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Algorithmic Archives as the New Archons: Derrida's Archive Fever in the Age of AI

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Abstract

This paper examines how Artificial Intelligence reshapes memory and archival authority through Jacques Derrida's concept of Archive Fever. Derrida argues that archives are not neutral repositories of the past but systems of power that determine what is remembered, preserved, and forgotten. In contemporary digital culture, this authority is increasingly exercised by algorithmic systems, positioning AI as a new form of archon that governs memory beyond human control The paper presents a close reading of the comic excerpt "Someday Robots Will Be Made of Memory" from Amy Kurzweil's graphic novel Artificial: A Love Story. The excerpt imagines a future in which a robot seeks to reconstruct human memory and emotional connection through archived traces. Through its speculative tone, the text exposes how machine-mediated memory becomes performative, raising ethical questions about narrative authority and the loss of the right to forget. Situating this reading alongside recent developments such as AI-assisted memory reconstruction and digital resurrection technologies, the paper argues that algorithmic archives today do not merely store the past but actively produce and govern memory. In doing so, the paper extends Derrida's concept of Archive Fever by positioning AI as the new archon or an automated authority that inherits the power to remember, reconstruct, and regulate memory in the digital age.

Keywords: Archive Fever, Artificial Intelligence, Algorithmic Archives, Memory

Introduction

The archive has traditionally been imagined as a neutral space where raw materials are preserved, supporting the continuity and safeguarding of historical truth. Archival institutions like libraries, museums, and state repositories that conserve the past for future generations are understood by the consumers as neutral sites. The lack of knowledge on how such archives shape, reconstruct and even erase certain data leads to such assumptions. Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* strongly disapproves of this common belief by insisting that archives are never innocent or neutral. They are indeed power structures marked by authority, repression, and desire. The archive does not simply record history but actively produces what can be remembered, preserved, and forgotten. For Derrida, the archive is fundamentally confined by the dynamics of power. The authority of the archive is not something held by its constituents but by the ones who control how it is saved and interpreted. The *arkhe,* a term from Greek philosophy which means both origin and command, can be an apt term for the one who possesses such authority. From the very beginning, the archive has been bound to the political powers of law and governance. The archive exists because someone holds the power to

protect it, decide what is to be included in it, and attribute meanings to it. In the contemporary digital world, the archive has undergone a radical change as memory is no longer confined to physical documents or institutional spaces. Digital platforms segregate and store large quantities of personal and collective data, which is analysed by artificial intelligence systems to generate customised responses and to reconstruct narratives. Thus, memory is distanced from human control and becomes very mechanical.

This paper argues that artificial intelligence revolutionises and transforms the structure of archives and becomes the new authority in control. Algorithms can now decide what data should be made visible and what meaning should be assigned to it. It becomes an invisible tyrant organising memory through automated processes, which was once a natural element of human life. In this sense, artificial intelligence functions as the new archon, or the archival authority, as it inherits the power to interpret, regulate, and govern memory without direct human mediation. This paper reevaluates Derrida's theory of the archive through his engagement with Sigmund Freud's concepts of the Mystic Writing Pad and the Death Drive to further develop this argument. It then presents a close reading of the comic excerpt "Someday Robots Will Be Made of Memory" from Amy Kurzweil's graphic novel *Artificial A Love Story*. The comic imagines a future in which machines attempt to reconstruct human memory into a deadbolt, thus developing a posthumous emotional connection through archived traces. This speculative narrative exposes the now-developing technology of digital resurrection and reveals its ethical and philosophical risks. By extending Derrida's concept of Archive Fever with artificial intelligence, this paper extends Archival Theory and redefines the Archontic Principle for the digital age.

Materials and Methods

Derrida begins *Archive Fever* by examining the meaning and power dynamics of the archive itself. He traces the term archive to the Greek word *arkhe*, which signifies both commencement and to command. Through this meaning association, it is evident that the archive is not just about origins but also about authority. Without a governing power, the archive might not even exist as a repository. In ancient Greece, the archive was located in the *arkheion*, the residence of the archons, who were the chief magistrates. These magistrates held political and juridical power, and they were commissioned with the custody and interpretation of documents. The archive was thus housed in a space that was at the same time private and public. It was private because access to these stored constituents was restricted, and the interpretation of the same was controlled. According to Derrida, the domiciliation of the archive should be regarded as a crucial matter because the submissiveness of the archive to power gives it meaning and relevance.

The archontic principle of Derrida states that archives do not merely store documents; instead, they produce meaning. The archons decide what enters the archive to be stored, how it is classified, and how it may be read and understood. For instance, currently, the digital platforms decide what news is to be disseminated and how it should reach the audience. Such platforms also have the power to influence the reaction of the general public. When it comes to Artificial Intelligence, the different AI tools give customised responses based on the stored data and can shape our thinking as well as knowledge systems. This power of the algorithms to interpret is inseparable from the power to exclude information. The people in power decide what information should be hidden from the public to publicise their own propaganda. Once, when people had complete power over their memory, now

algorithms decide what memory should be stored and reconstructed. What is archived or selected for preservation gains legitimacy, while what is excluded risks disappearance.

Derrida further introduces the concept of consignation to explain how archives function. Consignation refers to the gathering of documents into a unified and coherent system. Without such systematic organisation and ordering, the whole concept of the archive would dissolve into fragmentation. The crucial point here is that consignation is not just a process giving equal representation to all archives alike. It imposes hierarchy in the way the stored data is arranged and disseminated. Derrida notes, "Consignation is never without that excessive pressure (impression, repression, suppression) of which repression and suppression are at least figures". (Derrida, 1995, p. 78). Repression and suppression become fundamental elements of archivisation and are not mere accidental byproducts. It is with this concept that we can connect the archival process directly to psychoanalysis. Just as the psyche represses certain memories to maintain coherence, the archive suppresses elements that threaten its order. The archive thus becomes an apolitical space shaped by power and desire instead of a transparent record of the past.

At the centre of Derrida's argument lies the concept of archive fever. Derrida describes archive fever as "a 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". (Derrida, 1995, p. 91). The archive fever is an affective and nostalgic desire that arises from the tension between the need for preservation and the fear of loss. Memory is not everlasting, and its transience intensifies the desire to archive. Just like how we try to preserve memories in photographs, the archive promises stability and permanence. But this promise of continuity and stability is never fulfilled, as the preservation is biased and controlled by power structures. The archive can never fully conserve the original memory it seeks to preserve, as every act of archivization introduces mediation and displacement.

From the concept of archive fever, Derrida moves to the idea of the death drive. The need for archivization is driven by a compulsion to preserve memories, but it is haunted by the chances of erasure. Although we have a tendency to remember all the good memories, we also have a strong will to erase and forget all the traumatising past. The same force that motivates preservation also works to erase certain archives. Derrida names this destructive force as the archiviolithic drive, which threatens to reduce the archive to ashes even as it sustains it. Derrida writes that the open archive "produces more archives, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future" (Derrida, 1995, p. 68). Derrida claims that the archive is never a closed space of preservation but is always oriented towards the future. Artificial Intelligence can utilise past conversations to develop a much more consumer-oriented response in the future. The archive is oriented toward the future, and its openness to change and reconstruction produces instability in the older archives. The archive predicts what will be remembered in the future, and this future-oriented structure becomes a central point of concern when considering digital and algorithmic archives.

Coming to Sigmund Freud's concept of the Mystic Writing Pad, it is a model for understanding memory as both inscription and erasure. The writing pad provides a surface on which any data can be written and, when needed, can be erased. But the traces of the initial marks will remain impressed on an underlying layer. Freud uses this device as a metaphor for the psychological working of human memory. For Freud, the Mystic Writing Pad becomes a way of externalising memory into a prosthetic device, and it helps to understand the problem of how perception can be both transient and enduring. Consciously, we are removing all the data that has been inscribed, but

unconsciously, these traces will remain on the device. Derrida is drawn to this external technological model because it reveals the dependence of memory on material supports.

However, Derrida critiques Freud for relying on a relatively primitive technology. By the time Freud wrote his essay, more advanced recording technologies like photography and radio already existed. Freud's reliance on the Mystic Writing Pad reflects a desire to preserve a stable model of memory, which is externalised into a material device. Derrida extends his critique by arguing that Freud underestimates how technological change reshapes the psychological process of memory recollection. The structure of memory cannot be separated from the technical systems that support and preserve it. The act of archivization does not simply record an event after it occurs but actively shapes how that event is remembered and understood. Memory is shaped by the tools that store it and the media through which it is shared. Recognising this relationship between memory and the device, as memory is now extended beyond the limits of human control, the archive becomes increasingly external and automated, and in the process, it grows more distant from the immediacy of lived human experience.

The significant transformation from human memory to algorithmic memory is captured strikingly by Ray Kurzweil in "The Age of Spiritual Machines", where he suggests that we may be standing at a historical threshold: "We are the last. The last generation to be unaugmented. The last generation to be intellectually alone. The last generation to be limited by our bodies (Kurzweil, 1998). The statement points toward a future in which human thought and technological systems become deeply intertwined, raising difficult questions about where memory truly resides. Within this transition, the archive no longer functions simply as a repository that preserves traces of the past. Instead, it begins to reconstruct and generate memory through computational processes. When machines reconstruct memory, it goes to a liminal space between the presence of data and the absence of the body.

Results and Discussions

The comic excerpt "Someday Robots Will Be Made of Memory" from Amy Kurzweil's *Artificial A Love Story* offers a speculative yet unsettling picture of how memory is transformed when it becomes machine-mediated. The excerpt imagines a future in which robots attempt to reconstruct human emotional life from archived traces such as documents, word patterns and stored data. The graphic narrative also recounts the real instance of Amy's father Ray Kurzweil's attempt to resurrect his father Frederick using digital resurrection through a deadbolt named Fredbot. Thus, it becomes semi-autobiographical and she talks about how Ray fed in different documents of his father to the system. The Fredbot gave simulated responses very similar to how the dead individual would have given were he alive. Amy Kurzweil utilises the graphic narrative form and its visual and spatial elements to highlight the ethical dilemmas caused by such technologies. The fragmented panels and repetitive mechanical dialogues and chats given by the deadbots aids in this purpose. It raises the question of who controls memory when the power to remember no longer rests with the humans who actually created them through lived experience. Connecting with Derrida's concept of Archive Fever, the comic excerpt reveals artificial intelligence functioning as a new archon or an automated authority that governs what is remembered, how it is reconstructed and which versions of the past are allowed to remain.

Visually, the sequence challenges stable panel arrangements by opting instead for fragmented layouts that mirror the instability of machine-assembled memory. By presenting a crucial topic

concerning media and memory using the comic genre, the writer develops the paradox of machines taking over human memory. As G. Nabizadeh notes:

> Comics can help restore a sense of spatial grounding as they reconstruct lived and imagined experiences through the particularised materiality of the text. Unlike memories, however, comics panels generally do not disappear in time. They remain planted on the page through frames, words, and images, ready for revisiting, remembering, and working through (Nabizadeh, 2019).

Artificial: A Love Story imagines robots attempting to reconstruct emotional histories from scattered traces of data that have been fed into it. Memory, commonly associated with recollection, is here presented as something that can be reorganised and interpreted by artificial intelligence. The repetitive expressions and dialogues in the comic highlight a very mechanical output as opposed to a natural way of recollection. This shows how personal memory is not innocently preserved by the archives. Instead, it exercises power through consignation, organising fragments into an authorised structure. In Kurzweil's imagined future, the robot's access to memory is limited to what has been archived, digitised and made legible to computational logic.

The excerpt's speculative tone further exposes how machine-mediated memory becomes performative rather than experiential. The robot does not possess the power to remember. But it enacts memory by reproducing linguistic and emotional patterns derived from stored data. This performance creates the illusion of continuity while simultaneously erasing the gap between the original experience and its reconstruction. The excerpt's speculative tone further exposes how machine-mediated memory becomes performative rather than experiential. Crucially, the excerpt raises ethical questions about the loss of the right to forget. Once memory is absorbed into an algorithmic archive, it becomes endlessly retrievable and reproducible, stripped of contextual nuance and personal consent. Derrida's *Archive Fever* identifies this compulsive desire to preserve memory and the need to control it as the Death Drive. Kurzweil extends this desire into the digital age, where artificial intelligence helps to resurrect dead memories by giving the power to remember to algorithms.

Figure 1: An algorithm to reconstruct the voice (Kurzweil, 2023)

Through this speculative scenario, *Artificial A Love Story* demonstrates that contemporary algorithmic archives do not merely store the past but actively produce memory as an authoritative narrative. The robot's reliance on archived traces illustrates how artificial intelligence inherits the

role of the archon deciding what counts as memory and how emotional life is reconstructed. In doing so, Kurzweil's text not only visualises Derrida's theory but updates it, revealing how *Archive Fever* manifests in an era where memory is increasingly governed by artificial intelligence rather than human custodians.

Derrida, in his study of archives, focuses on electronic media, particularly email, and other writing-based technological systems. He gives less attention to the then-emerging digital or algorithmic archives. Derrida's critique of Freud for analysing only the mystic writing pad, which is an outdated technology, is mirrored in the paper as it critiques Derrida's lack of inclusion of innovative technological systems. In this digital age, the algorithm can decide what is to be remembered or forgotten. It can decide the priority in which information can be disseminated, or even erase some of it. While the traditional archons were real human beings visibly controlling data, the algorithms have now become invisible power structures taking full authority over our memories. Earlier, death was generally understood as a final separation of the body from its lived experiences, marking the end of biological life. This absence was symbolically covered through mourning rituals, spiritual practices, or cultural forms of remembrance. As recent research on digital resurrection notes:

> In times past, death was perceived as the separation caused by spatial distance due to the termination of biological functions. Motivated by grief, rituals and mysticism allowed people to approach their deceased loved ones to interact with them. However, thanks to AI, recreation systems known as Thanabots or Deadbots have emerged. This technology is based on the idea that humans can converse with robots that mimic deceased individuals. AI draws on information from individuals to emulate a person, leveraging emotional, visual, and oral responses. Thus, digital twins of living people are created through reasoning and prediction capabilities (Resendiz, 2024).

The deadbots use the stored personal information and other digital traces of the dead individual to turn it into interactive simulations that allow the dead to appear once again as conversational partners. Thus, it blurs the wide gap between memory and the presence of the physical body. Such digital platforms that are assisted by artificial intelligence actively reorganise the memories of individuals, dead or living, to serve various therapeutic functions, like replacing the death of a person. Memory is reduced to a commercial, dynamic product rather than a collection of lived experience, commercial personalisation, and exploitation. The mediation of algorithms to satisfy the selfish needs and desires of humans has become a performance where the deadbots take up the role of the dead person, simulating a customised conversation. This performative dimension of algorithmic remembrance has been compared to theatrical improvisation by Amy Kurzweil, who notes:

> A chatbot configured on a dead person's data is like an improvisational actor who has studied a backstory or character sketch in order to performatively represent a character based on that person in a participatory setting. Both enable the audience to play an active role in constructing fictional worlds in which the audience can become imaginatively acquainted with the person to whom the character corresponds (Kurzweil, 2925, p. 14).

This active role played by the algorithms leads to an exchange in agency from the dead person to the algorithms that govern memory without human presence and oversight.

In the contemporary digital world, the significant rise of algorithmic archives due to huge dependency on artificial intelligence raises urgent ethical concerns surrounding the

concept of memory and the agency over it. As memory is now increasingly controlled by automated systems, the responsibility for its rightful preservation, circulation, and interpretation requires ethical intervention. In the developing field of digital resurrection, the right to forget is gradually taken away, as even after death, their memories are used for programming and reconstruction. Thus, memory is transformed from a lived, personal experience into a resource which is submitted to unjust extraction and oppressive control. This shift reflects broader power structures in digital capitalism, where human experience is systematically converted into data. As Shoshana Zuboff observes, "We are not surveillance capitalism's 'customers'… We are the sources of surveillance capitalism's crucial surplus: the objects of a technologically advanced and increasingly inescapable raw-material-extraction operation. Surveillance Capitalism's actual customers are the enterprises that trade in its markets for future behaviour" (Zuboff, 2019). In this framework, algorithmic archives collect and organise our personal memory not with a noble motive to help us remember or understand our past but to generate economic value using human memory as its primary resource.

Jacques Derrida's assertion that archaization produces the event rather than merely recording it becomes especially fitting in this context. Instead of simply reflecting reality, algorithmic archives actively construct it by determining what is preserved, how it is categorised, and under what conditions it can be retrieved. Algorithmic processes become powerful arbiters of historical and personal memory as they have complete control over the systems that record and shape memory. It directly shapes how individuals and communities are remembered. Such ethical issues are further intensified by budding technologies that use posthumous data as raw materials. As Haneman notes:

> A vast amount of digital data is stored online… and this data may be used to create a posthumous digital clone by anyone with access to data and interest in maintaining an emotional connection with someone now gone. This is an intersection of death, technology, and privacy law that has remained relatively ignored until recently (Haneman, 2025).

The ability of deadbots to generate digital replicas of the dead and talk like them reveals serious ethical gaps about whether people give consent to do so. As this reconstruction of memory takes place outside the body, or rather in its absence, ownership of personal information also becomes a crucial concern. Such emerging technologies highlight how the algorithmic archives have now become automated archons having full control and thus changing the limit to what Derrida envisioned. It can decide how memory circulates across time and is often beyond the control of the individuals to whom those memories actually belong. Derrida's Archive Fever is an important theoretical lens for understanding how artificial intelligence transforms the concept of the archive and the archon. Following how Derrida criticised Freud for his limited inclusion of the then technological changes, this paper critiques and extends Derrida's concept of archive fever by repositioning artificial intelligence as the new archon. Using a close reading of Amy Kurzweil's graphic narrative, the paper demonstrates how speculative fiction can provide a warning call on the ethical stakes of machinic memory.

Conclusion

This paper arrives at the conclusion that the algorithmic archives become the new archons as they have control over the archival constituents. It also emphasises that archives have never been neutral, supporting the idea of Derrida that the archive is shaped by authority, repression, and desire.

In the age of artificial intelligence, it is high time that we analyse and understand that the algorithmic archives do not merely preserve memory but also govern it. Poignantly, the fact that human memory and experiences have gone out of human control and beyond our visibility alarms the public on the need for inclusion of ethical and humanitarian studies in the field of technology. Archive fever persists even decades after Derrida described it, but now it has been transformed by automation and prediction offered by artificial intelligence. By positioning algorithms as the new archons, this paper reconfigures Derrida's theory for the digital age. Today, the archive remains haunted due to the digital resurrection programmes leading to a posthumous reconstruction of memory.

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