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On the impossibility of archiving the radio and its virtues

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak today on this occasion and to give a general account of “How to preserve and promote the history of radio art”. That’s really a big issue and a very important one. And at the moment I have to confess, even greater than this topic is my uneasiness, because I am not at all sure I will ever be able to do justice to the demands of such a subject.

The problem is that I’d have to talk about an impossibility which we nevertheless hope would contain something possible in itself. Of course we all know there is no way to archive the real radio as such, because there is no way to archive such a process strictly over time. It would be like archiving a living thing.

An archive, on the contrary, is an assemblage of dead things. There is no place for the living. It brings together things in a repository; it is about past events. It is, as Jacques Derrida told us, a paradoxical structuration. It is a result of coping with a loss, to be precise, in Derrida’s sense, of coping with the death drive which is “an aggression or a destruction drive: a drive, thus, of loss.” (1998, 11) Not only that the archive represents in all of its actions a continuing fight against loss. It should not be forgotten, an archive is, above all, first of all, in itself a product of a loss, of something which is no longer present. But this tendency that all things have to come to an end or have to die, cannot be compensated in the founding of an archive, thinking that an archive would give its archived pieces their life again. And even this entropic tendency of all things is not the reason for the existence of archives. Bringing things back to life is not their vocation, quite the contrary. As Derrida stated: “The death drive”, which is the real but paradoxical motor underlying any archivist strand “is always anarchivic”, Therefore, what makes an archive necessary and indispensable is at the same time “archive-destroying, by silent vocation” (12). “The death drive tends thus to destroy the … archive, except if it can be [properly] disguised, made up, painted, printed, represented as the idol of its truth in painting.” Thus, each archive is a facade of itself, fighting relentlessly on two fronts simultaneously. On the one hand against a decrease of all that it has to collect and on the other side against its own decline, which makes it impossible to complete what it would have to.

In is book “Mal’d’archive” which is translated under a rather contradictory title in German as “Dem Archiv verschrieben” and in English as “Archive Fever”, Derrida traces the concept of 'archive' all the way back to “Archae” and “archeion”, the ancient Greek word for the absolute beginning and the residence of the “archontes” who had been the chief magistrates. “At the root of the word 'archive' is a double meaning of 'commencement' and
‘commandment” as Simon Reynolds pointed out. “The concept of the archive is thus deeply entangled with ideas of origin and order, authenticity and authority. ‘Arch’ is the same ‘arch’ that is in words like 'archaic', 'archetype' and 'archaeology', but it is also the 'arch' that's in words like 'monarchy'. Archive is also related to the word 'ark', as in Noah's Ark (the vessel in which, at God's command, the animals were preserved and classified) and the Ark of the Covenant (a different land of vessel, one in which the tablets of the Ten Commandments were stored).”

As seen, the disguise the death drive cloaks itself with - as an archive - is anything but innocent or harmless. Archives are always in alliance with power, command, control and regulation. Even though, the French title of Jacques Derrida’s 'mal d'archive' alluding to the notion of both illness and evil should not be misinterpreted. For Derrida, beyond the fact that archives are always accomplices and guarantors of power, there is something else that is morbid and fatal at the nucleus of the archival impulse. “It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire ... to return to the origin ... the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”

As we all know, it was Sigmund Freud who invented the concept of death drive to which Derrida is referring here, arguing that 'the task' of the death drive is always and has always been “to lead organic life back into the inanimate state”. One of its manifestations in human behaviour (and by extension, culture) is 'a compulsion to repeat'. Freud, as we know, saw this repetitive compulsion impulse as 'more primitive, more elementary' than the so called pleasure principle. But it is not operating on the same level, so to say. The reality and the pleasure principle, in the sense of Freud, are always struggling which each other, but the death drive is not a principle in that sense. “It even threatens every principality, every archontic primacy, every archival desire.”

Thus, we have a deep and already somehow overwhelming starting point of our considerations concerning the impossibility of archiving radio and its art. But, what is radio? Is it really a living thing? Is it a living thing, because it is “live”?

Working in and about radio for some decades, it has always struck me that the concept of “live” predominated the beginnings of the medium so much at a time at which it would have been perfectly possible to use records to produce radio pieces and to broadcast them from a disc. But, in the beginning everything was live. At least in Europe. We know that from the book, so to say, we know that recording media in German radio stations didn't exist prior to 1928/29. Therefore, by the way, in the beginning of radio, there was nothing to archive.

For instance, Walter Benjamin: As we now know, he produced 82 radio programs, mainly lectures and essays, all of them spoken by himself between 1929 and 1932. We know this from the printed program guides. Moreover, we have a brilliant description of his
acting in front of the microphone since he had once struggled with the live conditions of his performing and wrote about it in a brilliant commentary. Once Benjamin, as he tells us, misread the clock and finished his program a couple of minutes earlier than scheduled. Ouch, what to do with the minutes left? “On the minute” is the title of this little essay he wrote as the last of his German newspaper publications in 1936. The solution was a slow and meaningful stretched repetition of some paragraphs from the last manuscript pages. Referring to his so badly edited collected works, we can only get a very rough idea of Walter Benjamin’s important radio work because its texts are scattered all over the seven volumes without appropriate classifications and descriptions. To get to know what he really did we have to search through the dispersed program guides of Funkstunde Berlin, Frankfurt and Stuttgart radio archived partly in the DRA, partly in the Hessian Broadcasting Corporation. Anyway, we will never hear his voice. Performing radio programs live and on time was the accustomed practice far into the 1930s, so that we have not a single recording of Walter Benjamin’s voice.

Until the early 1930s archiving radio programs wasn’t an issue. But, why did the early German radio not record its programs? No lack on the necessary recording facilities, they were existing: the German technology of shellac-based disc records had been developed decades ago and was in a way a world leader product. There was no technological reason not to produce recorded radio programs and then play them back. The Americans did it like this. For example, one of the first radio serials called Amos & Andy was recorded from 1927 on since it was broadcasted in a syndicated manner, that is to say, its disc records could be play backed in different radio stations at the same time. Why was that not a practice in Germany?

Again, the answer touches on the problem of the archive. If something is materialized then it can be archived as well. Nowadays we use the word archive in the context of radio just for the indication of a safe place for the tapes and digital files of our programs. But, in contrast to the United States the early radio pioneers in Germany questioned seriously whether archived material would please the public audience in the same way live broadcasts did, sometimes therefore playing their plays fully dressed up in front of the microphones allegedly to improve its dramatic effects. Yes, radio is a medium to bring something right across and yes, this dilemmatic conflict between archived producing and live broadcasting was still an ongoing question in the years 1928/29. For instance, the famous radio drama “Hallo Welle Erdball” was first pre-recorded play, done with the help of sound stripes from motion picture film enabling cuts, inserts and other modifications that could achieve a new rhythm and a new sound shape of the piece. Other important radio directors like Ernst Hardt in Cologne opposed impetuously insisting upon their so called “absolutes Rundfunktheater”, which in their eyes could exclusively meet the demands of
reproducing dramatic poetry. Fritz Walter Bischoff, director of “Hallo Welle Erdball” from Breslau, was accordingly very uncertain about the success of what he called an experiment, so that before starting the play “Welle Erdball” he let an announcer ask the audience of whether it would agree to this kind of performance. Here is this legendary sentence:

“Der Versuch wurde durchgeführt um festzustellen, ob eine solche Wiedergabe der vollwertige Ersatz eines Originalhörspiels ist”

“The experiment was carried out to determine whether such a reproduction would be an adequate substitute for an original radio play.”

If there is nothing pre-produced there is nothing to be archived as far as radio is concerned. But now, here we have the first archived piece, manufactured on the sound tracks of celluloid film, cut, moved, edited dramaturgically and aesthetically, on 4 February 1928 in the Schlesische Funkstunde Breslau, then, recorded on shellac discs. These records of a radio production in spring 1928 are probably the first thing that went into something like a broadcasting archive or into a sound archive (“Schallarchiv”), or the “Lautarchiv” as it will be called later.

But before from now on records as the production basis of radio art in Germany could become a usual practice, a theory about it had to be developed, a strategic authorization so to say, and this was worked out by none other than Hans Flesch, the most important founding pioneer of the medium in Germany. Some month later in 1928 he repeatedly gave lectures in Vienna and in Wiesbaden vehemently crusading against the just mentioned "original radio play":

“I have not found a so-called radio play,” Flesch declared, “that not did turn out to be a disguised theatre spectacle just repressing its optical sense. Thus, let us follow the Viennese scholar Freud” Flesch continues “Freud, who traced back the repression to the basic nature of hysteria. Perhaps in this way we will get an explanation for the strange addiction of our current radio plays to catastrophes and all the tenseness and spasms.”

Strong words. The original radio play as the hysterical extravagance of the medium! However, as Brecht and Weill and Hindemith and Kafka and Schwitters, and all the other avant-gardists of the 1920s, Flesch had gone to the movies and had seen and heard what the new sound film had brought about. For one thing. On the other hand, he knows very well about the constraints of broadcasting, in German radio especially. After all, from early on Flesch was one of its CEO’s, first in Frankfurt, then in Berlin.

Flesch knew the hysterias of the radio, if radio operated originally, if it operated live. The media scholar Werner Faulstich met once a good definition: radio - a medium of fear. This generalization is quite high-strung, but it applies very well to the radio of the Weimar
Republic and the early Third Reich, that is to say, for the time radio sound archives emerged as we have them in principal until today.

In the beginning radio was dangerous just because it was live, so at any time something unexpectedly awful could happen. Still this fear of “Funkerspuk” - spook of the radio operators - as it happened directly after the First World War when leftist workers councils got the German communication networks under their control for quite a while. Could that anarchy happen again? Therefore, in radio it was forbidden from its beginning on to report live from any political event. All the programs of the Weimar radio were strictly censored in advance - to avoid any outbreak of something suddenly and immediately occurring.

Nothing was actually live, except radio plays and lectures read from notes. But whether there were street battles taking place at the Brandenburg Gate or a Foreign Minister was shot on the sidewalk, it was not covered in the radio. As Katja Rothe has taught us, in the early days of radio, the topics of fear and disaster dominated radio, not only in Germany.

“Richard Hughes “A Comedy of Danger” 15.1.1924, the first English drama of the BBC, plays live in the dark and deals with angst.

To finish these media exaggerations and to turn radio into a proper art, so to speak, Hans Flesch in 1928 puts his whole authority in the scale:

“In a radio play recorded on film, edited by cutting, fading and inserting something can be created which the Director will consider fully managed and can be presented after that at night at any time to the listener. On any superficial objections, for example on the apprehensions of “a mechanization of broadcasting”, I need not to enter. The radio is a mechanical instrument, and its native artistic effects will emerge only as a result of the mechanics. If one wouldn't believe that this is possible, one shouldn't believe in the broadcasting art at all.”

That is the way how the radio archive came into existence and gained its place in German radio art. From this date, since Hans Flesch founded the first audio archive in the Berlin “Funkstunde” 1929, radio plays, more and more, have been first recorded and then broadcasted. Since then they are, as today, provided from the archives - and all that just to avoid the pandemics of live broadcasting. The mode of pre-production and the archives as their custodians has enabled radio art as we know it, has made it possible and exempted it at the same time from radio itself. The place of this exemption is the archive. The archive preserves radio art from perishing in the here and now and from getting lost in the hysterias of radio. Only thus has it become possible. Therefore, to a person who is wondering whether pre-produced radio plays as we find them today en masse in the Internet are still pieces of radio - offered on demand or downloadable as podcasts - to such a question one should only answer: yes, it has always been this way. Always - since
there has been radio as a serious art - it stood and stands inside and outside of radio. Radio art has always owed itself to the radio and at the same time has gone on distance to it. The hinge of this paradox was and is called "sound archive".

The man who helped these things to emerge, Hans Flesch head of Funkstunde in Berlin since 1929, he was blown out of office one year before the Nazis came to power, in 1932, in the course of a so-called radio reform during which interestingly the sound archives, these new and strange, barely two or three year old departments, were uniformly placed under the newly created department of transmission affairs, in German: “Sendeleitungen”. Sound Archives, as far as German broadcasting stations are concerned, are still located there today.

Radio archives occupy the fragile axis of a paradox, namely to allow radio art to be both within and outside of radio. Not driven by a death drive, not blinded by any archontic or origin myth, an audio archive is a mere deployment service.

In contrast to an administrative or corporate archive, the sound archive of a broadcaster never had the task to archive broadcasting programs. As today, the documentation departments of the ARD will at best archive one day in a year minute by minute. However, administrative archives regularly archive administrative actions steadily and document all the essential operations of the institution including the program schedules. Radio archives don’t do that. No archive of a broadcasting company keeps the program events of a given day in the sense of an archival process documentation. Lists of the program schedules are recorded in the “program flags”, often stored not in sound archives, but in the general business files. To the authors and contributors, there are process files only in the fees and licensing departments. Whereas, the auditory sources are eventually stored, completely independent from all other acts, in the sound archive.

We find a similar torn structure of separated archiving already around 1930 and we find it until today. From their outset, the sound archives of German broadcasting stations represent what an archive in the strict sense should never represent, namely a pure storage facility. Ironically, the broadcasting archives of the late 1920s have thereby anticipated what is threatening the fate of data archives of today all along the line.

Because, as the archive scientist Angelika Menne-Haritz puts it: Today’s mere electronic storage of documents in databases reduced "the concepts of archive and archiving to pure mechanical recording, storage and retention without intellectual selection or order." (8834,21) Storing mountains of wax and shellac discs in the beginning, then later lining up endless kilometers of tape boxes, sparsely labeled only with a few data, this is to an extent still the state in radio archives today. At least before 1987, before new guidelines were laid down, archives in the German radio represented pure storage space for past
productions, so sparsely equipped with appropriate provenance information that already after a few years one could hardly tell what was hidden behind the cryptic labels on the tape boxes. In fact, this had nothing to do anymore with the actual duties of an archive.

Proper archival work mainly consists in determining the provenance of the archived pieces. Such a provenance can only be determined by clarifying the evidence of the state in which the items were before they came into the archive. To name a third important concept of archiving: “Cassation” - cassation is applied to reduce an archive to the essential, to get rid of unnecessary things - so for example just one percent of all operations in public administrations will become actually archived. And finally, another task belongs to the duties of an archive, namely the "development of the archive materials along the a called “persistence principle” (8831,79), that is, e.g., the definition of the appropriate systematization of the archived items. These are the four core concepts of archival work: Evidence, provenance, cassation and persistence. However, these concepts hardly play a role in audio archives of German public stations. To be precise, they did hardly play a role at all until the early 1990s. "The archival professionalism in the field of" sound archives "began only in the 1970s. Eventually in 1987, for the first time the “Radio Regulations Word” (“Regelwerk Wort”) developed criteria for the selective archiving of the radio program."(8916,150)

Since then, programs with "artistic character" are largely protected, by no means was this always the case. Form the 1950s on: How many features are lost through archival deletions? No one has counted them. Because sound archives in radio stations were always just pure production archives - and even today they have their purpose mainly therein - these facilities were never protected against the arbitrariness of those who ran them. Plates and tapes are prepared by the archives for their broadcasting - but what happened to all those thousands of pieces for which apparently nobody had any more use? They were deleted in a big way, sometimes. Cassation in storage rooms called archives, which have never been such.

But even the time of the proper archive may come to its end now. If the future world and half of the present today is already based on electronic operations, says the archive scientist Menne-Haritz, archives will be deprived of the evidence they need to order documents on the basis of provenance. That destroys their raison d’être. Solely as a result of the change in media and the digitization of all paths of communications, the archives of the future will tend to become mere virtual file containers and pure data storage facilities. All metadata are raised by the authors themselves or can be easily derived from big-data algorithms, time and geo-location data. As the former secretary of state Hilary Clinton demonstrated recently, in the age of courtesy copying, attachments, reattachments, data clouds and drop-box links, even the actions of a government is no longer allocatable to a
formal path. Therefore, without further evidence, even a classic archive can achieve today not much more than the first sound archives of the Weimar Rundfunk did yesterday, and that is just enumerating the pieces as they come in. Pure storage procedures.

From my point of view, as technological change now crumbles the death instinct-driven façade of the archives anyway, the sound archives of radio art should be opened, digitally and to the public of the Web. But first of all – to avoid further damage - some ongoing digitization strategies of audio material prior to 1990 should be corrected, as far as they are based on cassation and selective procedures again. As a proper answer to the decline of archive principles, all sound carriers in the archives should be digitized without exception, just as Google did it with the books of American university libraries. Granted, these documents are truly insufficiently bibliographied, as we find millions of them at archive.org. But they are there! They exist. They can be properly bibliographied and re-archived only by experts, I agree, but that might happen later. More importantly, the digitized material is accessible and it is already being used abundantly.

I will never understand why radio archives don't go the same way. Given the fact that the material in the sound archives from 1950 to 1990 was predominantly never descripted and labeled properly, because these archives have always been just production archives, based on selective assumptions which did not really secure the material in the first place. Of course, now the consequence must be making this material available for the Web public, all the tapes and recordings, exceptionless, in the sense of archiv.org or ubuweb.com.

Against such a proposal of saving this endangered auditive cultural heritage by opening it to the public, there could be the objection of violating intellectual property rights. I believe, however, the practice of ubuweb.com is striking and after 19 years of existence it is an appropriate example of how to go on with this issues. Thus in conclusion I come once again back to radio art. There is no better and more comprehensive source for audio art, visual, audible and concrete poetry in the World Wide Web as on this pagerun by Kenneth Goldsmith, which he founded 19 years ago. “UbuWeb hosts over 7,500 artists and several thousand works of art. You’ll never find an advertisement, a logo, or a donation box. UbuWeb has always been and will always be free and open to all.” Kenneth is asked on his site: “What is your policy concerning posting copyrighted material?” And here is what he answers:

“If it's out of print, we feel it's fair game. Or if something is in print, yet absurdly priced or insanely hard to procure, we'll take a chance on it. But if it's in print and available to all, we won't touch it. The last thing we'd want to do is to take the meager amount of money out of the pockets of those releasing generally poorly-selling materials of the avant-garde.
UbuWeb functions as a distribution center for hard-to-find, out-of-print and obscure materials, transferred digitally to the web. Our scanning, say, an historical concrete poem in no way detracts from the physical value of that object in the real world; in fact, it probably enhances it.

Should something return to print, we will remove it from our site immediately. Also, should an artist find their material posted on UbuWeb without permission and wants it removed, please let us know. However, most of the time, we find artists are thrilled to find their work cared for and displayed in a sympathetic context.

Q.: Can I use something posted on UbuWeb on my site, in a paper, in a project, etc.?

The copyrights belong to the copyright holders, not us. You'll need to seek them out for proper permission. Sorry."

I'm wondering - regarding our sound archives full of hard-to-find, out-of-print and obscure materials like this, why would it be impossible for radio stations to operate like Kenneth Goldsmith does for 19 years now. He is not based in Russia, he runs his Website from New York.

Thanks for listening.