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## **The Digital Dark Age**

Myth, Archive, and the Cultural  
Imagination of Digital Loss

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## INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have radically transformed the way we produce, store, circulate and remember information. Vast quantities of data are generated every day and delegated to digital infrastructures that promise accessibility and apparent permanence. However, the same technologies that develop an unprecedented expansion of memory have also introduced new forms of fragility. Hardware becomes obsolete, software formats disappear, and entire ecosystems of data can become inaccessible within a few years. Therefore, digital memory depends on continuous migration, maintenance, and infrastructural compatibility.

This tension caused by fragility is defining in our contemporary digital culture. Although we produce more information than any previous civilization, the material conditions of this production portray collective memory extremely unstable. Within this friction between expansion and vulnerability emerges the concept of *Digital Dark Age*, which refers to the fear that future generations may face a massive historical gap caused by the unreadability or disappearance of our digital records.

The urgency of this theme forces us to acknowledge the transformation of how societies relate to their own past and future by confronting anxieties about time, authority and historical continuity in late technological modernity. In this thesis, the *Digital Dark Age* becomes a lens through which I analyse cultural symptoms that go beyond simple technical issues and by opting for a critical analysis into how the possibility of digital oblivion is narrated, imagined and symbolically framed. By treating digital fragility as a simple technical issue, we risk ignoring the power structures, decisions and especially the

cultural myths that determine what is considered worthy of preservation and what is allowed to disappear. The resulting unease that comes from this state of anxiety, produces a sense of irreversible collapse which translates into a destined apocalypse. By examining this apocalyptic rhetoric, the thesis seeks to understand how digital loss is so readily translated into narratives of collapse, and what this outcome reveals about our contemporary expectations of durability and technological progress.

In order to address these issues, I have adopted a cross-disciplinary methodology that ties several academic traditions. The structure is based on the combination of different perspectives, from media archaeology to discourse analysis of preservation rhetoric and finally the analysis of selected case studies. The aim is to offer a critical examination of the narratives and imaginaries that shape contemporary understandings of digital preservation through debates on media temporality, archival power, and the cultural construction of memory.

The first part of the thesis reconstructs the origin of the *Digital Dark Age* discourse by adopting a media archaeological approach. By situating it within a longer history of media anxieties, it demonstrates that fears of technological loss are not unique to the digital era. Digital media introduces an important different condition compared to earlier forms of recording; manuscripts, books, engraved stone, as long as the object survives, the information will too. In a digital ecosystem this relationship does not exist anymore, and information exists only as encoded data. This structural dependency produces a new kind of vulnerability, in which preservation is no longer guaranteed by material survival but by continuous migration and maintenance. In this sense, the research shows that digital fragility transforms memory from an apparent stable accumulation of records into a vulnerable system sustained by infrastructures.

The second part of the research focuses on the symbolic and narrative aspect of the *Digital Dark Age* through a discourse-analytical perspective in order to analyse the mythic construct that dramatizes loss through apocalyptic metaphors, reshaping collective anxieties about memory, continuity and archival permanence. Starting with Roland

Barthes' *Mythologies*, phrases like "digital catastrophe" or "memory void" assume a new significance that frame digital loss as a destiny rather than outcomes of economic, institutional or political choices. Paul Connerton's distinction between inscriptive and incorporative memory reveals how forgetting enables selection amid excess. Michel Foucault's counter-memory politicizes this, in the sense that erasure exposes archival power structures that render certain traces "forgettable", challenging total preservation utopias as control mechanisms. Ultimately, "archival failure" reveals the archive as ethically charged; using Foucault's regimes and Ricoeur's productive forgetting, the thesis highlights how digital exclusions mirror power-laden selection, transforming the *Digital Dark Age* rhetoric from alarmism to critique.

In the third part, I explore three dimensions of the *Digital Dark Age* through a comparative analysis of three case studies in order to examine how different situations respond to the perception of digital fragility and archival crisis. Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* exemplifies Lev Manovich's database aesthetic by refusing linear storytelling and where viewers are free to create personal interpretations amid heterogeneous fragments, which mirrors digital non-sequential logic. The dependency on ephemeral ecosystems by *BBC Domesday Project* reveals how digital memory can easily transform multimedia into relic. This opens the discourse around "deep time" echoing Siegfried Zielinski by exposing media archaeology fractured strata. Finally, the *Rosetta Disk* which is the development of a post-digital monument with the aim of contrasting failure. This object questions whether such gesture addressed digital loss or instead intensifies the way we imagine it culturally.

Digital fragility, therefore, exposes the myth surrounding archives, highlights their exclusions and encourages resilient forms of remembering rather than total preservation. It seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the digital loss and invites readers to imagine new possibilities on how to extend human knowledge beyond fragile digital bits in a rapidly changing world.

## 1 DIGITAL DARK AGE

The desire for a universal library, as a place to archive all human knowledge, is not a new ambition born with the advent of digital technologies, but rather it has always been a dream throughout history to provide access to knowledge. The founding of the Library of Alexandria has become a symbol of achievement and more importantly, a symbol of loss. The catastrophic destruction serves as a reminder that knowledge is fragile and archives are vulnerable. Since then, it has been a repeated ambition and desire to ensure the longevity of publications, with the purpose of keeping at least one copy safe and building a well secured and cumulative corpus of knowledge that can resist the passing of time.

During the Middle Ages, monks and monasteries were essential in safeguarding and circulating books. Their efforts are the reason we possess so much knowledge of the ancient world and the cultural legacy of Greek, Roman, and Arabic civilization. This monastic role faded with the invention of the printing press, yet the respect for the historical record has resisted through the work of librarians and archivists in both public and private sphere.

Toward the end of the twentieth century there was a shift in this utopian vision. Scholars argued that digital memory was a fragile medium, and its corruptibility and obsolescence make it difficult to completely rely on this technology. In this context, the rise of the expression *Digital Dark Age* originated an expression that mirrors the fear of oblivion. Initially, it was introduced as a technical issue, but soon the expression changed its definition and turned into a metaphorical concept that embodies the contemporary anxiety about fragility, loss and the limits of preservation. Therefore, *Digital Dark Age* is not only about the fear of a future without archives but also the anxiety of the disappearing especially in a period of time when we consider technological tools as most powerful. As

Alexander Stille pointed out in his book, *The Future of the Past* (Stille, 2002), one of the paradoxes of the information age is that, although the late twentieth century produces more data than any earlier period, it will almost certainly end up losing more information than any era before it.

Today, however, there is a prevailing attitude that history has come to an end, fuelled by technology enthusiasts who insist that the Internet is transforming everything. Through this exaggerated technological optimism, there is a call among information professionals who invite for a deeper reflection on how new technologies shape society. One major concern is how to preserve historical records in a digital age that prizes rapid change over stability and long-term preservation.

Vint Cerf, Google vice-president, warned about the fragility of digital information long ago. Cerf cautioned that bit rot could produce a “forgotten generation, or even a forgotten century”, arguing that an enormous portion of our everyday life, and not only, is recorded in a digital form. Without effective preservation much of this is at risk of vanishing.

This chapter examines the emergence of the *Digital Dark Age* as a concept at the intersection of technological fragility and cultural imagination. The following sections show how this phenomenon functions both as a real preservation challenge and as a symbolic framework through which we articulate collective fears about the fate of our cultural record.

## **1.1 DIGITAL DARK AGE: ORIGINS AND DEFINITION**

The expression *Digital Dark Age* intentionally refers to the historical notion on *Dark Ages*, a period which usually is associated with scientific and cultural decline and the loss of knowledge. Dark Ages is a term used to describe the Early Middle Ages in Western Europe between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, after the fall of the Roman Empire and right before the Renaissance. The phrase was coined for the first time by Francesco Petrarca to evoke a sense of loss, obscurity and a fragile transmission of knowledge across time, even though now historians shed a positive light on the medieval period.

Petrarca wrote about the accomplishments of ancient Greece and Rome and believed that his society was moving backwards from the achievements of the Greeks and Romans. During the Renaissance, Petrarca's idea of dark and barbaric medieval Middle Ages contributed to humanists' belief that their own time was a rebirth of classical culture. One example is humanist Giorgio Vasari who believed that the period that preceded them had been a dark gap time between the important Classical Antiquity and the Renaissance. The Middle Ages were therefore a period that brought loss of the great intellectual achievements of the Antiquity.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars began to question the idea of the Dark Ages. They studied medieval society and culture in depth and slowly uncovered a period of history that had long been poorly understood. Their research showed that the Middle Ages included many phases of political, social, intellectual, and economic renewal. In particular, they demonstrated that the philosophical and scientific developments of the "Twelfth Century Renaissance" laid the groundwork for both the Italian Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The historian Alban Gautier argued that the term "Dark Ages" can still be useful. He said that historians may continue to use it, but only under

two conditions. First, it should apply only to a short period, roughly from 410 to 610 CE. Second, the term should not be understood in a negative sense. Instead, it should be used in a descriptive way, to indicate a time for which we have very little written evidence. For historians who rely mainly on texts, these centuries are “lost centuries” and are likely to remain so. In short, the Dark Ages were not “dark” because they were inferior, but because we know relatively little about them. (Gautier, 2016)

In this perspective, the *Digital Dark Age* represents an echo of that earlier fear and anxiety, which has emerged to describe the threat of technological obsolescence of digital media that might disappear forever. If not managed in the proper way, digital information risks to become inaccessible to future generations, creating a gap comparable to the losses suffered during the Dark Ages in the sense that there will be a lack of written record. Not only, if the Dark Ages represented a lack of written record, the *Digital Dark Age* is the anxiety caused by not being able to access the excess of data.

This anxiety emerges at a time when humanity has never been more connected and productive, and reliant on technology especially. The analogy serves, therefore, as a warning and as a reflection on our cultural condition.

The term *Digital Dark Age* dates to the late 1990s and early 2000s, where experts framed the problem in terms of volatility of storage media, the rapid pace of obsolescence and institutional negligence. Digital collections facilitate access but not preservation, therefore being digital meant being ephemeral.

Research programs have just started to develop strategies and guidelines to the growing concern regarding the preservation of digital information.

In 1996 a group of 21 experts, chaired by John Garrett and Donald Waters for the Commission on Preservation and the Research Libraries Group, spent over a year analysing, considering options and consulting other experts over the world in order to find a solution. One of the conclusions drawn is that this is not only a technical problem, but it requires a larger mobilization that enables preservation from libraries, corporations, and government agencies, by ensuring new policies and creating a secure environment of this generation’s knowledge into the future. (Rothenberg, 1999a)

Terry Kuny framed this phenomenon through a powerful historical contrast. Comparing modern librarians to monks, Kuny delegated them the responsibility of preserving and distributing knowledge as society entered a new electronic era made of digital objects. *Digital Dark Age* was first introduced in his 1997 essay *A Digital Dark Age? Challenges in the Preservation of Electronic Information* presented at the 63<sup>rd</sup> IFLA (International Federation of Library Association and Institutions), as a strong warning about the potential mass loss of digital information by emphasising the imagery of “darkness”. In his paper, Kuny, pointed out that long-term accessibility is at risk, despite the promised ease of creating and electronically encoding information. The comparison with monks is not casual, if archivers can still access books and manuscripts from centuries ago, digital formats cannot guarantee the same accessibility caused by media obsolescence. He argued that we were moving toward an era in which much of what is electronically encoded would be lost forever, hinting to some sort of collective “digital amnesia”.

Kuny addressed the role of institutions, arguing that librarians and archivists are the guardians of history in this new age of oblivion, considered as the heir of the medieval monastic tradition which safeguarded knowledge through action. (Kuny, 1997)

Jeff Rothenberg, senior research scientist of the RAND Corporation, proposed a series of solutions for the problem. His 1999 report *Avoiding Technological Quicksand: Finding a Viable Technical Foundation for Digital Preservation* for the Council on Library and Information Resources, identified how the physical lifespan of digital storage media was “surprisingly short”, requiring frequent transfer of data onto new media. Rothenberg provocatively stated, “Digital documents last forever – or five years, whichever comes first” (Rothenberg, 1999a). The report explores the technical side of digital preservation where the issue is caused by the constant copying and migration of data which represents a problem for long-term digital information. Most digital documents exist only in encoded formats which require specific software to make them usable; as soon as these programs with the specific software become obsolete, the digital document becomes unreadable. In addition to the technical issues, there are also administrative and policy issues that need to be addressed when taking in consideration digital data and which contribute to the short life span of it.

In 1993, the UNESCO *Memory of the World* Programme (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1993), an international initiative, initially aimed at safeguarding documentary heritage and promoting universal access to knowledge, focusing primarily on the preservation of analogue materials such as manuscripts and archives. It soon expanded its role to address the new challenges set in the digital era. The Programme has taken a leading role in defining the *Digital Dark Age* as a global priority, not only from a technical point of view, but also from a governance and cultural policy perspective with the focus on protecting the digital heritage.

In the *Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage* from 2009 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009), the role of UNESCO is stated in the Article 12, which is responsible to “take the principles set forth in this Charter into account in the functioning of its programmes and promote their implementation within the United Nations system and by intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations concerned with the preservation of the digital heritage;”. The Charter recognises that the disappearance of heritage in whatever form constitutes an impoverishment of the heritage of all nations, and it understands that the disappearance of the heritage is an urgent issue of worldwide concern. The Charter promoted cooperation and raised awareness by promoting ethical, legal, and technical guidelines to support preservation efforts. The adoption of the Charter gave the phenomenon of the *Digital Dark Age* new authority, transforming it into a recognised global issue.

The debate around preservation continued in the conference *The Memory of the World in the Digital Age* held in Vancouver in 2012 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2013), which brought together more than 500 experts from around the world by giving them a platform to discuss about the universal accessibility to the world’s documentary heritage. The conference emphasized the rapid pace of obsolescence and the fact that preservation efforts cannot keep up with the fast development of hardware and software technologies. Preservation was not a one-time solution, but a dynamic ongoing process. This issue required the formation of strategic alliances and the implementation of a global digital agenda.

Following this statement, in 2016 UNESCO in collaboration with the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the PERSIST project (Platform to Enhance the

Sustainability of the Information Society Transglobally), developed the *Guidelines for the Selection of Digital Heritage for Long-Term Preservation* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization & PERSIST, 2016). The guidelines determined that there should be a criterion for the selection of digital heritage, in the meaning that not everything is possible or desirable to preserve. Those guidelines recognised the need for standards and metadata that are crucial for long-term preservation, by emphasizing selection and shared responsibility. These guidelines marked an important step into a more pragmatic framework for curating and managing digital memory.

The specter of the *Digital Dark Age* can be understood not only as the technical anxiety but as a part of a larger theoretical reconfiguration of the archive. In the mid-1990s, libraries and the cultural institutions developed a fear for a future without memory, as fragile digital formats threatened to erase cultural heritage. Yet, as Wolfgang Ernst argued in *Cultural Archive versus Technomathematical Storage* (Ernst, 2010), the problem is not simply technological but conceptual, that means that the archive itself has been transformed.

The classical archive is built upon the four pillars of storage, preservation, classification and access, it functions as a static institution that arrests time and freezes documents into spatial order. In contrast, the digital archive embodies mobility, instability, and constant transformation. Ernst describes this as a shift from a culture of storage to a culture of permanent transfer, where archives are constantly updated, often fragmented and unstable. The “irony” is that archive means the opposite of what digital storage media promises, and that is an endless storage space where the process of selection and of classification, of indexing and revision, has been lost completely. This condition resonates with the apocalyptic imagery of the *Digital Dark Age*, which reflects a society that produces more information than ever before, but risks losing the ability to interpret its own cultural heritage.

Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (Derrida, 1995) described the archive both as a promise and a threat. The author emphasized that the archive shelters memory but also forgets it, revealing the paradox that every act of preservation entails loss. This analogy is present

also in Tarje Rasmussen's essay *Devices of Memory and Forgetting* (Rasmussen, 2010), arguing that digital media are not only technologies of memory but also of forgetting. He introduces the notion of the "present past", a condition in which the past is constantly accessible yet unstable, through mechanisms of digital infrastructure. He continues saying that forgetting is not a failure but a structural necessity: societies reproduce themselves by filtering information, deciding what to remember and what to forget. In this sense, the *Digital Dark Age* is not an anomaly but a shadow of digital memory itself.

From this perspective, this phenomenon is not only an apocalyptic metaphor but a structural possibility inherent in the digital condition, highlighting the paradox of our era.

## **1.2 THE FRAGILITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA: OBSOLESCENCE, DATA ROT, AND PRESERVATION STRATEGIES**

Over the centuries, we have created technologies that allow us to externalize the contents of our mind to more durable and compact objects and forms. Over forty thousand years, humans managed to cheat death by transferring their thoughts, feelings and dreams to a physical material that did not die. From cave paintings to printed books, each medium has extended the lifespan of human memory beyond the individual.

With the rise of digital technology, we were able to store immense quantities of information, yet the capacity of our memory systems is falling dramatically behind our capacity to generate information. Digital memory is everywhere, but at the same time it presents itself fragile and unstable. (Rumsey, 2016)

Thinking about the future of memory seems more urgent than ever especially in the digital age. What happens when the past exists only in volatile codes and temporary platforms, and no longer has a stable physical form?

One of the most emblematic demonstrations of how hardware obsolescence and media fragility can threaten memory, comes from NASA's own archives. Scientists attempted to access all the collected data from over three decades of space exploration, however a big part of the data had been poorly labelled, inadequately stored or inaccessible due to outdated media and missing documentation. Extracting useful information from the thousands of magnetic tapes would have taken years of work and technical investigation. Even tapes in good condition would have taken time to decipher caused by the missing documents needed to decode them.

Despite these challenges, some recoveries have brought the desired results. One example is the ten-year-mission data which allowed researchers to obtain the clearest picture of

the largest volcano on Mars (Blakeslee, 1990). Similarly, information was collected during the mid-1960's *Lunar Orbiter I* mission to create a detailed picture of the dark side of the Moon for future missions (O'Leary, 2006). These analogue tapes have been archived but later forgotten because they required special drives, which had become rare and obsolete over time. The Lunar Orbiter Image Recovery Project (LOIRP) (Wagner et al., 2019) managed to recover many of these tapes years later by reconstructing the drives, reconvertng the data, and delivering the restored images to the Planetary Data System. Despite the success of the efforts to recover the data, this episode highlights the fragility of storage media and the short lifespan of technological formats. The archival crisis exposed in a 1990 *New York Times* article reveals that while storage capacities increase exponentially, the access decreases. The NASA case serves as an example of how short-term archival planning and institutional neglect, which prioritises data production over long-term preservation, can represent a problem.

Beyond its technical issues, the NASA case anticipates the broader anxiety of the *Digital Dark Age*, where the surprisingly short physical lifespan of digital storage media generates the fear that a civilization capable of producing infinite data might ultimately fail to preserve it.

In order to understand where the state of unease comes from, we need first to recognise the technical part not as an end, but as the material condition from which cultural anxiety itself arises.

From a technical perspective, fragility emerges as a direct consequence of the reliance on multiple technological layers. Unlike analogue media, which can be accessed through their physical substrate, digital information is inseparable from hardware, software, and encoding system that makes the content available. When one of these parts becomes obsolete, the data is no longer accessible.

J. Glushko (Kosciejew, 2015) identifies three major challenges of digitalization and preservation: 1. Technological obsolescence, 2. Expected useful lifetimes of physical storage media, 3. The (un)availability of software and its associated computing environment. He argues that preservation is the key motive for digitalization, but digitalization alone is not preservation. The process of digitalization creates preservation

challenges, as the ongoing technological obsolescence of hardware and software require constant efforts to guarantee long-term accessibility.

The term *obsolescence* has been frequently used when discussing about *Digital Dark Age*, which the Cambridge Dictionary describes as “the process of becoming no longer useful or needed” (Cambridge Dictionary). Obsolescence is the process of becoming out of date or no longer useful, it describes a state of “becoming obsolete, rather than a state of already being obsolete” (Pearson & Webb, 2008).

Many types of digital media, e.g. VHS tapes or magnetic disks, are unlikely to last more than five years. However, the physical lifetime of media is rarely the main constraint for digital preservation because even if long lasting archival media were developed, they would likely become obsolete due to technological advance. Today, VHS tapes are now becoming lost due to equipment decay and disappearance. Therefore, newer media with increased capacity and speed constantly replaces older formats.

Seamus Ross (Kosciejew, 2015) addressed the challenges of digital preservation including the technological obsolescence at the 11<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Digital Libraries in 2007. He argued that digital objects “are prone to corruption” and that digital objects are tied to the hardware used to create or manage them.

Hardware obsolescence causes some of the most challenging issues for digital preservation. The issues arise when the physical devices used to read or write data are no longer available or compatible. Analogue devices relied on durable materials, such as paper, that required no technological mediation to be accessed. Digital information, on the other hand, exists only as long as the infrastructure remains functional, for example, magnetic tapes, hard drives or CDs. Every digital archive is therefore bound to an ecosystem of components that are continuously updated, discontinued or replaced. Even modern storage devices like the SSD (Solid State Drive) show vulnerabilities as it retains data as electrical charge. Over an extended amount of inactivity, these charges gradually disappear, which can compromise data integrity causing the so-called *bit rot*.

Hardware obsolescence is not an incident, but the result of market dynamics and technological evolution. As noted by Kryder’s Law, which predicted an exponential decline in storage costs, there is a rapid hardware turnover which is fuelled by

technological progress, and also by the commercial logic of the IT industry. This exponential growth, while making storage affordable for consumers, has driven the rapid turnover of hardware. The industry is removing support for older technologies, rendering devices obsolete not only for technical reasons but also for economic ones. As Rosenthal *et al.* have noted (Rosenthal *et al.*, 2013), this process is unsustainable for long-term preservation, as Kryder's Law shows signs of slowing down, and at the end representing a threat to the cost of digital preservation for archival institutions.

The obsolescence of software and file formats refer to the inability to correctly interpret data, even when the hardware is still intact. File format obsolescence appears to happen regularly; they appear to fall out of use due to software packages that makes them becoming less accessible or no longer available on the market (Cochrane, 2024). A format is defined as a “specific, predetermined structure for the organization of a digital file or bitstream”. If the software or the execution environment (e.g. operating system) that created or is required to interpret that format is no longer supported, the data becomes meaningless stream of bits. As Glushko notes (Kosciejew, 2015), there are different software and programs that can convert documents from an old format to a new one, but they are only useful if the old file can be read from its old storage medium.

As mentioned before, digital documents depend on software to make them accessible. Yet this process reveals a paradox: the tools that enable the creation and interpretation of digital memory are also the ones that can condemn it to silence. Wolfgang Ernst (Ernst, 2013) argues that digital archives are not static containers of information but dynamic systems of technological performance, therefore memory exists only when it is executed. When the software becomes obsolete, the archival process itself is interrupted.

Lastly, another enemy of digital preservation, is the so-called *bit rot*. The phenomenon can present itself under different names, such as data decay, or silent corruption, but they all represent the same problem. *Bit rot* is, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster), the “tendency for digital information to degrade or become unusable over time”. To understand what this stands for, we must first understand the nature of digital storage. Digital information can be stored on any physical medium that can record

digits, and what we call “bits” are the 0s and 1s. Different media can store a given sequence of bits in different ways, according to the physical properties of the media. Therefore, a “bit stream” is a stream of binary digits placed in sequence. A bit stream can represent anything, and understanding its meaning is not always straightforward. In addition to this, many documents embed information that is meaningful only to the software that created them. So, bits are meaningful only in the program that created the file, additionally it would be difficult to access a file without the appropriate software that can read and interpret correctly the bit stream (Rothenberg, 1999b).

Over time, the physical medium that hosts the digital data, is subject to degradation, such as corrosion or charge leakage. This alteration of the original state can compromise the integrity of the bits leading to unreadable files.

Often, the degradation of files can go unnoticed, caused by the so-called *silent corruption*. This phenomenon can represent a major problem because it usually leaves no visible trace until the file becomes inaccessible or corrupted beyond repair.

For the digital archive, the *bit rot* issue represents instability. The main effect caused by the silent corruption is that data which appears intact and stored on a functioning medium, may have logical errors that compromise its readability. Silent corruption is very insidious for the archive and its preservation, where the trust in the integrity of the record is fundamental. In conclusion, even if bits are immaterial, they are constantly at risk of degradation. The archive cannot be limited to storage, but it must take into consideration a system that monitors data integrity constantly.

The technical issues discussed earlier are very common when we take into consideration digital preservation, yet, strangely enough, people seem to think that in a digital world, the threats of decay are less urgent or complicated because they think it is easier to store it all somewhere digitally, making it a safer place. However, digital memory operates by annihilating memory (Chun, 2011). As Ernst Wolfgang (Ernst, 2013) argued, digital archives exist in a “permanently transient” state, meaning that their state depend on constant migration and renewal to remain accessible, which contradicts the idea of stability and timelessness that the archive traditionally represents.

Digitization emerged as a preservation form in the 1980s with the aim of saving intellectual content threatened by decaying materials. The National Endowment for Humanities microfilmed millions of books with the sole purpose of protecting them from decaying, thinking that digitization would be the best option for preservation, even though computer files have a five-year shelf life (Chun, 2011). Digitization has been adopted by libraries as a way to provide access to human knowledge, without walls. At the same time, digital archives have been considered as contributors to the process of archival instability and loss. Their fluid and mutable nature undermines both the reliability and endurance of cultural memory. The digital medium challenges the traditional concept of the archive, since it is inherently difficult to preserve it, and in many cases, has been poorly or incompletely archived.

Every major shift in communication technologies, from oral culture to writing, printing, and now electronic technologies, has reshaped our experience of time, of the past, and our capacity for abstract thought. In this sense, Røssaak (Røssaak, 2010) identifies two critical aspects of this technological transformation. One aspect concerns the filtering and the loss in translation, which means that we leave material behind in the analogue age. When historical material is transferred from analogue to digital formats, some content is inevitably left behind. Not everything can be digitalized, and some analogue forms risk being excluded from the digital archive. Another aspect is related to the transformation of the material through digitalization. Even when material is digitized, it is vulnerable to obsolescence and decay. Hard drives, CDs and DVDs are unstable carriers, and retrieval techniques themselves transform how information is accessed.

What happens to information that “prefers” analogue forms, or that resist digitalization? What about data that cannot be Googled because it is not indexed, or it is locked inside intranets and firewalls? These are just some examples that highlight the limits of digital memory, showing that while digitization expands access, it also produces new forms of forgetting and exclusion.

### 1.3 FROM TECHNICAL PROBLEM TO CULTURAL ANXIETY: HOW OBSOLESCENCE REFLECTS ON THE ARCHIVE

With the exponential growth of records and documentation in all media formats, it is understandable that the obsolescence process is intensifying too. Preservation, therefore, cannot be seen as a passive storage of objects, but rather as an active and continuous maintenance of a complex technological system that serves as a base for memory. Digital memory seems volatile and unstable, and because it gives us the opposite impression, it becomes even more unstable.

The digital archives consist of a large number of unstable components that need to be constantly repaired, replaced or enhanced to maintain the interaction between systems. But if the system fails, the archive “dies”. The general belief on computers and digital preservation in general, is that the past is easily accessible, like a time machine. Yet the paradox is that ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) are not truly preserving the past for future usability because they make us live in a perennial present. Memory is not just a question of storage and management; it is also a matter of careful curation of significant differences. Remembering the past does not mean conserving everything, but rather a choice of what is worth of being carefully preserved and how (Floridi, 2014). A website that constantly upgrades itself and which never deletes copies of old files, is a website without past, making it unlikely that any memory of past versions will survive for future access. The risk of constantly rewriting the past is present, and we may find ourselves in a perpetual present. This is why preservation strategies aimed at conserving our digital heritage for future accessibility are particularly important.

As Derrida argued in *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression* (Derrida, 1995), every archive is an act of power and exclusion. The desire to preserve the past while exposing

it to loss and forgetting represents a paradox. The archive is far from being a neutral container, and it functions as an active selective mechanism that organizes and legitimizes knowledge; therefore, it distinguishes between what is archivable and what is not. This process is described as a “fever” by the author, which represents an obsessive urge and desire to remember, this involves a tension between the act of conserving and the destruction and erasure of what remains outside of the archive. The archive allows forgetting, it threatens memory.

As Michel Foucault suggested in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 1969), the archive is not just a repository, but a system that defines what can be said, archived or transmitted. In digital environments, obsolescence is not simply threatening stored objects, but it transforms the very condition of enunciability, determining which traces of the present may enter the historical record and which will disappear.

The implications for personal and cultural memory are significant at this point. Historians started to seriously think about the future of memory in the digital age. How could people experience that unique connection to people from the past if the past lacked a clear and tangible physical presence? As Abby Smith Rumsey suggested in *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future* (Rumsey, 2016), we are risking of creating a “digital dark age” where future generations may find it impossible to access or understand vast portions of early 21<sup>st</sup> century life because of technological barriers and data loss. What we displayed in the 90’s withstood the test of time, but it is evident that there would be no test of time for digital information. In the past, the cost of materials used for recording, from paper to film, were very high, which imposed limits on the rate of production. These limitations acted as a filtering of what knowledge and creative expression were accessible and to whom. Maintaining large collections of physical artifacts was expensive, making both their acquisition and long-term preservation costly. Therefore, the question had always been “What can we afford to save?”.

Now those barriers have disappeared, and information moves at a very high speed. Anyone with a computer can publish a book, release a movie or their own music globally and in an instant. Therefore, the question today is: “What can we afford to lose?”.

Digital environments also alter the temporal structure of the archive. The preservation nowadays concerns a sequence of versions and updates, not a singular object. This

continuous overwriting risks erasing the historical depth that archives are meant to secure. When documents are refreshed, the past becomes indistinguishable from the present, and temporal distance disappears.

Although this may seem overwhelming, every technological breakthrough forces a reconsideration of how to use new communication tools. Writers, publishers, and archivists all tried to adapt to new situations, and it was always worth the price. But the early twenty-first century saw the notion of safeguarding knowledge disappear. Books, maps and audiovisual media are being replaced by computer codes that are less reliable than human memory itself. The code is quickly overwritten or made obsolete by newer and better versions.

This shift also transforms the role of the archivist. Instead of preserving objects, contemporary archivists are focused on sustaining unstable infrastructures. Preservation becomes a practice where archivists try to keep up with rapidly changing systems rather than focusing on custodianship. The question is no longer how to protect durable artifacts, but to decide which digital object deserves the effort required to keep them alive and which one to sacrifice. This challenge is made worse by structural, non-technical barriers. These include the high and unsustainable costs of keeping large-scale resources running over time, as well as legal limits related to copyright, which restrict the duplication and preservation needed for long-term conservation.

At this point, the problem of obsolescence reveals itself not simply as a technical malfunction, but as a structural condition that reshapes the nature of the digital archive. What appears at first to be a technical issue, reveals a more profound crisis in the way contemporary society safeguards memory. The digital archive does not simply “store” information, it conditions what can be forgotten, and what aspect of the past can remain accessible. This operation undercovers a form of instability that is present not only in a technological system, but especially in a cultural one.

In this scenario, preservation can no longer be conceived as a neutral operation, but it becomes a site of anxiety, negotiation and power. The tools meant to extend memory, risk to accelerate its disappearance.

The next section will explore this shift, analysing how the *Digital Dark Age* emerges also from a state of anxiety that shapes the contemporary understanding of the archive.

## 2 THE LANGUAGE OF DIGITAL LOSS

From the material and conditions analysed in the previous chapter, this chapter shifts the focus from technological vulnerability to its cultural articulation. Rather than treating the Digital Dark Age as a problem of preservation failure, it examines how digital loss is narrated, and symbolically framed within a contemporary discourse. The phenomenon, as mentioned before, is not only the manifestation of technical instability, but also of a cultural narrative through which societies express anxieties about memory, continuity, and historical transmission in an era defined by speed and excess.

The language used to describe digital loss is not neutral, but it is full of metaphors of catastrophe, darkness, disappearance, and rupture, evoking scenarios of irreversible collapse between the present and future. Expressions such as *digital catastrophe*, *memory void*, *archival collapse*, or *invisibility* do not only describe technical risks, but also shape a dramatic imagery in which the failure of storage technologies become synonymous with the failure of culture itself. In this sense, the *Digital Dark Age* is a symbolic lens that transforms infrastructural fragility into a broader existential concern.

This chapter argues that such narratives can be understood as a form of contemporary mythology. Relating to Roland Barthes' concept of myth as a system of signs that make historically specific phenomena appear natural, the *Digital Dark Age* emerges as a mythic construction that presents the fragility of digital information as unavoidable, almost as a matter of fate. Repeated imageries and metaphors, such as digital ruins, memory loss or data black holes, turn the instability of digital media into something vivid and dramatic, spreading the idea that nothing can be done to prevent it. These images circulate across academic discourse, media theory, and popular culture, contribute building a shared cultural imagination centred on loss.

At the same time, this apocalyptic language should not be understood only as alarmist. The digital loss phenomenon opens a critical space for rethinking the relationship between memory and forgetting. Instead of treating loss simply as a failure to be prevented, current debates recognize loss as a basic component of cultural memory itself. From this perspective, forgetting can act as a form of counter-memory, challenging the idea of total preservation and questioning the assumption that all data must, or should, be saved forever. In this sense, anxiety about digital preservation points to a deeper tension between the desire for complete archives and the recognition that memory is always selective and bound to time.

Therefore, this chapter questions the notion of archival failure itself. The *Digital Dark Age* is often described as the result of accident or technological inadequacy, yet such interpretation risks hiding the political and ethical aspects of archival work. Archives are never neutral storage spaces, they are a system of selection, exclusion, and authorization. Speaking of archival failure therefore also means addressing the decisions, explicit or implicit, that decide which form of knowledge are kept and which are allowed to vanish. The fear of digital loss exposes not only technical limits, but also power structures embedded in contemporary systems of memory.

By analysing the *Digital Dark Age* as a linguistic, symbolic and conceptual construct, this chapter establishes the framework for understanding digital loss beyond its material causes. It prepares the ground for a critical examination of loss as both a cultural anxiety and a productive force, and for a deeper reflection on the archive as a contested space where technology, power and memory come together.

## 2.1 THE *DIGITAL DARK AGE* AS A CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL MYTH

The concept of *Digital Dark Age* has gradually shifted from a technical perspective into a powerful cultural narrative through which contemporary societies interpret their relationship with memory, time, and technological fragility. Although it began with concrete concerns about obsolete media, software dependence, and data decay, it has since developed into a broader symbolic framework that goes beyond its original empirical basis. Today, the *Digital Dark Age* no longer functions only as an analytical term, but as a narrative structure capable of organizing collective anxieties around data loss, discontinuity and the failure of digital civilization.

To understand this transformation, the *Digital Dark Age* can be read through Roland Barthes' theory of myth as articulated in his 1957 book *Mythologies*. For Barthes, the myth is not a false story imposed on reality, but a semiological system that transforms a historically situated phenomenon into something that appears natural and self-evident. The myth operates by emptying a sign of its specific historical content and refilling it with a generalized meaning that conceals its constructed nature. In this sense, the myth does not deny history, but in a way, it depoliticizes it. (Barthes, 1957)

If this perspective is applied to the discourse surrounding digital preservation, the *Digital Dark Age* functions precisely in this manner. Technical vulnerabilities, such as format obsolescence, infrastructure dependency or institutional neglect, are translated into a narrative of unavoidable decline. Digital loss is no longer described as the result of specific social and technical choices, economic limits, or failures of governance, but as an inherent and almost natural feature of digital culture itself. From this narrative, the fragility of digital memory is treated not as a condition that can be addressed, but as a

destiny that must be accepted. Therefore, by following Barthes' theory, the *Digital Dark Age* myth frames oblivion and loss as an inescapable "darkness".

Barthes' definition of myth as a "second-order semiological system" is particularly important for understanding how technical phenomena such as bit rot are used within broader cultural narratives of digital decline. In semiological terms, bit rot initially belongs to a first-order system, meaning that it denotes a measurable process of data degradation under specific technical conditions. However, this first-order sign is emptied of its technical specificity and refunctioned as a form through which a new concept is made. Bit rot no longer signifies a specific infrastructural issue that can be mitigated through migration or institutional maintenance, it becomes, instead, the signifier of an ideological meaning.

This mythological operation is reinforced by the repeated use of apocalyptic language. Phrases such as digital catastrophe, collapse of memory, or the end of archive, circulate widely across popular culture, journalism and academic discourse. This representation of a phenomenon does not simply describe it but dramatize and exaggerate it. This dramatization produces a vision of total rupture between present and future, on which entire generations of knowledge vanish without trace.

This process corresponds to what Barthes defines as the fundamental operation of the myth, and that is the transformation of meaning into form, or how he calls it "language-robbery". The *Digital Dark Age* adopts technical vocabularies, archival metaphors and critical discourse on obsolescence and data loss, not to clarify these phenomena, but to use them as empty signifiers that naturalize the idea of inevitable disappearance. Archive collapse and unreadable files no longer function as symptoms that need better infrastructure, they are instead presented as self-evident manifestations of digital ephemerality. In this way, according to Barthes, this language used by the myth transforms contingency into fate, turning the complexity of digital infrastructure into a simplified narrative of loss already inscribed in the very ontology of the digital medium. As Martin Paul Eve suggested, metaphors of digital textuality actively condition our understanding of what digital objects are and how they behave over time. Within the myth of the *Digital Dark Age*, such metaphors reinforce the perception of inevitable decay. (Eve, 2024)

Barthes' distinction between different ways of reading the myth helps clarify how the phenomenon of the *Digital Dark Age* operates ideologically. Those who produce the myth (journalists, science writers etc.) present digital loss as a concrete fact, while critical scholars may try to demystify it by pointing to its historical and political causes. It is in the eyes of the ordinary reader that the myth is the most effective. Here, the *Digital Dark Age* is not interpreted as a symbol or exposed as an alibi (meaning ideological construction) but felt as a general cultural atmosphere: a sense of fragility that makes digital memory appear unstable by nature. It is this dynamic that allows the myth to depoliticize the archive, transforming preservation from a matter of collective responsibility into a disastrous technological fate.

Within this framework, *Digital Dark Age* can be seen as a contemporary expression of what Eva Horn defines as the “catastrophic future”, that is a future already imagined as a condition of loss (Horn, 2018). Debates on digital preservation do not merely point to technical risks but they construct the image of an approaching historical void, in which large portions of cultural memory will become inaccessible or disappear. This loss is presented as irreversible, visible only after the fact, and therefore impossible to notice once it happens. As a result, the future of digital memory is imagined not as an open horizon, but as a closed one, shaped by failure.

This apocalyptic frame is closely related to the cultural logic of dystopia analysed by Fredric Jameson. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson described that the contemporary culture has largely lost the ability to imagine alternative futures, leading to the dominance of apocalyptic and dystopian narratives. Science fiction often dramatizes our inability to think about the future, transforming it into a series of apocalyptic variants. Rather than proposing a meaningful change, these narratives show the collapse of existing systems as almost inevitable (Jameson, 2005). From this perspective, the *Digital Dark Age* and the myth of loss functions as a dystopian narrative of the archive: it imagines not the transformation of archival practices, but their ultimate breakdown.

It is also important that we take into consideration James Bridle's work *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* as a key of the cultural logic that underlies the discourse of the *Digital Dark Age*. Read through a Barthesian lens, Bridle's work does not describe a purely technological condition, but a mythic one. He analyses a narrative that transforms historically produced systems of computational complexity into a naturalized horizon of ignorance, where opacity appears unavoidable and human agency is progressively neutralized.

Bridle does not describe a catastrophe located in the future; he instead argues that a form of darkness is already with us that emerges from an overabundance of data, not from its shortage. Algorithmic infrastructure, machine-learning models and networked technologies generate knowledge at speed and levels never seen before, while being presented as neutral and autonomous. This concept broadens the notion of digital loss beyond material decay or technical failure (Bridle, 2019).

Reading this perspective through Roland Barthes' theory of myth, this condition can be understood as a contemporary mythological construction. As mentioned before and according to Barthes, myth transforms historically produced phenomena into naturalized facts, erasing their contingency and presenting them as self-evident. In this sense, Bridle's "new dark age" works as a second-order semiological system: the complexity of digital systems become the signifier of a supposedly unavoidable state of ignorance. Algorithmic opacity is no longer understood as the result of political decision or economic interest, but as a natural feature of technological progress itself. Complexity is thus mythologized as destiny.

This narrative considers human agency neutralized where resignation is encouraged rather than critiqued. Bridle repeatedly shows how the discourse is focused on the fact that systems are believed "too complex to understand", failures are attributed to abstract computational processes, and responsibility dissolves into black boxes. This logic mirrors the mythic structure of the *Digital Dark Age*, in which the risk of loss is separated from the concrete practice of preservation or selection, and reframed as a consequence of digital modernity. The darkness Bridle describes is not the absence of data, but the collapse of intelligibility.

In this logic, *New Dark Age* extends and radicalizes the mythology of digital loss. The previous chapter emphasized the material fragility of storage media or the obsolescence of formats, here Bridle identifies a more insidious form of disappearance. According to him, information may persist yet remain inaccessible due to its opacity. The archive becomes unreadable, but it does not vanish. This produces a paradox where abundance and loss coexist. The promise of digital preservation is turned into a narrative of failure, in which systems designed to expand knowledge instead contribute to its erosion.

In this light *Digital Dark Age* emerges less as a technical breakdown, but as a cultural narrative that transforms the limits of contemporary technological systems into an unquestionable horizon, shaping how memory and archives itself are imagined.

The interpretation of *Digital Dark Age* as a contemporary myth requires not only an analysis of its ideological function, as noticed with Roland Barthes, but also an examination of the linguistic mechanisms through which the myth is articulated and perpetrated. For this type of issue, the work of Martin Paul Eve provides an important theoretical framework in *Theses on the Metaphors of Digital – Textual History*. Eve's research focuses on the metaphors that structure digital textuality and digital history, affirming that our understanding of digital media is fundamentally shaped by the language used to describe it. Rather than treating metaphors as rhetoric options, Eve positions them as epistemological tools that actively construct the cultural imagination of digital.

Eve's work demonstrates that the digital is framed through metaphors of immateriality, permanence, and unlimited accessibility. Expressions such as digital memory and digital archive, evoke a sense of stability and continuity, suggesting that the stored information exists independently of time, material or institution. These metaphors conceal the underlying infrastructures of the digital (servers, maintenance labour, energy) creating the illusion of an eternal memory system. As a result, digital storage is culturally intended not as a fragile process, but as a natural condition of permanence (Eve, 2024).

These metaphors play a decisive role in the emergence of *Digital Dark Age* as a myth. Following Barthes' definition of myth as a second-order semiological system, Eve's analysis clarifies how this transformation occurs at the linguistic level. When metaphors promise timeless access and perfect preservation, any type of digital loss appears as a

catastrophic and apocalyptic rupture. The failure of digital loss is then interpreted through apocalyptic imagery rather than infrastructural and logic analysis.

*Digital Dark Age* rises from the collapse of the metaphors that support its cultural legitimacy, that shape the expectations about the digital future and the archives. When these metaphors fail, the result is cultural anxiety. The language used to describe this catastrophe (digital ruins, memory collapse) emerges at this point of rupture, functioning as a mythical response to the collapse of technological promise.

After this analysis, the *Digital Dark Age* can be understood as a contemporary cultural myth, and not only as a technical or predictive scenario. Following Barthes theory, this mythological investigation performs a double operation. On one hand, it amplifies collective anxieties surrounding the future and cultural preservation, appropriating apocalyptic metaphors that “romanticize” technological failure and portray it as culturally legible. On the other hand, by presenting digital loss as a destiny rather than a process, the myth skips the selective and power-laden mechanisms that governs archival practices. Following this mentality, the myth of the *Digital Dark Age* does not simply describe loss, but it organizes how loss is imagined, feared, and presented within contemporary culture. The myth also presents forgetting as a disaster and highlights a key tension in modern archiving. However, that tension represented by the desire to preserve everything clashes with the fact that total preservation is impossible. Anxiety about digital loss therefore points to a more profound crisis, about how we understand memory and value in the digital age, other than a technological one.

The next section will challenge the drive to archive everything and opens the door to alternative ways of remembering by moving from the myth to critique. By examining the digital oblivion as a space for counter-memory, there will be a chance to analyse new ways of understanding what it means to remember in the digital age.

## 2.2 DIGITAL OBLIVION AS ALTERNATIVE MEMORY AND COUNTER-MEMORY

When taking into consideration what the *Digital Dark Age* and the digital loss mean in our contemporary age, the only perspective of the myth is not enough. Such narrative risks repeating the same logic it tries to criticize, and that is the belief that memory must be immune to loss and always continuous. Against this logic, digital loss can be reinterpreted not only as a deficit, but also as a dimension of memory itself, a dimension that opens space of alternative forms of remembrance.

It is Derrida himself who claims that the archive is not a neutral accumulator of traces but presents itself as a selective process of inclusion and exclusion that determines what is preserved and what is allowed to disappear. In this sense, the oblivion is not simply the opposite of memory, but one of its conditions (Derrida, 1995).

Paul Connerton's work is essential at this stage because it directly challenges the assumption that memory is primarily a matter of storage. Much of the discussion surrounding the *Digital Dark Age* rests on an archival model of memory, according to which remembering coincides with the preservation and retrieval of recorded traces. From this perspective, loss is almost exclusively defined in technical terms.

In *How Societies Remember* (1989), Connerton interrupts this idea by demonstrating that social memory is not exhausted by what can be archived. Against the idea that memory is in documents, objects, media, he argues that a substantial portion of what societies remember is embodied and transmitted through social practices that leave little or no permanent trace. The author makes a distinction between inscriptive and incorporative memory. Inscriptive memory refers to forms of remembrance fixed in material supports,

such as images, texts, archives, monuments, and is associated with institutions, historiography and bureaucratic systems of knowledge. Incorporative memory, by contrast, is in the body and is expressed through gestures, habits, rituals and repeated actions. It is learned not by consulting records, but through participation and repetition. This theory is significantly important for how memory is conceptualized in the digital age. Digital technologies, by default, prefer inscriptive memory by promising unlimited storage, instant access and encouraging the idea that remembering is synonymous with saving data and ensuring long-term availability. What cannot be recorded tends to be lost. Connerton's theory exposes the limits of this logic by showing that memory does not coincide with what can be archived, and that some form of memory resist inscription. Therefore, social memory is not simply accumulated but performed.

This analysis allows for a critical examination of the cultural anxieties surrounding digital preservation. The discussion surrounding digital preservation until now was about losing data, but Connerton inverts the perspective. If memory has always depended on embodied and performative transmission, then loss cannot be measured only in terms of missing data. The question is not if information survives, but which forms of memory are recognized as legitimate. Modern societies tend to privilege inscriptive memory because it aligns with administrative control and classification. On the other hand, incorporative memory is difficult to regulate, making it sometimes invisible to official systems of preservation (Connerton, 1989).

Applied to digital archives, this argument reveals a structural bias. Digital systems are designed to store and process information, but they struggle to account for forms of memory that are ephemeral, affective or embodied. This type of memory risks exclusion not because is insignificant, but because it is incompatible with the logic of storage. Following this structure, digital oblivion does not necessarily represent failure, but instead it reflects the persistence of memory forms that operate outside archival expectations.

Connerton's work also reflects the assumption that more archiving automatically produces better memory. Memory is inherently selective, and forgetting is not the opposite but one of the conditions. When digital memory promotes the idea of total preservation, it risks reducing memory to data and erasing the embodied dimension. In

this sense, the author opens a space for rethinking loss and exclusion in the digital archive, opening the discussion of alternative memory practices and counter-memory.

Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) offers a similar perspective that helps clarify the role of forgetting. The author argues that forgetting should not be understood only as a failure of memory, but as an intrinsic component of it (Ricoeur, 2004). Memory, for Ricoeur, is never total, but it is always selective, incomplete, and structured through processes of omission. This position allows forgetting to be framed not only as loss, but also as a condition that makes memory possible in the first place.

His distinction between pathological forgetting and productive forgetting is relevant in the context of digital culture. Pathological forgetting refers to forms of erasure that prevent meaning, continuity and responsibility (such as repression or state-imposed amnesia), while productive forgetting enables ethical distance necessary for selection and transmission of the past. Considering this, the anxiety around digital loss can be seen not simply as the disappearance of information, but it undergoes a “silent erasure” outside of human control. Ricoeur’s concept of “reserve memory” offers a counterpoint to this fear, saying that the archive should function as a site of latency, where traces are preserved not for total recall, but to be potentially reawakened by future narratives.

This idea is even more evident when digital memory is contrasted with material forms of remembrance. Carolyn Steedman’s *Dust* (2001) challenges the idea of the archive as a rational system. Steedman suggests that it is impossible of things to truly disappear; for example, when a document is destroyed, its physical residue remains as a trace of human labour and mortality. Digital archives, however, hide their material conditions (servers, energy consumption) perpetuating the illusion of immaterial permanence. When digital objects fail, the loss feels immense, unlike the analogue archive, it leaves no “dust”, no tangible remains to anchor the memory to its physical experience (Steedman, 2002).

All these theories move the discussion beyond technical failure. Forgetting emerges as a process shaped by embodiment and materiality. This perspective allows the notion of “counter-memory” to function as a form of resistance. Following Domietta Torlasco’s concept of “heretical archive”, digital loss is not just absence, but an opportunity to

rearticulate the archive's political and perceptual textures. Forgetting becomes an active cultural movement that shifts from total preservation to the creative negotiation with what remains (Torlasco, 2013).

After discussing different forms of memory that go beyond traditional archival logic, it becomes necessary to introduce the concept of counter-memory in order to frame these practices within a broader philosophical perspective.

While authors such as Connerton, Ricouer and Steedman highlight how memory operates outside institutional archives through embodied memory, the role of forgetting, and residual traces, Michel Foucault provides a conceptual tool to understand how digital loss can acquire critical meaning within the contest of *Digital Dark Age*.

Foucault introduces the notion of counter-memory as a way of opposing the idea of memory as a neutral, cumulative, and continuous record of the past in his work *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (1977). Rather than perceiving memory as a faithful reconstruction of historical events, counter-memory emphasises fragmentation and rupture. The author describes a form of resistance against “regimes of truth”, where memory is something that emerges through conflict, exclusion and forgetting.

For the author, counter-memory is both a political act and a philosophical challenge to how memory itself is imagined. In this context of digital media, counter-memory allows us to reinterpret loss as a condition that exposes the limits of archival control. The author introduces counter-memory as a way of opposing dominant regimes of remembrance that present memory as cumulative and continuous. This phenomenon does not seek to reconstruct the past as a whole coherent event, nor to guarantee its permanence. In this light, it highlights discontinuity, rupture and not continuous historical events. For Foucault, memory is something that emerges through conflict, exclusion and forgetting (Foucault, 1977).

This perspective is helpful to understand the mechanisms of the *Digital Dark Age*, where the anxiety starts from the fear that digital information may disappear before it can be archived or transmitted to the future. The response and solution to this emergency have often been an intensified drive toward total preservation, that translates into more storage

and backups. However, counter-memory challenges the idea that the solution lies in expanding archival capacity.

Taking this into consideration in the context of digital media, counter-memory allows us to reinterpret loss as a condition that exposes the limits of archival control, and not as a technical failure. The promise of an eternal archive that preserves everything forever operate through infrastructures that are by nature unstable and prone to obsolescence. Therefore, the *Digital Dark Age* reveals a condition that is present at the very core of digital memory, and that is the impossibility of preserving everything the more we try to. Through this theory, we can say that counter-memory does not deny the reality of digital loss but reframes it. The author invites us to reflect on what kind of memories are produced by archival systems and what kind are systematically excluded. This shift moves the discussion away from the idea of memory as accumulation and toward memory as a selective, situated, and contingent process.

Here, counter-memory can be connected to Connerton's argument that memory is not primarily archival but performative and embodied, as well as Steedman's focus on dust and traces that escape institutional ordering. Foucault takes a step further and provides a conceptual language for understanding how such exclusions are not accidental but structural. What is forgotten, or inaccessible, in digital archives is not simply lost, but is made forgettable by specific technological or cultural frameworks.

Counter-memory counts for the *Digital Dark Age* as a critical tool that refuses the desire of a total archive. It exposes how digital preservation strategies often replicate older archival logics of control, hierarchy even when they claim to overcome material limits. By doing so, counter-memory is an alternative operation that engages with an incomplete and fragmented digital memory where loss is intrinsic rather than pathologic.

Considering this theory, counter-memory prepares the ground for understanding digital oblivion not only as a risk, but as an opportunity for criticism, where new forms of remembering the past can emerge.

The discussion of digital oblivion as an alternative way of memory and counter-memory allows for an important shift in how the *Digital Dark Age* is perceived. Instead of seeing the digital loss only as a technical problem or as a cultural fear that must be solved through

better preservation, this section showed that forgetting, absence and fragmentation can help us question dominant ideas of memory. From this perspective, the instability of digital memory both threatens the archive and exposes its limits.

Counter-memory highlights what the archive cannot fully capture, such as exclusion or uneven forms of remembrance. This is especially clear in discussions about the *Digital Dark Age*. The promise of preserving everything digitally conflicts with systems that are selective by nature and shaped by technology or institutions. Therefore, what is lost is not only the result of obsolescence or technological decay, but also of structural choices about what is worth remembering and how it should be preserved.

At this point of the discourse, it is easy to assume that digital oblivion can no longer be understood as a neutral or accidental phenomenon. The failure of the archive emerges as meaningful condition that exposes the power relations present in the archival systems. The *Digital Dark Age* is therefore a signal that brings attention to a deeper tension between memory and authority, visibility and exclusion and preservation and control, other than being a storage and durability crisis.

After this realization it is natural to move from *what* is forgotten in digital systems, to *how* and *why* forgetting is normalized or justified. The following section will analyse the archive as a site of power, desire and violence, where selection is active and failure is normal.

## 2.3 THE FAILURE OF THE ARCHIVE AS A POLITICAL AND ETHICAL CONSTRUCTION

Addressing digital loss only in terms of technical fragility or cultural anxiety is not enough. While previously I demonstrated how the *Digital Dark Age* operates as a cultural myth and how oblivion can function as an alternative form of memory, these perspectives remain incomplete if the archive is still considered to be neutral or passive structures. In reality, the archive is a system based on decisions, hierarchies and exclusions; therefore, its failures must be analysed as political and ethical topics.

The disappearance of data or data inaccessibility are influenced by other factors. They are produced inside institutional, economic and ideological frameworks that determine what is preserved and what is allowed to disappear. Digital loss, as a result, exposes acts of selection and omission, not only as a fragile space.

Understanding this type of failure requires the issue to be recognized as a structural condition of archival systems. Every archive, digital or in any other form, is founded on acts of exclusion. However, in the digital context, where promises of total memory and universal access are particularly strong, these exclusions become even more problematic. This gap between the desire of preservation and the reality of loss raises ethical questions about responsibility and authority.

This section therefore will approach the failure of the archive and cultural anxiety as a site of tension between memory and power. The archive emerges as a contested space, where technical infrastructures intersect with political choices and ethical consequences. By analysing the issue, the failure of the archive won't be considered as an anomaly to be corrected, but as a basic element of how memory is produced and controlled in the digital age.

Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995) offers an important theoretical framework for understanding why archival failure should be interpreted as a structural and ethical condition of the archive itself. Derrida does not consider the archive as a neutral container, but as a dynamic system governed by desire, authority and exclusion. But before diving in and analyse its work in relation to the *Digital Dark Age*, it is important to explain what the archive represents for Derrida.

*Arkhé*, the name of the archive, refers both commencing and commanding, that is the necessity of beginning and the inevitability of commanding.

For Derrida, the archive emerges at the crossing of place and law, where *archons*, senior magistrates were in charge with both safeguarding documents and interpreting them, establishing a proper residence or domicile. As he explained, "The meaning of 'archive', its only meaning comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*" which was initially a house, a residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded (Derrida, 1995, 20). As a result, the documents "speak the truth" only when entrusted to proper guardians and preserved in a designated location. Therefore, the archive was not originally a repository of documents, but it was the house of the magistrates who held political and legal authority. Because the documents were kept in their residence, under guardianship, archive's authority was inseparable from 'place' and 'power'.

Additionally, the author highlights that all archives "have to do with *topo-nomology*, with this archontic dimension of domiciliation, with this archic, in truth patriarchic function, without which no archive would ever come into play or appear as such." (Derrida, 1995, 8). The term *topo-nomology* emphasises that the archive depends on 'topos' (a place, site) and 'nomos' (law, authority). The archive is therefore both 'archontic' governed by those who hold power, and 'archic/patriarchic' tied to structure of lineage, inheritance and domestic order.

"Consignation" is another term used to refer to the process by which the archive gathers disparate materials, organizes them into a system and produces coherence, visibility and legibility. But this ordering is not innocent, it involves exclusion, containment and control.

Because the archive is where family law, state law, system of inheritance and norms of legitimacy intersect, it becomes a mechanism through which societies regulate what counts as knowledge, memory, identity, and truth. The archive is therefore not simply a repository but a technology of normativity.

Derrida frames the archive as structurally violent. Through consignment, the archive imposes a system that stabilizes meaning and authorizes only certain forms of knowledge to circulate. This violence is not physical but symbolic and epistemic, meaning that the archive domesticates memory under the authority of law, lineage and institutional power. By determining what counts as truth and who may interpret or access materials, the archive functions as a normative apparatus that reproduces patriarchal and juridical structures, hence Derrida's characterization of it as *patriarchive* (Derrida, 1995, 26-27).

Another key concept introduced by Derrida is the notion of *archive fever*. Basing this theory of Freud's death drive, he argues that the impulse to preserve and secure traces of the past is inseparable from a counter-drive toward erasure and destruction. The archive is never a stable repository but a site where the compulsion to remember is shadowed by an equally powerful tendency to forget.

This paradox is particularly relevant in the context of digital archives. As mentioned before, digital technologies promise a solution to the problem of loss through unlimited storage and permanent access. The drive toward total preservation produces even more complex system of control, which increases the risk of obsolescence. Derrida argued that every new archival technology amplifies the archive's internal contradiction of preservation and loss. The *Digital Dark Age* can thus be interpreted as an extreme manifestation of its internal contradictions.

Derrida also destabilizes the idea of archival completeness. The archive is never a total representation of the past, but always incomplete and oriented toward the future. The preservation act enables certain forms of interpretation and authority which produces the conditions of future knowledge. In this sense, the archive is less of a repository where the past is stored, but a system that shapes what can be understood and remembered in the future. Loss, therefore, is not something outside the archive that endangers it, but a condition through which the archive exercises its power.

Within this perspective, digital loss acquires a new meaning. The obsolescence that characterises digital objects, files and platforms reveal the underlying logic through which digital archives are constructed. Decisions about software standards, formats, institutional and economic decisions determine which data survives and which does not. These decisions, while often frames as technical or administrative, reproduce the same archontic logic discussed by Derrida: they establish hierarchies of value and shape collective memory.

By positioning the archive as place of desire, authority and exclusion, *Archive Fever* presents a link between technical failure and ethical responsibility. Derrida's contribution allows archival failure to be understood as a political and ethical condition, embedded in the structures designed to store memory.

While Derrida emphasizes the archive as a site of desire and selection, Michel Foucault analyses the archive from a different but complementary point of view. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975) the archive is not just a place where memory is stores, but a system that regulates what can be said or known within a given historical moment. For Foucault the archive makes the discourse possible, meaning that it does not just keep statements, but actively shapes what can be said.

In *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault describes the archive as a system that governs the appearance of statements, that means the rules that determine what can be recorded, stored and recognised as important during a historical moment, and not as a repository of documents. By doing this, the archive puts the conditions of existence; if something is excluded from the archive it becomes invisible or irrelevant (Foucault, 1969).

This theory introduces a shift from Derrida's idea. While the latest highlights the violence inherent in selection, Foucault emphasizes how archival systems actively produce regimes of knowledge and truth. The archive in this case generates norms, it defines categories and creates meaning through which reality is interpreted.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault enforces the idea of how systems of classification and surveillance function as technologies of power. His work is mainly focused on prisons and bureaucratic institutions but not only, I think that some of its insights can be directly applied to archival systems. The Panopticon is the clearest example which produces a

field of visibility in which subjects are governable and observed. The constant observation generates records and classification that later transforms individuals into cases and profiles, also called archivable units. Visibility is never neutral for Foucault, because to be visible means to be subject to regulation, and visibility becomes a central mechanism of power. What is recorded can be judged and observed, and what is not risks disappearing.

From this perspective, the archive operates as a regime of visibility. It determines which subject or data is made visible and which remain absent. Preservation is not total, but is actively shaped by what is considered relevant, valuable or worthy of preservation. In this case, this process inevitably produces exclusion risking of leaving outside the system certain forms of knowledge not because they lack importance, but because they do not fit existing categories or standards (Foucault, 1975).

Foucault's theory offers a new perspective on digital archives which are often imagined as tools of total transparency capable of recording everything. However, digital systems are structured by algorithms and platform policies that govern what is stored and rendered visible. These mechanisms operate as contemporary archival regimes that shape digital memory before any technical failure.

Therefore, digital loss should not be considered only as a consequence of technological fragility. Digital oblivion can be the result of archival systems that privileged some forms of data over other, or certain narratives. What disappears is often what those dominant systems never fully integrated or made visible, such as non-standard formats or marginal platforms. The *Digital Dark Age* emerges both from preservation issues and the normal functioning of archival power.

Compared to Derrida, Foucault has less of an anxiety centred perspective on the archive, instead he focuses on its role as a structural condition of knowledge. Both these perspectives allow the *Digital Dark Age* to be understood as a political and epistemological phenomenon. Archival failure is a condition that reveals how power operates through memory, and digital loss is more than lost data.

This understanding opens a crucial question: if loss and exclusion are structural features of the archive, how can they be made visible, questioned or reinterpreted? In order to consider this question, it is important to address the artistic practices that became relevant.

Considering this scenario, the following chapter will explore how artistic practices-à respond to the phenomenon outlined so far.

### 3 ARCHIVAL CRISIS: FROM ANOMIC ART TO INSTITUTIONAL RUPTURE

After the reflections developed in the previous chapters, it has been demonstrated that the *Digital Dark Age* cannot be understood only from a technical perspective related to data loss, obsolescence or preservation failure. Different authors came into help to reveal the broader cultural condition in which digital memory is experienced as vulnerable and unstable. If the archive has been revealed as a site of anxiety, selection and power, it becomes necessary to ask how these dynamics are perceived and critically elaborated in our contemporary culture. If the *Digital Dark Age* exposes the limits of technological solutions to memory, it also raises a fundamental question, and that is where can this fragility be observed and critically questioned beyond institutional and technical narratives?

This chapter will address that question by analysing three case studies as a space in which digital loss, archival failure and oblivion are not only represented but actively engaged.

Artistic practices have repeatedly questioned the archive's failures and contradictions, rather than solving the problem of digital preservation. On the other side, art does not function under the same rules as archives, libraries or technological infrastructure. Artistic practices do not require to guarantee durability or accessibility. For this reason, it can engage with what institutional systems tend to marginalize or ignore, such as uncertainty, excess or loss. In doing so, art offers a critical lens through which the *Digital Dark Age* can be examined as a condition to contemporary memory culture.

The relationship between art and archive does not begin with the digital age. Even before the digital turn, artists had already interrogated the logic of classification and

accumulation and the different reasons of the archival systems. Throughout the twentieth century, different artistic practices adopted archival forms to expose its instability through collections, atlases, series or databases. These works anticipated many issues and tensions that later became central to digital culture, some of the examples were mentioned before, and that is the impossibility of exhaustive documentation and information loss. From this point of view, the *Digital Dark Age* does not represent a radical rupture, but rather it exposes the pre-existing archival anxieties.

Art occupies a unique position in relation to the *Digital Dark Age*. If we consider that institutional preservation strategies try to stabilize and recover digital information, on the other hand, artistic practices often engage with loss as inevitable and meaningful condition. Rather than attempting to repair the archive or restore missing data, artists frequently work with absence, fragmentation and overload, taking all the critical issues, we analysed before and transforming them into critical tools. In this sense, art does not function as a solution to digital fragility, but as medium which makes visible the cultural and symbolic dimension of digital oblivion.

Contemporary art has increasingly addressed the tension between accumulation and disappearance, memory and loss especially in the context of digital culture. Artistic practices respond to this condition by exposing the paradoxes of digital storage where the promise of infinite storage clashes with the risk of sudden loss. By foregrounding these conditions, art becomes a space in which the myths and anxieties surrounding digital memory can be critically examined.

This chapter will adopt a case-based approach, focusing on a limited number of examples. Rather than offering a survey of digital art or archival practices, I will concentrate on specific moments in which the archive (whether artistic or institutional) reveals its limitations. Three study cases will be treated as representative of different dimensions of digital loss: the pre-digital crisis of total memory, the concrete failure of digital preservation, and the subsequent emergence of artistic practices. This analysis will breakdown how the archive can become a productive space for rethinking the relationship between memory, technology and culture.

The following study cases are Gerhard Richter's archival logic, the *BBC Domesday Project*, and the *Rosetta Disk* which all form three different responses to the tension between technological mediation, memory and loss. They are not isolated examples, but specific manifestations of broader tendencies that have shaped the contemporary understanding of the archive. These cases operate within a broader artistic milieu marked by the rise of database aesthetics, media archaeology and post digital reflections on preservation and obsolescence. What connects these case studies is the way each stages the archive as a response to vulnerability, whether through aesthetic fragmentation, technological ambition or material inscription, all three reveal how archival practices are shaped by imaginaries of totality and permanence. In this sense, the chapter will try to present three perspectives on how contemporary culture treats the limits of digital memory. It is important to mention that the case studies examined in this chapter will not try to reconstruct a lost digital past or to restore the integrity of damaged archives. Instead, the focus is within the space of missing and inaccessible. By analysing these case studies, this chapter tries to respond the same underlying question, and that is how do institutional projects and symbolic gestures react to the perception of digital loss.

### **3.1 THE ARCHIVE BEFORE THE DIGITAL TURN – ART AND THE CRISIS OF TOTAL MEMORY**

Before analysing how artistic practices interrogate the archive, it is necessary to recall the conceptual foundations upon which the modern idea of the archive has been historically built. The archive has long functioned as an epistemic device through which knowledge is ordered and made intelligible. Within modernity, the archive emerges as an institutional and symbolic structure that has a specific idea at its basis, and that is of completeness, classification and control, in other words an apparatus designed to arrest contingency and transform the flux of historical events into a legible form.

The modern archive is inseparable from the Enlightenment project of organizing the world through reason. One of its fundamental ideas is that total knowledge is possible through classification systems, inventories and taxonomies. To archive, in this sense, means to render the world readable by placing it within stable categories and hierarchical structures.

This vision has historically labelled the archive with a specific authority. By assembling documents, images, or records, the archive obtained the position of guarantor of truth and continuity. What is archived in this sense receives legitimacy and becomes part of an authorized narrative of the past. This process organises what counts as knowledge and what remains outside of it. Within this framework, the archive also operates as an instrument of control in which it gains the power to order information through selection, and exclusion. The modern archive promises to freeze historical traces, suspend decays and offer the illusion that the past can be safely guarded against loss. Its authority rests on the belief that accumulation leads to understanding and that the expansion of archival holdings corresponds to an expansion of knowledge (Derrida, 1995).

The archive is imagined as a space where nothing essential is missing, and where gaps are anomalies rather than structural conditions. Issues as fragmentation and disorder are perceived as problems to be solved through better system of classification and storage. By this logic, the archive promises and aspires to coherence and transparency, to access and a stable record.

It is this process that makes the archive such a powerful cultural construct. The archive does not merely store information, but it produces a worldview in which knowledge appears cumulative and finite. Loss is framed as failure and not as an intrinsic condition of memory, and absence is treated as a temporary deficit to be corrected through further accumulation.

This analysis of the archive provided a necessary point of contrast for understanding the critical interventions that emerge within artistic practices. The artworks and artistic practices in this chapter will not simply adopt archival forms but they will actively engage with and challenge the assumptions of a modern archive by confronting ideals of completeness, order and legibility and exposing the limits and contradictions embedded in the archive itself.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the idea of an eternal archive began to show visible signs of strain. While the logic of accumulation remains the same (image proliferations, documents multiplying) the relationship between quantity and meaning becomes increasingly unstable. Instead of producing coherence, the growing mass of archival material starts to exceed the very cognitive and perceptual frameworks designed to contain it, in conclusion, accumulation no longer guarantees synthesis. This shift is particularly important because it produces a shift within the archival imagination where the archive does not collapse, nor it loses its institutional authority, but it creates a state of tension. The huge number of materials stored destabilizes the archive's traditional function as a space of legibility and order, creating a condition in which knowledge is difficult to connect or interpret. The result of this phenomenon is that the archive starts to offer a fragmented and discontinued vision of the world where accumulation resists the narrative of closure. The structure of the archive remains identical, but the internal logic becomes opaque in the sense that meaning no longer arises from the orderly progression of classification, instead it is separated across disconnected elements whose relationships

are no longer self-evident. This phenomenon of overly accumulating documentation and images is the result of the assumption that more data leads to better understanding. On the contrary, the archive becomes saturated to the point where the contents can no longer be fully processed. And selection turns into a necessity imposed by overload.

Visual culture is one of the principal reasons this happened; the twentieth century witnessed an unmatched expansion of photographic and visual records, which altered the nature of archival accumulation. With the accessibility of new technologies, images multiply faster than they can be classified and archived faster than they can be interpreted. This will result in a field of visual density rather than an ordered transparent system where discontinuity becomes the dominant mode through which materials relate to one another. Instead of ordered synthesis, the archive produces unstable and often contradictory constellations (Spieker, 2008).

It is important to mention that this condition does not yet translate itself as a technological failure, not does it explicitly invoke digital conditions. This disorder emerges within analogue systems and modern artistic practices, revealing that the problem presented itself before the advent of computational media. The main issue is not the medium itself yet, but the growing gap between accumulation and interpretation, between storage and sense-making. In this context, therefore, the archive becomes a site of gathering where everything is stored but not sorted or resolved.

This early crisis prepares the ground for artistic practices that do not seek to restore order or to impose synthesis, but instead they work within accumulation itself by exposing fragmentation and transforming the excess into a method rather than a problem.

### 3.1.1 GERHARD RICHTER'S *ATLAS*: THE ANOMIC ARCHIVE

Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* is considered one of the most significant artistic engagements with archival form in the late twentieth century art. After moving from East to West Germany in 1961, Richter began assembling his image archive. It was only in the early years of the following decade that he started working on the *Atlas der Fotos, Collagen und Skizzen*, arranging on rigid panels not only his own photographs or family images, but also images taken from magazines, newspapers and encyclopaedia clippings, freehand sketches, collages, print proofs, and many other visual materials gathered over the years with consistency. By continuously expanding his collections, Richter transformed it into an open-ended project, a living and evolving body of work that remains subject to change and which grows in parallel with his artistic research (Baldacci, 2004).

At the present, the *Atlas* consists of 809 panels. The collection brings together images of widely varying origins and types, arranged with care so that each panel can be taken in at a glance. They are attached on white cardboard sheets of standard size, following rectangular grid layout, a method often used in archival systems to impose order and preserve overall clarity. The number of panels is not uniform, some of them hold as many as forty-four images, and other display only a single one, though many panels include approximately between four and ten elements. In its early stages, the collection focused on black and white photographs, however from the late 1970s Richter started favouring colour images. *Atlas* operates as a cumulative visual repository that accompanies Richter's pictorial practice while simultaneously exceeding it. Its form resists from closure, hierarchy, making the project a paradigmatic example of what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has defined as an "anomic archive" (Buchloh, 1999).

Unlike institutional archives, which are structured around principles of classification and order, Richter's *Atlas* deliberately opposes these logics. Images are grouped loosely,

sometimes according to thematic or visual affinities, yet without a stable taxonomy or explanatory framework. There are no hierarchies on the images, which are often ordinary, even deliberately non-artistic, nor does he arrange them according to levels of importance. To bring order to such a huge body of material, he follows two main principles: he groups the images by subject, creating thematic clusters, and by formal characteristics, placing on each panel elements of similar size. As a result, private photographs appear alongside mass-media imagery, harsh documentation of Nazi concentration camps is positioned next to pornographic scenes, natural landscapes with turbulent seas or overcast skies, still life, and so on. (Baldacci, 2004). This creates a field where private memory and collective history collapse into one another.

Although *Atlas* presents a formally strict coherent structure, its content is anything but uniform. The material presented is unpredictable, making it impossible to identify a single theme or unifying concept. The earliest panels contain only personal photographs taken from family albums, and it is from panel number 5 onward that Richter begins to incorporate different materials. It is important to note that Richter excluded artistic photography from his collection, relying almost exclusively on amateur and anonymous images. His negative view of photographs and their dominant style produced a negative feeling for artificial or retouched images. In contrast he values amateur and only certain professional images just because they lack subjective imprint and maintain a naïve quality (Baldacci, 2004).

*Atlas* also represents a repository of remarkable artistic and archival value, one that applies influence on Richter's practice. Indeed, his collection served as a substrate for his pictorial projects, it is essential for understanding how photography and painting interact in his work, working as a source for many of his *Fotobilder* (term used to refer to the photographic paintings Richter began producing after his move to West Germany).

Historically, *Atlas* emerges in a postwar European context marked by profound crisis of representation and memory. In the aftermath of National Socialism and the Holocaust, the possibility of constructing a unified historical narrative was deeply compromised. Richter's early career unfolds within this landscape of epistemic uncertainty, where images are no longer transparent carriers of truth, but unstable fragments shaped by ideology and trauma (Rosso, 2020). *Atlas* reflects, therefore, this condition by assembling

images without attempting to reconcile them into a coherent historical form, he does not aim to preserve memory but to expose its fractures.

In order to understand better this logic, Buchloh's reading of *Atlas* is crucial. He argues that Richter's archive is "anomic" meaning that it systematically refuses every principle that governs archival systems (Buchloh, 1999). Anomie does not simply stand for chaos in a negative sense, but in this case, it indicates the suspension of authoritative structure of meaning. *Atlas* confronts the viewer with an excess of visual material that cannot be easily absorbed or decoded, it is what Buchloh calls "archival aesthetic" (Buchloh, 1999). Importantly, *Atlas* also destabilizes the relationship between visibility and meaning. By placing images side by side without commentary, Richter denies the viewer the comfort of narrative continuity. Historical atrocities or intimate moments are presented on the same visual plane, without moral or interpretative hierarchy. This characteristic does not neutralize their content, rather, it exposes the difficulty of assigning stable meaning within an image-saturated culture. The archive becomes a space where interpretation fails.

In this sense, *Atlas* exemplifies what Hal Foster later conceptualized as the "archival impulse" in contemporary art which signals a shift in how artists engage with history, memory, and the production of knowledge (Foster, 2004). The archival impulse does not coincide with traditional archive functions such as preservation and historical stabilization. On the contrary, artists choose to work with fragments, leftovers and marginal materials, from documents to photographs. These elements are not assembled with the aim of creating an ordered past, but to expose the discontinuities and fractures that build historical memory. The archive becomes a space of investigation where meanings are open to challenge, not just a place where information is fixed.

In this sense, by applying Foster's theory to Richter's *Atlas*, we can say that Richter does not try to recover marginalized histories, instead, he stages the failure of archival logic itself. *Atlas* shows that accumulation does not necessarily produce meaning and understanding, resulting in generating opacity rather than clarity.

To understand better this perspective, it is useful to situate *Atlas* within what Lev Manovich has described as "database logic" of contemporary culture. In *The Language of New Media* (2002), Manovich argues that the database has become one of the dominant

symbolic forms of the digital age, replacing narrative as the primary structure through which information is organized or experienced. Unlike a narrative way which arranges elements into a linear sequence managed by coherence, the database presents items as a collection without hierarchy. Although *Atlas* comes before the presence of digital databases, its structure anticipates many of the cultural effects that Manovich identified. Richter's panels represent accumulation through juxtaposed images; they are the contrary of a narrative structure. The grid becomes a visual interface in which heterogeneous materials coexist without being forced to a single interpretative framework. In this sense, *Atlas* can be read as a pre-digital manifestation of database logic, in which a system is organized around storage and selection, and where spatial arrangement is more important than narrative progression.

From this perspective, *Atlas* exposes a transformation in the logic of cultural memory where the archive is no longer considered a stable repository governed by taxonomy, but a place of data whose meaning depends on contingent acts of selection and interpretation. This aspect can be interesting when viewed from the perspective of the digital age where the exponential growth of data overwhelms interpretative capacities.

By foregrounding fragmentation, excess and non-synthesis, *Atlas* reveals a tension at the heart of the archival form, one that will be fully visible through digital technologies. The work demonstrates that the crisis of the archive is not only technical but also cultural and epistemic. Before digital obsolescence and data loss, *Atlas* already exposed the limits of the archive as a repository of memory and historical continuity. Within this framework, Richter's work functions as a pre-digital case study that highlights the conditions under which the *Digital Dark Age* later emerges. Through the accumulation of heterogeneous and non-hierarchical images, *Atlas* presents reality as a confused collection of traces rather than as a unified narrative. Meaning does not emerge from synthesis, but from the tension between fragments that resist integration.

This study case exemplifies how digital and pre-digital anxieties about memory can be transformed into a cultural myth, where fragility and incompleteness become narrative strategies rather than failures. The work is the opposite of cumulative and ideological memory by enacting forms of embodied counter-memory. Here, the viewer must actively

perform connections between images, history, and traumas, creating meaning through physical and cognitive action. Based on Connerton's theory of incorporative memory, *Atlas* shift the focus from preservation of data to recognition of legitimate forms of memory, a form of memory that is transmitted and culturally enacted. The fragmented panels make tangible forms of memory that evade official systems, transforming incompleteness into a productive space of reflection. Foucault's notion of counter-memory resonates here by representing a space where alternative histories can exist against the totalizing narratives of power.

*Atlas* can be considered a work of myth because it transforms archival fragility and incompleteness into a narrative space where memory is performed and culturally enacted, other than merely preserved, turning absence and fragmentation into ethically and symbolically generative forces. The archival form is no longer mobilized in the service of preservation, order, or completeness, but is instead used as a critical device that puts these very ideals into crisis.

### **3.2 WHEN THE ARCHIVE FAILS: THE *BBC DOMESDAY PROJECT* AND DIGITAL OBSOLESCENCE**

The *BBC Domesday Project* was launched in 1989 to commemorate the nine-hundredth anniversary of the Domesday Book, a medieval survey commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1086.

Although the *BBC Domesday Project* does not belong to the most recent phase of digital culture, I decided to include and discuss it based on a methodological reason. The *Digital Dark Age* is often discussed as a contemporary and future-oriented phenomenon, associated with current platforms (often social networks), storage infrastructures and large-scale data regimes. However, the project represents one of the earliest moments in which digital media was entrusted with a fundamental archival role on a national scale, which later on revealed its structural fragility. Therefore, I consider the analysis of this project fundamental to understand the historical roots of the *Digital Dark Age* and also the present-day concerns about digital loss.

The original Domesday Book is regarded as one of the fundamental documents of English administrative history, a record of land ownership, resources and settlements across much of England.

Although the 1989 Domesday Project takes its name from the Norman Domesday Survey of 1086, the two initiatives are different in method and structure. The medieval Domesday Book was an official, top-down instrument of governance. By contrast, the 1989 project should not be considered the digitalization of the original manuscript, but a completely new, multimedia effort designed as a “people’s database”, built through public participation and intended as a public service. The connection is purely symbolic and

commemorative. With the help of BBC, the project released two video discs created to portray the state of Britain in 1986. The discs contain hundreds of thousands of on-screen pages featuring more than 40.000 photographs, over 22.000 maps, most official statistics on Britain, small-area Census data, and land-cover information collected by schools in a nationwide study. A wide range of software was included to allow data retrieval and display on various microcomputers (Goddard, 1989). For this reason, scholars often consider the 1989 *Domesday Project* as a precursor to contemporary digital archives, due to the fact that it experimented with user-driven data collection, multimodal storage, interactive retrieval, and the democratization of access; features that will become fundamental to digital heritage platforms and online archival systems.

The project was a large-scale, publicly funded initiative, the *BBC Domesday Project* aimed at creating a contemporary “snapshot” of the United Kingdom by collecting and organizing data about everyday life in the 1980s. Schools, local communities, and cultural institutions were invited to contribute with texts, photographs, maps, and statistical information describing their immediate environments. The project framed itself as educational and civic, aiming to democratize participation in the construction of a national memory. According to Peter Armstrong, the *BBC Domesday Project* is supposed to be like an “electronic exhibition”, he writes (Armstrong, 1989). This admission makes clear that the project is not a neutral or exhaustive repository of knowledge, but a curated expression of British life in the 80s. The editorial decision in this case is very strong, inevitably shaping the portrait produced. At the same time, the *BBC Domesday Project* cannot be considered an archive in the classical sense. Although the project is often compared to an archive because it gathers more than a million public contributions about life in the 1980s in Britain, it is very different from a traditional archive. A classic archive is a stable place where unaltered documents are kept for long-term preservation and can be accessed in a straightforward way. The *BBC Domesday Project*, instead, was an interactive multimedia “exhibition” which depended on custom hardware and special software to work. In this sense, it functioned more like an early hypermedia application than a traditional archival collection.

Despite the differences, I consider the project to be fitting in a thesis about the *Digital Dark Age*. By the early 2000s, the project had already become obsolete, due to the fact

that data could no longer be accessed without the right equipment. This is a clear example of weaknesses of digital media and of the cultural fear of losing information, where expectations of permanence give way to partial forgetting and efforts at recovery, such as the 2011 *Domesday Reload* emulation. As a publicly funded national initiative meant to echo the medieval Book, it shows how the idea of the archive has become fragile and depended on unstable systems, bridging theoretical limits with real-world failures. Although the project does not conform to the institutional definition of an archive, I will continue to refer to it as such because it performs archival functions, it organises, classifies, and presents materials as a structured representation of national memory. In this sense, “archive” is used here as a functional and cultural category rather than a strictly technical one.

The choice of digital media was an essential to the project’s life. By the mid-1980s, digital technologies were increasingly associated with efficiency, innovation and future oriented. The BBC adopted a format based on LaserDisc technology, accessed through BBC Microcomputers, allowing users to navigate information interactively rather than sequentially. Text, images and cartographic data could be explored non-linearly, offering an experience that contrasted the fixed structure of the medieval manuscript (Armstrong, 1986). The project, therefore, emphasized the capacity of the digital media to contain vast quantities of heterogeneous information while remaining intelligible and navigable. It was the embodiment of a strong confidence in the archive as a stabilizing structure, in fact, it was not created as an experiment or a provisional system, but as a definitive archive of its time. The assumption that digital media could easily carry content forward without change its status or meaning was very strong at that time.

In fact, digital technology was presented as the key that would overcome the material and logistical limits of traditional archival form, offering flexibility and openness. In this context, digitization was not understood as a technical choice among others, but as a cultural promise. Optical discs and computerized storage were considered stable repositories that could preserve information beyond the lifespan of paper, film or magnetic tape. Central was the idea of expanded access, in fact the project was meant to

be consulted by everybody, from specialists to private citizens. Users could navigate the archive non-linearly, to move between maps, images and audiovisual materials.

Beyond its commemorative intent, the *BBC Domesday Project* can also be seen as one of the earliest large-scale institutional examples of what Manovich described as database logic. In this sense, the project marks a historical moment in which the database responds to the promise of unifying accumulation and access, where vast quantities of heterogenous data could be stored without losing intelligibility. The project, therefore, represents the institutional response of the database aesthetic already visible in the previous case study, but now translated to a national level. The BBC used its authority and infrastructure to turn the laserdiscs into a “people’s Domesday Book”, promising interactivity. However, this setup revealed the fragility of database logic in practice. While Manovich praises modularity, Domesday relied on custom hardware and software, making it unreadable by 2002 and transforming accessibility into an archival relic.

The most critical consequence of the *BBC Domesday Project* emerges at the level of technological mediation. Within little more than a decade, the LaserDisc format, the proprietary software and the specific hardware required to access the project became obsolete, declaring the project largely unreadable. This form of loss is not the result of physical decay or accidental destruction, but structural incompatibility between rapidly evolving digital technologies and long-term cultural memory. Obsolescence operated silently, making data to continue existing yet inaccessible. In this sense the project anticipates the core anxiety of the *Digital Dark Age* by demonstrating that digital memory is not threatened only by neglect or catastrophe, but by the speed of technological progress. At the same time, the technical failure of the project has a deeper significance. This logic frames the project as an unfortunate yet avoidable mistake, where the outcome could have been prevented by a better preservation. While these factors are not insignificant, they are still not enough to explain way the project failed in way that was so sudden. The key through which to read this is an understanding of what means to archive culture through digital media.

At the base of this failure lies the implicit separation between content and technology; in fact, the project assumed that information could be extracted from its physical medium

and transferred across time independently of the specific infrastructures that made it readable. In doing so, they treated technology as a neutral and “transparent” container, like an invisible box that could be replaced without affecting the meaning or accessibility of the archived material. This assumption mirrors the fear of stability, a belief that digital technologies are not reliable anymore. Another reason is that the project failed to acknowledge the historicity of media, in a time where digital systems are considered timeless, and not historically situated, meaning that hardware, software and other components will age or disappear. By tying memory to a rapidly evolving technological ecosystem, the project inadvertently attached cultural preservation to the lifecycle of technical infrastructures. The archive thus became vulnerable not because it was neglected, but because it was designed under the illusion of technological permanence.

This is the reason why the project should be analysed as a failure of a cultural event rather than a technical accident. It exposes the consequences of considering the archive as a static repository instead of a historically contingent practice. Therefore, the case of the *BBC Domesday Project* reflects the theoretical framework developed in the previous chapters, considering that the archive is not a neutral container of memory, but a system shaped by power and selection. If the technological conditions are naturalized rather than critically engaged, the archive becomes blind to its own fragility, meaning that the technological conditions of the archive are taken for granted and therefore no longer perceived as historical, cultural or political choices.

From the perspective of media archaeology, as mentioned by Siegfried Zielinski, technological systems are never timeless carriers of information but historically situated strata subject to emergence and disappearance, also known as “deep time” (Zielinski, 2006). It shows how media history is not a straight line of progress, sometimes innovations can burst with creativity and then quickly become obsolete. For Zielinski, projects like this are “historical windows”, which translates into moments of experimentation that reveal hidden layers of media possibilities. The project failed because it was considered outside of its archaeologically awareness. The issue is the project assumed continuity and ignored the failures built into its laserdisc system. When it became unreadable, it revealed how media history is actually fractured and not linear, reflecting Zielinski’s idea of “deep time” of media.

From a mythic perspective, the project illustrates the tension between technological optimism and archival fragility, revealing how digital preservation can never fully guarantee continuity. Following Paul Ricoeur's concept of "reserve memory" (Ricoeur, 2004), these records did not vanish entirely, they continue to exist as latent potential, awaiting reactivation through technological intervention. From the early 2000s onward, several recovery initiatives have attempted to restore access to the Domesday material through processes of emulation, data migration and reinterpretation. CAMiLEON (2002), Domesday Reload (2011-2018), and Domesday86 (2020) are just some recovery projects of the original LaserDiscs by extracting data and recreating Domesday experience through emulated environments. In this case, preservation no longer meant to maintain the original medium but to reconstruct the functionality through another system. The archive in this case survives through continuous technological mediations. This scenario embodies the cultural narrative of the *Digital Dark Age* where the promise of total memory and permanence collide against the reality. The myth of reserve memory demonstrates that digital loss is more than technical failure, it also depends on the choices made about how archives are organized, maintained, and interpreted. In the *Domesday Project*, data became inaccessible due to obsolete technology, yet it was not truly lost because the structure of the archive allowed future reactivation as seen. This shows that what survives digitally is shaped by cultural and narrative decisions, determining which stories are remembered and which remain hidden, deciding how memory is experienced over time. Here the archive functions both as a technological system and as a symbolic space of hope.

However, the continuous recovery attempts raise an important question: what exactly survives when a digital archive is preserved? If the information is preserved, the material conditions of access (such as interface, interaction logic, visual language) are transformed. The *BBC Domesday Project* accessed through emulation is not the same as it was in 1989, the hardware is different, the software is new, and the cultural interactivity has changed. The result therefore is a translation rather than a restoration. It is interesting to read this phenomenon through the lens of the Ship of Theseus that questions whether an object remains the same when all of its components are gradually replaced. If the physical support has changes, the operation and interface system too, as well as the user

experience, can the archive still be considered the same archive (Balasubramanian, A. 2025)?

The technological components of the original project (such as the LaserDisc) and the specific modes of navigation were not neutral parts but constitutive elements of the archive itself. Once these elements were replaced, the archive “survives” only as a rebuilt entity whose continuity is conceptual rather than material. This project exposes a tension that is at the core of the *Digital Dark Age*, it shows that digital memory can endure only by accepting discontinuity or loss. What is fixed is not an object, but a fragile balance between content and experience, other than technological infrastructures.

The *BBC Domesday Project* demonstrates that the *Digital Dark Age* is not a future catastrophe awaiting us at the end of the digital era, but a recurring condition embedded within our history of digital archiving. The project revealed a structural condition of digital archiving itself. The project embodied many assumptions that continue to exist in digital preservation today, such as the belief that technology is durable and the blind trust in media infrastructure as neutral and transparent carriers of memory. These expectations did not collapse because the technology was immature, but because the archive was imagined as standing outside the historical life of its own medium. This event also helps perceiving the *Digital Dark Age* just as a pure technical issue that can be solved through better standards, formats or storage. As the Domesday case showed, technological solutions alone cannot address the deeper issue, and that is the archive’s failure to acknowledge its own historicity and dependence on specific media.

The *BBC Domesday Project* prepared the ground for the case that follows, opening a space in which contemporary reaction to digital fragility shapes how digital memory is imagined and contested.

### 3.3 RESPONDING TO LOSS: THE *ROSETTA DISK* AND THE MYTH OF POST-DIGITAL

For my third study case I chose a deliberate shift in perspective, where I go from the analysis of an institutional failure of digital archiving to the examination of a symbolic response to the failure. The *Rosetta Disk* takes distance from the *BBC Domesday Project*, where the last one exposes the structural vulnerability of early digital archives, while the *Rosetta Disk* will emerge as a cultural gesture shaped by the awareness that digital memory is fragile and unreadable in the long term.

The case of the *Rosetta Disk* is an interesting one because it is an object situated between archive, monument and relic. Like an archive, it aspires to preserve knowledge, at the same time it represents the collective anxiety condensed into a small and materially charged form. The most remarkable part of it, is that its characteristics reveal the contemporary attitude toward digital memory and its unstable perception, rather than its preservation strategy. In this sense, the Disk responds to the *Digital Dark Age* by proposing a symbolic shift from the digital, imposing materiality, legibility and permanence as opposed to digital ephemeral.

This case study should, therefore, not be approached as an answer to the problem to digital preservation and the archive, but as a cultural reaction to the recognition of the archival loss. The *Rosetta Disk* represents the desire for continuity at the very moment when continuity appears threatened, thus its relevance stands in what it expresses about the changing imagination of the archive after the digital failure.

The *Rosetta Disk* was developed by the Long Now Foundation, an organization dedicated to long-term thinking and the preservation of knowledge across extended temporal

horizons, especially to draw attention to the drastic and accelerated loss of the world's languages (The Long Now Foundation, n.d.). The Disk was conceived as a micro-engraved nickel disk containing over 13.000 pages of information, including texts, images, scientific knowledge, and linguistic documentation. Because each page is stored as an image rather than as digital 1s and 0s, it can be read directly with the human eye using a 500x optical magnification. The disk is housed in a sphere made of stainless steel and glass, which allows it to be exposed to the air while protecting it from accidental impact and scratches. With minimal care, it could remain readable for thousands of years (The Long Now Foundation, n.d.). Alongside the materials, the Disk also contains thousands of human languages which are visually encoded and accompanied by material intended to support future decipherment. By archiving over 1,500 translations of the Book of Genesis, the project creates a modern Rosetta Stone designed to survive for millennia without the need for evolving computer technology. The idea of gathering the same text in different languages comes from the original Rosetta Stone, which contained the same texts in three different languages. By comparing these inscriptions, scholars were able to decipher the unknown languages (Kelly, n.d.).

The reliance on analogue legibility is central to its conceptual framework; in fact, the Disk explicitly rejects to depend on infrastructures that may become obsolete within a few decades. At the same time, the *Rosetta Disk* does not prioritize accessibility in the present, it is not interactive and does not allow for user navigation, updates or to be expanded. The contents are fixed and its access is made to be slow, mediated and indirect. For this reason, it stands in contrast to digital archives that emphasize immediacy, searchability and continuous revision.

Another important fact is that the Disk is not presenting itself as a total archive or definitive repository of memory. In fact, rather than attempting the impossible task of archiving all human knowledge, which would be destined for the same obsolescence as the *BBC Domesday Project*, it functions more as a “decoder ring” for future civilizations. The hyper-selective focus on linguistic extinction (projected to claim 90% of languages by 2100) acknowledges archival limits by prioritizing structural keys over comprehensive content, transforming anticipated cultural amnesia into a deliberate act of minimal memory that negotiates oblivion for symbolic eternity.

For this reason, it would be misleading to consider the *Rosetta Disk* as a solution to the challenges imposed by the *Digital Dark Age*.

The Disk is made in opposition to the structural fragility of digital media. Where digital archives depend on complex technological ecosystems, the *Rosetta Disk* deliberately reduces its conditions of existence to material persistence and optical legibility. This is a purely conceptual logic, because if digital memory is characterized by instability and the risk of unreadability, the Disk is the solution for duration.

Central to this is the notion of *deep time*, which the *Rosetta Disk's* founders embraced to foster long-term thinking and responsibility (The Long Now Foundation, n.d.). The Disk is not designed for contemporary use, nor for regular consultation. It was imagined to be addressed to a hypothetical future reader, temporally and culturally distant, in this sense, memory is detached from immediacy and thought for a long-term horizon beyond technological generations. Therefore, preservation means survival across time, not just access and circulation, and the rejection of several defining principles of digital culture creates a shift. The *Rosetta Disk* opposes obsolescence by eliminating reliance on rapidly aging technologies, it rejects infrastructural dependency and refuse the logic of continuous access characterised by updates and searchability. Instead, access becomes slow, effortful.

The project could be read as a provocation through the lens of the post-digital especially as a cultural reaction to the failure, but not as a historical phase that comes “after” the digital. In this perspective, the post-digital does not reject or surpass digital media, instead, it marks a moment of reflection in which the usual beliefs about digital permanence, accessibility, and control are questioned. The Disk normalizes loss by choosing structural markers over the whole, creating an illusion of continuity exactly where the digital fails. It functions less as a practical solution and more as a cultural talisman that makes anxiety more manageable.

The *Rosetta Disk* emerges exactly at the moment where the confidence in digital preservation collapses, taking the role of “metabolizing” the trauma. The decision to return to analogue and to a durable material turned into a human-readable format is not a casual choice, but a response to loss, in particular to the recognition that digital archives

are historically fragile. This phenomenon functions as a myth within the broader mythology of the *Digital Dark Age* outlined in Chapter 2. The object does not eliminate the anxiety of the oblivion, nor does it offer certainty over time, but it makes anxiety more manageable and consolation. The Disk offers the possibility of dreaming of survival across deep time making us believe that something can endure the inevitable loss.

Analysing the case through Barthes's concept of myth, we can say that the *Rosetta Disk* presents digital fragility as something inevitable, as something that is destined to collapse sooner or later. Instead of addressing obsolescence through political and technical solutions, it symbolically addresses the issue by returning to analogue materiality. In Barthesian terms, the project transforms a contingent technological crisis into a natural condition where digital loss appears as destiny rather than an outcome. By referring to "deep time", the Disk presents preservation as a timeless and universal necessity rather than as a contemporary technical and political choice. In doing so, it labels fragility and loss as an inevitable condition of modernity and not as the result of different choices. This temporal element produces a mythic effect when analysed through Barthes's theory, meaning that what is historically constructed is made to seem natural and self-evident. However, the selection of languages and materials remains a human decision shaped by authority and limitations. The appeal to deep time does not remove politics from preservation, it simply makes it less visible.

Nonetheless, its inaccessibility recreates the same unreadability of the *Digital Dark Age* that it claims to prevent. The Disk imagines abstract futures over a useful present and exposes the utopian idea of total preservation as ultimately unrealistic. Its selectivity (language and content) reproduces archival exclusions, raising the questions of whether analogue "eternity" truly prevents oblivion or simply shifts digital anxieties onto a form of unshared permanence. The Disk emphasizes that the responses to digital oblivion are symbolic rather than solutions and simultaneously supports mythic narratives of salvation, while it critiques over-reliance on technological optimism. The project traces a trajectory from historical failure (such as the *BBC Domesday*) to mythic resilience, contributing to the structural inevitability of the *Digital Dark Age*.

All these case studies discussed in this chapter mark a decisive shift in how the archive can be understood before, during, and after the *Digital Dark Age*. These examples made clear that the archive can no longer be perceived as a stable, self-sufficient system of preservation, from Richter's anomic archive to the infrastructural vulnerability of the *Domesday Project* and finally to the material form of memory in the *Rosetta Disk*, we can clearly see that the archive appears no longer a stable system but a site of negotiation between accumulation and loss, continuity and rupture.

## CONCLUSIONS

What emerges from this analysis is not the confirmation of an imminent digital apocalypse, but the destabilization of that narrative. The *Digital Dark Age*, as frequently described in media and especially in academic discourse, imagines a catastrophic ending for most of the digital resources, yet none of the cases analysed support this apocalyptic collapse. Richter's *Atlas* demonstrates that discontinuity and incompleteness do not eliminate meaning, reinforcing the idea that memory persists through active reconstruction. The *BBC Domesday Project* further complicates the apocalyptic framing by offering proof of digital fragility. However, the project exposes infrastructural limits and reveals the importance of information recovery, transforming the scenario from an apocalyptic one to an issue of maintenance. The *Rosetta Disk* radicalizes the rhetoric of survival by projecting preservation into millennia. The Disk does not prevent linguistic extinction or guarantee cultural continuity; it simply embodies the desire of endurance while leaving intact the structural selectivity of preservation. Here the apocalyptic tone shifts from imminent collapse to heroic solution, but the underlying anxiety remains the same.

Together, these cases suggest that the *Digital Dark Age* is a narrative simplification implying that digital memory does not disappear in a single catastrophic moment. What should be considered is that loss is something incremental and infrastructural, not an event that results into an apocalyptic ending. If we adopt the dramatic logic that is perpetrated by the media about our digital future, we find ourselves trapped into a binary logic, either

of total preservation or total oblivion, which is counterproductive. The case studies demonstrate instead a spectrum of partial survivals, recoveries and transformations. Digital culture is not eternally secure, neither destined for absolute darkness, instead the right approach should be in the middle. Digital culture is structurally unstable and totally dependent on human intervention and infrastructures, yet the real risk lies in an uneven preservation, selective neglect and asymmetries of power. In my perspective, the *Digital Dark Age* is not a future event waiting to happen, but a rhetorical tool that amplifies anxiety in order to mobilize action. The historical media, either analogue or digital, has never depended on permanence, but on continual renegotiation. The similar dynamics shaped between the Dark Ages and the *Digital Dark Age* imagine a parallel destiny, when in fact the medieval period has since been reinterpreted as an era of intellectual reorganization rather than darkness. In this sense, the *Digital Dark Age* risks reproducing the same narrative structure, which translates into projecting the fantasy of total erasure onto processes that are, in practice, discontinuous and uneven. Memory has never depended on uninterrupted permanence, but on fragile chains of transmission and institutional care. What we are describing as digital oblivion may instead be another historical moment in which memory changes form, becoming legible and accessible under different conditions. Therefore, the *Digital Dark Age* does not describe the end of memory, but the dramatization of its structural fragility.

On the other hand, digital loss is real, unreadable files, obsolescence and bit rot are a real and tangible problem. Technical issues related to the digital world are unavoidable, and servers, platforms and archival systems all have a limited lifespan. Archival policies which decide what to preserve, how and for how long, are inevitably biased, creating a situation where some information is prioritized, while other materials are neglected or overlooked. Yet none of this erases history. In practice, digital memory persists in imperfect and mutable forms, requiring human intervention to interpret and activate it. Thus, this describes a world of memory that is incomplete, selective and constantly reinterpreted, not apocalyptic.

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the *Digital Dark Age* from a narrative perspective that reshapes contemporary understanding of memory and the archive. Rather than asking whether digital information will disappear, the research tries to examine how the

possibility of disappearance has been imagined in our culture, articulated and symbolically treated. The central objective is to demonstrate that the *Digital Dark Age* operates as a cultural myth that reshapes the meaning of preservation, continuity, power and historical responsibility in the digital era.

## LIMITATIONS

While the thesis provides a theoretical and case-based analysis on the *Digital Dark Age*, it necessarily operates within a selective scope. The focus on Western archival practices, only three case studies, and theoretical frameworks means that many contexts, media types and technological ecosystems remain unexplored. These limited choices are conceptually and symbolically dense in order to construct a theoretical path, rather than offering a map of the field. Similarly, the research focuses on symbolic analysis rather than providing quantitative data on digital decay. The unexplored areas include different types of memory, such as community-led archiving initiatives or emerging technologies such as AI-assisted curation. These absences are not weaknesses but in part intentional, in the sense that the focus is on the intrinsic complexity and multiplicity of digital memory. The way no archive can claim total completeness, no study can include all practices, narratives or cultural meanings associated with digital loss.

Furthermore, the research conducted in this thesis could represent a starting point to acknowledge what has not been covered, for instance non-Western archival logics, the impact of preservation practices of different communities and even emerging archival platforms. This current openness reinforces the idea that the *Digital Dark Age* is a phenomenon that demands ongoing attention, reflection and intervention.

## FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The framework developed in this thesis could serve as a starting point for future research on digital memory and archival culture.

First, archival science and digital preservation could benefit from a deeper understanding of how mythic framing of the *Digital Dark Age* shapes institutional priorities. By recognizing that anxieties about total loss often exaggerate or simplify actual risks, archivists and information manager can develop strategies that focus on increasing better preservation, rather than seeking illusory permanence. Studying different strategies from archives, libraries and museums across different countries could identify which practices are successful and durable.

Second, digital humanities and media studies could investigate how narratives of loss and catastrophe influence cultural perceptions of technology. Studying social medias and media coverage could reveal how myths of digital apocalypse perpetrate in public discourse through fears and behaviours. Such research could help users to understand the limitations and potentials of digital memory without succumbing to dramatization.

Third, institutions and policymaking could gain different practical insights from this perspective. Understanding digital limitations and fragilities as socio-technical and culturally meaningful phenomenon could guide investment decisions and prevent disasters, ensuring that insufficient resources are allocated strategically and ethically. Also, by highlighting which materials are at risk of disappearance, policymakers can address asymmetries in access and representation.

Finally, interdisciplinary contribution is a crucial direction. Technology experts, archivists, cultural theorists and policymakers should collaborate in order to create better preservation strategies to account for technical practicality, social relevance and symbolic meaning. Further work could explore emerging technologies such as AI-generated archives, analysing their contribution on anxiety and the myth.

Therefore, this thesis could open the door for further investigation on the *Digital Dark Age* by providing a cultural lens through which ongoing transformations in archival practices and cultural memory can be critically interpreted.

As a result, we must confront the myth of permanence that has governed our digital era and accept the consequences of trying to build an immortal memory on the most ephemeral device. At the end, the true lesson we must learn from the *Digital Dark Age* is that we must learn to live with the “dust” of the digital, recognising that, as Ricoeur

suggests, memory is only meaningful when it is balanced by the force of forgetting. The “darkness” of our era is not the lack of light, but a complex problem that demands a new way of seeing, one that finds value in fragments and the enduring human effort to remain visible within systems designed for disappearance.

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