

Alternative Archival Ecologies of Memory: Mnemonic Significance of Body and Media

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This article explores how memory is shaped by media ecologies, emphasising embodied and postcolonial perspectives. Challenging digital and Eurocentric archival practices and its infrastructures, we examine the disembodiment of memory in digital environments and advocate for alternative, embodied forms of remembrance. Drawing on thinkers such as Stiegler, Simondon, Derrida and Foucault, the text underscores the ontological and political stakes of archiving. Through case studies from Latin America and philosophical inquiry, the article proposes a revaluation of bodily practices, local traditions, and intersubjective rituals as vital infrastructures for cultural memory, justice, and epistemic diversity in a digitised and globalised world.

Keywords: cultural memory, media ecologies, bodily perception, archives

INTRODUCTION

The human condition carries a paradox. Human beings are not technologically self-sufficient; survival, culture and meaning depend on tools and media (Herder 2004), but at the same time, consciousness resists reduction to brute objecthood, transforming and temporalising existence into history and narrative, a process increasingly mediated by technological systems (Stiegler 1998). As McLuhan (2001) observed, media are not neutral conduits but formative ecologies in which culture, identity and temporality take shape. This insight highlights a political problem: who controls these ecologies of memory and who secures access to cultural continuity (Zuboff 2019)? For Levinas (1998), identity itself emerges from collective memory, which makes the regulation of archives an ethical issue as well as a political one.

This article advances the thesis that memory is not a passive record of the past but an embodied, relational process embedded in infrastructures of power (Parui 2024). While digital archives are celebrated for their accessibility, they risk disembodiment of memory and detaching it from the intersubjective and affective ground that makes it meaningful (Hoskins 2024). We explore alternative archival ecologies that foreground bodily practices, communal rituals, and local traditions as vital infrastructures of remembrance (Giese, Keightley 2024).

Drawing on several philosophical and sociological fields of research, such as embodied cognition, philosophy of technology, and media ecology, and examining Latin American case studies through a postcolonial lens, we examine how media both extend and constrain

cultural memory. Through case studies from Latin America, we show how colonial and digital infrastructures regulate who is authorised to remember and whose voices are marginalised (Navarro 2024). We argue that non-digital practices – murals, oral traditions, textiles and performance – must be revalued as living archives that preserve cultural heterogeneity (Ringel, Ribak 2024). To advance the argument, first we develop a theoretical framework that situates media as embodied ecologies of memory. Second, we analyse the dominance of digital archives and their disembodied effects to then examine Latin American case studies that illustrate alternative infrastructures. Finally, we propose a reorientation toward embodied individuation as a path to more just and plural futures of remembrance.

MEDIA ECOLOGIES AS EMBODIED MEMORY ECOLOGIES

Media do not merely store information; they afford actions, perceptions and projections. In Gibson's (1986) ecological theory of perception, affordances represent the possibilities for engagement within an environment. Media, then, can be seen as cultural affordances, spaces of mediated action that structure how we interpret, feel and move. These media ecologies are embodied in their operation; they shape the sensorimotor engagements of users and the social scripts available to them.

In this sense, media assign roles to subjects and prefigure forms of human agency. Media ecologies structure what is visible and sayable, not only within specific institutions (like the courtroom or classroom) but across broader sociocultural domains.* These configurations are rarely neutral. They are historically and geopolitically contingent, shaped by who has the power to archive, distribute and validate certain forms of knowledge. Mediated sociality, as Couldry and Hepp (2017) explain, is now a globalised reality, a condition where interpersonal relations and cultural imaginaries are continuously recalibrated by algorithmic and transnational media systems.

Reality, therefore, is not given but constructed. And this construction is neither evenly distributed nor ideologically innocent. Media not only illustrate values but enact them, embedding imaginaries within the fabric of the everyday. Myth (usually relegated to the pre-modern past) resurfaces in the guise of media spectacle. Following Eliade (1968) and Harari (2024), myths function to reduce complexity, provide cohesion, and sustain group identity. The mediated myths of our time, from nationalist iconographies to consumer rituals dramatise, repeat and embody the ethical contours of social life.

Other than that, reality is a social process. It is not given but is implemented by people. Sociality is mediated, and people (others) are given differently today (Couldry, Hepp 2017). Media illustrate abstractions of human values (Shapiro, Spaulding 2024: 296). Sociality is also a consequence of imagination (Anderson 1983). Replacing things with signs, subjects embody interpretations. Institutions represent and stabilise interpretations, synchronise the prediction of others through typicality. But today the variety of media channels and heavy critique from postcolonial studies brought humanity to another ecological catastrophe: the global social networking and institutionalisation lost the main fundament, the *trust* (Warren 2020). And when the trust is lost, mythological thinking comes to the fore (Harari 2024), or we should rather say mythologisation of media functions and effects get the stage. It has the function of

* In the case of certain media environments (e.g. library, radio, film, television, internet, etc.), the specifications are more often implicit and informal, half concealed by our assumption that what we are dealing with is not an environment but merely a machine.

reducing complexity of reality (Eliade 1968) as stories give meaning, order and guidance in a fragile universe. These myths can gather and sustain larger groups of individuals (sense of identity and intersubjectivity, social synchronisation). Abstracts from immediate perceptions and situations thus grounding Collective Imagination (primal Archetypes and Emotions).

It should be also stressed these myths are not merely symbolic; they are performative. They operate through phatic communication, ritualised gestures, and bodily habits. As Derida (1995) and Plato suggested through the concept of *pharmakon*, media have a dual character: they are both poison and cure. Thus, rather than demonising mediated reality, we must develop a pharmacological perspective, one that assesses the therapeutic and toxic potentials of media in the constitution of memory.

EMBODIMENT AND THE ONTOLOGY OF MEDIA MEMORY

Media ecologies are not flat surfaces of representation; they are dynamic, embodied milieus. As Shapiro and Spaulding (2024) stress, the significance of memory arises not from abstract computation but from embodied, sensorimotor engagements. Ontological importance of media symbolism here is that it discloses human cogito as always embedded into media environment. This is the ecological nature of media, i.e. to affect everything it touches (Postman 1993).

Hence, the acts of remembering are not born out of a thin air; the solipsistic subject and its memories do not exist in the vacuum but are usually pre-reflectively enacted via specific media technology. This embodied ground of memory negates representationalist, computational accounts as well as discloses the dynamic relation to memory not as the storage of snaps but rather something that was attended via many ways of givenness, was caressed (Chiang 2002) for a time being, maybe was radically modified, evaluated and has some continuity in any present acts as well as future projections.

Consider the nostalgic affect evoked by media artifacts: the warmth of a Coca-Cola commercial at Christmas, the melancholic embrace in a family photograph, or the collective memory of the Mexican Revolution. These are not merely representations; they are structured recollections, cultivated through media that reconfigure body schemata and affective patterns. As Keightley (2022) argues, memory in the postcolonial context involves not only recovering the past but critically negotiating its representation and accessibility.

These dynamics raise questions of epistemic justice (Fricker 2007). Who gets to archive memory? Whose stories are preserved, and whose are marginalised? In a postcolonial take on memory, all the colonised (the defeated) are doubly excluded: not only are their narratives repressed, but their epistemic authority as narrators is diminished (Navarro 2024). Technologies and technics are not neutral arbiters but participants in historical struggles, they mediate who is recognised as a source of knowledge and who is erased from the archive. Similarly, in a postcolonial infrastructural inquiry, Navarro and Ortiz (2019) examine the geopolitical barriers to archive access in the Latin American public sphere. In the Mexican context, they show how the telling of political history is constrained by the location and control of archival resources, often split between Mexico's National Archive and the U.S. State Department, heavily leaning to the latter. Thus, the politics of memory cannot be divorced from the material infrastructures that govern its circulation.

In this light, media ecologies must be understood as fields of power. They shape not only memory but historical possibility itself. As Kopytoff (1986) has argued, the commodification of cultural goods is also a process of narrative containment, of defining what counts as history and what is relegated to the margins. The body, in its mnemonic and affective capacities,

resists this flattening. It offers alternative schemata for remembering, not through images, but through practices, rituals, and shared temporalities.

DOMINANCE OF DIGITAL AND IMAGINARY IN MEMORY ARCHIVES

In order to explore the embodied aspect of mediated memory ecologies the phenomenological distinction between body image and body schema – as the difference between the perception (or conscious monitoring) of one's own or other's movement (image) and the actual pre-reflective sensorimotor accomplishment of meaningful action (schema) – is very important (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Gallagher 1986). We can remember events (representational images) or how to participate in those events in an embodied schematic way.

The second half of the 20th century saw the fierce dismantling of the view that memory is a storage of fixed representations. Memory is now understood as grounded in embodied perception and action (Shapiro, Spaulding 2024: 296; Noë 2004), presupposing the usage of technology within a relevant ecology. Memory, therefore, is not the recall of static snapshots, but the experience of relevance, of what matters for certain tasks, and is always related to the sense of agency, i.e. what we can and cannot accomplish. Cognition, agency, and affective tone thus operate together. To perceive someone stumbling and falling is to sense inwardly my power (and moral imperative) to hold her (Lingis 2000).

This sense of power or helplessness is a form of emotion that already testifies to a non-so-lipsistic relation to the environment. Emotions have both cognitive and moral significance and are deeply associated with body posture and sensorimotor memory (Casasanto, Dijkstra 2010). Such postures and bodily senses are a form of embodied memory that introduces the individual into complex social processes.

Therefore, some relevant questions and perspective arise:

1. The construction of meaning continuity over time – a condition of historical normality – must be approached critically. Media determines imagination and sense-making; hence, this continuity is never abstract.

2. Every ideology is enacted in embodied action, and such action is embedded in media ecologies.

3. Today, the global archiving of memory still depends on Eurocentric mediatisation – particularly the dominance of digital media ecologies.

Accordingly:

- All identities are imagined differently (Anderson 1983). But we must scrutinise who founds these imaginaries – media – and acknowledge that some ways of imagining (fascism and imperialism) are ethically unacceptable.

- Everyday use of media-based channels for externalising memory creates psychological needs, which in turn generate energy for ideology (e.g. the imperative to defend a nation, or consume goods). In this sense, tourists with cameras near cultural objects function as ideological imagery.

- Digital memory ecologies are founded more on images than on schemata. This turns the user into a Narcissus – not in love with herself, but with her image, numbed by screens, while media generates the ecology (space and time) in which understanding and self-understanding unfold.

Yet, colonial encounters and the discovery of new worlds showed how different human beings can be. Those others were not only subjected to the technological expansion of war industries but also to the falsification and suppression of their memory archives (Keightley

2022). The material-technological substrate of Europe came to dominate native archiving techniques and ultimately imposed the sacred image of the digital as universal memory support.

DIGITAL ARCHIVAL DISTANCE AND DISEMBODIMENT

The digital archive, often celebrated for its accessibility and scale, paradoxically introduces a profound estrangement between individuals and their histories. Rather than bringing us closer to memory, digital image-based archiving often increases the distance, replacing lived experience with abstracted representations and weakening the embodied, intersubjective ground upon which memory is formed.

This distancing is not merely technological but ontological. As Derrida (1995) writes, ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory.’ To archive is not simply to preserve, but to reconfigure: to displace memory from body and place into systems governed by institutions, protocols and interfaces. This displacement introduces a loss of *intersubjectivity*, a gap in the shared co-presence that gives memory its affective and ethical force. When memory becomes image rather than encounter, what is remembered is no longer *with* us, but *before* us, and therefore becomes spectacle.

In Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), he describes archives not as passive collections but as active systems of power that shape what can be said and thought. The digital archive privileges visibility, but this visibility is often detached from the motoric, kinesthetic and sensual basis of memory (Gallagher 1986; Merleau-Ponty 1962). The result is an *as if* affection, an image that simulates closeness but lacks intimacy. Memory becomes performance without presence, knowledge without care.

The transformation of memory into spectacle, as Guy Debord (2020) noted, marks a shift from authentic social relations to their mediated representations. Where reading once individualised the subject through silent interiority, digital media now atomise us further into visual fragments, endlessly circulating but seldom touching. As Shapiro and Spaulding (2024) suggest, embodied cognition is foundational to meaningful memory. When the archive ceases to be an extension of bodily engagement and becomes a closed system of representation, it no longer provides a place for human identity, it merely displays.

This is particularly problematic in postcolonial contexts where the capacity to remember has always been contested. As Navarro (2024) argues, those positioned as historical losers not only face a limited access to institutional archives but are rendered less visible as credible sources of knowledge. In this way, the archive enacts what Stiegler (1998) calls a ‘default of origin’: a technological foreclosure that structures not only what is remembered but who is authorised to remember.

The digital archive, therefore, is not a neutral vessel but a contested terrain – a site of both promise and peril. Its promise lies in democratising access, but its peril lies in disembodiment, turning relational events into discrete images, and distancing us from the affective labour that memory demands. True memory work may require a return not to nostalgia, but to embodied, intersubjective practices that resist the seductive coldness of the image.

ALTERNATIVES TO DIGITAL ARCHIVING AND EMBODIED INDIVIDUATION

Non-Western memory infrastructures were for centuries marginalised as exotic or outdated. For example, in the context of the Bolivian Andes, textile artifacts are not merely considered utilitarian or decorative objects; rather, they are regarded as living entities that actively

engage with their social and material environments. As Espejo and Arnold (2012) observe, these textiles possess the capacity to foster relationships among individuals and communities, contributing to the formation of extensive networks of exchange, and serving as sources of both material and spiritual sustenance. Such an understanding challenges the conventional dichotomy between animate and inanimate, positioning the textile not as a passive object but as an agentic medium embedded in dynamic processes of human interaction, experience, and eventual transformation or decay. The relational ontology articulated by Elvira Espejo is further reflected in the metaphorical language employed in the Andean discourse, where the term 'woven' signifies social cohesion and integration – serving as the very warp or structural foundation (*pilar*) of communal life.

Simultaneously, non-digital modes of transmission of memory were routinely denied the epistemic status of technology (Keightley 2022: 11). But you cannot deny them as media and/or ecology. That is, it needs to be recognised as media shaping the message (memory and eventually sociality) in their own way. Community can be marginalised because of the lack of digital archiving, but a rich ethnographic work, for example, Taylor (2003) in performance studies has explored the ways in which dance operates as a mode of communicating memory, not simply as a symbolic content but as a bodily system of knowing and transmitting memory.

When a Mexican reads a book or watches a movie about different Mexican characters (as in Pedro Páramo, Roma, etc.), her cognition/imagination unites the identity. This succession of those culturally significant mediated plurals make abstract topics incarnated (Anderson 1983). Thus, a poor neighbourhood at the outskirts of CDMX may be mediated with the help of the reuse of impressions of a prison and thus boost the sense (of agency) of social solidarity. That is how Uranga (1951) saw the ties for nation, not via the blood, but via incarnation, embodiment (on which the metaphor of blood so beloved by nationalist media is based).

This simultaneous imagining is crucial for identity because enacting of imaginative community via media presupposes others in technological media: even if I read alone, or sing a national anthem, I still 'know' others also read (portals or newspapers). These ceremonies (of communal externalisation of national memory) root imagination in everydayness and vice versa. So now the question is what ecology suits Mexican body schemata better than Europocentric digitality?

First, it must be an intersubjective environment. As Sartre (2000) reminds us, without friends our story shrinks; we no longer tie understanding to experience. Different cultures sustain unique practices grounded in shared meaning. Intersubjectivity allows members to interpret and engage in these practices. Collaboration – teamwork, artistic creation and problem-solving – requires shared goals. Such intersubjectivity should be based not on image but on schema. Groups of others are more or less known to me, even across varied modalities – temporal, cultural, interpersonal, virtual, or biological (Schütz 1967). Their activities generate 'products' – cultural objects, institutions, values and technologies – which inherently refer to others (Heidegger 1967). We operate within zones of manipulation and shape our typicality accordingly. Museums may reflect a neo-colonial memory infrastructure, while murals remain indigenous mnemonic devices (Navarro, Briedis 2023). Between digital tourism imagery and authentic archiving, media and technology – especially in memory rituals – re-shape sociality and intersubjectivity (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

Second, Mexico's cultural archive practices must focus more on body-schema-based methods, fostering intersubjective synchronisation (Briedis, Navarro 2023). Doing things together, balancing the mechanical and the novel, shapes our collective narratives. Recognising the plurality of memory transmission – through ritual, oral tradition, communal labour, or environmental immersion – is no nostalgic gesture but a response to digital monoculture. Embracing alternative media infrastructures is vital not only for epistemic justice but for recovering the affective and communal dimensions of memory flattened by screens. From indigenous codices to murals and participatory theatre, these practices offer ecological, embodied memory techniques that resist commodification and cultivate a temporality rooted in care, attention, and generational dialogue.

Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation provides a compelling lens for rethinking memory beyond the constraints of digital abstraction. For Simondon, the individual is not a fixed entity but a phase in a dynamic field of tensions involving the preindividual, environment and technics. 'The true principle of individuation is mediation,' he writes, emphasising that form emerges from resolving internal potentials, not from imposing structure on passive matter (Simondon 2020: 25). Memory, likewise, is not a static store of representations but an ongoing process shaped by embodied experience, social practice, and material mediation. Digital archives, by contrast, often reduce memory to discrete, replicable data, disconnecting it from the lived dynamics that generate meaning. What is lost is not just content but the process through which memory becomes.

Reclaiming memory's embodied dimension is thus an ontological and political act. Individuation through memory involves reviving preindividual charges in gesture, ritual and sensorimotor engagement – dimensions that resist codification. It also means viewing technical objects not as passive tools but as participants in becoming. When memory systems promote ambiguity, participation and affect (rather than surveillance and standardisation), they restore the interval essential for subject formation. Bodily practices, community-based archives, and non-digital mnemotechnics are not nostalgic residues but active counterforces to disindividuation. Simondon's relational ontology points toward memory as a living, transformative process grounded in the body.

CONCLUSIONS

In the face of escalating digital abstraction and algorithmic control, rethinking archival practices becomes a vital ethical and political act. This article has argued that memory, far from being a passive record, is an embodied, relational and situated process. Against the flattening tendencies of digital archives that prioritise representation over presence, we have outlined a vision of memory as individuation – a dynamic becoming grounded in gesture, intersubjectivity, and affective labour. Drawing from Simondon, Derrida, and postcolonial critique, we emphasised that alternative media infrastructures – murals, oral traditions, ritual, and participatory performance – offer living, non-commodified forms of remembering. These are not nostalgic returns but forward-looking strategies to reclaim epistemic agency and preserve cultural heterogeneity. Memory work, then, is not only about the past but about the possibility of more just futures. To remember differently is to imagine otherwise, and this requires expanding our media ecologies beyond screens toward more embodied, plural and grounded forms of archival life.

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Alternatyvios archyvinės atminties ekologijos: mnemoninė kūno ir medijų reikšmė

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip medijų ekologijos formuoja atmintį, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant kūniško suvokimo ir postkolonijinėms perspektyvoms. Kvestionuodami skaitmenines ir eurocentristines archyvavimo praktikas bei jų infrastruktūras, autoriai nagrinėja atminties įkūnijimą skaitmeninėje aplinkoje ir aptaria alternatyvias, kūniškos atminties formas. Remiantis tokių mąstytojų kaip B. Stiegler, G. Simondon, J. Derrida ir M. Foucault darbais, tekste pabrėžiami ontologiniai ir politiniai archyvavimo aspektai. Pasitelkiant Lotynų Amerikos atvejų studijas ir filosofinius tyrimus, siūloma iš naujo įvertinti kūno praktikas, vietos tradicijas ir intersubjektyvius ritualus kaip gyvybiškai svarbias kultūrinės atminties, teisingumo ir episteminės įvairovės infrastruktūras skaitmenizuotame ir globalizuotame pasaulyje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kultūrinė atmintis, medijų ekologijos, kūniškas suvokimas, archyvai