ALAIN RESNAIS'S ENTROPIC ARCHIVE

João Oliveira Duarte[1]

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to show that Alain Resnais's documentary *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* establishes a parallel, a symbiosis, between order and disorder, between classification and entropy. The bureaucratic procedures, the "Fordist model", the shadowy figures in the documentary, all of which imbue the *Bibliothèque Nationale* with an air of science fiction, have a sombre counterpart: the badly lit basements, the chaotic boxes filled with books and papers awaiting retrieval. By comparing Resnais's documentary, Borges's *Library of Babel* and Kafka's work, this chapter reveals a secret desire for the senseless chaos of unread books.

KEYWORDS

Memory, Archive, Alain Resnais, Bureaucracy, Entropy.

1 This work is funded by national funds through the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia – under the SFRH/BD/130366/2017 and under the project PTDC/FER-FIL/32042/2017.

1.
PETRIFIED CHAOS

What do the initial shots of Alain Resnais's *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* show? Rooms full of stacked and dusty papers, boxes filled with forgotten books. A *petrified chaos* that seems to reign in the poorly lit rooms[2] (Figures 1 and 2). We don't know, and Resnais's documentary doesn't tell us, where they are situated, what their function is, whether they have one:[3] do they correspond to the place where the books are brought, prior to their classification, or, on the contrary, do they remain a negative illustration of Dumesnil's voiceover, a chaotic sea of documents, papers, books, all those memory supplements that don't supplement anything, in the imminence of submerging anyone who ventures to cross the threshold of this mute space.

This is the archive, Resnais seems to be telling us, in its most dreadful aspects, beyond all order, the hellish nightmare that it never stops dreaming of: crammed, forgotten books, meaningless words that no one has ever read, an almost inaudible lament that rises from the ocean of unread pages that stand there, *waiting*.[4] But for what? For whom?

2 According to the script by Remo Forlani: "The camera slides from one room to the other, under arched cellars with low ceilings and lighting. It shows, in passing, apparently abandoned stacks of newspapers, boxes overabundantly filled with books, or else large collections where the badly cropped sides show the weight of time" (Forlani, 1965, p. 65). Apart from the texts that have been published in English, all translations are mine.

3 "The three-minute sequence contains only five shots, four of them tracking shots with durations ranging from eight to thirty-eight seconds. All are set within a dimly lit space filled with piles of newspapers and topless crates of books. The disordered belowground contrasts with the ordered spaces that will soon be seen aboveground. What place do these disordered objects have among the BN's collections? Are they newly arrived items not yet processed? Are they rejects, somehow unworthy of the treasures on display above?" (Ungar, 2018, p. 194).

4 "Visible to the spectator, the camera and the microphone travel through a dark basement. Briefly aided by a guard's flashlight, it finds stacks of books and newspapers, boxes, statues, ancient vases and dusty manuscripts. This fantastic storage space, this basement where the accumulated objects seem to have been forgotten by everyone, is the last crypt of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*: we are in the presence of treasures that belong to us. These yellow papers, these damaged treasures, are not lost. They are waiting" (Douin, 2013, p. 44).

One leaves this nightmare, this infernal landscape,[5] but not to the light, to broad daylight (this will appear only at the end of *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*, when Resnais speaks of an enigmatic happiness). One leaves these crammed rooms full of dust and debris, this entropic space, to enter the shadowy functioning of bureaucratic apparatuses, a mechanical world full of ghostly beings, repetitive gestures and abstract reasoning.

There's some irony in Resnais's quasi-unconscious reference to the Fordist factory model, with the many tubes depicted in the documentary, the factory-like movement, the workers, stunned, as if living examples of what Heidegger and Agamben called *Benommenheit*.[6] Hopelessly locked in their repetitive gestures, blind to whatever lies outside the scope of mechanical functioning, these workers (Figures 3 and 4) stand in dialectical tension with the treasures of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* – treasures that embody the world's memory.

Beyond this common reading of Alain Resnais's short film, however, *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* presents a set of details, of motifs, that can be related to a well-known short story by Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*. The details that relate this documentary to the Borgesean universe are easily identified: first, there's the aforementioned reference to a totality in the first sentence of the short film and in the title of Resnais's documentary. There's also the presence of the bookshelves, filmed as if to give a sense of infinity, the circularity of the library's dome or the growth of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* of which Resnais speaks, a

5 Alain Carou speaks of a purgatory: "Between the first version of the script and the second, without any risk of error, Resnais and Fornali visited a fantastic underground purgatory, where thousands of books (or tens of thousands) await better days to join the library's catalogue and shelves" (Carou, 2007, p. 127).

6 In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben understands the term *Benommenheit* as the absence of proper action: "The mode of being proper to the animal, which defines its relation with the disinhibitor, is captivation (*Benommenheit*). Here Heidegger, with a repeated etymological figure, puts into play the relationship among the terms *benommen* (captivated, stunned, but also taken away, blocked), *eingenommen* (taken in, absorbed), and *Benehmen* (behavior), which all refer back to the verb *nehmen*, to take (from the Indo-European root **nem*, which means to distribute, to allot, to assign). Insofar as it is essentially captivated and wholly absorbed in its own disinhibitor, the animal cannot truly act (*handeln*) or comport itself (*sich verhalten*) in relation to it: it can only behave (*sich benehmen*)" (Agamben, 2004, p. 52).

growth both upwards, towards the sky, and downwards, into the middle of the earth (conjoining heaven and hell). But there's also a spiral, a typical Borgesean motif, which opens the library to infinity (Figures 5 to 8).[7]

2.
MEANINGLESS LOGIC

It's a sombre short story. The world, Borges begins by saying, is a library – or, put differently, the Library is the world: "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries":

> The arrangement of the galleries is *always the same*. Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon's six sides; the height of the bookshelves, floor to ceiling, is hardly greater than the height of a normal librarian. One of the hexagon's free sides opens onto a narrow sort of vestibule, which in turns opens onto another gallery, *identical to the first – identical in fact to all*. To the left and right of the vestibule are two tiny compartments. One is for sleeping, upright; the other for satisfying one's physical necessities. Through this space, too, there passes a *spiral staircase*, which winds upward into the remotest distance. In the vestibule there is a mirror, which faithfully duplicates appearances. (Borges, 1999, p. 60)

An everlasting sameness, devoid of any kind of difference, of novelty, galleries upon galleries where beings wander in no direction in particular, full of books written in languages no one can understand. No one could ever visit all those hexagonal galleries; no one could ever read all those strange and for the most part incomprehensible books. The universe, that is, the Library, contains

7 Andrew Tracy also underscores the idea of the labyrinth: "With Resnais's probing and moving camera work and a commentary by French writer Remo Forlani, *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* transforms the library into a mysterious labyrinth, something between an edifice and an organism: part brain and part tomb" (Tracy, 2013, p. 49).

everything, encloses all the various times and places, but places everything in the never-ending sameness of the galleries. Recalling Pascal's statement about God, Borges claims that the "Library is a sphere whose exact center is any hexagon and whose circumference is unattainable" (Borges, 1999, p. 60). It amounts to negative knowledge, a negative infinity or a dark and melancholic knowledge. Given the unattainability of the circumference, no one can ever fully grasp the Library; every hexagon is followed by another hexagon, exactly the same as the one before.

Like the archive, it is a heterotopia,[8] in itself devoid of time but enclosing all of time. While it could be read as praising bookish knowledge (the world as a library, or a library containing the entire world), *The Library of Babel* presents us with a world devoid of sense, or a world in which sense and non-sense are no longer distinguishable. In its mechanical production of words, sentences and books, Borges's universe seems strangely close to the initial shots of *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*: sombre galleries, packed with books, words that have come together by sheer luck, without reason or logic: "Light is provided by certain spherical fruits that bear the name 'bulbs'. There are two of these bulbs in each hexagon, set crosswise. The light they give is insufficient, and *unceasing*" (Borges, 1999, p. 60):

> Those examples allowed a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This philosopher observed that all books, however different from one another they might be, *consist of identical elements*: the space, the period, the comma, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also posited a fact which all travelers have since confirmed: in all the Library, there are no two identical books. From those incontrovertible premises, the librarian deduced that the library is *"total" – perfect, complete, and whole* – and that its bookshelves contain *all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols* (a number which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite) – that is, *all that is able to be expressed, in every language*. (Borges, 1999, p. 61)

8 Not a real heterotopia, of course. I am using this concept as a metaphor for the type of space that Borges creates.

This "totality" – "perfect, complete, and whole" – the "fundamental law" that comprehends "all that is able to be expressed, in every language", is the effect of a blind logic, a purely mechanical functioning: the vast but not infinite possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols. Since all books, regardless of what is written, can be reduced to a mechanical logic (each book must contain *one* possible variation of the twenty-two orthographic symbols, with the additional rule that no two can be alike), the universe, that is, the Library, is nothing but a space filled with an undistinguishable noise devoid of sense – even when we can *read* the text. All sense retreats, giving way to a sheer accumulation of words and a combination of letters that, even when sense is achieved, bears the mark of mechanical production.

After this sombre picture, Borges presents us with one of the lists he seems so fond of, full of marvellous details and eccentric descriptions. The Library contains everything, "all that is able to be expressed, in every language":

> All – the detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels, the faithful catalog of the library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs, the proof of the falsity of those false catalogs, a proof of the falsity of the true catalog, the gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary upon that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in every language, the interpolations of every book into all books, the treatise Bede could have written (but did not) on the mythology of the Saxon people, the lost books of Tacitus. (Borges, 1999, p. 61)

This vertiginous list strikes us with its sheer non-sense, despite all its eccentric details. It contains everything: what has been lost forever (Tacitus' works), the possible (the treatise Bede *could* have written), the contradictory (the "proof of the falsity of the true catalog"), the false, the impossible (the autobiographies of the archangels).

Indeed, one can draw a parallel between this passage from Borges's *The Library of Babel* and a well-known story told by Leibniz in his *Theodicy*. Extending the story told by Lorenzo Valla in *De Libero Arbitrio*, Leibniz speaks

of a Palace of the Fates, where all possible worlds are present in a pyramid-shaped building at the top of which resides the actual world:

> At the command of Pallas there came within view Dodona with the temple of Jupiter, and Sextus issuing thence; he could be heard saying that he would obey the God. And lo! he goes to a city lying between two seas, resembling Corynth. He buys there a small garden; cultivating it, he finds a treasure; he becomes a rich man, enjoying affection and esteem; he dies at a great age, beloved of the whole city. Theodorus saw the whole life of Sextus as at one glance, and as in a stage presentation. There was a great volume of writings in this hall: Theodorus could not refrain from asking what that meant. It is the history of this world which we are now visiting, the Goddess told him; it is the book of its fates. You have seen a number on the forehead of Sextus. Look in this book for the place which it indicates. Theodorus looked for it, and found there the history of Sextus in a form more ample than the outline he had seen. Put your finger on any line you please, Pallas said to him, and you will see represented actually in all its detail that which the line broadly indicates. He obeyed, and he saw coming into view all the characteristics of a portion of the life of that Sextus. They passed into another hall, and lo! another world, another Sextus, who, issuing from the temple, and having resolved to obey Jupiter, goes to Thrace. There he marries the daughter of the king, who had no other children; he succeeds him, and he is adored by his subjects. They went into other rooms, and always they saw new scenes. (Leibniz, 1985, p. 376)

All of Sextus' possible lives are present in the Palace of Fates (every hall has, or so it seems, a book that contains the history of that particular variation), all the countless differences, all the variants that could either amount to a small departure from the actual world or contain an unimaginable Sextus.

As in Leibniz's Palace of Fates, in Borges's Library we find all possibilities. But whereas in Leibniz none of these variations exist, lacking actuality and

thus allowing Agamben's Messiah to descend to the myriad of possibilities (Agamben, 1999, pp. 266-267), trying to retrieve the lament for the possibility enclosed in Leibniz's Tartarus, in Borges the possible is always already actual, real. As a matter of fact, Borges's Library lacks possibility, given that the possible is real, and all possible variations exist in a hexagon. Tacitus' lost works *actually* exist (but what does it mean to say that the lost works really do exist, without saying that they are not lost at all?), as do the archangels' autobiographies and the treatise Bede *could have* written. Even the "proof of the falsity of the true catalog" exists, or rather coexists, with the actual, true catalogue. The abyssal logic followed by Borges goes even further, however, by refusing to ascribe Reason of any kind to the universe. We might also recall another famous quote by Pascal, a thinker who would seem to be decisive to understanding Borges's short story: "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me" (*le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie*) (Pascal, 1910, p. 78). It is this eternal silence that in the end follows, as a consequence, the senselessness of the Library:

> In order for a book to exist, it is sufficient that it be possible. Only the impossible is excluded. For example, no book is also a staircase, though there are no doubt books that discuss and deny and prove that possibility, and others whose structure corresponds to that of a staircase. (Borges, 1999, p. 62)

Following this logic, alongside all those eccentricities listed by Borges, the myriad of marvels and wonders that can be imagined (the "detailed history of the future" alongside false histories, given that one can only distinguish one from the other if one has access to the Library's "circumference"), we find "the formless and chaotic nature of virtually all books" (Borges, 1999, p. 60) – the endless variation, lacking all reason, of the letters of the alphabet:

> One book, which my father once saw in a hexagon in circuit 15-94, consisted of the letter MCV perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another (much consulted in this zone) is a mere labyrinth of letters whose penultimate page contains the phrase:

> *Oh time thy pyramids*. This much is known: for every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherence. (Borges, 1999, p. 61)

This lack of sense invades everything: entire sections of the Library containing a "senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherence", followed by one book, one bookshelf, containing a "rational line". The difficulty, however, lies precisely in this distinction: if every book contained in the Library is nothing but *one possible* variation among others of the letters of the alphabet, then every book is, in itself, nothing but a fiction – a fiction devoid of sense, owing its being to a mechanical logic.

From this combination of logic and illogic, Borges draws a melancholic conclusion:

> There is no combination of characters one can make – *dhcmrlchtdj*, for example – that the divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance. There is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god. To speak is to commit tautologies. *This pointless, verbose epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five bookshelves in one of the countless hexagons – as does its refutation*. (Borges, 1999, p. 63)

"To speak is to commit tautologies": there's nothing one could say or write that isn't always already inscribed in the "senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherence" of the Library. Indeed, everything one could write is always submerged by this "senseless cacophony", which emerges from the chance variations of the letters of the alphabet. And Borges seems to point in this direction. Why does he say, turning this logic against his own short story, that it is a "pointless, verbose epistle" if not due to the fact that the "senseless cacophony" is always already there, conditioning every single sentence? "You who read me – are you certain you understand my language?" "The universe (which others call the Library)" is nothing but an indistinct mass of books,

piled up without any order whatsoever, eternally frozen, to which nothing can be added. A petrified chaos, a calm and steady catastrophe, full of "verbal nonsense, and incoherence".

3.
GREY NEUTRALITY

In *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*, one likewise encounters a sort of list. It's not the same type of list that Borges was so fond of, full of logical conundrums and bizarre details. Its logic, on the contrary, is quite easily grasped, even if we don't regard Alain Resnais's documentary as an encomium to the grandeur of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*.[9] It reveals several treasures from different times and places, now housed in the Parisian library: the unpublished manuscripts of the *Journal des Goncourt*, the Codex Peresianus, Goncourt's unpublished manuscripts, diaries that can only be opened on a specific date (1974), the manuscript of Pascal's *Pensée*s, Zola's complete works, the Michaux Pebble, from Baghdad, an album of sketches by Villard de Honnecourt, Victor Hugo's manuscripts, Sébastian Cabot's World Map, a liturgical book, the first book ever printed in Paris, Charlemagne's *Evangeliarum*, Saint-Sever's Apocalypse, etchings by Mantegna, Dürer and Redon. "Everything here is rare, unique, precious, unobtainable", as we are told by Dumesnil's voiceover (Figures 9 to 11).

However, this idiosyncratic collection of disparate (and priceless) objects, which could resemble a curiosity cabinet, finds its possibility in the library's logic – not in the sense, we are told in the first sequences of the short film, that the library contains, *saves*, "all the memory in the world", in the sense that it holds and protects memory (such that the library functions as an enormous supplementary memory), but in the sense that the library is primarily an archive, an accumulation of time, built *against* time itself. As mentioned above, and following Foucault's analysis, a library is no longer "the expression

9 João Bénard da Costa sees in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* a turning away from a politics of praise by the French Ministry: "It was produced by one of Quai d'Orsay's cultural departments at a time when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to foster the making of documentaries that spread the greatness of one of France's largest cultural institutions" (Costa, s/d, p. 131).

of an individual choice" but a sheer accumulation of objects and documents, a historical endeavour in which books are sorted, classified, analysed and numbered:

> Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit, whereas in the seventeenth century, even at the end of the century, museums and libraries were the expression of an individual choice. By contrast, the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. (Foucault, 1986, p. 26)

In this sense, those treasures that Alain Resnais shows us are part of a more general logic in which what needs to be emphasized is this endless accumulation of time – always already in danger, however, of collapsing into sheer compulsive hoarding. This "general archive" thus institutes a different logic than that of the treasure that is preserved for the future, saved from the ravages of time. This different logic has to do with all the ghosts we've already encountered, with this world of clerks, with blind bureaucratic procedures. And to some extent, Resnais's documentary enhances this grey machine. It's not just all the mechanisms, the tubes and machines, that we are shown in the short film. It's this door (Figure 12): anonymous, neutral, numbered, contaminating from the outset everything that is presented to us after, as if to mark a difference between spaces. These treasures are always already plunged into this grey world of equivalence, in which Rimbaud's manuscript is equal, from an archival point of view, to every other book, no matter how insignificant it is in the history of literature.

Therefore, the "idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive" has, as a consequence, a sort of calm, frozen, ocean of documents and objects, in which they are all reduced to the same grey neutrality.

There aren't any treasures at all, only objects that must be catalogued, placed in their proper location, dealt with from an administrative point of view. Hence, the library as archive – as a heterotopia[10] – is not just a matter of accumulating everything. It's a question of procedures, of establishing a general equivalence, of the blind administration of papers and documents, of classification and cataloguing.

This idea of a general equivalence finds an ironic, playful example in *Les Nouvelles Aventures de Harry Dickson*. After establishing a negative limit on our knowledge in the form of a hidden, unknown treasure ("who knows whether these papers hold other revelatory texts?"), Dumesnil asks an impossible question: "who knows what will someday bear best witness to our civilization?" In the form of an impossible address, this question carries with it an insane injunction: to save everything, to hold, in a place outside of time, every text, every document, all the books (an out-of-joint undertaking about which the Nietzsche of *Untimely Meditations* (2007) would have something to say, with his defence of forgetfulness as a condition of life itself). Prior to this mad injunction, as a kind of proof of this compulsion, we hear Dumesnil speak of an incomplete collection:

> An incomplete collection depreciates in value. This is why the slightest lack of attention is not allowed. If an issue is missing, it will be requested. Even if some are only ever consulted once, *they must be conserved. That's the rule*. Among them, Rimbaud's first publication was discovered in an obscure newspaper from the Ardennes. (Resnais, 1956: emphasis added)

The idea conveyed by the voiceover, which is accompanied by images of someone in the repetitive act of storing newspapers, seems to be divided into two dimensions: first, *one must save everything* so that those in the future *can decide* what bears witness to our civilization. One must protect everything from the ravages of time, as Foucault said, but one must also take away from time itself the possibility of deciding. Therefore, one must call upon oneself to decide

10 As an endless accumulation of time, the library in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* (a library that really exists) functions as a real heterotopia.

what the future *will be able* to decide, withholding that decision from time itself and deciding *in advance* – even if this decision is not a decision, even if it is in fact a decision *not to decide*. Second, to save, to conserve, is to pile up, to stack, to accumulate indefinitely, that is, to build a general archive that is always already on the verge of becoming an entropic archive, a chaotic mass of unread documents, a story of layered dust sedimented through time.

Among the treasures I have listed, Resnais includes *Les Nouvelles Aventures de Harry Dickson* (Figure 13). The effect is quite easily grasped, given its insertion between the Codex Peresianus and the private diaries that should not be opened until 1974: a semantic asymmetry, portrayed by this mass media document, inserts itself among the national and priceless treasures.[11]

It could be argued that, more than merely being proof of Resnais's lifelong interests, the presence of these mass media products – Harry Dickson, Mandrake – is one way of responding to the question of what bears best witness to our civilization. In the answer to this question, we find an archival point of view: given the general equivalence that the archive imposes, what bears witness to our civilization are all these minor documents, these unnoticed publications.

Another dimension that opposes the exuberance of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*'s treasures is the fake volume of the *Petite Planète* (a collection curated by Chris Marker). The irony contained in this obviously fake book (a Mars travel book) consists in the bureaucratic blindness of the library's workers (figure 14). Resnais uses this volume to accompany the "production process" that renders the book, from the mass of indistinguishable documents to its final "resting place" in the library's abstract memory. From the moment he arrives to the different stages of the cataloguing process, we are presented with images

11 According to Ungar, "the fake book was more than an inside joke. Much like shots elsewhere in the film featuring comic-strip characters Mandrake the Magician, Dick Tracy, Terry and the Pirates, and pulp detective Harry Dickson, it expresses Resnais's lifelong interest in mass-market print cultures, including comic books and detective fiction. The inclusion of these materials also raised questions concerning their physical and figurative place among the BN's collections. Were these materials part of the BN's collection? Or had Resnais placed them in his documentary as a provocation, in line with similar provocations in films by Buñuel and Jean Vigo? (...) Their inclusion expressed Resnais's personal take on the BN and its collections as a means of dislocating the vision of the library as a repository of national treasures that the French Foreign Ministry had presumably intended the film to convey" (Ungar, 2018, p. 192).

of different workers holding the volume – *absolutely indifferent* to the content, interested only in bureaucratic procedures, closed to all gestures beyond those that have an administrative function. This is something between the science fiction reference that was already present in the documentary's initial synopsis[12] and the Fordist production model.

4.
GHOSTLY FIGURES

At the end of the bookshelves, barely visible, a human figure (Figure 8); other figures (Figure 3), descending to the basement, as if entering the purgatory that we see in the documentary's first sequences; workers with mechanical, repetitive gestures, breaking time into discrete units, folded onto themselves; shadowy figures who appear and disappear (Figures 15 and 16); guards watching, spying on their prisoners (the books or the researchers?).[13] These are the bureaucrats of knowledge in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*, parts of a "cash machine of knowledge",[14] for the most part unaware and insensible to all the books they hold, all the books they keep – ambiguous figures, since they can also *keep hold* of all that knowledge.

Of all the strange beings we encounter in the documentary, two are particularly interesting: the two guards (Figures 17 to 19). They are barely

12 When commenting on the sequence in the temperature control room (which contains a reference to Jules Verne), Carou speaks of a gigantic, futuristic machine and Douin of a futuristic atmosphere: "This sequence needs to have a 'science fiction' style. Imagine a gigantic machine (a robot) capable of responding to everything with the ease of the machines in the subway that measure weight" (cit. in. Carou, 2007, p. 125); "'[w]e sensed a certain atmosphere, of a type reminiscent of Louis Feuillade, that reigns from the basement to the roof of this remarkable bazaar of knowledge', said Resnais, fascinated by the pneumatic tube conveyor and the futuristic design, à la Jules Verne, of the heating system" (Douin, 2013, p. 45).

13 At the beginning of the documentary, we hear a voiceover saying that "in Paris, words are imprisoned in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*".

14 "Resnais plans to keep from the primitive scenario if not the theme of the initial confusion then at least the department store aspect of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. It's in this context that he will present what the public doesn't necessarily expect to find in the *Bibliothèque*: a boiler room, machinists, etc. (…) the theme of the automatic machine will also be maintained" (cit. in. Carou, 2007, p. 134).

visible, shadowy *apparitions* that seem to fade away as quickly as they appear: incarnations of the library *as* archive – close and yet different from the other figures that, with their repetitive gestures, bring the library and the factory together.

We are no longer in the dim glow of the clerk's universe. We have left behind the tubes, the strange machines, and the mechanics of knowledge (figure 20) – in a literal sense. We have left behind the classical image of the archive with the ever-expanding catalogue of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and the file cabinet. We have now passed the faint but rigorous frontier that separates the bureaucracy, the "universal memory", "abstract and indifferent", as we are told,[15] from those "false, paper-eating insects" that, each in its own domain, contribute to the "civilization of specialists"[16] of which Jacques Rivette speaks.

The higher shots (Figure 21) allow us to see these curious "insects" labouring in their own particular domain, *indifferent* to those sitting next to them (there's a parallel between these insects and the library's workers) – "insects", as Rivette says, that are incapable of seeing the cunning of happiness.[17] But this doesn't explain the guard, of whom we catch a brief glimpse, looking at the same spectacle that we are seeing.[18]

15 "Just then, it was part of a universal memory, abstract and indifferent, in which all books are equal" (Resnais, 1956).

16 In a conversation between Godard, Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Pierre Kast and Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette points to the danger of this "civilization of specialists": "There is no one nowadays who has the capacity to decipher both an ancient inscription and a modern scientific formula. Culture as the common treasure of mankind has become the prey of the specialists. I think that was what Resnais had in mind when he made *Toute la mémoire du monde*. He wanted to show that the only task necessary for mankind in the search for that unity of culture was that of trying, through the work of every individual, to reassemble the scattered fragments of the universal culture that is being lost" (Hillier, 1985, p. 60).

17 All of them are working for the "lost secret of humanity", even if they aren't aware of this.

18 Ungar defends the proximity of *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* to *Nuit et Bruillard*: "In this instance, the two shots of the reading room guard recall the archival photograph in *Nuit et Bruillard* of a figure whose uniform and cap identify him as a military guard at Pithiviers detention camp (this was the image that French censors had insisted on removing from the film). Aligning the two photographs supports my sense that the happiness or peace to which *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*'s commentary refers as the

One way of viewing this guard is as a veiled reference to censorship. This may be a metaphor for the *Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie*, the institution that censured the last part of *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, an institution that, like the guard in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*, guards knowledge while at the same time guarding itself, "saving" us from knowledge.

Hidden behind his glasses and partly obscured by a column, in a darker part of the library's reading room, this guard is all the more present insofar as he remains always already unnoticed. A "visor effect", to recall Derrida's concept (Derrida, 2006, p. 6), destabilizes all visibility – a gaze, like that of an animal, that one cannot cross, both visible and invisible.

Both guards are reminiscent of Kafka's characters, however. It's not only the *Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie* that censures without quite censoring, that doesn't agree with *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* without saying what it is, exactly, that it doesn't agree with – protecting itself by saying that it shouldn't replace the authors,[19] a decision that seems to emanate from the world of Kafka. It's also this ghostly logic. In *The Trial*, Kafka's characters situate themselves at the threshold of visibility, appearing in the most unexpected of places and disappearing after a short time – just like the figures who, like ghosts, wander through the bookshelves: the guards at the beginning of *The Trial*, for example, who disappear as soon as K. leaves his house, only to reappear in the strangest place of all, a storage room at the bank in which K. works; the children, constantly peeking and spying when K. visits the painter; the woman who disappears with the student in an ambiguous scene; the judge at the lawyer's house, who remains half hidden until he is "forced" to emerge. But there's also the officials in *The Castle*, never to be seen but always present.

This gaze, directed behind the columns, just like the gaze of the other guard, looking into the street – doesn't it tell us something about desire? Doesn't it carry with it lustful desire? And what is the object of this desire? Is it the ordered "insects", each and every one of them occupied with their own subject matter? Or is it the architecture of power and knowledge inscribed in the library, this well-oiled machine full of movement, ever expanding, producing countless

library's secret contains a second secret, seen in the film's final sequence as an agent of surveillance kept almost – but not completely – out of sight" (Ungar, 2018, p. 194).

19 Chris Marker reproduces the letter in an appendix to his *Commentaires*.

other words that are always already inscribed in the library – in an endless circular movement? Or perhaps there's a strange proximity between this guard and the first sequences of the book, as if a parallel could be drawn between the administrative apparatuses, the bureaucratic procedures, and an entropic movement – as if these power-knowledge apparatuses had a *secret desire* for chaos, for the dusty rooms, badly lit, full of unread papers.

In Kafka's *The Castle*, in a scene in which K. speaks with the village mayor, the latter asks his wife to find a particular document:

> The woman opened the cupboard at once, while K. and the mayor watched. It was stuffed with papers, and when it was opened two large bundles of files fell out, tied up as you might tie up bundles of firewood. The woman flinched in alarm. "Try lower down, lower down", said the mayor, directing operations from his bed. The woman, gathering up the files in her arms, obediently cleared everything out of the cupboard to get to the papers at the bottom. The room was already half full of papers. "Oh, there's been a lot of work done," said the mayor, nodding, "and this is only a small part of it. I keep the larger part of what I have here in the barn, but most of it has been lost. How can anyone keep all this together? (…)" (Kafka, 2009, p. 56)

This tide of papers that threatens to fill the entire room is evidently the consequence of an administrative apparatus that allows no mistakes whatsoever[20] – nothing, no decision, can ever be forgotten. However, this mass of paperwork, the administrative dimension of every archive and one of the best-known aspects of Kafka's writing, is not the most interesting part of the conversation between K. and the village mayor. At one point, K.'s assistants enter the room:

20 "It is a working principle of the authorities that they do not even consider the possibility of mistakes being made. The excellent organization of the whole thing justifies that principle, which is necessary if tasks are to be performed with the utmost celerity. Sordini therefore could not enquire in other departments; moreover, those departments would not have responded to his enquiries, because they would have noticed at once that they were being asked to look into the possibility of some mistake" (Kafka, 2009, p. 60).

> "Well, they bother me", said K. frankly, letting his gaze wander from the assistants to the mayor and back to the assistants, and *finding it impossible to tell their three smiles apart*. "However, since you're here," he suggested tentatively, "you can stay and help the lady look for a file with the words Land Surveyor on it underlined in blue." The mayor did not object to that; while K. wasn't allowed to search the papers the assistants were, and they flung themselves on the files immediately, *but just churning up the heaps rather than searching properly, and while one of them was spelling out the words on a piece of paper the other kept snatching it from his hand*. As for the mayor's wife, *she was kneeling in front of the empty cupboard and no longer seemed to be searching at all*, or at least the candle was a long way away from her. (Kafka, 2009, p. 57, emphasis added)

What is interesting about this passage is not so much the *lack of will* to find K.'s file – as if the assistants and the mayor's wife *didn't want* to find it. What is striking is the extent to which they seem to relish the chaotic disorder of the files, as if this disorder were the true object of their desire.

The gaze of the guard in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* becomes contradictory, directed both at this mechanics of knowledge, the organic metaphor that Sebald uses to characterize the Parisian National Library, and at the disorder we see both in the initial shots of the documentary and in Kafka's *The Castle*. In fact, we cannot decide what comes first: this desire for order, for the purely mechanical functioning of the library – we are not far from Kafka's bureaucratic world – or a desire for chaos and entropy, a desire for rooms full of dust and unread papers. We can only say that, given the proximity of these objects of desire to each other, we can establish a parallel between order and chaos, as if the distinction were just a matter of perspective.

The first shots of *Toute la Mémoire du Monde* are therefore neither the beginning nor the end of the library, neither a principle nor a teleological goal (as if all libraries where destined to become either an indistinct mass of papers or, as in the case of the Library of Alexandria, a pile of ashes); this desire for chaos accompanies the library in all its moments as its double, both

visible and invisible, tracing an obscure desire. Likewise, the ghostly figures we encounter in Resnais's documentary are both folds of the mechanical ordering of the library and the embodiment of a desire for entropy, a desire for the masses of unread papers, of dust-covered documents, on the brink of disappearance.

5.
A MECHANICAL AND ORGANIC METAPHOR

At one point in W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, mention is made of Alain Resnais's *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*. Before this mention, however, as a reading prior to any reading, Sebald speaks of a "continual regression", a perpetual motion that continuously adds details:

> In the week I went daily to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in the rue Richelieu, and usually remained in my place there until evening, in silent solidarity with the many others immersed in their intellectual labors, losing myself in the small print of the footnotes to the works I was reading, in the books I found mentioned in those notes, then in the footnotes to those books in their own turn, and so escaping from factual, scholarly accounts to the strangest of details, in a kind of continual regression expressed in the form of my own marginal remarks and glosses, which increasingly diverged into the most varied and impenetrable of ramifications. My neighbor was usually an elderly gentleman with carefully trimmed hair and sleeve protectors, who had been working for decades on an encyclopedia of church history, a project which had now reached the letter K, so that it was obvious he would never be able to complete it. (Sebald, 2011, pp. 446-447)

Interestingly enough, this "continual regression", which keeps jumping from one detail to the other, producing endless ramifications,[21] is somewhat related to the Library's constant production of words. And if Sebald brings together,

21 There is a melancholic side to these endless ramifications, which Agamben

even if only indirectly, Resnais's documentary and Kafka's work (the curious reference to the "letter K", but also a subsequent reference to a penal colony, recalling a well-known and much-debated story by Kafka), this proximity has to do with this endless production of words but also with an organic and mechanical metaphor:

> Some years later, said Austerlitz, when I was watching a short black and white film about the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and saw *messages racing by pneumatic post* from the reading rooms to the stacks, along what might be described as the library's *nervous system*, it struck me that the scholars, together with the whole apparatus of the library, formed an *immensely complex and constantly evolving creature which had to be fed with myriads of words, in order to bring forth myriads of words in its own turn*. I think that this film, which I saw only once but which assumed ever more monstrous and fantastic dimensions in my imagination, was entitled *Toute la mémoire du monde* and was made by Alain Resnais. Even before then my mind often dwelt on the question of whether there in the reading room of the library, which was full

underscores: "Study, in effect, is *per se* interminable. Those who are acquainted with long hours spent roaming among books, when every fragment, every codex, every initial encountered seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter, or who have experienced the labyrinthine allusiveness of that 'law of good neighbors' whereby Warburg arranged his library, know that not only can study have no rightful end, but does not even desire one. Here the etymology of the word *studium* becomes clear. It goes back to a st- or sp- root indicating a crash, the shock of impact. Studying and stupefying are in this sense akin: those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold. The scholar, that is, is always 'stupid.' But if on the one hand he is astonished and absorbed, if study is thus essentially a suffering and an undergoing, the messianic legacy it contains drives him, on the other hand, incessantly toward closure. This *festina lente*, this shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient, is the rhythm of study. (…) This also explains the sadness of the scholar: nothing is bitterer than a long dwelling in potential. Nothing shows better what disconsolate gloom may derive from an incessant postponement of the deed, than the *melancholia philologica* which Pasquali, feigning to transcribe it from Momsen's will, sets down as the enigmatic sum of his own existence as a scholar" (Agamben, 1995, pp. 64-65).

> of a quiet humming, rustling, and clearing of throats, *I was on the Islands of the Blest or, on the contrary, in a penal colony* (…). (Sebald, 2011, p. 488)

Although this last sentence seems to be a clear reference to Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, what strikes us is this equation between a machine ("messages racing by pneumatic post") and the organic metaphor (the library as a body with a "nervous system") as a means of understanding the function of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. Between a machine and this "immensely complex and constantly evolving creature", with its own nervous system, the Library produces and feeds itself with a "myriad of words". These words, ironically, are not due to any sort of hermeneutic reasoning – in the end, they are not to be read; they are what propels the Library.

However, this being which is both creature and machine is always already breaking down, collapsing, always already embracing an entropic dimension:

> Sitting at my place in the reading room, said Austerlitz, I thought at length about the way in which such unforeseen accidents, the fall of a single creature to its death when diverted from its natural path, or the recurrent symptoms of paralysis affecting the electronic data retrieval system, relate to the Cartesian overall plan of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, and I came to the conclusion that in any project we design and develop, the size and degree of complexity of the information and control systems inscribed in it are the crucial factors, so that the all-embracing and absolute perfection of the concept can in practice coincide, indeed ultimately must coincide, with its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability. (Sebald, 2011, p. 479)

We already encountered this equation of the "Cartesian overall plan of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*" with "chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability" in Kafka's *The Castle* – the equation of order and disorder, ordering and entropy. The Cartesian plan, with its transparency, absence of error, with its mechanical functioning, leads to constitutional dysfunction, a machine *that*

can only produce mistakes and errors – even if, from the machine's perspective, mistakes and errors are impossible.[22]

There is nevertheless a difference between Kafka and Resnais, on the one hand, and Sebald on the other. For the latter, the entropic dimension of the Library as archive is the result of mechanical functioning, as if the blind mechanism can only lead to entropy, to rooms full of dusty papers. For Kafka and Resnais, however, this entropy is achieved not only via purely mechanical functioning but as a consequence of a desire, of the gaze we encounter in *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*: it *wants* the bureaucratic procedures, the order and the ordering it imposes on the Library, the mechanics of knowledge revealed in the documentary, but it also *wants* the disorder, the fake book, the entropic dimension of the archive. Giving itself a rhetoric in which this gaze is born within the brightness, and to the brightness, of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*'s reading room, the guard whom we barely see actually *wants* nothing more than those dusty, badly lit rooms.

22 This explains in part the fake book we see in Resnais's documentary. From a bureaucratic point of view, this book *cannot be* impossible.

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ATTACHMENTS

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Figures 3 and 4
Factory model

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Many deserve a look, but a hundred
films would not be enough.

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