

A Genealogical Approach to The Disobedience Archive*

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Abstract

This article examines the *Disobedience Archive's* display, *The Zoetrope*, at the 60th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, investigating how this nomadic video archive challenges conventional understandings of history and memory. By analyzing the installation's unique spatial configuration, the paper demonstrates how its spiral form intertwines diverse times and subjectivities, thereby critiquing the idea of linear temporality. The article then employs Foucault's concept of genealogy to better understand how archival material is accessed and experienced, moving beyond a chronological progression of events. Conceived by curator Marco Scotini as an atlas of contemporary resistance tactics, the archive reconfigures itself in each setup, bringing forth voices and practices marginalized by normativity that now, more than ever, demand recognition.

Keywords: Zoetrope; Temporality; Atlas; Archive; Video

Abstract

Questo articolo analizza l'allestimento *The Zoetrope* del *Disobedience Archive* alla 60ª Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia, per comprendere in che modo questo archivio video nomade metta in discussione le concezioni convenzionali di storia e di memoria. Attraverso l'analisi della configurazione spaziale dell'installazione, il saggio mostra come la sua forma a spirale intrecci tempi e soggettività differenti, criticando così l'idea di una temporalità lineare. L'articolo adotta il concetto foucaultiano di genealogia per comprendere in modo più approfondito come il materiale d'archivio venga fruito ed esperito, andando così oltre una semplice progressione cronologica degli eventi. Concepito dal curatore Marco Scotini come un atlante delle tattiche contemporanee di resistenza, le configurazioni dell'archivio fanno emergere voci e pratiche marginalizzate che, oggi più che mai, necessitano di riconoscimento.

Parole chiave: Zoetrope; Temporalità; Atlante; Archivio; Video

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1. Introduction

In a 2010 study, Aleida Assmann argued that both political and mnemonic aspects shape archives and that, accordingly, to control archives is to control memory (Assmann 2010). For a long time, dominant narratives depicted the archive as a place where facts can be found, or, in the words of Jeffrey Wallen, “a place where secrets are revealed or where one can now find truths that had been hidden and that actively shape and produce the identities of those it registers” (Wallen 2009, 267). These arguments arise from a significant theoretical engagement with the archival *dispositif*, underscored by foundational studies by Foucault and Derrida. Most of these studies highlight that the very construction of an archive is not neutral; instead, it can both elucidate and obscure dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of specific histories and subjectivities. Ernst van Alphen describes this process as a system in which “archives cover two types of knowledge: the knowledge that can be articulated and objectified by discursive rules, and the knowledge that remains overlooked because of the same discursive rules, now working as rules of exclusion” (van Alphen 2023, 10). The logics of exclusion discussed do not pertain exclusively to archival dynamics; instead, they are more broadly inherent in the very structure of historical discourse, which has traditionally conceptualized the archive according to a linear and philological temporal logic, arranging events sequentially. Generally speaking, archives, when confronted with how to classify nomadic or subaltern identities, are subjected to at least three tensions that are difficult to resolve: first, the inclusion or exclusion of certain “voices” in the archive; second, the loss of individuality of these “voices” once included; and, finally, the activity of archiving as a form of “pigeonholing” (van Alphen 2023).¹ In recent decades, many artistic collectives have been working with different kinds of archives, including personal archives and living archives such as griots, as well as with the embodied forms of knowledge they sustain. Thanks to such critical and artistic practices, the archive is now increasingly recognized as a device capable of articulating a critical perspective through its specific modes of display.

This article focuses specifically on this aspect—on the analysis of the archive’s display, and specifically on its spatialization in terms of its “plastic and sensorial consistency” (Castellani 2022). Following Miriam De Rosa and Catherine Fowler, it adopts a topological perspective, that is, it examines the archive as it is displayed within a given space where “artworks [...] turn the environment they enter into a place for viewing, within which the space surrounding the screen/s essentially becomes part of their fluctuating identity and form, making them navigable and practicable” (De Rosa and Fowler 2021, 514). This approach seeks to understand the role of display and of the moving image

1 The term *pigeonholing* defines a process that attempts to classify different entities into a limited number of categories, thereby flattening their complexity (see van Alphen 2023).

in bringing previously silenced subjectivities from home-made, personal, and subjective archives into a public exhibition context, thereby shaping *queer* exhibition spaces that move from the domestic to the public sphere. This case study provides a starting point for reflecting on the archive's temporal stratification, which can be "disentangled" with each new installation, particularly in the most recent display based on the zoetrope model. Drawing on the idea of an archaeology of telepresence, the article examines how the *Disobedience Archive (DA)* critiques linear arrangements and temporality by using the zoetrope as a paradigmatic media configuration that generates effects of presence and fundamentally transforms the ways in which the archive is experienced and received.

2. The Disobedience Archive

Launched in 2005, the *Disobedience Archive* (Fig. 1) is described on the project website as "an archive of video images conceived in multiple phases, mobile and evolving, which focuses on the relationship between artistic practices and political action. The project positions itself as an atlas of contemporary resistance tactics, from direct action to counter-information, from constituent practices to forms of bio-resistance. It functions as a 'manual for use' in social disobedience, including hundreds of documentary elements covering several decades" (Disobedience Archive website). The *DA* has taken different shapes over time: as a multifaceted device, it has featured over fifteen interventions realized in various countries, taking on different configurations with each edition, never assuming a definitive form and opening onto an idea of situated knowledge. For the *60th International Art Exhibition* in Venice, the curator conceived *The Zoetrope*, a dynamic set-up presenting two main sections, "Diaspora Activism" and "Gender Disobedience," which constitute the principal axes around which the film programme is organized.

Here, *The Zoetrope* display draws inspiration from the pre-cinematic device, chiefly by adopting its centrifugal spatial arrangement. The zoetrope, also known as the "wheel of life" and refined by William G. Horner in 1834, developed within the broader context of commercial optical devices, alongside instruments like Stampfer's stroboscope, already available in London by 1833 (Crary 1990; Herbert 2000; Sdegno 2003). It belongs to a period rich in optical experimentation that preceded the advent of the cinematograph. Earlier inventions such as the *thaumatope* (1825), the *anorthoscope* (1828), and the *phenakistoscope* (1832) had already paved the way. Composed of a rotating cylinder with slits, the zoetrope housed sequences of drawings inside—dancers, jugglers, and other figures—allowing multiple spectators to view a single simulated action simultaneously (Crary 1990). The illusion of motion perceived through the apertures produces a stroboscopic effect, transforming static figures into continuous movement before the eye (Crary 1990). This is, perhaps, the most

significant element among those that the *Disobedience Archive* has incorporated for its zoetrope-inspired installation: namely, the simultaneity of vision for a group of spectators who, each positioned before a screen, find themselves inserted into a “machine” that opens up multiple subjective paths which can change from visit to visit (Campagnoni 1997, 2007). The various panels, suspended within the very long spaces of the *Corderie dell’Arsenale*, emerge midway along the entire exhibition path as a device with both centripetal and centrifugal force. This compels the viewer to enter its spiral, or, if they choose not to follow its trajectory, to quickly traverse it by zigzagging. This article argues that it is precisely the topology of the spiral, and the forces, positions, and paths that it entangles, that function as a dynamic tool allowing users to deconstruct the established narratives.



Figure 1. *Disobedience Archive (The Zoetrope)*, 60th International Art Exhibition – *La Biennale di Venezia, Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*. Photo by Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

3. The Spiral Shape

How does the exhibition format shape the meaning of the works, and what is the specific contribution of the medium? We argue that the zoetrope-inspired spiral enables the archive to unfold along multiple, interrelated pathways, producing a simultaneous and navigable experience. To develop this claim, we examine the display from two entwined perspectives—external and internal—mapping their spatial and temporal implications.

From the outside, it is important to note that, unlike various Virtual and Augmented Reality devices which provide total immersion to the point where observers may lose the ability to distinguish between reality and fiction, the spiral structure offers the spectator only partial control. While able to decide their direction, the viewer nonetheless remains absorbed by the set-up. If a sense of immersion is maintained in this display—despite it not being a 360-degree screen—it is closer to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's definition of "flow": a state in which the observer becomes so deeply involved that everything else recedes in importance. This idea of immersion is closely linked to the concept of telepresence, understood as the way technologies emulate reality, making the user feel as if they are directly interacting with a simulated environment that is, in truth, distant—in a "there and then" different from the spectator's own. For the experience of immersion, and thus a feeling of telepresence, to be complete, the perception of the medium supporting the representation must vanish, becoming, in Louis Marin's terms, *transparent* (Marin 2012).

In the case of the original zoetrope, a stroboscopic effect is achieved through the intermittent viewing of figures perceived in periodic motion. During rotation, the drum's external surface (usually painted black) does not appear to the observer, who enters directly into the content (Crary 1990). Spatially, the videos are arranged like sequential figures on a cylindrical band and the zoetrope's viewing apertures are reconfigured as dark partitions between screens. In this sense, the zoetrope, in its original form, produces a strong sense of telepresence: as the slits of the *dispositif* disappear, they "connect" images and viewer, who actively participates in the experience of the image. While a traditional zoetrope produces an effect of presence primarily through an optical mechanism that allows the eye to reach the content through apertures—spinning in a totalizing and all-encompassing way—the Disobedience Archive's Zoetrope produces an effect of embodied presence. This is generated through the displacement of the observer, who literally enters the filmic generative machine and inhabits it, shifting the point of view from the outside to the inside and vice versa. In doing so, there is no longer a central element that turns with a centripetal force. Instead, the body of the observer becomes its centre, and their movements become the only force that guides the displayed narratives.

In the *DA's* version, the historical zoetrope is remediated in form and scaled up so that the observer looks into the machine from within, where the original

drawings would have been. If the dispositif becomes large enough to *absorb* not only the gaze but to *contain* the observer, the drawings are replaced by screens. The environment thus incorporates both the video works and the observer, whose bodily experience—moving within a topology designed to grant freedom within a defined framework—structures the encounter. Even without physical apertures, the DA's moving-image ensemble functions as a whole: the “memory” of the original zoetrope—“a visual echo of technology's oneiric life” (Beloff 2005)—invites viewers to perceive the entire group of films as a single, continuous present. As Anna Caterina Dalmasso notes (2019), drawing from Sergej Ejzenštejn,² the interplay of two dynamics—emergence and immersion—characterizes immersivity, or the idea of presence: on one hand, the real spills into the virtual, and on the other, the virtual (the fictional) incorporates the real. *The Zoetrope*, thus, with its cyclical motion that brings static figures to life, can be described as a primitive device for *tele-representation* or *telepresence* of forms. The *Disobedience Archive's* installation at the Biennale, by reactivating and reinterpreting this mechanism in archaeological terms, powerfully re-examines the issues of *presence/absence* and bodily mediation—themes that remain central to understanding telepresence in a contemporary context, thus reaffirming what has already been naturalized as a post-medium condition (Eugeni 2015). The circular device, even if not in spinning, allows for a coexistence and joint viewing of the works respecting the mission of the DA described as a dispositif that “reorganizes geographies, subjectivities, and political trajectories” (*Disobedience Archive* website) that is reinforced by the multiplication of viewpoints, which generate a sense of “choral presence” and “tele-participation” in the narratives being represented. *The Zoetrope's* display, with its concentric circular structure, does not merely represent the concept of a frontier but transforms it into a physical experience. Working with the semantic idea of a border acquires profound significance precisely because the installation compels the spectator to physically overcome these barriers by moving from one concentric circle to another. This movement can evoke, with due ethical distance, a displacement currently undertaken by those who inhabit the narratives of the films presented. For example, the struggles depicted in Khaled Jarrar's *Notes on Displacement* (2022), the journeys in Oliver Ressler and Zanny Begg's *Right of Passage* (2013), and the frontiers explored in Maria Kourkouta and Niki Giannari's *Spectres Are Haunting Europe* (2016) are rendered tangible through the very act of traversing and navigating the exhibition. It is now clear how the spiral shape can create contamination between the spaces and the images, in both topological and spatial terms. However, is the topological dimension intrinsically entangled with a temporal critique?

2 Ejzenštejn (1949) describes the stereoscopic event as an alternation between depth and relief, illustrating the medium's capacity to connect the real and the filmic dimensions.

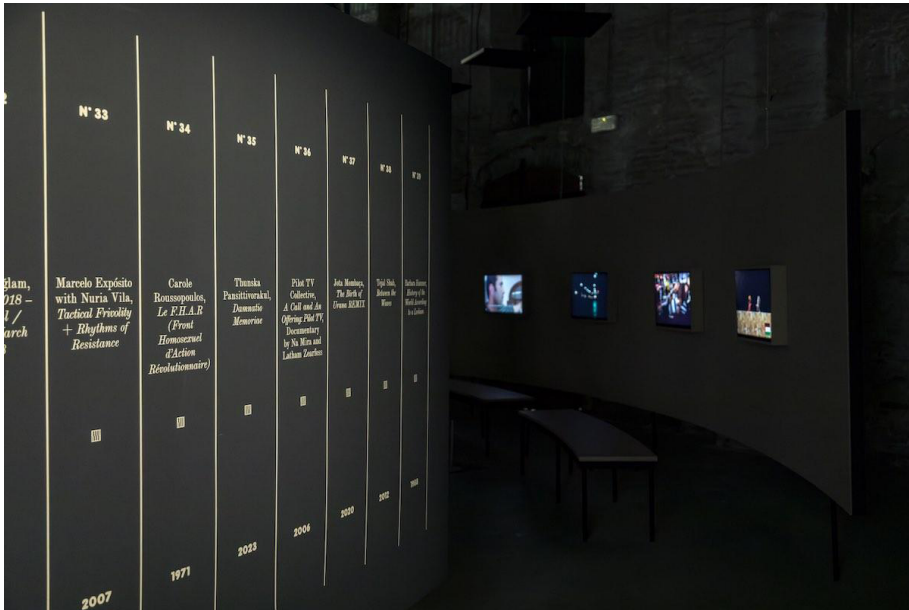


Figure 2. *Disobedience Archive (The Zoetrope)*, 60th International Art Exhibition – *La Biennale di Venezia, Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere*. Photo by Marco Zorzanello. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

4. Rethinking Time

To better understand the critique of time inherent in the *Disobedience Archive*, it is useful to step back and examine the concept of genealogy, particularly Michel Foucault’s understanding of *Entstehung*. One of the central problems for theorists and practitioners engaging with this question is how to “profane” history from within the same dispositif that has allowed these histories to emerge (Castellani 2022; Scotini 2022). It is undoubtedly through the display and the montage created by curatorial choices that a new meaning emerges, allowing the material to become readable due to new connections. This also allows the observer to take their own path and produce their montage, as noted above. This article advances “critical genealogy” as an operative concept: an approach that departs from the idea of a single origin and helps us better understand how to create counter-histories.

From this perspective, the *DA* can be read as a genealogical laboratory in which the materials do not document a coherent historical progression but rather expose the fractures, returns, and re-emergences that structure the present. The spiral arrangement of the work does not simply juxtapose films produced in different years or contexts; it also stages the coexistence of heterogeneous

temporalities that collide in the viewer's embodied experience. What appears as simultaneity in the installation—multiple screens active at once—corresponds, at the historical level, to a complex layering of struggles that are neither reducible to a common origin. The curator, Marco Scotini, points out how “the word ‘archive,’ much like ‘archaeology,’ truly resonates with the Greek root ‘archè,’ which, according to Derrida, stands for command (*archon*) and origin. However, as the two fathers of modern philology and archaeology have stated, it is now about thinking of something where the origin is not the pristine and coherent unity of a phenomenon, but always the dispersion and hybridization of multiple events” (Scotini 2022, 33).

The apparent historical linearity of Western thought, which permeated history up to the 1960s, generated idealized continuities in reality that make it difficult for images to open onto new investments of meaning extending beyond historiographical interpretations. Foucault, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche's critique of historicism in his historical revision, traces an epistemological path in which he moves beyond his initial proposition, the “archaeology of knowledge”—whose inquiry is, moreover, dedicated to the archive as a system determining the formation of subjectivities—to initiate that of “critical genealogy” (1977, 194). One of the reasons Foucault “replaces” the archaeological method with the genealogical one is to highlight the influence of power dynamics on knowledge, and of the forms of domination connected to the use of apparatuses³. The philosopher, in these inquiries, dedicates himself to the study of history's “accidents” and “deviations” in order “to agitate what was perceived as immobile, to fragment what was believed to be united, to show its heterogeneity” ([1971] 2004, 29). Before addressing the search for origin—at least in a Nietzschean sense—Foucault questions whether such an endeavor is even possible (Cati 2013), since, in his view, the term “origin” can have multiple meanings. Foucault specifies three different meanings of the term “origin” understood as birth: the origin (*Ursprung*), the provenance (*Herkunft*), and the emergence (*Entstehung*). *Ursprung* refers to the exact essence of the thing, that is, to the place of truth understood as a kind of original foundation “even outside time itself” (Cati 2013, 156), which could be seen as the “positivist” and traditional way of understanding archives.⁴

3 The concept of the *dispositif*, which Foucault also called the *apparatus of power*, holds a specific significance. It designates a complex set of discourses and institutions: “architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (Foucault [1977] 1980, 194).

4 “Origin (*Ursprung*), though a thoroughly historical category, has nothing in common with genesis (*Entstehung*). By origin we do not mean a becoming of what is already born, but rather something that emerges from becoming and passing away. The origin stands in the river

Genealogical knowledge does not aim to establish what is “true,” but rather how those truths are produced within discourses. This means that the search for *Ursprung*—for the proper and ideal origin—is far from the genealogist’s intentions. Foucault uses the other two meanings to confirm his position regarding the “excavation of the past.” The philosopher argues, instead, that origin should be understood as “provenance” or “emergence” (and not in the traditional sense of “influence”), thereby demonstrating that every beginning can be grasped only from the present as a syncope. As Alice Cati (2013, 157) notes, “the *Herkunft* alludes to the idea of provenance as lineage, belonging to a group to which the individual is tied by factors of blood [...]; genealogy conceived as an analysis of provenance must refrain from investigating fundamental anthropological phenomena, such as criteria of resemblance between individuals, in order instead to turn to the heterogeneous layers that render any inheritance precarious.” Foucault then focuses on *Entstehung* as re-emergence—the return of an event that reappears symptomatically: “a singular appearance through which a given situation can be understood from the perspective of the entry onto the scene, the irruption of certain ungovernable forces that collide with one another [...]. Emergence always occurs within a certain state of forces, thereby designating the site of a confrontation, a struggle that cyclically reproduces the conflict between dominants and dominated” (Cati 2013, 158).

Finally, *Entstehung* replaces the idea of a unified temporal synthesis with that of a stratified horizon in which it is possible to understand the discontinuous processes through which the past becomes present. Genealogy problematizes the present by revealing the power relations upon which it depends, since its objective is to trace the displacements and construction processes from which contemporary practices emerge, but also to show the historical conditions upon which these practices depend. The time required by the genealogical method must therefore be extended, because “the forms of knowledge required by our present necessitate a careful dedication to understanding deep time, medial, symbolic, linguistic, and material archaeologies, as well as to non-dominant epistemologies that resist the excess of light in our present, moving between what is illuminated and what is opaque” (Soto Calderón 2023, 17). In archives, these never-realized “lines of action” can emerge through display and become connected differently—not according to chronological or thematic relations, but rather those dictated by the physical movement of the observer. In light of what has been discussed, the archive itself should not be conceived merely as a warehouse of materials but as an *ensemble* that can be exhibited and experienced. The concept of *Entstehung* enables us to identify what emerges within discontinuity, allowing practitioners to move beyond the philological historicism that

of becoming like a whirlpool (*Strudel*), drawing the material of birth into its own rhythm” (Benjamin [1926] 1971, 24).

traditionally shapes archives and their display methods. In this sense, the curatorial team participating in the exhibition project is central to bringing previously overlooked materials to the forefront, and they should collaborate actively with archivists in order to create new forms of coexistence across different medialities, even though the observers remain the pivotal center of the montage's construction.

5. Conclusion

In short, the archive, as a *dispositif*, can be seen not merely as a structure for preserving memory but also as one that questions both its linearity and its construction. If the archive is to move beyond grand modernist narratives, considering time in its plastic and concrete dimensions proves to be a heuristic operation that opens new avenues for meaning. The archive “is a collection of heterogeneous materials not immediately channeled into a construct finalized for something or into a story that claims to signify totality in a single account” (Scotini 2022). In this sense, the media setups through which it is shown play a central role in defining not only its reception but also its modes of signification. The methods chosen by the curator and his collaborators to challenge linear time prove to be a generative and fertile approach, producing new ways of viewing films that were previously difficult to access. The two sections selected for *The Zoetrope* already signal a refusal of homogeneous political subjectivities, favoring instead intersectional positions that cut across national, ethnic, and gendered boundaries. The archive becomes, in this sense, a field of forces rather than a neutral repository: by re-editing and re-siting the materials in relation to different struggles, the DA exposes how images participate in constructing and contesting hegemonic narratives. Its nomadism thus does not merely refer to the physical displacement of the exhibition from one institution to another; it also indicates an epistemic mobility, whereby the criteria of classification, grouping, and comparison are constantly renegotiated in response to new contexts and alliances. This “archive exhibition”—a format that clearly deserves further theoretical investigation—offers a model for actively performing the archive. It serves as a framework where media and the processes of remediation of ancient media play a central role in shaping subjective experience, and contribute to ordering the film content into new forms of narration. What activates the archive is the observer, endowed with agency, who performs a subjective act by moving through the spaces of *The Zoetrope* and becomes an archivist capable of building counter-histories. Ultimately, De Rosa and Fowler's (2019) concept of “topological thinking”—developed from Rey Chow's (2012) reflections—offers a way to conceive the space within the work as a site of “entanglements” in both physical and semantic terms.

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