REGISTRY CULTURE

By Jorge Luis Marzo

During the minutes that lie ahead we are going to deal basically with two matters. On the one hand, with the relationship between writing and its recording function. On the other, with the fact that the mediation of technology is the result of this function. In other words, I would be pleased if two main issues concerning the definition of our Western culture as a culture of registry and archives were hovering critically in the background.

First issue: The original gestation of writing already implicitly contained the condition of registration and classification and, above all, the condition of secrecy and authority in the management of information and data. This does not of course imply an essentialist definition of registration, merely that the act of writing occurred as a result of certain needs of social organisation, and therefore is of a markedly classifying nature.

Second issue: Present paradigms of registry and archives have not arisen from contemporary technologies; on the contrary, it is the existence of certain social, political and cultural characteristics, long–present in the fabric of capitalism, that have led to the appearance of current technologies.

With this preliminary claim I hope to make it clear that I am not in the least interested in signalling present information technologies as the inducers of the perceptions that currently celebrate or revile our registry culture. These technologies respond to forces that are perfectly visible in the substratum – or perhaps we should say the moss – from where the technological toadstool will stem. Without a doubt, the nature of these technologies encourages new forms of registration, yet this takes place insofar as language itself attempts to solve new patterns of institutional interaction and of social control. In short, technology is the result of pre–existing forces and needs and not the cause of these, even though the proliferation of electronic mediation in writing may entail a springboard

effect on the projection of these previous needs, as occurred for instance with the introduction of the typewriter. And I say a powerful springboard, for it seems to project the leap so far that one is even able to arrive at the springboard itself, generating in this way most of the current critical amnesia and the revelry surrounding these new tools.

Having said this by way of setting out an ideological framework of discussion, let's enter into our subject. We'll begin with a historical item of news, stemming from archaeological evidence: "The roots of writing extend back to counting, which is grounded in the ability to engage in "time-factored activity""[1] Numerous bones and stone artefacts dating from the Glacial Age, some 30,000 years ago, present marks that apparently registered the days between the different phases of the moon. Everything seems to indicate that the first processes of written expression responded a need of temporal organisation. Later on, around the year 3,000 AC, with the advent of the first cuneiform tables in Mesopotamia we note that the chief factor that prompted their appearance was the need to list and classify kings and dynasties, in order to allow registration of the present moment within a given assimilable chain of historical experiences. Writing thus emerged from the classifying possibilities of language itself, from its own ability of numbering. Writing and numbering therefore set out on their journey hand in hand. One is the other and vice-versa. "The urge to be exhaustive derives from a form of intellectual play that seeks to organize and control the newly perceived categories of experience"[2]

The modern concept of mathematics, firmly formulated during the Baroque period by means of the Cartesian definition of "analytic vision", is also largely characterised by being a new way of modelling the contents of our relations with the outside world through abstract symbols. The possibilities such symbols have of registering and checking reality expand proportionally to their comprehensive capacity, as in an equation. That is to say, mathematics, the language of registration par excellence, is now

considered a universal language, potentially able to reach the remotest corners of the world. The inscrutable signs made by archivists are examples of the replacement of writing by symbolic interfaces. A global system of symbolic representation, through the elaboration of a complete genetic map or archive, represents the seed of the present digital discourse, the evolution of which however can be traced, in its turn, back to the origins of writing. Writing and numbering are vocationally universalist and classifying.

It is no coincidence that Leibniz, the German Baroque philosopher and mathematician who conceived the first structure of binary mathematic language, the basis of present-day computer systems, should have spent his whole life attempting to elaborate what he called the "Universal Characteristic", a kind of general calculation that would provide a model of universal writing. Leibniz said, "By means of this universal language, any sort of information can be systematically registered in abstract symbols."[3] Neither it is too banal that Melville Bell, father of Alexander Graham Bell, the chief inventor of the telephone, should have published his universal alphabet in 1867 under the title *Visible Discourse.*[4] Nor that in the forties the linguist Noam Chomsky should have proposed a universal grammar, while in parallel the theories he defended were giving rise to the famous "code of the 1000 words" for the North American army, with the objective of ensuring intelligibility of radio communications.[5]

This intrinsic relationship between records and the exhaustiveness or global nature of their contents is easy to perceive in the light of the ephemeral condition of man. The visions of Pompei, where the lava made a millimetric registry of life at the precise moment of its disappearance, or those of Hiroshima, where the thermal flash literally photographed the shadow left by beings and things[6], thereby becoming the largest photographic registry made by man, seem to exert a tremendous persuasive power regarding the connections between archives and

disappearance, perhaps because of their endless dimensions, the illustrated spirit that represents them, guided by a light that sees and registers all in the way of a panopticon.

The timed race that involves the act of registration cannot be dissociated from the profound unease produced by the volatile nature of human life and of its experiences, both on an individual plane and collectively speaking. Personal diaries and historic chronicles provide good examples. Nevertheless having reached this point, it is necessary to stop in our tracks. History teaches us that the very idea of registry underlies, parallel to that of disappearance: we tend to record speed, the capacity of reality itself of disappearing, of becoming virtual, intangible. The ultimate purpose of recording the mechanisms of the world is to capture its inclination towards evasiveness, the absolute fragility on which it is based, its deciduous nature. In this way, the act of recording is legitimised by the certainty that what is being registered will eventually disappear. This could appear to be a very human act of durability. Yet, we also find numerous examples of quite the opposite. In his wonderful novel *The Sound Technician*[7], the writer Marcel Beyer tells the story of a sound technician who during World War II was commissioned to carry out all sorts of voice recordings in order, supposedly, to classify human emotions, emotions which were no doubt destined to disappear within the tragedy of Nazism and of the war. What immediately springs to mind is the case of the meticulous registration, by means of thorough personal records and photographs, of all those deported to the extermination camps of the Third Reich. Millions of people murdered in an industrial way were secretly classified with utmost professional and technical dedication. It is only possible to understand such frenzied activity as a result of the murderers' need to register disappearance itself -- just as nowadays attempts are made to document, as fast as possible, the disappearance of an animal species in danger of extinction.

In this sense, at the very origins of writing and numbering we come across a circumstance of extreme importance for our analysis of this recording potential. Cuneiform writing was based on cryptographic symbols and signs, only susceptible of being modified and combined over the course of time by scribes. In other words, information systems are born within institutional circles and their understanding is totally relegated to a reduced group of experts. In this sense, the appearance of Gutenberg's printing press of mobile types in the mid-fifteenth century would provoke a truly modern revolution in patterns of information management and treatment. Writing, no longer subject to a strict monopoly of the means of production on the part of the ruling classes, began to threaten direct control of the contents of the lists drawn up by power. Parallel lists began to proliferate dangerously, lists in which order was totally different to that of the officially established lists. The response to this situation would came directly from the Catholic Church, via the residues left by Machiavelli's theories in European political thought. Machiavelli had spoken of power in terms of knowledge and usufruct of the "arcana imperii" – what we would now call "confidential information" – and of the public projection of their possession; it was the possession and not the contents that had to be divulged. That was where he considered the strength of power resided. Thus, in 1633 the Vatican founded the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*. Although its deliberations and archives were of the utmost secrecy it simultaneously devoted a great deal of effort to the task of making its omnipresence public. This institution established for the very first time an explicit relationship between the registration and storage of data and the modern notion of propaganda, legitimised in the notion of the common asset, of the social mass, in the interests of which institutions must acquire total independence. This independence is the fundamental value alleged as regards their external projection in order to justify the need for security and secrecy.[8] Without a shadow of doubt, this has been the prevailing

model to our days; from the military and police information systems to the sacred arcana of contemporary marketing, not to mention the encrypted networks of financial information, the practice of the secret treatment of information has achieved political and social consolidation thanks to the appeal to common sense and to the need of not transpiring information that could be detrimental to collective interests, whether these be national or entrepreneurial. Parallel to the accumulation of secrets, their management is publicly emphasised as a reminder of where power lies. Suffice to bring to mind a well-known example: the official promise made by government ministers not to reveal the deliberations of their meetings. "In politics – as in the world of business – legislative and administrative secrets have always sought to conceal procedures; the results, that is to say the laws, bylaws, regulations, etc., are public. The importance of secrets does not lie as much in what they contain as in their rhetoric force, their persuasive capacity."[9]

It is interesting to note that the present justification of the disclosure of institutional secrets, what is known as "official de-classification of documents"[10], is defined *grosso modo* because they no longer affect national security, international relations or the security of informers. Legislation varies according to each country. The most usual time standard is twenty-five years. We all remember the case of the Tarradellas archive, deposited in the Monastery of Poblet under the explicit condition imposed by the donor of impeding its divulgation until twenty-five years after his death. This is a wonderful example of what we have just mentioned – the power of the secret does not lie in its contents but in the publicity of its possession. By conditioning the opening of the archive to the passing of time, the ex-president of the Generalitat implicitly emphasised that he kept secrets of certain significance. Although the institutional interpretation of this fact be the preservation of social consensus, awaiting the political or physical disappearance of those affected, in point of fact what this attitude

conceals is a threatening message -- a genuine exercise of power and coercion which deep down impinges upon citizens' access to certain information which is no doubt affecting current political reality. Waiting twenty-five years for access to information regarding our present implies a further upshot of Machiavelli's recurrent political theories.

Paradoxically, and this is a detail we should not blithely overlook, the most secret cases of archives have three extremely important enemies: the individual, fate and the material nature of the document itself. In many noteworthy instances, these three circumstances have freed archives from the claws of secrecy. In the first place, on many occasions the magnitude of the archive allows individuals to discover fissures and chinks that enable them to sneak inside, or on the contrary, to find gaps through which "inside" information can be made public. In second place, destiny sometimes generates events that disclose deeply hidden structures. Thirdly, physical documents (including those in digital format), the registering nature of which usually implies durability, produce in themselves an effect opposed to that of their secret existence, thus resulting in their public emergence. I will cite two cases by way of example, both of which symbolise the convergence of these disastrous circumstances for the secret existence of archives. The first case is the so-called "Horror Archives of the Condor Operation"; the second is that of the Archive of the Secret Political Police, or Stasi, of the German Democratic Republic.

One morning in December 1992 a Paraguayan judge and the ex-political prisoner Martín Almada walked into the police station at Lambaré, a suburb of the Paraguayan capital Asunción, in search of Almada's police files[11]. What they discovered instead was an untidy heap of papers, letters, documents and records which, as it turned out, constituted the documentary archive on repression under the Stroessner dictatorship, both in Paraguay and in other countries. The "Horror Archives", as they have

since been known, have become one of the keys to decipher Latin America's recent history. The archives detail the fate of hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of Latin Americans secretly kidnapped, tortured and murdered by the right-wing régimes of the seventies and eighties. They also provide written clues that confirm the existence of a conspiracy between the secret services of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay in order to trace and eliminate political adversaries regardless of national frontiers, and evidence of the co-operation of North American intelligence with the dictatorships of the region.

Chance would have it that an individual came across a wonderful collection of documents which some years later formed a part of the driving force behind the judicial persecution of General Pinochet initiated in Spain, Great Britain, Chile and other countries. In this case, the loopholes that a system of huge dimensions grants individuals, combined with fate and with the actual physical existence of the documents, resulted in the contents of the archives suddenly turning against those who had created them.

In a very different context and with very different implications on a personal level, on occasion of the opening of the Stasi archives in 1992, the British journalist Timothy Garton Ash[12] – who had lived in Berlin as a student from 1978 to 1981 – decided to find out whether perchance there happened to be any dossier on him among the documents brought to light. What he discovered is that not only had he been systematically watched and his movements and conversations recorded in detail, but that most of his encounters and the relationships he had struck up with friends and even lovers over those three last years of the decade in Berlin had in fact been Stasi informers. His personal experience had been recorded and re-contextualised following a certain strategy – in this case, a police and ideological strategy – and thus the very creation of the archive produced a complete falsification of a part of his past. Who knows whether one day,

when the Tarradellas archives are opened, we shall face the tragedy of discovering that a part of our social period was no more than a simulacrum.

Human experience transformed into writing has been so potentially dangerous for power that the latter has completely taken over its management in order to facilitate improved co-ordination, as we are repeatedly told. Many could be led to think that this is no longer valid in a world like ours, in which the margin of freedom of expression is supposedly much greater than it was a few years back, let alone a few centuries ago. However, a number of examples contradict this judgment. Let's see. For instance, corruption is usually secret, and only ceases to exist when it is publicly exposed. In other words, we know there is corruption, but not having any proof of it we cannot consider it to exist as such. Nonetheless, the writing of the documents contained in the "Condor archives" reveals to be in itself sufficiently powerful to do away with Pinochet's immunity. The most recent instance took place only a few days ago in Peru. Writing, in this case a videographic record, has evinced what everybody already knew, that the Fujimori régime was an absolute farce. In this way writing, and its recording capacity, have proven terribly problematic for power. Such are the paradoxes of writing -- it developed as a model of power yet at the same time it would also grow to be a way of deconstructing power.

Someone once wrote that writing merely stores the fact of its authorisation[13]. From the Greek Archeion – etymologically "building where official documents were stored" – to the present, the notion of the archive has referred directly to storage and restricted control of information. The progress made as regards systems of information storage and treatment has been traditionally linked to centres of institutional control and management. In 1649 Blais Pascal created the first mechanical calculator to facilitate his father's work as a state tax collector. In 1890 Hermann

Hollerith, a civil servant working in the United States Census Office, was commissioned to design a machine able to reduce the time spent on classifying fiscal and census data. Hollerith's "Tabulator" became one of the first contemporary proto-computers. And by way of a historical joke, years later we come across Einstein working as an employee in the Patents Office in Berne, while he was drawing up the fundamental principles of modern physics.

The evolution of reliable registration and filing techniques has almost always responded specific institutional needs: registers, census, tax monitoring, passport offices, the establishment of secure networks of confidential information (political, police and military), the analysis of regular cycles, both natural and macro-economic (with their complicated variables), but above all it has been the scientific need which has imposed the currently prevailing technical model. And I speak of science from the Baroque point of view it still contains, perhaps more than ever, in the sense that science has been defined since Galileo by the mechanisms or technologies it uses. We must not forget that without its utensils, science has no acceptance at all nowadays. What we demand from science is no longer immediate explanations of reality but immediate predictions, quick solutions to face up to what will no doubt arise. So under this premise, during the 20th century science has only been linked to one single client, a client who has no qualms and sets no limits to research considering it a promising business where the possibilities of success are not 50% but 100% -- all or nothing. I am referring to the military. If we say that registration is an activity defined by its exhaustiveness, the military are no doubt the most appropriate patrons. Besides, everything is kept secret, perfectly legitimised by the need to conquer and protect us from the "baddies".

The modern format and management of archives or data banks appears after World War II, in the highly militarised and ideologically-

directed atmosphere of the Cold War, in turn set in the framework of new fully inter-connected computer processes. These political-military principles have also been fully applied as social and industrial platforms throughout the 20th century and definitively reaffirmed via the latest digital technology and its marketing (interactivity). We will soon be dealing with these. However, before cybernetics we could trace certain phenomena that have left a marked influence on all subsequent processes, including of course digital technology -- certain technical applications that deeply subverted the notion and management of information, especially the archive, and which in the end would almost totally shape our social and cultural relations with regard to memory and the way in which we move about our map of human experiences.

Recent researchers have once again reviewed the processes and resulting changes in the evolution of certain technical applications of our modernity: the typewriter, the gramophone and the cinema, the three technologies strictly related to registration that prompted a new set of relations between individuals and information. More than mere machines, they were direct responses to a pressing need of isolated individuals to seek forms of mediation with their surrounding reality. The three technologies took care of mechanically reproducing human experience for the first time; they were not simulacra as has been suggested, but genuine documentation systems adhering to life like second skins, and were consequently understood in terms of necessity. In short, the only way of confirming one's life is through the registers recorded in these machines.

The change entailed by the move from handwriting to typewriting has perhaps been one of the most crucial mental transformations our society has known. Writing thus became a mediation; a distance was created that in the long run would affect the way in which we think of writing itself, just as the invention of the sewing machine in 1860s definitively affected the way in which we project our visual identity on

dress. It is no coincidence that William Jenne, head of the Remington firm that developed the first sewing machines together with Singer, also promoted mass production of the typewriter. Nietzsche had stated that our writing tools also work on our thoughts. The same idea had been expressed by Mark Twain when he wrote *Tom Sawyer* in 1874, the first typewritten literary text in history. With the appearance of the typewriter, calligraphies were unified in a precise symbolic code and writing was reduced to the sole purpose of registering them. The typewriter gave rise to the concept that media are only formed by other media, that is to say that media writing is constituted by the connective capacity of different supports, the importance of which in our current digital culture we shall now proceed to underline. To typewrite implied recording writing and this in turn, recorded language. To transfer messages from one medium to another always involved modelling them to adjust them to new standards and materials[14].

On the other hand the typewriter, like the telephone, will prompt the appearance of new working behaviours, as exemplified by the immense halls with hundreds of stenographers and operators, at the service of the classifying nature of human communication. Information is thus elevated to an industrial condition while introducing women for the first time in to the working atmosphere of capitalism, consigning them to strict tasks of registration as we can still often verify nowadays.

In its turn the gramophone was defined by its chief inventors as a way of privatising the storage of memories beyond the mere written diary or epistolary correspondence. The recording and institutional nature of this new medium is illustrated by the fact that Edison first regarded his phonograph as a detective service which, in his own words, "could be used as an unimpeachable witness in a court of justice". This was the age of Sherlock Holmes and someone has said that Francis Galton's dactylograph

for fingerprint recognition, and Edison's phonograph appeared at the same time[15].

As we were saying, the technological mediation of writing entails above all a new relationship between the very media. This new circumstance of inter-connection and compatibility will orientate a fair amount of 20th-century cybernetic research, deeply affecting the idea of the archive and of data fluctuation.

As mentioned, computer development took its most important steps as a result of certain scientific needs in the military field. To be precise, the enormous calculations employed in the making of the American atomic bomb, the need for an automatic system of swift ballistic computations for bringing down planes in mid-flight, or the question of how to centralise and analyse the information stemming from the different radar points to articulate global answers are some of the most important justifications leading computer investigation. Machines should be capable of processing massive amounts of information and multiple variables in order to achieve an acceptable degree prediction. That is to say, information no longer merely recorded a reality, but projected it in strategic scenarios. The experience of here and now is linked to its possible function at a later moment, thus stealing the experience of the present according to future objectives, as imposed by the religious discourse in its day. These new technologies of data archiving and processing will definitively convert our culture into a registry culture, thereby confirming the globalising comprehensive intentions that many mathematicians have maintained since the Baroque period. Vocationally, digital culture is absolutely global as the greater the amount of data introduced, the greater the reliability of its predictions. Its nature is infinite, which explains the fascination it produces and the fear it generates in the social individual of remaining outside a totally integrating system.

The contemporary archive is naturally characterised by being entirely digital. Yet the very dynamics of electronic mediation of experience and of information has led to substantial changes. The need to store and to process in real time all the variables within a global discourse had to adjust gradually to an increasing individualised social existence, in which public space lost strength in favour of a privatised conception of man. Hence the birth of the notion of interactivity, for it greatly extended the compilation of data by favouring a voluntary and instantaneous participation of a large mass of individuals. Digital interactive techniques such as visa cards, the Internet, contemporary telephony, cable television or television *à la carte* are able to millimetrically trace the desires and behaviour patterns of users, thereby creating a defined register of social, consumer and political habits, etc., that shape a phenomenal map of institutional predictions, a giant archive of human experiences at the service of the institutional industry. It is still perplexing that in spite of the constant evidence of such a problematic situation, there should continue to be people who only welcome these technologies through an emancipating discourse, instead of endeavouring to understand the substrata of the problems and seek new models of communicative involvement with these formidable tools we are equipping ourselves with.

The question is, is it possible to change the registering dynamics of digital technology when such a technology arises precisely out of registry needs, when writing itself grew as a classifying model? Can we possibly get rid of the military influence or of the strategic data evaluation governing these technologies today? Is it even conceivable to come to a sudden stop to reflect on these issues, when these technologies appeal to isolated individuals urgently in need of means of social connection, who are offered the benefit of absolute freedom as regards consumerism though not as regards production? Prick up your ears!

Notes

[1] Michael E. Hobart and Zachary S. Schiffman, *Information Ages. Literacy, Numeracy, and the Computer Revolution*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, 35

[2] Hobart and Schiffman, 47

[3] Idem.

[4] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, The MIT Press, 1999 (first edition Toronto, 1964), p. 268.

[5] Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World. Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, The MIT Press, 1996, p. 217.

The "code of the 1000 highly intelligible common words" was developed around 1943 by the Psycho–Acoustic Laboratory in Harvard, in collaboration with the Electro–Acoustic Laboratory. This research soon had a direct impact on civil life, prompting its application in numerous working activities requiring radio–transmission systems. At present the international code base for swift identification of initials is as follows: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Juliett, Kilo, Lima, Mike, November, Oscar, Papa, Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, Uniform, Victor, Whiskey, X–ray, Yankee, Zulu.

[6] "The blinding Hiroshima flash which literally photographed the shadow cast by beings and things, so that every surface immediately became war's recording surface, its film." Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, London, 1989, p. 68.

[7] Mercel Beyer, *El técnico de sonido*, Debate, Madrid, 1999 (first edition Frankfurt, 1995).

[8] On the links between secrets and propaganda, see Jorge Luis Marzo, "Escamoteo", in J. L. Marzo (ed.), *Escape*, Sala Amarica, Vitoria, 1998, pp. 149–213.

[9] Idem., p. 188.

[10] On the regulations regarding the use of confidential information, and its de-classification in North American legislation, see http://www.library.yale.edu/govdocs/declcol.html
http://www.fas.org/

[11] The information on this case stems from Stella Calloni, "Los Archivos del Horror del Operativo Cóndor", *Covert Action*, 1994.

[12] Timothy Garton Ash, *El expediente. Una historia personal*, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1999 (first edition London, 1997).

13 Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, 1999 (first edition Berlin, 1986), p. 17.

[14] Timothy Druckrey, *Telekphrasis: Configurations of Communication*, 1999.

[15] Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues and Scientific Method", in Kittler, op. cit., p. 83.