction of images of the past for illustrative purposes, at stake in contemporary filmmaking is a fascination with archival images (in line with the “archive fever” diagnosed by Jacques Derrida) and simultaneously a critical interrogation of their epistemological gaps, their conditions of production, and their role in shaping the memory of historical events. Within the archival economy of contemporary visual practices, the archive is not a mere storage of memory, but a shifting and transformative process that shapes and impacts the images through which the past is recalled and reenvisioned in the present.

This paper focuses on the archival economy of contemporary visual memory and wishes to interrogate the way the archive is not only appropriated but also constituted as a problem through contemporary film practices. My interest in this question is twofold: on the one hand, the social and cultural implications of the centrality of the archive in film practices (to phrase it shortly, why the archive now, in this specific historical moment); and on the other, how this archival economy shapes the image-making process and film practices in particular (in other words, what happens to the film image under this new archival regime).

A notion that may bridge these two concerns, the cultural and technological one, to put it this way, is that of the “spectral”, understood as a trope and a “conceptual metaphor” (Blanco and Peeren 2013). Unlike the “ghost”, the “spectre” invites an etymological linkage to visibility and vision, to that which is both looked at – as a mesmerizing spectacle – and looking –

in the sense of inspecting –, suggesting its suitability to explore phenomena related to visuality, and more specifically to the film image. In 2001, Roger Luckhurst coined the term “spectral turn” to describe the new and sustained interest in questions of haunting, ghostliness and spectrality ever since Jacques Derrida’s publication of *Spectres of Marx* in 1991. While in 1989, in their book *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory*, Peter Brunette and David Willis could still claim that Derrida’s influence on film studies had been “minimal” (1988, 3), more conceivable as a “structuring absence”, today his influence on film theory, in the wake of his considerations on spectrality, is finally becoming visible (Burchill 2009; Holland 2015). And this despite the fact that Derrida never wrote a text on cinema, privileging, as he himself admitted many times, a systematic thinking on the *logos*. He did, however, write about a particular film – Safaa Fathy’s *Derrida’s Elsewhere* (1999) – in addition to appearing as both actor and subject in three films as well as in a fiction film playing himself, Ken McMullen’s *Ghost Dance* (1983), which is precisely where Derrida would deliver his most famous formulation of cinema’s affinity with what he terms “spectrality”. In this well known scene in *Ghost Dance*, interviewed by Pascale Ogier, Derrida first declares he himself to be a ghost, alluding to the fact that, when filmed and aware of the image’s vocation to be reproduced in one’s absence, one is haunted in advance by one’s future death in such a way that, even before “ ‘re-appearing’ on the screen”, one is already “spectralized” by the camera, as he would later put it in his conversations with Stiegler (1996, 131). Then, after adding that being haunted by ghosts consists in the memory of something never having had the form of being-present, Derrida sets down a much debated formula: “Cinema plus psychoanalysis equals a science of ghosts”. Fourteen years after his apparition in McMullen’s film, Derrida would regret the improvised and imprecise nature of this formulation, and expand on these reflections in an interview he gave to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, in 2001. Asked about the relation between cinema and spectrality, Derrida replies in this interview that the “cinematic experience partakes, in its every aspect, of spectrality (...). The spectre, neither living nor dead, is where a thinking about cinema (*un pensée du cinema*) could be possible”. He then goes on to

distinguish the cinematic rendition of spectrality in the form of the Gothic or horror film, from what he calls “the spectral structure of the cinematographic image itself”, alluding to a technological apparatus that is spectral in its operations. Later in the interview, asked if he were to write about something specific about cinema, what would have it been, his answer was:

If I were to write about cinema, what would interest me the most would be its mode and regime of *belief*. There is a modality of belief in cinema that is absolutely singular (...). In cinema, one believes without believing. Because the spectral dimension is neither that of the living nor of the dead, neither that of the hallucination nor of the perception, this modality of belief must be analysed in an absolutely original fashion. This phenomenology wouldn't be possible before cinema because this experience of belief is tied to a particular technology, which is historical through and through. This is why cinema's vision is so rich. *It makes it possible to see new spectres while storing in memory (and projecting them onto the screen) the ghosts haunting the films already seen.* (2001, 78, translation and emphasis mine)²

This phenomenology of cinema, couched in a spectral technology that brings the dead back to life, thus generating an unprecedented modality of belief, is further complicated if we think of films which incorporate archival imagery. In fact, in his lecture entitled *Archive Fever*, Derrida also claims that “the structure of the archive is spectral”, and that through the archive “the phantom continues to speak” (1998, 84). This common spectrality of film and archive lies in their capacity to reproduce a moment of inscription, their technological aptitude to inscribe an historical experience that can be indefinitely repeated after its occurrence and material imprint. As Derrida claimed in McMullen's

² Original version: “Si j'écrivais sur le cinéma, ce qui m'intéresserait surtout serait son mode et son régime de *croissance*. Il ya au cinéma une modalité du croire tout a faire singulière: on a inventé, il y a un siècle, une expérience sans précédent de la croyance (...). Au cinéma, on croit sans croire, mais ce croire sans croire reste un croire. (...) Puisque la dimension spectrale n'est ni celle du vivant, ni celle du mort, ni celle de l'hallucination ni celle de la perception, la modalité du croire qui s'y rapporte doit être analysée d'une façon absolument originale. Cette phénoménologie-là n'étant pas possible avant le cinématographe car cette expérience du croire est liée à une technique particulière, celle du cinéma, elle est historique de part en part. (...) C'est par cela que la vision du cinéma este tellement riche. Elle permet de voir apparaître de nouveaux spectres tout en gardant en mémoire (et de les projeter alors sur l'écran à leur tour) les fantômes hantant les films déjà vus.”

film, “the ghosts do not come, they return”; but this return is always differential and reproductive in its capacity to produce new meanings.

Within the current archival economy of memory, in which filmmakers increasingly turn to the archive, the spectrality of film and archival technologies complicate the temporality of cinematic experience. As Laura Mulvey argued, films resorting to archival footage, in their process of reassembling the old into the new, have a “double time structure”, often making a traumatic image bear on the present of spectatorship (2007, 109-110). If the cinematic image is already spectral, as it captures forever something that is bound to disappear but that can be reproduced indefinitely, archival films reinforce the spectrality of the film experience, by juxtaposing the temporality of the first cinematic inscription, the temporality of its appropriation, and the temporality of spectatorship. Daniel Blaufuks’ most recent film, *As If*, foregrounds and confuses this time structure by revisiting a Nazi propaganda film and juxtaposing it with present images taken by himself at a former Nazi site. In fact, *As If* follows up on an earlier film entitled *Terezín* (2007), in which the artist slowed down and tinted that very same Nazi propaganda film of Theresienstadt known as *The Führer Gives the Jews a Town*.³ Because only parts of the film were recovered after the war, Blaufuks’ video slowed down the remaining footage to recuperate the supposed original length, in an attempt to reconstitute the original temporality of the Nazi image-world. By slowing down the surviving footage, *Terezín* accentuates the temporality of the appropriation of the archival imagery and the singularity of repetition inherent to the reception of these images in the present. While trying to recuperate the original viewing experience, Blaufuks’ film radically disturbs it, emphasizing its own appropriative gesture.

³ The official title of the film was *Theresienstadt. Ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet* (*Terezín: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settlement Area*). According to Karel Margry (1996), the apocryphal title was used with irony by the inhabitants of Theresienstadt themselves, many of whom were forced to act in the film and deported to Auschwitz shortly after the end of the film shootings. The title was referred to so often in survivors’ testimonies that it became more recurrent than the official one.

This gesture is resumed in Daniel Blaufuks' most recent film, whose title, *As If*⁴, seems to conjure Derrida's reflections on cinematic belief. In this 4 hour long film, Blaufuks returns to the Nazi film of Terezín but intertwines it with modern day images of this Czech town and popular fiction depictions of the concentration camp, such as the 1978 mini-series *Holocaust*, a landmark in the "global broadcast" of the Holocaust (Levy and Sznajder 2006, 116), Alfred Radok's *Distant Journey* (1949), and Zbynek Brynych's *Transport from Paradise* (1962). There are other, smaller inclusions, but these four visual sources were edited and intercut to four and a half hours – roughly the amount of time that it took the Red Cross to visit Terezín in 1944 and leave convinced that Jewish mistreatment was not a reality at this transit camp. There is once again a concern with duration (as the material piece of time) and different temporalities that are quite literally juxtaposed. Throughout the film, the flow of images shot by the artist in contemporary Terezin is interrupted by the intrusions of past images, as if reproducing the process of signal interference, but also that of traumatic remembrance, wherein different images blend together, often in incoherent fashion, conjuring new images of contested reliability that are difficult, if not impossible, to discern from the original ones.

The present-day Terezin shot by the artist thus becomes a landscape haunted by the spectre of past images that contaminate the way we look at the present. The multiple long shots of buildings that are interrupted by fictional movie images where these buildings are recreated emphasize the materiality of memory, but also the intrusion of the fictional into the remembrance process. In one of the sequences, a shot of modern-day Terezin's town square buildings is interrupted by the football sequence taken from the staged Nazi film, where the ghetto inmates play a football match for the Nazi cameras. This sequence is abruptly interrupted by a very short excerpt of the 1978 mini-series *Holocaust* that recreates the exact same sequence. The fictional

⁴ The film is part of the exhibition entitled "All the Memory of the World – Part I", curated by David Santos and held at Museu Nacional de Arte Contemporânea (MNAC) between December 11 2014 and March 29 2015. The exhibition draws a connection between George Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) and W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001) to reflect on the deceptive nature of visual memory.

reenactment is thus made to interfere with the original Nazi images which were themselves staged, played by real inmates who were asked to play a different, better-off version of themselves. Throughout Blaufuks' film, the present-day buildings of Terezín constantly open their doors to fictional and historical images of Theresienstadt that seem to invade the edifices that silently store the memories of the town's past. In one of these sequences, a shot of a doorway in a present-day peaceful Terezín shifts to a shot of Zbynek Brynych's *Transport from Paradise*, in which a Nazi officer stands in front of a similar doorstep, urging inmates to move inside. As doorways into the composite nature of visual remembrance, Terezín's buildings function in the film as the mediators between present, past and the intricacies of the process that binds the two.

The film is thus assembled through visual homologies and fabricated synchronicities that simultaneously render and problematize the process of remembrance within the archival economy of memory. By resorting to footage from the staged Nazi film alongside images from Hollywood productions, the film reflects on the way multiple images, regardless of their provenance, be their historical, staged or fictional (the Nazi film, for instance, is all at once) together shape our imagination of the past and the way we remember or believe we remember. If read as a symptom of the contemporary archival regime of visual memory, *As If* foregrounds the reliance on archival imagery as a cultural problem because our imagination is informed by so many visual sources that is hard to pin down what the archive actually is. Our perception of historical events is, after all, the result of a complex coagulation of materials that could be understood as private and collective archives of cultural memories. Of course, this turn to the archive is a symptom of a wider historical problem, which is that of the physical disappearance of the witness and its process of turning into memory through the archive. In this particular historical moment, there is the risk of fetishizing the archive and to rely on it not only for evidence but also for affective proximity to the past (what Jaimie Baron (2014) recently termed "archive affect"), and what Blaufuks seems to be suggesting with this film is that in the current archival economy of memory,

these images (staged, fictional, filmic, artistic) are all part of the archive now, they all inform our perception, imagination and remembrance not only of this particular historical event, but of different ones. The very notion of the archive, its epistemological implications and its affective experience, are thus under scrutiny.

In a digital memory ecology, how we conceive of memory, the past, and the act of recollection requires reconceptualization. Hence the paradoxical title of the exhibition in which the installation film was screened, “All the Memory of the World – Part I”, suggesting on the one hand the fantasy of totality enabled by the large scale of digital storage, and on the other, the gaps, errors and uncertainties inherent to a growing archive subjected to technological change. What this digitally networked archive affords memory with is the possibility of simultaneity of temporalities, of indeterminacy, recursiveness, appropriation and the uncontrollable reassembling of the old into the new.

These processes are aesthetically and critically recreated by Blaufuks to foreground the impact of the digital archive upon memory and the possibility of its visual articulation. At the same time however, the impact of digital mnemotechnics upon the imagination of the past is brought into the film in order to emphasize the inherent complexity of visual remembrance and the way the mnemonic process has always been fraught with interference, juxtaposition, simultaneity, recursiveness, uncertainty and forgetting. In a media-archeological fashion, the film suggests that both old and new archival economies of memory face challenges that demand visual renditions capable of addressing the complexity of the changing regimes of memory and vision.

Consequently, and to draw to a conclusion, *As If* also rethinks the fantasy of the archive still at work in recent films, where the archive emerges as an almost mystic place where hitherto unknown historical records can be unearthed from to reveal new truths about our past and its visual rendition. Quite differently, the archive in *As If* corresponds to the system of circulation of audiovisual records that we inhabit in our daily lives and that shape the discursivity of historical events and the way we have come to remember,

imagine, depict, discuss and pass on our shared past. This archive of new proportions, boundaries and access certainly transforms the spectral quality of our images, which can now cross temporalities with a new fluidity and ‘appear’ in different settings with increased simultaneity and scattered semantic control. While bringing this new circulatory regime into visibility, *As If* also probes the notion of “cinematic belief”, this notion of “believing without believing”, one that Derrida would have written about, had he written anything about cinema. To rephrase his original question, what kinds of ghosts is cinema now creating? And do we (have to) believe in them?

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