

**WAYS OF REPRESENTING ACCUMULATION: THE ARCHIVE AND THE
COLLECTION IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EVERYTHING IS
ILLUMINATED* AND JOHN FOWLES' *THE COLLECTOR***

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Abstract: *The paper explores the desire of accumulating in our contemporary society by analysing two processes: that of archiving and that of collecting; and how these are represented in literature, in novels such as **Everything is Illuminated**, which deals with the preservation of memory through the archive; and **The Collector**, which brings a different perspective on the act of collecting, namely, the relationship between collecting, possession and fetishism.*

Keywords: *archive, collection, possession, tabulation, preservation.*

1. Introduction

Archiving and collecting are two processes that imply storing and accumulating. In this sense, both processes are very similar to each other, more than this, they are complementary: collecting in itself implies the process of archiving, while archiving in its turn, implies the process of collecting. In what follows, I will have a look at how the archive and the collection are represented in Anglo-American literature by examining two novels: *Everything is Illuminated*, by the American author, Jonathan Safran Foer, and *The Collector*, by the British author, John Fowles. The first of the two presents the process of accumulating as Archive, but one similar to a museum, thus public; while the second presents the process of accumulating as Collection, one that is personal and private.

2. Accumulation in Time

The activity of collecting can be traced back into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when in Europe emerged the first 'wonder cabinets' or as the Germans used to call them, 'Wunderkammern,' where collectors could exhibit pieces of art and curiosities of the time. Objects were classified under the category of *naturalia*, meaning minerals, stuffed animals, plants, ethnographic artefacts, and fossils; and *artificialia* (Belk 2001:32), meaning paintings,

weapons, scientific instruments, and mechanical curiosities, such as clocks and automata. Religious objects and relics were often a third and distinct type of curiosities of the cabinets.

The activity of archiving, instead, emerged later, in the nineteenth century Imperial England. With the foundation of institutions such as *The Royal Geographical Society*, *The Royal Photographic Society* and *The British Museum*; the archival industry began because of a need to gather world-wide knowledge, an amount of information which had to be synchronized and unified. This was accomplished by putting together specific forms of “*discreet, quantifiable, and tested knowledge (positive knowledge) into universal principles of aggregated data*” (Enwezor 2008:19) which included photographs, images, documents, maps, surveys, etc.

In defining the archive, we could describe it as a place filled with drawers, filing cabinets, shelves covered by tabulated and indexed documents, “an inert repository of historical artefacts.” But most importantly, the archive is the representation of the “taxonomy, classification and annotation of knowledge” (Enwezor 2008:16), which Foucault understands as a “representative historical form, defined as a field of archaeological inquiry, a journey through time and space” (in Enwezor 2008:16).

But in the case of the collection, W. Durost presents the following, elaborate, definition:

A collection is basically determined by the nature of the value assigned to the objects, or ideas possessed. If the predominant value of an object or idea for the person possessing it is intrinsic, i.e., if it is valued primarily for use, or purpose, or aesthetically pleasing quality, or other value inherent in the object or accruing to it by whatever circumstances of custom, training, or habit, it is not a collection. If the predominant value is representative or representational, i.e, if said object or idea is valued chiefly for the relation it bears to some other object or idea, or objects, or ideas, such as being one of a series, part of a whole, a specimen of a class, then it is the subject of a collection (qtd. in Pearce 1998:2).

This means that we should make a distinction between accumulating for the collection, and between accumulating objects that we use for everyday purposes. The word ‘collecting’ comes from the Latin ‘*colligere*’ meaning ‘to select and assemble’ (Latin-Dictionary), and therefore implies selection. Accumulation per se means that things are gathered without a specific pattern, and most of the time, have a utilitarian purpose, while objects that are collected are immediately removed from everyday life, such in the case of art objects which exist for their own aesthetic sake. Collecting also implies an orientation to the cultural: it has its interest in those objects that might have some exchange value, or are objects of conservation, or of display.

Both the act of archiving and that of collecting introduce meaning, order, boundaries, coherence, and reason; and both imply making distinctions and creating categories. As Ernst van Alphen suggests, “the ordering of objects collected and archived is ultimately a form of association, that is, a form of connecting and joining together” (2008: 66).

The difference between archiving and collecting is that in the case of the archive, it usually has an institutional purpose, as the word ‘archive’ comes from the Latin ‘*archivum*,’ and means ‘a place in which public records or historical documents are preserved; the material

preserved; a repository or collection especially of information' (Merriam-Webster); therefore, its role is of an official nature. While in the case of the collection, its purpose is a more personal and private one—it implies a person who is interested in collecting some specific items for themselves. This collection can later be institutionalized, as in the case of museums and art galleries that display usually items belonging to collectors that have been donated or bought. But as mentioned before, the two activities, that of collecting and that of archiving, are complementary: archiving implies the process of collecting items, and collecting also implies the archiving of the collected objects through tabulation and indexing.

3. Behind Accumulation: Power and Possession

But let us now put the question: why archive or collect? We can find one of the answers for this question by having a look at children: between the age of seven and twelve, they are fascinated with laying down their toys, with grouping and handling them – this can be seen as a way to exercise their own control over the outer world. So in this sense, we could say that the desire to archive and collect comes from an unconscious desire for power: by collecting or archiving we are given the power to manipulate and control a micro world of our own – we can play God.

Also, the act of collecting implies possession, and by this a continuous acquisition of objects: the collector always has to acquire new things for the collection, and that's why the collection is in a continuous growth, it is accumulating. But the desire for acquisition is generated by a 'missing item,' and in this way an object becomes valuable just because of its absence. For the French word '*objet*,' the Littré dictionary gives the following definition: 'Anything which is the cause or subject of passion. Figuratively and most typically: the loved object' (in Baudrillard 1994:7). But this also implies some form of possession – if an object is invested with our passion, then that means that we desire to own it in one way or another. Therefore, possession applies to a collected object once it is divested of its function and made relative to its owner: "the object, pure and simple, divested of its function, abstracted from any practical context, takes on a strictly subjective status. Now its destiny is to be collected. Whereupon it ceases to be a carpet, a table, a compass, or a knick-knack, and instead turns into an 'object', or a 'piece'" (Baudrillard 1994:8).

For example, Walter Benjamin believes that ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects, because to a book collector, every book finds its freedom on his shelves, and therefore suggesting an investment of feelings in the collected items:

One of the finest memories of a collector is the moment when he rescued a book to which he might never have given a thought, much less a wishful look, because he found it lonely and abandoned on the market place and bought it to give it its freedom—the way the prince bought a beautiful slave girl in the Arabian Nights (1968: 64).

Also, an object depends on the fact that it is an 'I' who possesses it. This suggests a narcissistic attitude of the owner, who, in a way, finds his own reflection in his collection; therefore, we might say that it is 'oneself' that one collects: "what these collectors may be attempting is 'symbolic self completion' at times when they have lost a significant human part of their extended self. In this sense too, the drive of completing a collection is also a drive toward self completion" (Belk 2001:90).

The archivist or the collector also has a significant role in what the archive or collection's principle of organization is concerned. He arranges the items according to time and space, or the qualities of the objects themselves, what should be private and what should be public. But as Stewart remarks, by arranging the items according to time, the archivist/collector overlaps his own personal time with the historical time of the archive/collection and thus, creates a fiction of the individual life, which means escaping into a time which is both transcendent to and parallel to historical time:

The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism. The collection replaces history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world. (1993: 151)

In this sense, we might say that the archive or the collection's function is not the restoration of a specific historical context, but rather, the creation of a new context, one that stands in a metaphorical relation to the collector's everyday life. Stewart further argues that the archetypal collection is Noah's Ark, a hermetic world which is "representative yet which erases its context origin" (1993: 152), because while the Earth is destroyed by the flood, the world of the ark remains intact. Therefore, this world should not be one of nostalgia, but one of anticipation, of forgetting the past and starting over.

4. The Archive and the Collection: from memory to fetishism

In what follows, I will have a look at how accumulating is represented in the novels of Jonathan Safran Foer and John Fowles, who bring two different perspectives upon this issue. The first, presents the process of accumulating as Archive, meaning the preservation and tabulation of specific historical objects and documents in time; while the second presents the process of accumulating as Collection, meaning the gathering of objects for personal enjoyment.

In Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, we are introduced to the young Jonathan, a Jewish-American writer, who travels to Ukraine in an attempt to find his grandfather's shtetl, Trachimbrod, and a person named Augustine, a woman who had saved his grandfather from the Nazis during the Second World War. In his quest, he is helped by a young Ukrainian named Alex, his grandfather, and their dog, Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior.

Their search turns out to be very difficult, because apparently, Trachimbrod is a place that no one has heard of, and the old picture which Jonathan carries with him, representing his grandfather and Augustine when they were young, proves to be of great help when they encounter an old lady, who recognizes the people in the picture. She claims that Trachimbrod was completely erased and that she is the only survivor, having as proof all the possessions that once belonged to the people of Trachimbrod gathered in her house. At first, she is believed to be Augustine, because of their high resemblance, but she claims to be, in fact her sister, Lista. A very remarkable scene of the novel is when Alex first walks into her yard:

Many clothes were lying across her yard. I am certain that they were drying after a cleaning, but they were in abnormal arrangements, and they appeared like the clothes of invisible dead bodies. I reasoned that there were many people in the white house, because there were men's clothes and women's clothes and clothes for children and even babies (Foer 2002:116).

This scene of the exterior anticipates what there is enclosed in the interior of the house. The two rooms of Lista's house are described as having many things from the floor to the ceiling: piles of clothes, hundreds of shoes of different sizes, boxes filled with items, while the walls are covered with photographs of many different people. Each box is labelled according to its content: "weddings and other celebrations," "privates: journals/diaries/sketchbooks/underwear," "silver/perfume/pinwheels," "hygiene/spools/candles," "chess/relics/black magic," "figurines/spectacles," "darkness," "death of the first born," "dust". This description is, evidently, one of the Archive, in which objects are categorized, tabulated and preserved.

One of the functions that such an archive possesses is its ability not only to preserve objects, but also to preserve memory. Each object in the archive links the present moment to one in the past, and by doing so, it also resurrects a specific narrative of the object. At some point in the novel, Lista exhibits the contents of a box "brimmed with many photographs, and many pieces of paper, and many ribbons, and cloths, and queer things like combs, rings, and flowers" (Foer 2002:151), which is labelled 'remains.' When extracting, for example, 'Miriam's clip,' the story of Miriam comes into Lista's mind, and she begins remembering and narrating her story: how Miriam was a very active girl, who would not sit down because "she was always loving to do things" (Foer 2002: 152); and how she once found her clip under her pillow and realised that she was keeping it there because she would hold it all night in order not to suck her thumb.

Also, when extracting Baruch's photograph, Lista begins narrating his story, and how he would sit in front of the library all day long, or take books out of the library without being able to read. The photograph plays a very important role in the process of archiving, because it is not just an object that is being archived, but also an archive in itself. As Enwezor remarks, the photograph is "an archival record, document and pictorial testimony of the existence of a recorded fact, an excess of the seen" (2008:12).

But if we were to have a closer look at Lista's archive, we would dare to say that it is more than an archive, it is in fact a museum in itself, a museum of the Holocaust, probably the

one that Hitler intended to create by archiving the belongings of the Jewish people. For the Nazis, even people were seen as items of archiving: when they were taken to labour camps, they would have numbers tattooed on their arms, transforming them from individuals into objects recognized by numbers. Like Ernst van Alphen observes, “like objects in an archive or museum, the inscription classified them as traceable elements within a collection. Upon entering the camps they were also sorted into groups: men with men, women with women; children, the elderly, and pregnant women went to gas chambers”(2008:67).

On the other hand, in Fowles’ *The Collector*, we are presented the character Frederick Clegg, an amateur lepidopterist who wants to add to his collection a new and strikingly different item: that of the art student, Miranda Grey. Because of the collector’s personal passion for the object of the collection, we are faced in this case with the process of accumulating as Collection.

Clegg’s collection is arranged in drawers, according to species, like for example ‘Chalkhill and Adonis Blues,’ ‘var. ceroneus Adonis,’ ‘var. tithonus Chalkhills;’ but he expresses his desire and ambition of adding some new and more valuable pieces, like the ‘Swallowtail,’ the ‘Black Hairstreak,’ the ‘Large Blue,’ ‘rare Fritillaries like the Heath and the Glanville;’ and later, the woman he becomes obsessed with. His infatuation with Miranda begins by following and watching her, like the way a lepidopterist observes the butterflies:

Seeing her always made me feel like I was catching a rarity, going up to it very careful, heart-in-mouth as they say. A Pale Clouded Yellow, for instance. I always thought of her like that, I mean words like elusive and sporadic, and very refined—not like the other ones, even the pretty ones. More for the real connoisseur. (Fowles 2)

He realises that the only way he could collect this ‘rare species’ is by kidnapping her, so after buying a van and a house at the country side, Clegg waits for Miranda one evening when she comes out of the cinema. He captures her, using a rag soaked in chloroform, ties her up in his van, takes her to his house, and locks her in the basement room. After performing this act, Clegg feels that: ‘it was like catching the Mazarine Blue again or a Queen of Spain Fritillary’ (Fowles 12).

His desire to collect Miranda can be seen as the artist’s desire to bring his art to life, like in the Pygmalion myth; in the collector’s case, paradoxically enough, to bring his collection to life. He wants to pin down Miranda, which, in a sense, would imply to kill her; but in the same time, he wants her alive, because her beauty stands in being alive. Clegg’s desire of possessing such an item as Miranda, can also be seen as a form of fetishism, because as fetishism, it implies ‘a targeting of a privileged item’ and ‘its inability to grasp the supposed item of desire’ (Baudrillard 1994:19). This fetishism is manifested in his desire to take photographs of Miranda in erotic positions, like having her tied up to the bed, or half naked, but excluding the possibility of sexual intercourse.

The fact that Miranda dies in the end of pneumonia, can be seen as the end that had awaited her as part of Clegg’s butterfly collection – she has finally been pinned down. And dying

of lung disease can be seen as the equivalent of the pinching of a butterfly through its thorax, which is the best way of killing Lepidoptera before storing them. Also, she has found her place like all the other butterflies of his collection that are kept in drawers—she is in a box, under the apple trees. But Miranda is not the last item to complete Clegg’s collection: he has already spotted another interesting ‘species,’ a shop girl who resembles Miranda very well.

5. Conclusion

In comparing the two novels, *Everything is Illuminated* and *The Collector*, we can see that in the first one, we are presented the process of accumulating seen as Archive, even as a museum, one that is strongly related to memory and the past, one that is static, finalized, public—open to the viewers. While in the case of the second, we have the process of accumulating seen as Collection, one that is influenced by the desire of possession of the collector, one that is dynamic, we could also say ‘animated,’ and most important: unfinished— therefore, related to the future, but in the same time, private.

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