páginas / año 19 – n° 49 Enero- Abril *ISSN 1851-992X/ 2027*
http://revistapaginas.unr.edu.ar/index.php/RevPaginas
DOI: 10.35305/rp.v19i49.1099

The Production Conditions of Archives: Political and Literary Matters [1]

Las condiciones de producción del archivo: materiales políticos y literarios

Daniel Noemi Voionmaa
Northeastern University (Estados Unidos)
d.noemivoionmaa@northeastern.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5116-0827

Resumen
Este ensayo reflexiona sobre los sentidos y usos del archivo en el contexto literario y político hispanoamericano, recordando la clásica discusión en torno al ensayo de Derrida *Mal de Archivo.* A partir de ello, se desarrolla un análisis y reflexión sobre la novela del escritor guatemalteco Rodrigo Rey Rosa, *El material humano*. Esta novela es un excelente ejemplo de las paradojas y contradicciones que el uso de los archivos posee y su compleja relación con la literatura.

Palabras claves
Archivo; Derechos Humanos; Rey Rosa; literatura latinoamericana.

Abstract
This essay discusses and reflects on the meaning and uses of the Archive in a literary context as well as its political implications (mostly connected to Human Rights issues). Taking the controversy surrounding Derrida's *Archive Fever* as a starting point, it analyzes the novel of Guatemalan writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa, *Human Matter*. This novel is exemplary of the paradoxes of the uses of the archive, and its complex relation vis-a-vis literature.

Keywords
Archive; Human Rights; Rey Rosa; Latin American literature.

[1] Some parts of this essay appeared in the book *Surveillance, the Cold War, and Latin American Literature*, published by Cambridge UP in 2022. The text has been modified, altered, and, at times, contradicted.

Esta obra está sujeta a la Licencia Reconocimiento-NoComercial-CompartirIgual 4.0 Internacional de Creative Commons. http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/

The allure of the archives entails a roaming
voyage through the words of others
Arlette Farge [2]

What is an Archive? What is in an Archive?

One of the anonymous reviewers of a preliminary version of this essay, pointed out that contrary to what I suggested Archives do not tend to accumulate every document. Instead, the reviewer argued, there is a process of selection about what is kept and what is transmitted. The reviewer –who rejected this essay and provided excellent criticism—is right. It is, in fact, impossible to accumulate every document. However, the reviewer also misses the point: the process of selection happens because of that impossibility. Ideally, an Archive would be like Borges' Library of Babel. This is even more relevant when we look at Archives that contain files and documents produced by repressive governmental agencies. Perhaps, no one said it better than the Stasi's Minister Erich Mielke: "Genossen, wir müssen alles wissen" ("Comrades, we must know everything"). The way to achieve this (impossible) absolute knowledge was through the creation of an (impossible) all-encompassing Archive.

So, what happens when we are confronted to such a panoptical and panoramic attempt? My reflections are an effort to answer that question. They are a speculation –there is no other way—that delves into the real and the fictional archives in different times and places (and, perhaps, does not know when one becomes the other). A speculation that combines theory and experience and leaves us (I hope) with more questions than certainties.

Political matters

The Archive, as a reality and as a metaphor, in Latin America is inextricably linked to Latin America's history of violence. Hence, the archive's very concrete and practical connection with Human Rights *in toto* (its legal and ethical aspects). Let us begin with the remarkable words that we hear in the opening of *La Isla*, the documentary on the Archives of Guatemalan National Police: 'llegó la hora de conocer verdades, el pasado no se olvida. Tantos caídos claman justicia desde las alturas, aquí se esconde la verdad. Millones de papeles cuentan realidad'. [The hour of truth has come. So many fallen ones demand justice from above. Here truth lies. Millions of papers tell us of what happened.] But, as we realize again and again, truth is not easy to achieve. There is truth (or should we say 'truths'?) in the Archive, however, as we will see, we don't always know how to find it.

Where should we begin? Perhaps, here: Among the many things that Spaniards brought to Latin America was the obsessive tendency to keep written records of everything. This accumulation of writings constitutes the foundation of the archives that almost every institution in the region, openly or secretly, produced.

[2] Farge, A. (2015). *The allure of the archives*. Yale University Press.

So, from the beginning we must note that there are two sides to the Archive: The archive is a physical site; and, also, it is a conceptual and symbolic space. Archives embody power, they often resemble temples and prisons, as Ketalaar puts it: "two seemingly opposites sides of power" (in Jimerson 2006: 20). While archives, and the knowledge that they keep, have been used to control, regulate and repress, that same knowledge opens the possibility for the destabilization of the very power that created it. As Derrida puts it: "The archive always works, and a priori, against itself" (1995: 14). In other words: there is no archive that functions only in one direction; it always contains the seed of its reversal.

Archives are not a modern (or Spanish) creation, but their contemporary use and symbolism certainly is.[3] Archives, with all their multiplicity and their paradoxes, are privileged sites (again: real and metaphorical) where one can look for the faces inscribed in the powerful gaze of modernity. What we find in the archive constitutes the basis of knowledge used and exercised by power. Because of this, the archive becomes power; the archive *produces* power.

Archives have been surrounded by much hype and controversy since the 1990s. Derrida's 1995 essay, problematically translated as "Archive Fever," set the stage for a debate that continues today.[4] Historian Carolyn Steedman criticized Derrida pointing out that the real experience of being and doing research in an archive has nothing to do with the topic the French philosopher was talking about: "what on earth an archive was doing there in the first place" (Steedman 1159), in a text that deals with psychoanalysis and Freud. She complained that the experience of the archive was something very different: "if we are historians, forced to exasperated expostulation that archives are nothing like this at all" (Steedman 1163). Steedman continued, not without humor, saying that she knew what "Archive Fever" was: the one produced by the documents' dust and which begins "in the early hours of the morning, in the bed of a cheap hotel, where the historian can not get to sleep" (Steedman 1164). Perhaps both positions are not as antagonistic as they may seem. After all, archives are about love and death, like the historian's desire to bring the past to the present. Yes, the most obvious crossover with the archive is death: "the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive" (Derrida, 1995: 14). Also, archives (like love, like death) are experienced and theorized upon: the historian who is not able to

[3] It is possible to talk about "archives" in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. There are archives, at least, since the invention of writing. However, it is during the early modern period when we see a significant development, especially regarding the link between archives and the state.

[4] Manoff points out that Derrida's work has had an outstanding resonance beyond the library and information sciences discourses. In two special issues of *History of the Human Sciences* (1998 and 1999) on the subject, ten out of fifteen articles quote or are based in Derrida's text (Manoff, 2009: 11). "Archive Fever" has also criticized. Historian Carolyn Steedman argues that the real experience of being and doing research in an archive has nothing to do with Derrida's topic: "what on earth an archive was doing there in the first place" (Steedman 1159), in a text that deals with psychoanalysis and Freud. Moreover: "if we are historians, forced to exasperated expostulation that archives are nothing like this at all" (Steedman 1163). She adds that she actually knows what Archive Fever is: the one produced by the documents' dust and which begins "in the early hours of the morning, in the bed of a cheap hotel, where the historian can not get to sleep" (Steedman 1164).

sleep in a room in a cheap hotel is not so different than the philosopher that wonders about the limits of the archive, both are trying to enter a real and symbolic space.

Love and death: the discussion about Archives has not been limited to academic and intellectual conversations. In Latin America, thanks to the "discovery" and/or accessibility of police archives, archives have played a very concrete role over the last two decades in the processes of justice, mostly related to human rights abuses (Ketalaar talks about an essential connection between archives and human rights). There have also been political debates, understood in practical terms, about their legal uses, their limitations, and whether what we find in the Archive is "true." Let us be clear and say it again: this judicial use[5] of archives is the most urgent and necessary. However, it is not the only one.

In Latin America, archives have had a rather tumultuous life. As already mentioned, they have been at the center of power since the arrival of the Spaniards and the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries. This tendency to record everything and to keep every record is one of Spain's most noteworthy legacies: a very material love of the archive. After Independence, archives were fundamental for the establishment of the nation-states. In his classic essay *The Lettered City,* Ángel Rama shows the links between intellectuals and writers (the *letrados*) who either had or were close to power, and where the main locus of that power pertained to how the city functioned. These letrados were fundamental in the creation of what we could call the *national archives*. Some decades later, in Latin America, taking a dark turn, archives became a cornerstone for the dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of independent nations. In fact, the archive became particularly relevant for the "forces of order," an oxymoronic term used to refer to the police, and their several incarnations. Archives were an essential component to a machinery of surveillance and control; but, as Derrida argues, that centrality has also played against itself. More recently archives have been key to several trials and judicial proceedings. It is not surprising, then, that archives have been a noticeable presence in Latin American fiction. Borges exemplifies this better than anyone else: not only does the archive appear constantly in his stories, taking on different shapes and imaginations, he is also the Great Archivist of Latin American literature;[6] in other words, he is the custodian (and the transformer and transgressor) of Latin American fiction and its Archive.

Thanks to Borges we know that archives produce their own fiction; but fiction is not necessarily different from reality, as we will see when discussing Rey Rosa's *Human Matter.* Furthermore, Borges problematizes the link between archives and truth. In fact, the connection between archives and truth is altogether far more complicated than it may seem *a priori*. Do archives tell us the truth? Is what we find

[5] In the home page of the *Digital Archive of the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive* it is possible to watch several videos with cases in which documents found in the Archive have helped to find the culprits of several crimes. https://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu/home

[6] Roberto González Echevarría develops this idea in *Myth and Archive* (1990).

in them (what we read, what we discover), true? Do we find reality in the archives? We do not need to be postmodernists to affirm that no, not everything in the archive is true. Or, more clearly put, it depends on how we look at it, how we interpret the archive. Yes, there is usually 'objective' information that is present: the names and professions of people disputing a claim, or the number of prisoners; but even if that material were 'true', what do we do with it? What is the truth *we* seek to unveil? The archive creates its own reality; a world that seems to be encrusted and intertwined with another reality, one outside its material and metaphorical walls (Derrida's questions immediately come to mind here: where does the archive end? Where are its limits? We will return to these questions, perhaps). The archive is not a mirror to reality, but it does provide an image and an idea of said reality: one that is distorted, inverted, reverted, juxtaposed, and even, maybe, more real than reality itself. The archive is, as I say somewhere else, simultaneously panopticon and a panorama. The archive is, as we have noted, one of the focal points to power, and from within it, that very power is exercised and imposed. Power sees through the archive. Its gaze is built upon its shoulders. Resistance will eventually rise from it too, but the archive's first movement has been towards the consolidation of power through an all-knowing and permanent surveillance. The archive claims that its perspective provides us with an accurate view of reality, though as we know well, its perspective, like any perspective, is anything but objective.

But let us not forget, as Steedman points out, that the archives have also a very concrete reality. For instance, the archives that contain the files from police and "intelligence services." In them, we can analyze their materials, their formation (and destruction), and their silences and fevers. We can examine the people who wrote the documents we are now reading: the spies and agents (full time, part time, and casual informants), and the sad chiefs of police (secret administrators with gray suits and lives, chain smoking). We can consider, of course, the people mentioned in the documents (the subjects of surveillance). There is no sidereal gap between the theoretical and the practical approaches; on the contrary, we will be able to understand and interpret the archives, and their material, only if we keep in mind both the real and metaphorical power of the archive.

Indeed, the archive is a privileged site for metaphors. In the 2005 Presidential Address at the Society of American Archivists, Randall Jimerson mentioned three "aspects of the power of archives" (2006: 24) that are expressed through metaphors: the temple, the prison, and the restaurant. As a temple, the archive exercises "control over social (collective) memory," and the "records of human activity achieve authority and immortality" (2006: 24). As a prison, the archive exudes "control over preservation and security of records" (2006: 24). Moreover, the reading room resembles, "a prison where the inmates were kept under constant surveillance" (Jimerson, 2006: 26)—a panopticon. As a restaurant, the archive is a place "where those hungry for truth or knowledge seek nourishment" (Jimerson, 2006: 27). In this restaurant, "the waitress welcomes the customer,

interprets the menu, suggests an entrée or desert, and collects the money before the customer exits" (Jimerson, 2006: 27). Certainly, it is possible to come up with more analogies: the archive is also a school where students learn and are disciplined. Also, we could think of the archive as a hyper-reality and simulacrum: a time and space where reality is replaced by its (partial and attempted) representation. The list could go on: the archive as a map, as the universe, as a genetic code, and so on.

Moreover, the archive establishes a special relationship towards memory. In a beautiful essay, Sergio Rojas reflects on the preponderance of the archive today. Regarding memory, he says that we are experiencing an "archival turn." This turn's consequences are multifold: "the archive rather than an allegory of the past, is a kind of metaphor of the present in which everything acquires the materiality of the *document*, an authorless accumulation" (Rojas, 2013: 32). So, an aporetic challenge emerges. A "memory that overflows the ability to remember, because there is a radical immeasurability between the present and that memory that belongs to everyone and no one" (Rojas, 2013: 32). In this way, the archive has enormous symbolic and concrete power. It functions as a complex (sometimes deceiving, sometimes perfect) mirror—not of reality, but of the way in which reality is seen and constructed by society. The archive carries a double significance and purpose: it functions as a source of knowledge and information; information that must be deciphered and interpreted. Now the question is, precisely, how to do that. Literature shows us a how difficult (impossible?) that trajectory is.

So, archive and fiction are inextricably linked; and perhaps there is no better example than what surrounds the Archive of the Guatemalan National Police.

In July 2005, workers for the Institution for Human Rights of the Attorney General of Human Rights (PHD) were assigned to check on the possibility of explosives in a building in Zone 6 of Guatemala City that used to be the National Police Hospital. And they found explosives, millions of them, but they were of a totally different nature than expected: they found approximately 80 million folios – almost 8 kilometers of packages containing secret documents – mostly in very bad condition, moldy and partly eaten by rats. After doing a preliminary sketch of the area, the workers realized that these documents, dating between 1882 to 1997, with 31 million documents from 1960 to 1996 – the Civil War years in Guatemala – belonged to the National Police Archive.[7] It was the largest discovery of secret documents in all of Latin America.

The very existence of the archive had been denied several times but now there could be no doubt: The archive did exist. Immediately, as it is stated in *Del Silencio a la Memoria* (*From Silence to Memory*), --a summary of more than 500 pages, describing the history of the Archive, the structure of the police forces, and some of

[7] Kirsten Weld calls the discovery a "serendipitous coup that none had ever imagined possible" (2014: 2). Her description of the condition of the documents is worth quoting: "The papers it housed seemed endless, crude bundles by the millions spotted with vermin feces and cockroach carcasses, their hand-scrawled labels barely visible beneath years of dust, with puddles of cloudy water seeping up into the piles of paper and rotting from within" (2014: 30).

the most relevant findings in National Police Archive, published by *Consejo Consultivo Nacional* of the Archive-- the PHD "did what was necessary to protect the documents" and "created a research team that, at the beginning, searched, identified and scouted the documents; this work resulted in the first relevant discoveries, documents that shed light on the National Police organizational structure and on what had happened to several victims of forced disappearance" (2011: 22).

At the time, the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Vielman, stated: "What's the point of wasting time with that bunch of old papers" (*Del Silencio,* 2011: 21). It was a view not shared by everyone (this viewpoint, however, is not particularly uncommon, although it usually disguises itself differently and is usually presented less blatantly). In fact, the archive, in the words of the *Consejo Consultivo Nacional* (CCN), co-authors of *From Silence to Memory*, "is much more than a *bunch of old papers*, it is living memory, a part of what we have been, of what we are, and it can also be, a part of what we would like to be and what we would like not to be anymore" (2011: 19). In July 2010, documents found in the archive were, for the first time, considered a fundamental factor for initiating a trial against two former agents of the National Police for the illegal detention and forced disappearance of Edgar Fernando García in 1984. At the end of the trial, "both agents were found guilty and sentenced to 40 years in prison" (2011: 45).

The Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive is overwhelming and hallucinating. To start, because of its sheer size, it is impossible to search the entire archive (its 80 million folios are slowly being digitalized and are available to anyone).[8] Its initial state of chaos and the semi-destruction of many of its documents made finding information more difficult. However, it is precisely in that confusion where (and when) we begin to grasp the power of the archive, the scope of its gaze. The archive creates a parallel reality exercising what we could call a sovereign power – the power over life and death – over the spectral bodies of the thousands of women and men who are subjects and witnesses within its pages.[9] The archive shows us that everything is past; except the past.

Literary matters

An initial state of chaos. That's precisely what the protagonist of Rodrigo Rey Rosa's novel *Human Matter (El material humano)* finds when he begins his journey into the archive.

[8] As Weld notes "The permanent preservation of the digitalized records was guaranteed by the Swiss Federal Archives; their accessibility online was made possible by the University of Texas at Austin" (2014: 299). For someone who is not an expert in archival research, the search engine still presents a challenge. However, the project is laudable and sets an outstanding precedent for other cases.

[9] The work and research that continues to be done in the Archive is, as the Report says, "the beginning of an institutional effort in order to contribute to the clarification of the many human rights violations, the reconstruction of historical memory, and the clarification of the truth as well as the achievement of justice" (*Del Silencio*, 2011: 513).

Rey Rosa's *Human Matter*, published in 2009, is possibly a fictional text – a text that may or may not be a novel – that deals with the experience of a writer beginning to visit the recently discovered Archive of the National Police of Guatemala. Significantly, looking for files about the artists and intellectuals "who were the subject of police investigation—or who had collaborated with the police as informers or accusers—in the twentieth century" (Rey Rosa, 2019: 2). The narrator in *Human Matter* quickly realizes that his project, given the chaotic state of the archive, is impossible. A similar conclusion could be made by anyone trying to navigate the hundreds of thousands of real or virtual pages within the archive. However, the initial work done by the narrator, whose name, we assume, is also Rodrigo Rey Rosa, was not an absolute failure: although it is not possible to find systematic or organized information about the writers or intellectuals in the archive, it is within that same archive where we (and Rodrigo) are able to find out about a writer named Rodrigo Rey Rosa—the subject of his inquiry. His induction into the archive, which is constantly described as a labyrinth, attempts to take him toward the center of himself so that he may know who he is. *Human Matter* is not only an allegory of the world (as Ester Hernández-Palacios says) and what that world entails; it is also a critical-specular reflection on the gaze, and on intellectuals. What Rodrigo finds in the archive is his own file, and the novel is an exhibition of that file (a file, by the way, which is created along with the writing of the text—the very text we are reading). Thus, the novel assumes the position of the archive and projects it onto its subject, the one who is also creating it. Briefly, both in time and in space, the novel and the archive become synonyms. Both are located in an unstable, unspeakable territory as has been noted by the critics of *Human Matter*. Both are located between reality and fiction – Mónica Albizúrez emphasizes the ambiguity of the auto-fictional; Nanci Buiza concludes that the lines between reality and fiction are erased – the territory where the truth is built in the midst of doubts and deviations and is in constant struggle; and agony, with the vision, gaze, and hegemonic-panopticon to be imposed from 'above'. The not-so-ironic irony is that, as we know, these two tense glances (the one that tries to see everything and embraces reality completely, and the one that fragments, breaks and unhinges it) coexist in the archive and in the novel.

The text is presented as a series of notes, whose chronological order gives the impression of a daily diary. This is reinforced by the material support wherein these notes are written: they are not chapters, but "journals" and "notebooks" in which Rodrigo writes down what he is reading in the archive, telling us what he did that day, jotting reflections and citing a variety of authors who, as Albizúrez notes, gives the protagonist an aura of erudition (or snobbery) that contrasts with the "illiterate trope" (2013: 19) of workers found within the archive. The fragmentary nature of the text is fundamental, and it allows us to establish a primary connection between the state of the archive (also, as allegory) and narrator. The inability to achieve a comprehensive and totalizing story points to the condition of the text and to Rodrigo's mindset. He is unable to make sense of the labyrinthine chaos he has

stepped into; a chaos in which he himself is in with his personal relationships with his parents, his daughter, his partner B+; it is a chaos that is perceptibly also post-conflict Guatemala. Each of these aspects shapes the fragmented gaze offered by the text and through which it seeks to establish a possible truth of what occurred. Again, the truth is questioned and desired on several levels: the protagonist wants to know the identity of one of his mother's kidnappers and find out about surveilled writers and intellectuals. And what about the truth behind those arrested for common and political crimes, whose names the writer copies down between astonishment and skepticism? What is the truth behind the human matter found in the thousands of folios within the archive?

At the end, Rodrigo tells his daughter that the story he writes is perhaps only for him. Pía, the daughter, asks if he knows how it will end. Shaking his head, he tells her no. And she replies: "With me crying, because I can't find my dad anywhere" (Rey Rosa, 2019: 169). The novel ends (and commences) like this, with another inquiry. There is a similar gesture at the beginning of the journey; it is Rodrigo's archival inquiry, and his self-journey that surrounds it. Just as his attempt to "find out about cases of intellectuals and artists who were the subject of police investigation" fails due to the "chaotic state of the material" (Rey Rosa, 2019: 2), his daughter is able to intuit the impact the experience of the Archive has had on her father; the way it was making him immerse himself, almost mimic himself, respect to those "cases of intellectuals" that, due their chaotic state, cannot be known. Likewise, if within the chaos of the archive, it is Ariadna, the young archivist with the mythological name, who grants him the thread allowing him to not completely undo himself through this journey and gives him the appearance of meaning when he is shown the files from the Identification Cabinet. In the end it is Pía who opens up a new possibility because it is her admonition that becomes a mandate: she must also find her father.

In this way, the journey through the archive acquires an ethical force that is marked by a sense of filial belonging. What is sought in the archive is the truth of belonging: who I am is inextricably linked to where I come from. What is in the archive—the truth—happens in those relationships we can establish with others and with ourselves. There is no truth outside human matter.

The literary references (from the omnipresence of Borges and Kafka to the quotes of Zweig, Voltaire, Sartre, Zagajewski, and others) that can at first give the impression of a dilettante engaging in escapism searching material horror for a novel (the trips to the archive are, at the beginning, "a kind of entertainment" (Rey Rosa, 2019: 3), constitute another way of articulating the archive where Rodrigo loses himself (and perhaps finds himself).[10] Literature is also a form of chaos where

[10] At one point, the narrator compares his sensation at the Archive with the sensation Zagajewski describes in his essay "Intellectual Krakow": "a place where the stories of the dead were in the air" (2004: 84). Zagajewski describes a neighborhood in the west of Krakow, an "intellectual quartier." This vision goes against the characterization that a friend of Zagajewski's, an American journalist, provides: "proletarian and mediocre"—a description that only encapsulates the present, "what really exists" (Zagajewski, 2004: 177). Zagajewski is able to see beyond: "streets that had given

every search ends in unexpected and sometimes unwanted, findings. There, in that archive, another truth is laid and constructed. A truth that does not oppose the first truth, but rather, truth that support each other. The files from the Identification Cabinet – their truth – go hand-in-hand with the literary files running throughout the pages of *Human Matter*.

The lists of detainees in *Human Matter* perform the paradox of making visible those who have disappeared in the pages of the archive, while making them again invisible when converted into fodder – matter, material – for the novel.[11] The photograph that appears on the book's original Spanish-language cover is attributed to Uli Stelzner, the creator of *La Isla*. *Archives of a Tragedy*, a documentary about the archives.

On the cover, we see the face of a man where the area around his eyes – his gaze – and mouth have been husked. Below, this man's name has been crossed out; above we read a word that could well serve as the novel's subtitle, has been typed: "inquiry"

The archive is updated (it becomes real) through the literary text of Rey Rosa (via the truth of literature); There is no Archive without a logic of repetition, just as there is no literature without repetition (all writing is rewriting). The archival repetition in the novel (and vice versa) is what makes their respective existences possible.

Human Matter can only exist via the truth of the archive; and this truth is undeniably linked to memory. But how certain can we be of our memory? Towards the end, the narrator quotes Yoshida Kenko, a Buddhist monk from the early fourteenth century: "The most precious thing in life is uncertainty" (Rey Rosa, 2019: 168). Kenko's vision, on which the narrator's vision of the universe is based, is that uncertainty is what governs us; it acquires a sense that is both ironic and, possibly, redeeming.[12] Throughout the real and metaphorical journey through the archive, the protagonist has sought certainties: the truth about writers who were either spied on or made to be spies; the truth about those whose names appear in the long lists; the truth about the kidnapping of his mother. But the only thing he has achieved is, at best, a minimum approximation to them—uncertainty remains

---

birth to books" and "the latent nobility of the streets." The *Human Matter* protagonist's immersion in the Archive has similar consequences for him (and for us): he begins to see beyond what "really exists." What we begin to see is *time* and *history*.

[11] A similar process has been discussed in *Senselessness* (*Insensatez*) by Horacio Castellanos Moya, a novel whose protagonist edits the final report about the genocide in Guatemala. Grinberg-Pla's questions about the (mis)use of the testimonies by indigenous people. The listing penned by the narrator "oscillates between self-benefit and aestheticization, can it be considered a legitimate way of establishing memory… or shall be considered an ethically inadmissible appropriation because it decontextualizes the reality of those named?" (Grinberg-Pla 2007). *Human Matter* has been studied alongside *Senselessness* in several articles: Le Haije (2017); Carini (2014); Haas (2010); Jastrzebska (2012).

[12] Kenko's (1284-1350) reflection at the beginning of his *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness) may be read in an ironical key, as a comment on the importance of writing itself. And it is not too difficult to think of the narrator of *Human Matter* jotting it down: "What a strange, demented feeling it gives me when I realize I have spent whole days before this inkstone, with nothing better to do, jotting down at random whatever nonsensical thoughts have entered my head" (1967: 3).

and prevails. And this (herein lies the irony) may not be so negative, there may be value in this uncertainty. *Human Matter* leaves us vacillating between these possibilities. If before, the protagonist's mother was able to forgive her captors (without knowing who they were), and refused continuing with investigating the case –– now, the protagonist faces the same question of what to do before this non-knowledge, before this implacable presence of uncertainty, which, after all, is what is inside the labyrinth that is the archive.

The idea of uncertainty invades both reality and the text we are reading. The expansive and uncertain ending, Pía complaining about his father's absent presence –may be read as the need to decide between the future, symbolized through the daughter, and the necessary adjustment needed to account for the past through writing; an impossible choice "without such reckoning, there is no possibility of a future" (Kokotovic 2016: 94)—Thus, the no novel-novel becomes a call: A call to readers so that they, through their own way of reading but also from beyond, look for the possibility of finding meaning in those "stories" present in the labyrinth of our own archives.

The archive, we have repeated, always works against itself. As Hölderlin says: where danger is found is also where our saving grace lies. Derrida poses this as the transaction between "Eros and Thanatos" (Derrida 1995: 14). In *Human Matter*, this tension and transaction goes through, and passes through, the protagonist. From its multiple labyrinths – individual and collective – the text elaborates on a critique of the exercise of power that resides in, and comes out of, the same archive. In this way, the novel reflects on the need to historicize the present: "Power, as Borges says, always acts according to its own logic. The only criticism of this power is perhaps History. But since History is written from the present, and thus *encompasses* it, it is not probable that an impartial critique can be made" (Rey Rosa 2019: 45). The impossibility of being outside (our) present implies recognizing that all history is not, or will ever be, an objective construction. This, the narrator suggests, should not lead us to not think about history or to write it, however. Conversely, because history is not impartial, we are obliged to return to it again and again. And in those multiple, sometimes unexpected returns, is where the possibility of a critique of power emerges.

Human Matter questions the outside and the inside of the archive. The question about its end (as well as its purpose) surrounds us at all times. There is a first attempt at a physical response: a door, a window, or a wall that either opens or encloses (but what happens when the archive is lost or its existence is denied?); there are the margins of a document, the tactility of the sheet, the smell, the dust, the luminosity of the paper cemetery. All these things are, of course, the archive. So is the waiting for the document. So is the voice of the archivist telling us they will or will not allow us access. But the memories that emerge from these pages, are they also the archive? The writing that those memories produce, is also part of it? The archive cannot be everything. It cannot be the Borgean map that matches point by point what is mapped. There must be a time when the archive ceases to be,

when it becomes *something else*. Even then, we face an insurmountable dilemma: what is not the archive? What is left out of its abysmal reality, outside its eternal time?

Perhaps we can ask us, then: Can the archive also be a utopia? A space that ultimately and definitively does not exist but can nonetheless be imagined? What is utopian about the archive is the endless desire of its gaze; its unlimited wanting; its infinite inquiries. Reality faces itself and must be responsible for its own fulfillment. The archive has its own language, a language in permanent dialogue with truth: Truth circulates in the archive, in its inside, and its uncertain outside. However, do not forget that there is no future truth in the archive: the gaze of modernity can only unfold towards the past and within our ephemeral present. The time of the archive seems to subsume all time; it combines the image of the Benjaminian ruin with that of positivist progress. These words, that also will become part of the archive, are like San Juan de la Cruz's babbling, in their being and in their senses. If a better future and a different modernity where justice will be served might be possible, emerging from the babbling of the archive—it may be a time when the invisible gazes from the past will show us a new perspective, and the silenced voices still buried in the archives will be heard.

Bibliography

Albizúrez Gil, M. (2013). *El material humano* de Rodrigo Rey Rosa. El archivo como disputa. *Centroamericana*, *23*(2), 5-30.

Benjamin, W. (1969). *Illuminations* (H. Zohn, trad.). Schocken Books.

Buiza, N. (2016). Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* and the labyrinth of postwar Guatemala: On ethics, truth, and justice. *A Contracorriente*, *14*(1), 58-79.

Carini, S. (2014). "La historia no la leemos, la releemos siempre": Fuga dall'archivio in Rodrigo Rey Rosa e Horacio Castellanos Moya. *L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, *22*(2), 229-236.

Consejo Consultivo Nacional del AHPN. (2011). *Del silencio a la memoria: Revelaciones del Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional*. Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional.

Derrida, J. (1995). Archive fever: A Freudian impression. *Diacritics*, *25*(2), 9-63.

Farge, A. (2015). *The allure of the archives*. Yale University Press.

Haas, N. (2010). El papel del lenguaje y la escritura para las víctimas: El enfrentamiento con el pasado conflictivo en Guatemala. *Iberoamericana*, *10*(37), 176-180.

Jastrzebska, A. S. (2012). Capacidad criminal, capacidad ficcional, tensiones entre historia y ficción en la novela negra centroamericana. *Mitologías Hoy*, *6*, 18-30.

Jimerson, R. C. (2006). Embracing the power of archives. *The American Archivist*, *69*(1), 19-52.

Kokotovic, M. (2016). Trapped in the labyrinth: Postwar Guatemala and the challenge of literary representation in Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano*. *Hispanófila*, *178*(1), 81-96.

La Haije, M. (2017). Narration and madness: Schizophrenia, paranoia and autofiction in Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*. *Confluencia*, *32*(2), 145-155.

Rey Rosa, R. (2009). *El material humano*. Anagrama.

Rey Rosa, R. (2019). *Human matter: A fiction* (E. Aparicio, trad.). University of Texas Press.

Rojas, S. (2013). Pensar la superficie infinitamente profunda de lo cotidiano. *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*, (5), 21-42.

Steedman, C. (2001). Something she called a fever: Michelet, Derrida, and dust. *The American Historical Review*, *106*(4), 1159-1180.

Stelzner, U. (Dir.). (2010). *La isla: Archivos de una tragedia* [Película]. ISKA.

Weld, K. (2014). *Paper cadavers: The archives of dictatorship in Guatemala*. Duke University Press.

Yoshida, K. (1967). *Essays in idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō* (D. Keene, trad.). Columbia University Press.

Zagajewski, A. (2004). *A defense of ardor*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Recibido: 10/11/2025
Evaluado: 18/02/2026
Versión Final: 05/10/2026