On Classification or Wonder Is the Denial of Analogy

Paolo Caneppele

* Bressanone, Italy | Vienna, Austria

Paolo Caneppele is an archivist and historian with a PhD in cultural studies. He is Head of the Non-Film Collections at the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna and teaches at the Universities of Udine, Vienna and Milan. The focus of Paolo's research is at the intersection of history, cinema and the other arts.

cypherpunk [ˈsaɪfəpʌŋk]

started in the 90s as a movement dedicated to ensuring privacy over secrecy: "a private matter is something one doesn't want the whole world to know, but a secret matter is something one doesn't want anybody to know. privacy is the power to selectively reveal oneself to the world." (paul hughes, cypherpunk manifesto: 1993). now more than ever does this ring true. strategically one must consider anonymity in relation to privacy (especially in a world where all data melts into information-segments); politically one must rewrite the 9th century habeas corpus (there shall be the body) into 21st century law. an updated magna carta in the zero-one swamplands of being.

¹ Janet Thumim (1998), "Mrs Knight Must Be Balanced: Methodological Problems in Researching Early British Television," in Gill Branston, Stuart Allan and Cynthia Carter (Eds.), *News, Gender and Power*, (London: Routledge), 91–104.

² Jorge Luis Borges (1973 [1964]), "John Wilkins' Analytical Language," in his, *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 101–05. The list that follows is taken from this source.

³ Michel Foucault (1994 [1966]), *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Vintage Books), xvi.

The archive has presented an instrument of power for thousands of years and the aspiration to keep it in control threads its way through history. Archival work and its related practices, such as the choice of what should be preserved, acquisition policies and 'weeding procedures,' influence historiography. In this context classification is and remains an inescapable archival and heuristic necessity; the archive cannot exist without names, titles, indexes, classifications or categories. However, by considering classification merely as a heuristic tool for access to collections, we leave aside its scope of power as an instrument to influence historiography. Each enumeration always creates a narrative—the parity between *Zahl* (number) and *Erzählung* (enumeration) is well known. The historian must be careful though not to distort what they receive from the archivist, since what has been made available to the researcher, has been preselected according to criteria opaque to them.¹

It is not clear, however, what the optimal model of classification should look like. In one of his famous stories, Jorgé Luis Borges mentions an ancient Chinese encyclopedia named *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*.² Borges does not dwell on this encyclopedia, but he indicates with an example dedicated to the classification of animals, how concepts and things were ordered:

"In its distant pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush; (l) etcetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that from a long way off look like flies."

Michel Foucault was inspired by Borges' parable and his awareness for the "exotic charm of another system of thought," and enlarged upon this idea in his book *The Order of Things*.³ In reality, and not only in the fictitious writings of Borges, there are endless ways to classify and catalogue the world and to organize and arrange knowledge. For instance, the different ways to place books in a library can be sorted by size, cover, colour or origin—or one may decide to keep together virtually even the ones that have been stolen.

Ever since their existence, the practices of arranging, quantifying and classifying have been the very basis of museums, archives and libraries. Many of these institutions followed the example of Hernando Colón, second son of Christopher Columbus, a passionate bibliophile and founder of what today is called the *Columbine Library* in Seville.⁴ Hernando Colón used to document his book and print collections in various lists and catalogues to facilitate the work of scholars. His classifying system reads as fascinating and astounding as the one described by Borges. Colón explains:

“The system devised by Ferdinand for classifying his prints was determined by the sorts of prints that were available to him at the time he began collecting. In the inventory, the prints are described pragmatically, categorised first by one of seven sizes (sezavo, octavo, quarto, medio, pliego, marca and rétulo), then subject (male and female saints, men and women, animals, inanimate objects, decorative knots, topography, ornament and vegetation). The third category is the number of any one of these in the image, for example, ‘6 male saints’ or ‘3 dogs’. After fifteen, the designation ‘many’ is used. The fourth criterion is whether they are dressed or undressed. A complete heading from the inventory runs, for example, a pliego-size Print of ‘8 clothed male saints’ (Pliego de 8 de santos vestidos) The prints that agreed with the criteria were then described under that heading.”⁵

This of course is yet only another example to illustrate the dangers of excessive and obsessive cataloguing based on verbal signs. In the past classifications often were made up by nothing else but *ekphrasis*, the verbal descriptions of objects or images. Even today *Verbalizing Images* still is seen as a valid approach.⁶ However, the translation of images into words is a questionable practice, as emphasised by Didi-Huberman and other scholars who critically examine the ‘danger of contemporary logocentrism.’⁷

But what exactly is classification? According to Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star put forth in 2000 it is “a spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world. A ‘classification system’ is a set of boxes (metaphorical or literal) where things can be put, to then do some kind of work-bureaucratic or knowledge production”.⁸ From a set of boxes to the metaphor of the drawer is attributed to Henri Bergson, who claimed that concepts are drawers that allow the classification of knowledge.

⁴ Cristina Gonzalez Hernandez (2008), “Found a Columbian specimen among the complutense funds,” in *Pecia Complutense*, (Madrid: Madrid University) no. 8, 72.

⁵ Mark P. McDonald (2004), “The System of Print Classification and Description in the Inventory,” *The Print Collection of Ferdinand Columbus (1488–1539): A Renaissance Collector in Seville. History and Commentary*, (London: The British Museum Press), Vol. 1, 75.

⁶ Ingo Zechner (2018), *Verbalizing Images. Report for the conference I-Media-Cities Mapping City Films*, The Austrian Film Museum at filmmuseum.at/forschung_vermittlung/forschung/i-media-cities

⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman (2005 [1990]), *Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press), 39.

⁸ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (2000), *Sorting Things Out. Classification and Its Consequences*, (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press), 10.

⁹ Gaston Bachelard (1964 [1958]), *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press), 75.

¹⁰ Robert Darnton (1984), "Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge: The Epistemological Strategy of the *Encyclopédie*," in Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (New York: Basic Books), 192.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein (1993 [1967]), "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Eds.), *Philosophical Occasions (1912–1951)*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), 123.

The metaphor of the drawer became enormously influential and is still used in books and discussions on the subject today. In his *Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard identifies the metaphor of the drawer as a symbol of a perverse classificatory and taxonomic obsession. For Bachelard an object undergoes a process of depersonalisation when placed in a 'drawer'. It may shrivel up; it might crystallise with other similar ones. As he puts it concepts begin as "ready-made garments which do away with the individuality of knowledge that has been experienced"; but when being classified they become lifeless thoughts "since, by definition, it is classified thinking."⁹

In a certain sense it must be considered that there are no right or wrong classifications but systems that are more or less appropriate and practical to achieve the respective purpose for which they were drafted. The cultural historian Robert Darnton writes:

"We order the world according to categories that we take for granted simply because they are given. [...] Things hold together only because they can be slotted into a classificatory scheme that remains unquestioned. [...] Pigeon-holing is therefore an exercise in power."¹⁰

On the other hand Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that all explanation are hypotheses.¹¹ One could say that every cataloguing is a hypothesis. It is therefore necessary to accept and develop new forms of cataloguing that will enable new systems of knowledge. Work must be done in response to the urgent need to develop new organisational forms beyond established categorisations and indexing systems. The motivation to organize knowledge and to make it accessible never was a philanthropic concept and was always driven by economic interests or the will to maintain and expand political power. The extent to which knowledge production has been functionalised, however, has changed in the last decades. It peaks in our modern world, which is based on enumeration, statistics and classifications in a way previously unseen. This utilitarian mindset partly derives from the New Public Management, a legacy of Margaret Thatcher's premiership—a way of thinking that centres the measurement of performance in various fields of human actions.

As Bevilacqua and Borrelli summarize:

"It is based on the application of the principles of competitiveness and 'customer satisfaction' to activities like public services or university education and research, until then considered traditionally

alien to the logic of the free market. In a sense, an idea of governance based on the measurement of performance expresses—as it could not be better—the spirit of our time, since it represents what is the political reason in the era of its substantial neo-liberal liquidation.”¹²

Although the Thatcher era is long past, we still feel its impact on present-day society, which is dominated by ‘algorithmic culture’, as Striphas calls it.¹³ Despite the value assigned to classifying activity today, theorists in this field still are asking themselves how and why making lists and drawing up rankings can produce knowledge, no matter whether useful or not.¹⁴ But even those who are still looking for answers on how classifying produces knowledge are convinced that “classification is a capital foundation of thought.”¹⁵ They also assume that it is something typically human.¹⁶

Regardless of these reinsurances, the crucial cultural action of sorting, classifying and hierarchising has now been almost completely delegated to machines.¹⁷ The culture of evaluation has eventually also reached the administration of museums, collections and media archives. In order to obtain grants, one must submit statistical reports with detailed lists of the number of visitors, services provided and so on. But in the context of museums, classification has always influenced the way collections are managed and objects described. The current tendency is to identify automatically individuals by facial recognition, and places by geotagging; or to count the scenes in a movie with programmes like *Cinematics*.¹⁸

¹² Emiliano Bevilacqua and Davide Borrelli (2014), “La valutazione della conoscenza nell’epoca della sua producibilità digitale,” in *Im@go. A Journal of the Social Imaginary*, no. 4, 67–68.

¹³ Ted Striphas (2015), “Algorithmic Culture”, in *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4–5, 395–412.

¹⁴ Cf Richard Adams (2003) where he writes: “Classification has three main functions: “Management of data, [...] predictions of event, [...] explanation of phenomena”, in his *Perceptions of Innovations: Exploring and Developing Innovation Classification*, PhD Thesis, (Cranfield: Cranfield University), 48.

¹⁶ Geoffrey C. Bowker et al. *Sorting Things Out*, 1.

¹⁷ Ted Striphas (2015), *Algorithmic Culture*, 396.

¹⁸ Manuel Carin and Albert Elduque (2017), “The Intermittence of Visual Motifs: A Quantitative Methodology for a History of Cinema Without Names,” in Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto and Leonardo Quaresima (Eds.), *A History of Cinema Without Names/2*, (Udine: Mimesis), 59–72.

¹⁵ Paolo Fernando Gil (1981), *Sistemática e classificazione*, in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, (Torino: Einaudi), no. 12, 1025.

¹⁹ Ian C. Jarvie (1978), "Seeing Through Movies," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 4, 378.

²⁰ Salvatore Settis (2005 [1979]), *Iconografia dell'arte italiana 1100–1500: una linea*, (Torino: Einaudi), 124.

²¹ The MPLP (More Product, Less Process) is fundamental to a specific ideological platform linked to economic and new forms of capitalism. In my view the MPLP should not have any space in culture. Cf Nuccio Ordine (2013), *L'utilità dell'inutile. Manifesto*, (Milano: Bompiani). Cf Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner (2005), "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," in *The American Archivist*, vol. 68, 208–63.

Data processing systems support the frame-by-frame annotation of movies by automatically recognising objects and living beings in films, videos or digital recordings. This kind of 'deep' cataloguing primarily contributes to promoting the selling of material preserved in the respective institution. Such surveys are not implemented with the ultimate aim of improving knowledge. Deep classification or the decomposition of films into scenes certainly does not serve the appropriate citation of the filmic sources by historians—a requirement evident at least since 1978.¹⁹ For this purpose, the simple time-code is completely sufficient. Given these premises, any deep cataloguing tending to the perfection of the moment (usually called *best practices*) seems uneconomic in terms of time and resources. As stated by the art historian Salvatore Settis, this kind of cataloguing creates a tension towards perfect form. There is no development beyond this so-called perfection.²⁰

Deep cataloguing as a consequence eliminates the need for research and analysis. It presents as if all the answers about an artifact or a film are contained in the catalogue. It works like video surveillance connected to automatic face recognition systems. In the future, tracking and tracing will be no longer required. Neither will there be space for the analysis of critics and historians. Critical analysis is the first victim of any deep-catalogueraphic system. To put this differently: if the catalogue provides all the answers, it is no longer necessary for the historian to raise too many questions. In opposition to this situation, to paraphrase Édouard Glissant: I demand for all the right of opacity. Instead of identifying every minimum aspect of an object belonging to a collection or archive, it would be much more efficient from an epistemological point of view to catalogue all the materials stored there. The back log is immanent to the archive: to invest in campaigns, to acquire new materials or to share the materials for free with the public means to invest in the use, reuse, communication and free sharing of archival material. This seems more far-sighted than investing money and time to develop deep cataloguing.²¹ For the scientific community to study and analyze documents, it is important to know which documents exist by their peculiar characteristics, not their nuances. This facilitates the transfer and extension of new knowledge. In order to meet the cognitive need for a brief overview, there is no necessity for deep cataloguing.

The importance of primary cataloguing is exemplarily demonstrated by biological research. The *International Union for Conservation of Nature* (IUCN) has established precise rules to determine when an animal species is considered extinct. The first rule states that only a species previously discovered, analyzed and therefore known to scholars and to the rest of the world can be considered extinct. As a consequence, one could deduce that what is unknown cannot disappear.

Unfortunately reality is quite different, but the rule demonstrates how crucial is a first cataloguing, a first census. How much dies unknown without a trace, without seemingly causing a problem, instead causes incalculable consequences. The inclusion of witnesses, testimonies and documents, until now neglected or consciously excluded from archives and collections, must have priority over deep cataloguing practices. Drawing attention to sentient beings is more reasonable than investing in a perfect database or in the most accurate cataloguing system.

The precise and detailed classification, which is defined by the adjective 'deep', serves mainly for quantification and statistics. Both may be valuable and exact sciences, but are not very useful for writing the history of living creatures—or in fact any species that act and create. Statistics do not help much in understanding human impulses and behaviour but—as it seems—"numbers have lost nothing of their mystical glamour."²² Human action is always unpredictable and is modified by numerous erratic 'accident factors'.²³ To embed life, memory or the trace of earthly existence in a histogram, a diagram or a database is to violate existence. If, for example, one historical statistic analysis finds out that 83 hairdressers and 32 water carriers were active in a given place and time: "the eighty-three hairdressers represent eighty-three individual beings, and the thirty-two [...] have only this in common, that they carry water."²⁴ The statistical enumeration will not tell us anything about emotions and individual temperament. History understood as the study of human beings: "is one of the last barriers preserving our society from the total loss of both individual and national identity," cannot be based on questionable archival or catalogueraphic procedures.²⁵

The history of sentiments, a field that has been investigated especially in the classic historiographic research.²⁶ So far little has been applied to the issue of cataloguing and archiving, although

²² Henri Lefebvre (1991), *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol 1 Introduction*, (London, New York: Verso), 103.

²³ Richard Cobb (1976 [1971]), "History by numbers," in Richard Cobb, *Tour de France*, (London: Duckworth), 1–8. The following argument is drawn from this article.

²⁴ Ibid, 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ute Frevert (2013), *Transient Emotions*, (Göttingen: Wallenstein).

²⁷ Cara Krmpotich and Alexander Somerville (2016), "Affective presence: The Metonymical Catalogueuee," in *Museum Anthropology*, vol. 39, no. 2, 178–91. "It is rarer to encounter affective relations that illuminate cultural or social engagements between objects and people prior to their life in the museum." Ibid, 183.

²⁸ Emily Vermeule (1987), "Baby Aigisthos and the Bronze Age," in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, no. 33, 145.

²⁹ Roger Caillois (1964 [1960]), *The Mask of Medusa*, (New York: Potter), 9–15.

³⁰ Ando Gilardi (2003 [1978]), *Wanted! Storia, tecnica ed estetica della fotografia criminale segnaletica e giudiziaria*, (Milano: Bruno Mondadori).

invitations to step into this direction are increasingly perceptible.²⁷ Emotions disconcert the historian, but their necessity is masterfully described by the French archaeologist Emily Vermeule who draws up a merciless report with regard to feelings in archeology:

"The contemporary archaeologist is handicapped when dealing with poetry. Poetry, and art, offer selected myths and isolated heroic individuals, two elements archaeologists have been trained to ignore, perhaps abhor. An archaeologist is permitted by his colleagues to deal only with quantified, anonymous people, estimated consumers of barley, occupants of graves graphed on computers for place and time. He is not permitted to deal with individual yellow-haired chiefs of the Argives. He must subdue his private fictions to evidence photographable in the dirt, and should ideally publish his results as mathematical formulae."²⁸

How can the ephemeral, the inconsistent and the marginal be catalogued? This is especially difficult if the catalogueuer is required to follow *status quo* ethics, that is to say professional ethics, which binds him to an objectivity that in fact does not exist. The French sociologist and poet Roger Caillois, an expert in diagonal sciences, defines any form of classification as ephemeral.²⁹

On the other hand, there are systems that have proven more durable. The Linnaean taxonomy, for instance, has existed for several centuries, but with the important difference that it has been continuously corrected and modified. Considering the increasingly rapid succession and alternation of hardware and software systems based on which modern classifications are generated, we must assume that today's classifications will have an ever shorter life expectancy. The classifications as such, which do not present actual knowledge themselves but rather tools to attain it, are ephemeral. Classifications do not go into crisis as a theory, but are surpassed by others, which are not necessarily more effective but primarily more modern.

It can be observed that more complex classifications become, the less they work. An example for the malfunction of complicated systems is the abandonment of the method for identifying criminals (known as Bertillonage in use from 1883 to 1913) developed by the French criminalist Alphonse Bertillon.³⁰ Apart from the obvious problem of racial, social and sexual stereotyping there is another argument demonstrating the need to rethink practices of deep cataloguing in archives and museums.

No collection is ever static; it is continuously subjected to cyclical changes or radical restructuring caused by territorial or political changes—new acquisitions, new repositories or changes within the structure of the institution owning the collection.³¹ Jochen Brüning writes that the inventory and presentation of collections is subject to constant and often intensive change.³²

Considering the collections are constantly changing, why create data, catalogue lists and invest so much time and money in deep cataloguing, especially since in order to reflect the collection, the catalogue must change when the collection changes. Classification is a continuous activity that always produces provisional and never definitive results. We might reduce it to the essentials and not complicate it. If personal life, knowledge, and history advance only obliquely as philosopher Merleau-Ponty asks why the catalogue should be linear?³³ If knowledge about images is by its very nature an eccentric, heterotopic and transversal knowledge, it is unlikely that they can be encased, catalogued, described once and for all.³⁴

In his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault states: “Where language required the similarity of impressions, classification requires the principle of the smallest possible difference between things.”³⁵ Reducing differences is an unwise and less desirable practice, even when this important characteristic of classification, especially in the human sciences. Each classification produces assimilation and ultimately a flattening in variety: “Defining a concept is a limiting activity; trying to establish a common meaning can have the effect of excluding enriching diversities.”³⁶

³¹ Ernst Posner (1942), *Effects of Changes of Sovereignty on Archives*, in *The American Archivist*, vol. 5, no. 3, 141–55.

³² Jochen Brüning (2009), “Science and Collection,” in Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Eds.), *Picture Schrift Zahl*, (München: Fink Verlag), 88.

³³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1969]), *The Prose of the World*, (Evanstone: Northwestern University Press), 112.

³⁴ Georges Didi-Huberman (2012), “Au pas léger de la servante. Savoir des images, savoir excentrique,” in Pascale Haag and Cyril Lemieux (Eds.), *Faire des sciences sociales. Critiquer*, (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales), 177–206.

³⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 159.

³⁶ Patricia A. Sullivan and James E. Porter (1993), “Remapping Curricular Geography. Professional Writing in/and English,” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, vol. 7, no. 4, 391.

³⁷ Richard Adams, *Perceptions of innovations*, 3.

³⁸ Bevilacqua et al, 81–82.

³⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

⁴⁰ For the argument that the computer branch should be brought back to its origins and not be used as a control and calculation machine but as a tool for the expansion of consciousness of individual, mental and expressive abilities, see John Markoff (2005), *What the Doormouse Said: How the Sixties Counter-culture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry*, (New York, London: Penguin Books).

Classification eliminates the unexpected and the marvelous by using analogy as its main instrument. If the statement of Foucault is credible, one could misread the argument and think that a valid classification is disordered, chaotic, rhapsodic and certainly not precise or measured. But as Foucault develops the argument around the discursive this eventually can lead to classifications and archiving inspired by the methods of artistic research. Since any classification is always subject to the societal histories to which it is a part, this is not intended to be an argument against classification, but it is a fact a way to include those worlds that actively refused admission.³⁷

The act of classification is never innocent or anodyne. The word 'class' comes from the Latin *classis* (military fleet) which itself comes from the original meaning of a calling or convocation. Therefore, attributing something or someone to a class means literally asking it, calling it to occupy a certain position, placing it within a predefined conceptual grid. In this sense, each classification system is a device in the service of producing the identity of what it classifies, rather than simply registering and taking note of it.³⁸ Knowledge does not derive from discipline but from questioning what has been studied, known or classified. As Thomas Kuhn has shown: every scientific theory (and every classification) is useful only as long as it works.³⁹

No classification and no annotation can ever satisfy all the questions and search criteria of historians or scholars. The catalogues of museums or archives are enormously useful tools, but no one can ever predict what the questions of future researchers will be. In addition, a scholar if worthy of the name will never follow the well-beaten path already gleaned and made available to all through a database.⁴⁰ In order to progress in knowledge, it therefore is necessary to look for what has not been studied, for things that have escaped attention, for things that have not been seen, and in practice for things that have not been considered worthy of classification.

We cannot expect to have useful and suitable classification terms for all the infinite cases that life offers. No matter how structured and complex it might be, no classification will ever be able to incorporate the infinite types of existing facts. Even if it were humanly possible to manage an infinite classification, groups such as 'other' or 'none of the above' could not be avoided. The categories *etcetera*, *miscellanea* and similar exist, and if one follows the method of artistic practice-led

debt [det]

in a small gathering over pizza and beer, a circle of freshly minted mba's, all or most, global ceo's in their respective fields, tossed out the question 'what is the most expensive item you have bought in your lifetime?' around the wooden tables came answers: a string of restaurants! a yacht! a trip around the world! when almost all had responded in such-like terms, the last to speak raised a glass and flatly declared: 'i bought the greek debt.' (of course this was sold on, enriching the pockets of the wildly wealthy whilst making certain those not in the know paid for that debt over and over and over again). leveraging the future—always good for a laugh.

research one is able to accommodate this fact. Since these residual categories expand and contract over time; that is open to everything a new distribution of what they contain is always already in the making. These shifting classifications often include an array of categories where things are designated in a way that one does not know what to do with an everchanging and ubiquitous Other.⁴¹

In practice, what tends to escape statistical computation, in the German language is termed *Dunkelziffer* (literally 'a number that lies in the dark'—meaning the unknown). Mainly used in forensics, economics and medicine, the term indicates what escapes or is not reported in the statistical surveys. It is the estimated number of unknown cases. Every cataloguing misses something and has its own *Dunkelziffern*. Archivists have developed a hideously biased system to reduce *Dunkelziffer* and what they consider *garbage categories* by the rejecting testimonials from social classes that they do not want or cannot accept. Sociologist, literary critic and philosopher Roger Caillois affirmed the importance of spurious, eccentric classification. In his view, to classify is to make the best possible choice between distinctive features. The eliminated characteristics are not fallacious as such, because these subsidiary or disregarded classifications may suddenly become essential.⁴² When one re-evaluates abandoned subdivisions, subsidiary, polythetic or so-called useless classifications new perspectives and opportunities for research open.⁴³ Of what then does an archivist's work consist? The non-acceptance of certain documents and the practice of archival weeding are fundamental and for certain theorists central for archival activity. Éric Méchoulan points out that the archivist's job is first to discard, only then to organize what has been deemed worthy of remaining. In other words, from his point of view, archives are part of a policy of leftovers.⁴⁴ As a consequence the catalogue only describes the remnants and creates the illusion of a coherent and seamless whole. The corresponding classification for its part, generates the illusion of an absolute and beguiling completeness. As a result the catalogue hides the gaps left by what was not accepted or has been eliminated, whereas the classification hides the traces of destruction and further erases the losses. In addition, it allows the immediate identification of the catalogued objects and therefore facilitates subsequent 'operations of weeding.'

⁴¹ Bowker et al, 149.

⁴² Roger Caillois (1960), *Méduse et Cie*, (Paris: Gallimard), 10.

⁴³ Rodney Needham (1975), "Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences," in *Man*, vol. 10, no. 3, 349–69.

⁴⁴ Éric Méchoulan (2011), "Introduction. Des archives à l'archive," in *Inter-médialités. Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, no 18, 9–15. "The archivist's job is first to throw away, then only to organize the conservation and filing of what has been deemed worthy to remain. This means that archives are part of a remnants policy." *Ibid*, 12.

The archive is also a sliver: “Archives offer researchers at best a sliver of a sliver of a sliver. [...] And this sliver of a sliver of a sliver is seldom more than partially described.”⁴⁵ So then in the end, the catalogue is a partial list of the remaining partials. Archiving is an art of controlled destruction.⁴⁶ It makes us forget that what exists is always a small remnant of what existed before in much greater number. Any search with positive results is based on the consequent elimination of double objects, or documents not considered useful and not accepted in the collections.⁴⁷ The easier and faster it is to find, the more was destroyed before. Sometimes, so it seems, not to catalogue is the best strategy to avoid the destruction of what remains.

⁴⁵ Pierre Nora (1990), “Die Gedächtnisorte,” in Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Gedächtnis und Geschichte*, (Berlin: Wagenbach).

⁴⁶ “The Smithsonian Institution Archives recommends that files be weeded on a regular basis. Weeding is the act of removing unnecessary files from the active records. The result is significant savings in storage space and faster and more efficient retrieval of information for research purposes.” See at siarchives.si.edu/what-we-do/weeding-files.

degenerate art [diˈdʒenəɪt a:t]

so designated by nazism for all works produced by the capital o Other, which tended to include the modernism of erotics, of undulating flesh, of deeply entwined bodies, of cubism, jazz, improv, rhythm and beat. in a world that increasingly assumes the binaric either/or dress sense of a zero and one where exclusion was the common-place order of the day (fatherland/immigrant, for example), those who fell into the unwanted zero-land of exile, racist attack and all around ugliness, necessarily had to ask: how can art flourish when this kind of death-cruel binarism seems so utterly common, so all-encompassing, so totalising (or, with the obviously nod to adorno: ‘how can one write poetry after auschwitz?’).

⁴⁷ Verne Harris (1997), “*Claiming Less, Delivering More: a critique of positivist formulations on archives in South Africa*,” in *Archivaria*, no. 44, 137.