

Archaeology of the “Event ‘A Lament for Book Burnings’”

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Extended Abstract

Book burning and its various dimensions constitute a historically rooted phenomenon that has recurred across different societies and epochs, taking on distinct forms over time. This phenomenon not only encompasses the physical destruction of books and written works but also symbolically represents the erasure of human knowledge and awareness. In the contemporary era, book burning manifests in nuanced ways, with artists employing innovative languages and media to reinterpret this issue. One prominent example is the performance “An Elegy for Book Burnings,” which this study analyzes through the lens of Michel Foucault’s archaeological method. Unlike conventional historical approaches that seek to uncover origins and causal connections, archaeology emphasizes the diversity, discontinuity, and fragmentation inherent in events. This method aims to analyze the implicit and unconscious rules governing discourses that shape knowledge in specific social and temporal contexts—essentially providing an archive of prevailing orders within a given society and era. The central research question addresses how book burning relates to concepts such as erasure and the obliteration of human knowledge and consciousness, and how these ideas are artistically represented. Utilizing descriptive-analytical methodology based on library research, this study investigates how the director of “An Elegy for Book Burnings” reinterprets history through the archaeological approach, highlighting ruptures and discontinuities over linear or continuous historical progression. The performance, employing a wide array of media including performance art, music performance, act, theater, ritual, and video installation, portrays book burning not

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solely as a historical fact but as a conceptual and symbolic framework relevant to the modern age. Audience interaction is a crucial aspect of this event. Unlike traditional fixed venues, the audience is immersed in an evolving, multimedia environment, compelled to actively engage cognitively and emotionally with the performance. This interactivity, however, does not imply total control or completion of the work by the audience but rather exemplifies the active role spectators play in interpreting the artist's message. The director's judicious use of ancient and literary languages (Pahlavi language), which are largely incomprehensible to the contemporary audience, symbolizes the shrinking vocabulary range and declining reading culture a modern form of book burning and cultural amnesia. The archaeological discussion of the performance reveals that the director is less concerned with uncovering the causes or historical origins of book burnings, focusing instead on describing the emergence, presence, and disappearance of related discourses. This depth-oriented description aligns with Foucault's notion of "historicity" as an epistemological foundation rather than mere content or chronology. In this perspective, book burning emerges as a unique, non-repeatable historical event, with no deterministic necessity or logical inevitability behind its occurrence. Each event is framed within its own spatial and temporal context, discontinuous from prior and subsequent periods, rejecting notions of gradual historical evolution or continuity. Furthermore, the performance connects the contemporary crisis of low literacy rates and the consequent vocabulary erosion with a form of modern book burning an insidious erasure of knowledge and awareness. Through the integration of visual, auditory, and musical media, grounded in the cognitive theory of multimedia learning, the production activates the audience's memory and encourages the formation of mental models linking verbal and visual representations, thereby facilitating deeper understanding. The director, through modern manifestations, allows for a critique that transcends mere physical destruction to highlight the broader cultural and historical erosion of human identity. The performers in the piece are intentionally devoid of distinct individual traits, symbolizing a fragmented historical spirit of passive, internally crushed humans who metaphorically write, burn, and lament their existence. The elegy transforms into a muted outcry yearning for recognition and renewal a lament never fully comprehended or heard. In conclusion, this study finds that from the

archaeological standpoint employed, the concept of book burning is intricately linked to the erasure and obliteration of human knowledge and awareness, seen through a lens of historical discontinuity and specificity rather than a cumulative process. The performance’s multidimensional and multimedia approach effectively embodies this conceptualization, while also presenting the modern attenuation of reading culture and vocabulary as a contemporary symbolic form of book burning. This recognition underscores the urgency of critically addressing the cultural erosion impacting human cognition and identity today. Thus, “An Elegy for Book Burnings” is more than a memorial to physical book destruction; it is a lamentation over the collapse and destruction of historical identity—the identity of those who have forgotten their words, their discourse, and ultimately their selfhood, because their vocabulary—the foundation for expression and memory—has itself been consumed and annihilated.

Keywords: Archaeology, Foucault, Event, A Lament for Book Burnings.

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