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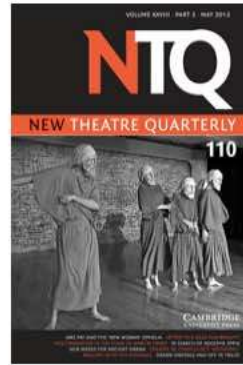
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Letter to a Dead Playwright: Daily Grind, Vicki Reynolds, and Archive Fever

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Letter to a Dead Playwright: *Daily Grind*, Vicki Reynolds, and Archive Fever

'Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word "archive",' observed Jacques Derrida in his book *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (1996). This paper reflects on the unsettling process of establishing (or commencing) an archive for the Melbourne Workers Theatre, to form part of the AusStage digital archive which records information on live performance in Australia. Glenn D'Cruz's paper juxtaposes two disparate but connected registers of writing: an open letter to a deceased Australian playwright, Vicki Reynolds, and a critical reflection on the politics of the archive with reference to Derrida's account of archive fever, which he characterizes as an 'irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement'. Using Derrida's commentary on questions of memory, authority, inscription, hauntology, and heritage to identify some of the philosophical and ethical aporias he encountered while working on the project, D'Cruz pays particular attention to what Derrida calls the spectral structure of the archive, and stages a conversation with the ghosts that haunt the digitized Melbourne Workers Theatre documents. He also unpacks the logic of Derrida's so-called messianic account of the archive, which 'opens out of the future', thereby affirming the future-to-come, and unsettling the normative notion of the archive as a repository for what has passed. Glenn D'Cruz teaches at Deakin University, Australia. He is the author of *Midnight's Orphans: Anglo-Indians in Post/Colonial Literature* (Peter Lang, 2006) and editor of *Class Act: Melbourne Workers Theatre 1987–2007* (Vulgar Press, 2007).

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IN HIS RICH and stimulating book, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida argues that to be stricken with archive fever 'is to have compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement'.⁹ And since Freudian psychoanalysis provides a sustained engagement with memory at the very point where memory fails, we must grapple with a host of Freudian impressions if we want to comprehend the status and function of the archive today.

Derrida formulates three theses about the archive, which we would do well to reckon with as digital technologies exponentially expand the archive's scope and multiply its functions. Before examining these propositions, I want briefly to describe my specific interest in the archive with reference to

AusStage – a vast web-based archive that contains information about 'live' performance events in Australia. The Australian Research Council (ARC) and a consortium of eighteen universities and industry partner institutions (including the Australia Council for the Arts) fund this facility.¹⁰ Established in 1999, AusStage 'records information on live performance in Australia, as a wealth-producing creative industry, a generator of social capital and an indicator of the nation's cultural vitality.'¹¹ It functions as a valuable resource for a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, students, artists, and those who have an interest in Australian live performance. The archive will, if it hasn't already, transform the ways that scholars conduct research into Australia's performing arts culture.

My specific role in the project is to digitize the archive of the Melbourne Workers Theatre.

Letter to Vicki Reynolds

Dear Vicki,

You didn't know me, so let me introduce myself. My name is Glenn D'Cruz, and I'm a theatre studies academic at Deakin University. Through a convoluted chain of events I won't bore you with, I find myself faced with the daunting task of organizing the Melbourne Workers Theatre archive. I guess I'm one of the guardians of the company's history. Since you were an important part of that history, I feel obliged to tell you, for reasons I'll reveal later, a little bit about what I intend to do with the remnants of the company's past – the photographs, the videotapes, scripts, and other bits of production ephemera. Soon, I will sort, catalogue, classify, describe, analyze and eventually deposit these items in the Deakin University library, and they'll be accessible to anyone who has a scholarly interest in MWT, or perhaps the history of Melbourne, or maybe some other purpose I can't possibly anticipate. You see, I'm troubled by the fact that I cannot know who will examine this material – I can't predict how future scholars might use and interpret the contents of the archive, and I'm not sure how to proceed. I thought you might be able to assist me. What do you reckon, Vicki? Before I go any further, I should say something about my motivations, just in case you're wondering about why I've summoned you here today.

First, let me assure you that I'm not some disinterested academic without any direct involvement with MWT. I was the chair of the company's Committee of Management from 2002 to 2006, and a member its Artistic Advisory Committee from 2002 to 2008. I've seen almost every MWT performance for the last ten years, although I must confess missing most of its early productions, so I'm sorry to say I never actually saw any of your work. I also edited a book celebrating MWT's twentieth anniversary in 2007, but more importantly I'm someone who admired the company's radically egalitarian ethos and its political commitment. So, there you have it – my credentials, my justifications. I have to confess that my motives aren't completely altruistic – as an academic, I stand to benefit from sifting through the miscellaneous debris of MWT's past. This task I find a little disquieting won't hurt my career. Anyway, enough preambles – let's get on with it.

In short, I'm writing to you because during the course of digitizing the company's archive I found a videotape which I subsequently identified as belonging to the first production of your play, *Daily Grind*. You might be pleased to know that it was a great success – MWT staged it in 1992, and it was remounted by the Street Arts Company in Brisbane in 1994, and Belvoir Street Theatre, Sydney in 2001. So, belated congratulations. Anyway, unlike most of the archived MWT video material, which consists of edited production highlights, or full-length performances, the tape in question, while obviously connected to your play, was difficult to classify without researching its context.

Why is this a big deal? Well, I can't just deposit this artefact without some contextualization and commentary – I'm an academic, after all, and we're compelled to inspect, classify and analyze any artefact we consider significant (don't ask me about the stuff we toss out – I might come to that later). Some of my colleagues call this process of selection and commentary 'dramaturgical analysis'.¹ Can I put a footnote in a letter? Sorry, you probably don't give a shit, but there are no hard and fast protocols for what I'm doing in addressing you like this, Vicki. You've probably sensed my nervous disposition – this is a bit weird, especially since this letter is not a private bit of correspondence. I want to respect your privacy, but since your work and name are scattered through several archives for all to see it's probably a bit late to be overly sensitive.

Anyway, the grainy VHS tape contains three sections. In the first, an actor, who I subsequently identified as Belinda McClory, performs a choreographed striptease for the camera. She bumps, grinds, gyrates, and strips to Prince's song, 'Cream' – her performance is obviously sexual, although hardly provocative given the proliferation of soft pornography in popular culture in the early nineties (her 'striptease' is positively tame by today's standards. (How do I know? Well, let's not go there.) Belinda's character is clearly performing for the camera, and my first impression is

Having catalogued and deposited a wide range of visual material in the Deakin University digital repository (which is linked to the AusStage database), I have recently completed the digitization of the company's video archive. For the most part, I have been concerned with technical problems concerning cataloguing protocols and preservation strategies.¹² These practical problems are not insignificant, but they do seem to have dominated my engagement with the process of archiving MWT's rich legacy until I discovered the videotape mentioned in the letter alongside. This document raised a number of philosophical problems about the archive which I will address with reference to Derrida's *Archive Fever*. But before engaging with Derrida's rich commentary on the politics of the archive, I want quickly to summarize the often-contentious debates that have been generated by the increasing ubiquity of video documentation.

The Archaeological Imperative

The impetus for this paper began with a video fragment that I could not immediately classify or interpret with any degree of authority or conviction. What was a piece of soft pornography, for that is what I initially thought I was watching, doing in the MWT video archive? This fragment generated a host of other questions including one about the status of video documentation in an archive devoted to 'live' performance events? Scholars of performance raise this vexed question regularly, and the widespread use of digital technologies to preserve works recorded on fragile magnetic tape makes it especially pertinent to those responsible for organizing and ordering archives such as AusStage.

Despite several recent attempts to assert the important heritage value of performance archives, there is little doubt that many performance practitioners and scholars regard recordings of 'live' performance events with varying degrees of suspicion and hostility. However, during the last decade a significant number of researchers have debated the valorization of live performance as a sentim-

ental anachronism and argued convincingly for the crucial contribution video documentation can make to performance research.

Even a cursory examination of these deliberations will reveal that anxieties about documentation in general are largely the result of performance events becoming legitimate objects of academic enquiry with the power to enable scholars to participate in 'proper' academic practices. As the fields of drama, dance, theatre, and performance studies have expanded, so too has the ailment Derrida calls archive fever. For scholars need archives. In fact, they must be afflicted with archive fever in order to meet their institutional responsibilities, for what can an academic accomplish without the authority of the archive? More to the point, how can academics, charged with producing new knowledge about 'transient' performance events, survive without somehow co-opting, classifying, inspecting, and interpreting its traces?

The academy demands, quite correctly, that its employees follow strict methodological protocols and produce verifiable 'truths' about the events and practices they investigate, so the desire to get ever closer to the 'truth' of an event drives *homo academicus* into a feverish frenzy to substantiate their research findings, and legitimate their place within the academic institution. The archaeological imperative hovers over every interpretative practice like a ravenous bird of prey, poised to swoop on any artefact capable of moving us towards the holy grail of full presence, of originary truth.

But academics are not the only ones afflicted by archive fever. Artists also depend on archival technologies to produce a 'body of work' they can submit to those fickle funding organizations that hold the purse strings of cultural production. Like it or not, electronic documentation of 'live' performance is an integral part of performance culture, and we may as well acknowledge the political and ethical consequences of our necessary addiction to the archive – consequences conspicuously absent from most commentaries on the status of video documentation. Whether enthusiastic, critical or

that the tape does not represent any sort of record of a 'live' theatrical performance. The second part of the tape contains footage of a man leaning on the bonnet of a parked car at night. He rolls and lights a cigarette; looks up at the sky, shakes his head with a look of disdain, walks away from the car and disappears into the distance. The image fades to black. Someone has obviously composed the scene to look like it's part of a film or television drama. The final section is also filmic, and portrays the stripper in the first scene walking down a street with a large blue bag strapped to her left shoulder. She walks right up to the camera until her head is fully in frame, and produces a look somewhere between trepidation and anxiety.

It didn't take me long to solve this mystery. Of course, I'd heard bits and pieces about you and your play while assembling the MWT book, and I remembered your friend and collaborator Patricia Cornelius insisting that the book must include some acknowledgement of your singular contribution to the company. I republished a short article that Patricia had written about you for the April 1995 edition of *Australasian Drama Studies*. Included in that volume, which I dutifully located in the Deakin University library, were several other pieces you might find interesting. First, the journal contained the revised version of your script with an account of the 'making' of *Daily Grind* by Carol Stevenson, who was the play's assistant director.

Apologies for this, but I need to quote a bit of Carol's article.

*The original production of Daily Grind began with video footage of Roxy performing a strip and the live actor coming on to complete the routine. The juxtaposition of live and recorded images of the same woman – the one passive, viewed, the other confrontational, speaking – helped to highlight the way in which the female nude is generally positioned in an X-rated cinema compared to the way in which Roxy is positioned within Daily Grind.*²

Carol sounds like an academic (she did teach theatre history at Victoria University in New Zealand according to her biographical statement in the journal, which explains the tone of her article, which sounds as though it's informed by aspects of feminist theory). Anyway, there's no direct reference to the video in the published script, and I couldn't locate earlier drafts of the work when I was editing the MWT book. Perhaps I should trawl through the formidable pile of MWT papers and documents again. Did you ever consider using video to make the point about the disparity between passive and active performances, Vicki? Convinced that I have a duty to undertake more than a perfunctory dramaturgical analysis of the video, I searched for more information about you and *Daily Grind*. Possessed by a desire to locate as much information as possible about you, your play, and your play's multiple contexts, I punched your name into my web browser, and discovered, unsurprisingly, that it's scattered all over the Internet.

I discovered several reviews of your play on the Theatre Works website (the venue for the MWT production of *Daily Grind*). In addition to the reviews, the company's online archive contains a poster, an excerpt from a MWT newsletter and a short biographical sketch of you, which mentions your illness and untimely death. Your name also crops up in relation to *The Bridge*, which you produced with Donna Jackson in 1990. There are several other references to you in cyberspace, frequently in the AusStage database – the archive I'm helping to develop. I could go on. Every reference leads to another reference and another and so it goes on and on.

Anyway, I think you will probably be most interested in a work that appears in a recent edition of the journal *Double Dialogues*, written by your sister, the playwright and academic Jodi Gallagher. Jodi's article is titled, 'Blood is Thicker than Water: Family Drama, Self-Representation, and the Construction of Authenticity'. It's a fascinating piece, which, among other things, examines the relationship between the private and the public, and the place of autobiographical disclosure in art. To get right to the point, Jodi writes very eloquently about how your death inspired both her play *Elegy* and your daughter Bindi Cole's installation and photographic exhibition, *Bindi's Boxes* and *Unpacking Bindi* 1–3. Like me, your sister, for perhaps different reasons from mine, wanted to

cautiously circumspect about the value of video documentation, arguments for and against the technology are couched in the language of fidelity to the ontology of the live event, while expressing a desire to capture the elusive performance for scholarly interrogation.¹³

For and Against the Video Record

In 1985, when video recording had already become, for many, a ubiquitous part of everyday life, Marco de Marinis argued against reifying the performance text as the only object of theatrical activity worth preserving. He valued the creative process as much as the completed product, and called for the producers of video documentation to record 'the whole creative-productive process'.¹⁴ He also urged documentarians to record the context as well as the text, arguing that video records of completed products are meaningless without reference to the extra-theatrical context that 'underpins and surrounds the fact of the performance'.¹⁵

More forcefully, he saw performance documentation as a kind of ethnographic practice, and called for documentation of the entire theatrical event, including such things as the behaviour of spectators ('interviews with members of the audience, whether done on the spot or some time later, could prove valuable in this respect,' he writes).¹⁶ Finally, he urged the consumers of such documents not to privilege the video artefact above other traces of the performance event. Despite making a number of eminently reasonable suggestions about how video documentation might assist scholarly analysis, de Marinis nevertheless describes video documentation in terms of a *faithful betrayal* or a *respectful forgery* of the originary live performance event.¹⁷ His tone was measured and slightly circumspect, and he did not even consider the status of video artefacts, like my *Daily Grind* fragment, that may have been an integral *part* of the live video event.

Writing some 15 years after de Marinis, Denise Varney and Rachel Fensham are more enthusiastic in their appraisal of video documentation. They point out that many

people believe that video recordings betray the ontological integrity of 'live' performance.¹⁸ They cite, for example, Peggy Phelan's declaration that theatre's 'being' is dependent on its transience, on its becoming itself through disappearing, and conclude that such conceptions of performance create an ultimately unsustainable binary opposition between transient performance and their mediatized shadow.¹⁹ They argue that video documents are consistently defined by its detractors through a series of absences: the corporeal presence of actors, the co-presence of performers and spectators, and the ineffable atmosphere of the transient event, to name a few of the most prominent deficiencies of recording technologies that fail to respect the veracity of the performance event.

They also contest the notion that theatre's 'liveness' is sacrosanct, and make a convincing case for using video documentation in the scholarly analysis of performance. In short, they make a compelling case for the value of video as an analytic tool by exposing the metaphysics of presence that dominates the arguments of those who are sceptical of the ability of video to represent the 'live' theatrical event. They list some of the enabling analytical advantages of video while pointing out the dangers in ignoring electronic modes of documentation in favour of human memory. They vigorously contest Eugenio Barba's belief that human memory is the best repository for 'ephemeral' performances since the 'essential dimension of the theatrical performance resists time not by being frozen in a recording but by transforming itself' in living memory.²⁰

The Value of Human Memory

In other words, the apparently lifeless, static archival artefact is not up to the task of preserving 'live' performance, which requires a more organic repository, one that is prone to transformation, because performance is defined by the spectator's perception of the performance as much as by what actually takes place on the stage. For Barba, human memory is such a mechanism; it is an archive

summon your spirit, and return you from the ranks of the dead. Jodi was also looking for traces of you in your play. She writes:

I searched for traces of my sister in the characters on the stage while knowing that they were never intended as portraiture. I listened to the rhythm of the words and heard her speech patterns that echoed mine. I relived the times when Vicki would read me drafts of scenes on the phone and we would laugh about what we thought would be the response from the audience – the audience that I was now part of, responding, listening, watching, all the time knowing her absence.³

I'm searching for different kinds of traces – as you know, we never met, I don't know what you were like, and how close your play was to your own experiences. All I have are the scattered and contradictory references to your work, your name, and your life. I'm looking for traces that will allow me to attempt to contextualize your work, as far as this is possible, for the future, a future that I cannot possibly anticipate.

I don't have time to outline all the issues that Jodi's article raises, and the anxieties it creates for me, your archival guardian, so I'll focus on just one aspect of this rich and suggestive work – authenticity. We're all looking for authenticity, aren't we? Archivists and academics perhaps even more than most people want the 'real' thing, the most authentic artefact that is as close to the absent event or the deceased person as possible – and archivists, academics, and collectors generally think about authenticity in terms of an item's proximity to some absent origin, or generative principle. We can't help doing this, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. Nonetheless, Jodi takes issue with another sense of the word 'authenticity'. She notes that Alan Filewod and David Watt impute that you are a working-class woman in their account of MWT's history, which I republished in *Class Act: Melbourne Workers Theatre 1987–2007*.⁴ Your friend Patricia Cornelius also attests to your 'working-class background'. Patricia writes that you 'saw the work of strippers in industrial terms and the play is refreshing for it. The play is strong in its authenticity – from one who knows that world and does not romanticize it.'⁵ She also records that:

From the outset, Vicki was very interested in the politics of the company and in the telling of stories about working-class experience. Her own writing reflected her own working-class background and an interest in telling the stories which are largely left untold.⁶

Jodi points out that your alleged status as a working-class woman lends a certain credibility to *Daily Grind*, and the theatre company's image as a collective dedicated to making work 'for, with, and about working-class people'.⁷ The description of *Daily Grind* in the AusStage database, the archive I'm helping organize, reinforces this sense of authenticity – '*Daily Grind* was written by an ex-stripper which accounts for the almost palpable aura of honesty,' according to one of the play's reviewers. Jodi contests this official picture of you as an authentic working-class artist, while accepting that you were probably partly responsible for propagating a bogus working-class image. She writes:

Was she working class – under any definition? I can quite clearly state that she wasn't – by any definition. Her life experience, however, is in this instance being used as a marker of authenticity and authority for the company's practice.⁸

Under any definition? How do you define class, anyway? It used to be about the position you occupied in the production chain, as all good Marxists know. If you didn't have the ability to purchase the labour power of others, if all you had was the ability to sell your own labour, you were working class. Simple, eh? Not any longer, but let's not go there right now. At the very least, you, like MWT itself, clearly identified with a certain working-class image. Early archival photographs of the company at the Jolimont rail yards testify to this affinity with workers. The picture on the front cover of the MWT book shows several members of the company dressed in overalls, and boots – they look like factory workers. I know you spent a considerable amount of time in the rail yards. What was that like? What did the workers make of the likes of you? Did they see you

in the sense that Freud's conception of the psychic apparatus is an archive. Freud describes this organic archive as being analogous to the infamous mystic writing pad (of which I will say more later). This valorization of human memory as archive is echoed by, among others, Patrice Pavis, who claims that 'the only memory which one can preserve is that of the spectator's more or less distracted perception'.²¹

Mathew Reason takes this opposition between video and human memory as the point of departure for his argument on the limitations of the conventional live performance archive, which preserves various material, electronic, and digital traces of the live performance event. He takes particular exception to Varney and Fensham's concept of 'videocy' – a theory and set of methodological protocols for analyzing video records of performance events that overcome the limitations of fickle and fragile human memory.²² Reason argues that while 'videocy' promises

the authoritative archival ideal, such documentations must fail to deliver, as archive theory makes clear, on any count of completeness, neutrality, and accuracy. Academic documentations can also take on an arrogant egotism – theatre history constructed as that which is studied and written about – that surely transcends any elitism that can be levelled at memory.²³

In other words, Reason appears to contest the idea that a video archive can provide any stable, comprehensive, or authoritative record of live performance (not that Varney and Fensham make such a bald claim). While he quite rightly points out that scholars must be vigilant about the video archive's potential to valorize only those performances that are recorded, he fails to provide a trenchant critique of the politics of the video archive, preferring to advocate a different and quite novel archival practice that involves trying to document the *spirit* of a performance as opposed to any misguided attempt to provide a definitive account of the 'live' event. He calls for an archival practice that will reject 'the claimed authority of archives, look beyond the surface authenticity of video recordings, and accept the positive valuation of memory's transformative power as a

positive characteristic of a mutable live performance archive'.²⁴

Tim Etchells and Richard Lowdon's documentation of Forced Entertainment's production of *Emanuelle Enchanted*, suggests Reason, does not attempt to provide any interpretation of the performance's meaning, context, or creative process, but rather to reproduce the *experience* of the performance by deliberately preserving its fragmentary traces, thereby supposedly steering a path between the clinical archive and transformative human memory.

A Theory of the Archive

What all these accounts lack is a theory of the archive that reckons with the history and politics of the archive in general, and with the ethics of all forms of archival practice in particular. This brings me, finally, to the importance of Derrida's *Archive Fever*, which goes a long way to disturbing commonly held assumptions about the archive's authority.

Derrida reminds us that the ancient Greek word *arkhe* that shelters within the word 'archive' surreptitiously refers to acts of commencement and commandment. Thus, the term 'archive' contains traces of two forgotten and potentially antagonistic principles that identify the archive as a domicile where things apparently commence and a place where certain privileged people command and exercise power according to the principle of the law. In other words, the first principle speaks of origins and beginnings, while the second carries a nomological force.

The *arkhe* is, in short, one of Derrida's 'undecidables', since the term 'archive' is fractured and split between what is originary, and what commands and orders the event after the event. Moving on to the word's Latin root, *archivum*, Derrida notes that this term derives from the Greek *arkheion*, which refers to the domicile of the superior magistrates (that is, those citizens charged with the publicly recognized authority to make the law). The ancient Greeks called these figures *archons*, and deposited official documents in their homes. Derrida writes:

and your mates as a bunch of arty wankers playing dress-ups, or did they appreciate your desire to contribute to the struggle against capital? The rail yards don't exist any more, and MWT stopped performing in workplace venues a long time ago. In fact, your play was the first MWT production performed in a regular theatre venue. What do you think about that, Vicki? And what do you make of your sister's claim that you weren't working class by any definition?

How do I phrase this next question? Who were you, Vicki Reynolds? Who *are* you, Vicki Reynolds? Who or what *will* you be, Vicki Reynolds? I can't possibly settle the matter of your working-class identity here or any time in the future, no matter how many traces I follow in order to find the 'truth' about you and your play. But I know that I will partially determine the answers to these questions, which is why I'm writing to you, hastily, hesitantly, under the heady disorienting grip of archive fever. I'm not mad enough to expect a reply from you any time soon, but chasing your name across various archives has given me pause for thought about my responsibility to you as a singular identity, working class or not.

I hope I haven't bored you or annoyed you with this missive, Vicki. In closing, I'd like to give you the last word, but I know this is impossible. Anyway, while trawling through the various MWT videos on my computer I found you, a fuzzy, hazy electronic representation of you (it's from an SBS TV documentary). You're sitting in front of an old Macintosh computer, which is framed by sundry bits of paper pinned to some kind of notice board. You look thin, a little gaunt, your face framed by an eighties-looking hairstyle. You gaze confidently at the interviewer and explain the MWT *modus operandi*:

We do all the research for the shows amongst the working class. Making contacts through the union movement, and through here where we work at Jolimont railway maintenance yard. There's a big percentage of migrant workers here. Obviously for Taxi we interviewed lots and lots of them. Through the trade union movement we talk to people from the RSI support group, which is mainly made up of Italian and Greek women who worked in factories on machines and who've been injured at work. I think whatever show we do is always to some extent about migrant experience, and we try to use actors from different migrant backgrounds and their languages. I mean that's a priority in this company to use those people, so, you know, their stories are told.

Forgive me for trying to tell some of your story, and thanks for indulging me (I know you had no choice).

Yours sincerely,

Glenn D'Cruz

The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives.²⁵

Today's archivists are contemporary archons, recognized authorities who make laws and decisions on what is significant, worthy of preservation, or consigned to destruction. We also have a hermeneutic authority that gives credence to our readings of the documents contained in the archive. My clumsy and inadequate attempt to correspond with Vicki Reynolds is one manifestation of my own

archive fever – that is, my desire to solve the enigma of Vicki's traces in the MWT archive, to follow the traces of Vicki's life to some point of origin that might tell the truth about the authenticity of her play and her contested 'working-class' identity.

I have a responsibility to future scholars interested in MWT, and the authority to identify and interpret *significant* performance events. How do I proceed? How far do I let my archive fever drive my search for the truth about Vicki Reynolds? My letter to Vicki attempts to underscore what I have learned from Derrida about the politics of the archive. While recognizing the necessity

of ordering, interpreting, and consigning archival documents, I want to mark the tensions that exist between making the personal public, and underline the inherent violence involved in the process of selecting documents of significance, and interpreting those documents under the sign of official, institutional authority. I also want to draw attention to the extent to which the archive produces the event it attempts to preserve.

For Derrida, the archive produces the event as much as it records and preserves it. This double function, he claims, 'is also our political experience of the so-called news media'.²⁶ How does the archive produce the event? To what extent is the 'being' of a past event determined by its ability to be archived? Archival technologies produce the event by excluding everything that cannot be archived. Of course, what cannot be archived today may be easily incorporated into the archive tomorrow, which means the 'truth' of an event cannot be settled once and for all.

The digitization of video records is a concrete testament to the archive's open structure – it is always possible to add and subtract from the archive. Moreover, the archive's technology (paper files, boxes, magnetic tape, computer hard drives, the internet) determines what is archivable. This relationship between the archive and technology, as I will demonstrate in more detail later, is crucial, and explains why the archive both preserves and destroys memories of the past. To what extent does my 'Letter to Vicki' count as a 'production' of *Daily Grind*, I wonder? And what are the political implications of digitizing her archive? What kinds of violence do I commit by invoking her name, and commanding her ghost to speak to a community of scholars?

Derrida's 'Three Theses'

I don't have space to resolve these questions here, since I want to conclude by explicating Derrida's three theses about the archive in order to clarify the archive's obligations with specific reference to digital video records.

Let's call the first thesis the Freudian impression. For Freud, the unconscious is a

vast archive, an inexhaustible storage mechanism that records all sensory impressions. These impressions cannot be directly recalled once they've been deposited in the interior of the unconscious (after making the journey from the outside world through the medium of the sense organs). Freud describes this psychic archive by way of an analogy with a simple child's toy, the mystic writing pad. This device consists of a thin plastic sheet placed on top of a wax slate. It is possible to produce markings on the surface of this toy with a pen or stylus. The impressions 'magically' disappear when the user lifts the plastic from the slate. The wax slate, however, retains the impressions made by the stylus after they have vanished from the plastic sheet.

While acknowledging the imperfect nature of the comparison, Freud nevertheless argues that this device comes closest to approximating the workings of human memory. Indeed, all other mechanical supplements to memory fail to display the ability both to contain an unlimited amount of impressions and to remain open to new information. For example, a piece of paper can permanently record a limited number of impressions before running out of space. A white board, on the other hand, can receive an infinite number of impressions but cannot retain them without destroying its ability to keep receiving new imprints.

Of course, contemporary supplements to memory are not hampered in the same way. Computer technology has vastly expanded the capacity and capabilities of electronic supplements to human memory (to the point where limitless storage capacity is a foreseeable possibility with nano technology). This is why Derrida claims that digital technology transforms the archive. What would the Freudian archive contain if Freud had communicated via email instead of letters? How would historians sift through a much larger body of electronic Freudian impressions? What criteria would they use in deciding what to preserve and what to destroy? Technology will transform all archives in ways we cannot anticipate or imagine.

As I have already intimated, AusStage has already radically transformed Australia's

performance archive and exponentially expanded the amount of information available to scholars seeking to write about its performing arts. However, we have only made a few tentative stabs at comprehending the ethical implications of the AusStage archive. As Irving Velody observes, the ethics of the archive is no trivial matter, since 'appeals to ultimate truth, adequacy, and plausibility in the work of the humanities and social sciences rest on archival presuppositions'.²⁷ Any serious theory of the archive must reckon with this fact, and Derrida's so-called Freudian impression, which compels acts of explication and interpretation in the quest for a stable point of origin. To be an archivist is to be a Freudian.

More forcefully, Derrida also argues that Freud's formulation of the psychic apparatus, with its concomitant notion of repression, makes the idea of the archive possible. Repression is a kind of writing, an opaque inscription, located both outside and inside the psychic mechanism, and Freud resorts to metaphors of writing to describe the psychic apparatus, which is a repository for the subject's sensory impressions.²⁸ This psychic archive is a technical apparatus that cannot be reduced to memory, or, more properly, to the act of remembrance, or simple recollection. The psychic archive, like the dream, requires interpretation.

This is another significant aspect of the Freudian impression: the impression he has left on the world, on thought – writing bequeathed to the future. However, Derrida also notes that this radical formulation of the psychic apparatus doesn't stop Freud from demoting repressed psychic inscriptions to a secondary status in relation to 'live' memory – in other words Freud, as a classical metaphysician, prioritizes living 'presence'. Psychoanalysis thus seeks through archaeological means the live origin of repression, or as Derrida puts it 'the archaeological outbidding by which psychoanalysis, in its archive fever, always attempts to return to the live origin of that which the archive loses while keeping it in a multiplicity of places'.²⁹

Indeed, the archive is always in the shadow of archaeology – they are close to

each other, co-implicated yet paradoxically heterogeneous. The archaeologist, if successful, renders the archive superfluous by letting the *origin* speak for itself, and the zealous search for this origin constitutes archive fever. After prolonged and laboured excavations, the archaeologist's discoveries are self-explanatory – the enigma solved, the untranslatable translated, the cause of the repressed symptom uncovered.

Derrida's second thesis concerns the death drive as a condition of possibility for the archive. What does Derrida mean when he claims the death drive makes the archive possible? First, there is what he calls originary finitude – that is, the unconditional mortality of life, which creates the motivation to preserve the remains of what once lived, and what may be forgotten. Mortality and finitude create the desire for the archive. However, beyond the finitude of life exists an in-finite drive towards destruction, which both motivates archive fever and threatens to destroy the archive.

Encounters of the Spectral Kind

This tension between destruction and preservation, between remembering and forgetting, gives the archive its spectral character. To enter the archive is to reckon with ghosts, and follow the traces of the dead. Indeed, neither history nor culture is possible without close encounters of the spectral kind; and Derrida claims that the

structure of the archive is spectral – neither present nor absent 'in the flesh', visible or invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met.

Derrida draws attention to Freud's metaphysics, which demands that he account for phantoms in order to exorcize them, for the spectral has no place in a metaphysics of presence, which values immediate, present perception. If Freud conversed with ghosts, it was only so he could attain the holy grail of archaeology – the instant of pure origin. A Derridean approach to the archive would keep the conversation with ghosts in play, so we might want to develop a 'hauntological' practice of the archive.

Derrida's third and final thesis about Freud and the archive concerns the archontic principle, which is not interested in the archive as a place of commencement and origins but rather as a place of commandment, law, domicile, and filiation. In other words, Freud recognizes that the archive is always an exercise of political power. It enshrines paternal and patriarchal authority, lending its documents, its traces of life, legitimacy. The keepers of the archives, the archons, therefore have a formidable responsibility to the others, and the unforeseeable future to come.

The archive, for Derrida, does not merely preserve traces of the past by remembering and memorializing the dead – it's also necessarily about the future.

The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise.³⁰

The Derridean promise depends on space, a gap, a crack for the light of the future to shine through. The archive can never be fully present, nor can its *aporias* ever be resolved, nor should they be resolved if resolution was a possibility. Maybe sometime in the future we might know what it will have been to be or not to be a working-class woman, Vicki Reynolds. Not tomorrow, but in time to come. Perhaps.

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