

Stirrings in the Archives: Order from Disorder. By Wolfgang Ernst. Translated by Adam Siegel. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015. 101 pp. Index. Hardcover. \$75.00.

In *Stirrings in the Archives: Order from Disorder*, German cultural and media historian Wolfgang Ernst attempts to reconcile the difference between “German-Prussian archival science and the metaphorical conceptualization of the archive in Parisian philosophical circles” (p. 2). If that feels like a daunting thesis for readers to parse, Ernst also summarizes his work as addressing the question, “Is what we have an inventory of memory rather than a history?” (p. 2). While certainly more succinct, for many readers *Stirrings in the Archives* will likely not answer the second question any more clearly than the first. In this slim volume originally published in 2002, Ernst has written a series of 24 short essays of about three to four pages each which heavily focus on examining archives through the lens of French philosophy and the perspective of media archaeology. Unfortunately, it is hard for a volume to make compelling arguments based on French philosophy without sufficient room to explain said philosophy to a general archives audience. This book is likely ideal for readers wishing to examine archives from a highly philosophical and European point of view (and already possessing or willing to acquire the intellectual background to do so), but others will find it a difficult read. The most rewarding part of this book for readers without a background in Parisian philosophy will probably be its examination of how the archival record is regarded as history or memory, but Ernst devotes so much of this work to achieving his first goal that this potentially more accessible discussion is practically lost in the observations of how Michel Foucault and other philosophers interacted with the archives. Ernst relies heavily on French philosophy in his analysis of archives, particularly Foucault. Readers unfamiliar with the late French philosopher’s works and philosophy in general should be prepared not to fully understand a significant number of the arguments Ernst makes. The works of other notable intellectuals are also discussed, but, again, the author seldom elaborates on the arguments being made in any detail. For example, in the opening sentence of chapter 11, Ernst states:

The *New Historicism* in literary criticism is generally interpreted as a function of the archive. Stephen Greenblatt writes his cultural analyses of early modern responses to the new world in a decidedly modular fashion, largely by means of the avowedly fragmented quality of anecdotes, those indexes to the strangeness of chance; he forms relationships between their subjective forms of perception, in order to approach, at least archaeologically, the ever withdrawing historical object. (p. 33)

The present reviewer confesses, at the risk of sounding less than thoroughly educated, to a lack of familiarity with *New Historicism* and Stephen Greenblatt. Unfortunately, the text does not elaborate on either in any detail. Conversely, archivists typically mentioned by American authors in the discussion of archival theory, such as Müller, Feith, and Fruin (the “three Dutch authors”), Sir Hillary Jenkins, and T. R. Schellenberg, are entirely absent from this work. This does give it the virtue of presenting a fresh perspective on the topic of archives to American practitioners, but one many readers will likely not have sufficient context to understand or appreciate.

The other major issue plaguing Ernst’s work is that it has become somewhat dated. Originally published in 2002, Ernst discusses how digital media technology and particularly the

Internet create problems for archives and archivists who have spent considerable time and effort placing their collections in careful order and context. While more relevant to many archivists than the discussion of Parisian philosophy, this dilemma is not nearly as pressing in 2015 as it was 13 years ago, as many archivists have decided that the improved access of the Internet makes placing materials online worthwhile, even if it removes provenance and original order from digitized objects. Chapter 16 does provide an interesting discussion on monitoring and video surveillance, which plays well with current concerns about police body cameras and drone surveillance, but, again, the heavy reliance on French philosophy to frame the discussion makes it a difficult read for a general audience.

Fortunately, the translation to English of the work itself is very readable. The present reviewer is unqualified to judge the accuracy of the translation from the original German, but translator Adam Siegel provides a clear, readable text with some evocative phrases such as the following from chapter 9: “DRACULArchiv’: Up all night, at his or her desk, writing in ink that dries like blood, the historian-author drains their subject. Dracula’s fangs correspond to the voiceless grave of letters that is the archive” (p. 25). In other passages Siegel appears to have used punctuation to indicate words or expressions where an exact translation is not possible, such as, “Through the re(d)action and activation of memory (between the file and the archive), an unpassed, and, thus, be it as legal monument or otherwise, a constant past, is reconfigured into a new state” (p. 85). Overall, Siegel appears to have made sincere efforts to remain true to the spirit of Ernst’s text, while still presenting it in a readable manner.

While the text is generally readable, this is not a book to be read for pleasure. Ernst is a scholar writing for fellow scholars, and he freely uses a complicated vocabulary and terms (for example, the words “eschatological,” “metonymical,” and “peregrinations,” and the term “Bakhtinian chronotope” all appear within a span of five pages). To his credit, Ernst has created a work that draws upon sources not typically utilized in discussions of American archives, but the aforementioned lack of context (either provided by the author or pre-existing) can make this very difficult to appreciate. A Google Scholar search shows the original German work (published in 2002) to have been cited 77 times, so it clearly has scholarly merit; however, as the work was originally written in German, many of the citations are also to works in German. While this is certainly no failing on the part of Ernst, for those who do not read German, it does increase the difficulty of following his sources to establish a broader context for his arguments, and this limits the utility of the work.

Ultimately, this lack of context (and, to a certain extent, the age of the original work) makes it very difficult to recommend *Stirrings in the Archives* for a broad audience of American archivists. The book is scholarly in nature but generally well written and well translated; however, the intended audience is apparently those already familiar with European archives, German-Prussian archival science, and French philosophy. Archivists with a fascination for theory and the appropriate background will likely appreciate Ernst’s work. Those without that background, and particularly those with little use for highly theoretical discussions, will find little here.

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