

Media Archaeology

INCITED BY RISE OF 'NEW' MEDIA

Impetus for Zielinski's book: 1990s: "The shifts, which had become standard practice, were judged to be a revolution, entirely comparable in significance to the Industrial Revolution. **Hailed as the beginning of the information society** and new economy... Every last digital phenomenon and data network was celebrated as a **brilliant and dramatic innovation**" (Zielinski 8)

20th c fascination with "all things digital" – "**The twenty-first century will not have the same craving for media**...they will be a part of everyday life....Thus it is **all the more urgent to undertake field research on the constellations that obtained before media became established as a general phenomenon**..." (Zielinski 33)

"**studies of new media often share a disregard for the past**... The new media have been treated as an all-encompassing and 'timeless' realm that can be explained from within." – yet "Numerous studies and collections addressing the media's past(s) in relation to their present have appeared in recent years.... Still, one cannot avoid noticing how little attention has often been devoted to defining and discussing methods and approaches" (Huhtamo & Parikka 1)

INFLUENCES

Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Giedion, Ernst Robert Curtius, Dolf Sternberger, Aby Warburg, Marshall McLuhan, recent "debate on new historicism" (2) – "Theories of cultural materialism, discourse analysis, notions of nonlinear temporalities, theories of gender, postcolonial studies, visual and media anthropology, and philosophies of neo-nomadism all belong to the mix" (Huhtamo & Parikka 2)

"When classifications of media archaeology have been attempted, a binary division has usually been drawn between the **socially and culturally oriented Anglo-American studies** and the **techno-hardware approach of German scholars**, who have taken their cue from **Friedrich Kittler's** synthesis of Foucault, information theory, media history, and McLuhan's emphasis on the medium as the message.

One way of explaining this division is to see it as a **consequence of different readings of Foucault**. We find quite different readings of Foucault in the German variant of media archaeology, which was strongly influenced by Kittler's *Aufschreibesteme 1800/1900* (1985)...

Foucauldian Archaeology

"The old questions of the traditional analysis (What link should be made between disparate events? How can a causal succession be established between them? What continuity or overall significance do they possess? Is it possible to define a totality, or must one / be content with reconstituting connexions?) are now being replaced by questions of another type: **which strata should be isolated from others? What types of series should be established? What criteria of periodization should be adopted for each of them? What system of relations (hierarchy, dominance, stratification, univocal determination, circular causality) may be established between them?** What series of series may be established? And in what large-scale chronological table may distinct series of events be determined?" (Foucault 3-4)

“how is one to specify the **different concepts that enable us to conceive of discontinuity (threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation)**? By what criteria is one to isolate the unities with which one is dealing; what is *a science*? What is an *oeuvre*? What is *a theory*? What is *a concept*? What is *a text*?” (Foucault 5)

German Tradition

Kittler argued for the need to adjust Foucault’s emphasis on the predominance of words and libraries to more media-specific ways of understanding culture. According to him, the problem was that **‘discourse analysis ignores the fact that the factual condition is no simple methodological example but is in each case a techno-historical event.’ To be able to understand media technologies from the typewriter to the cinema and on to digital networks an coding paradigms, one must take their particular material nature into consideration** – an idea Kittler’s followers like Wolfgang Ernst have adopted for their own work” (8) – Michael Wetzell – “...Kittler has denied any affiliation with the notion of media archaeology” (Huhtamo & Parikka 9)

Anglo-American Tradition

“The **Anglo-American tradition** has valorized **Foucault as a thinker who emphasized the role of discourses** as the loci where knowledge is tied with cultural and social power. Material bodies, events, and institutions are all conditioned by discursive formations. **The effects of ‘hard’ technology are considered secondary to immaterial forces that differentiate and mediate their uses.**” (Huhtamo & Parikka 9)

Anglo-American media archaeologists – “received impulses from the **new historicism**” – “new cultural history” – “H. Aram Veaser aptly summarized (new historicism’s) ‘key assumptions’ by stating ‘1) that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; 2) that **every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes**; 3) that literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably; 4) that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths or expresses inalterable human nature; 5) finally...that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.” (Huhtamo & Parikka 9)

“The German tradition has been claimed to emphasize the role of technology as a *primum mobile*, which has led to **accusations about technological determinism**, whereas Anglo-American scholars often assume that technology gets its meanings from preexisting discursive contexts within which it is introduced.” (Huhtamo & Parikka 8)

NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT HISTORY

Discarding the Linear Arrow of Progress

“linear successions, which for so long had been the object of research, have given way to discoveries in depth.” (Foucault 3)

“one thing above all others is refined / and expanded: the **idea of inexorable, quasi-natural, technical progress**...absolute necessity for simple technical artifacts to develop into complex technological systems, or the continual perfecting of the illusionizing potential of media. In essence, such genealogies are comforting fables about a bright future” (2-3) – “The **notion of continuous progress** from lower to higher, **from simple to complex**, must be abandoned,

together with all the images, metaphors, and iconography that have been – and still are – used to describe progress. Tree structures, steps and stairs, ladders, or cones with the point facing downwards...are, from a paleontological point of view, misleading and should therefore be discarded” (Zielinski 5)

“What is it that holds the approaches and interest of the media archaeologists / together, justifying the term? **Discontent with ‘canonized’ narratives of media culture and history** may be the clearest common driving force” (Huhtamo & Parikka 2-3) – see Zielinski’s Variantologies

“**a way of studying recurring cyclical phenomena** that (re)appear and disappear and reappear over and over again in media history, somehow seeming to transcend specific historical contexts” (Huhtamo 1997: 222)

Looking at the Margins and Layers

“construction of linear histories runs the risk of leaving important statements, objects, and networks of power in **neglected margins**” (Parikka & Ernst)

“emphasis is shifting into **treating history as a multi-layered construct**, a dynamic stream of relationships” (Huhtamo 1997: 221)

Relating the New and the Old

“For...Geert Lovink, media archaeology is by nature a ‘discipline’ of reading against the grain, ‘**a hermeneutic reading of the “new” against the grain of the past**, rather than telling of the histories of technologies from past to present.’” – “Media archaeologists have **challenged the rejection of history by modern media culture** and theory alike by **pointing out hitherto unnoticed continuities and ruptures**. As a consequence, the area for media studies has been pushed back by centuries and extended beyond the Western world. On the basis of their discoveries, media archaeologists have begun to construct **alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media that do not point teleologically to the present media-cultural condition as their ‘perfection.’** Dead ends, losers, and inventions that never made it into a material product have important stories to tell.” (Huhtamo & Parikka 3)

“...we will need a **different perspective from that which is only able to seek the old in the new. In the latter perspective, history is the promise of continuity and a celebration of the continual march of progress** in the name of humankind. Everything has always been around, only in a less elaborate form; one needs only to look. Past centuries were there only to polish and perfect the great archaic ideas....Now, if we deliberate later the emphasis, turn it around, and experiment, the result is worthwhile: **do not seek the old in the new, but find something new in the old**” (Zielinski 3)

question **obsolescence**: “If we define obsolescence as something that has fallen out of fashion or has become unwanted, unusable, or outside the mainstream then this definition relies on the constitutive mainstream itself” – “key logic of capitalist production” (Parikka & Hertz)

CAVEAT

“My quest in researching the deep time of media constellations is **not a contemplative retrospective nor an invitation to cultural pessimists to indulge in nostalgia**” (Zielinski 10)

NEW METHODS FOR 'WRITING' HISTORY

Finding Foucault's Ruptures, As Well as the Clichéd

“For the anarchaeological approach, taking account of the specific character of **media with regard to time** has two important consequences. [First,] **The field of study cannot encompass the entire process of development**; exploring different historical epochs has the aim of allowing **qualitative turning points** within the development process to emerge clearly. The **historical windows** that I have selected should be understood as **attractive foci, where possible directions for development were tried out and paradigm shifts took place**” (31) – 2: “a heightened alertness to ideas, concepts, and events that can potentially enrich our notions for developing the time arts....They appear in the guise of shifts” (Zielinski 32)

“Still, **amid all the variety, there is a need to define approaches and perhaps even to crystallize them into 'methods,'** at least in a local and tactical sense” (14) – Erkki Huhtamo's “effort to apply the idea of topos”; “The **topos approach** eschews ‘the new’...**emphasizes the clichéd, the commonplace, and ‘the tired’**... Identifying new ways in which media culture relies on the already known is just as essential as determining how it embodies and promotes the never before seen. In fact, these two aspects are connected with each other; **the new is ‘dressed up’ in formulas** that may be hundreds of years old, while the old may provide ‘molds’ for cultural innovations and reorientations” (14) – “the topos approach helps to **detect novelties, innovations, and media-cultural ruptures** as well” (Huhtamo & Parikka 14)

Foucauldian Archaeology (Discourse Analysis), Minus the Discourse

“Media Archaeology, indebted to the German scholar Friedrich Kittler, as well as the French Michel Foucault and the Canadian Marshall McLuhan, **excavates the technological conditions of the sayable and thinkable and strongly critiques narrative media history.** As Wolfgang Ernst explains, ‘media archaeology describes the **non-discursive** practices specified in the elements of the techno-cultural archive. Media archaeology is confronted with Cartesian objects, which are mathematisable things...’ However, **if cultural studies has been criticized for not engaged technology rigorously, media archaeologists often appear as ‘hardware-maniac, assembler-devoted and anti-interface ascetics, fixed to a (military) history of media** without regard to the present media culture.’ They often seem **blind to content and user practices.**” (Chun 4)

Rummaging Through Archives

“Media archaeology rummages textual, visual, and auditory archives as well as collections artifacts, emphasizing both the discursive and the material manifestations of culture. Its explorations more fluidly between disciplines, although it does not have a permanent home within any of them. “Such ‘nomadicism,’ rather than being a hindrance, may in fact match its goals and working methods, allowing it to roam across the landscape of the humanities and social sciences and occasionally to leap into the arts.” (Huhtamo & Parikka 3)

Examining False Starts, History's Losers

“**Registering false starts, seemingly ephemeral phenomena and anecdotes about media can sometimes be more revealing than tracing the fates of machines that were patented,** industrially fabricated and widely distributed in the society – let along the lives of their creators – if our focus in on the meanings that emerge through the social practices related to the use of technology” (Huhtamo 1997: 223)

“mobilizing histories and devices that have been sidelined during the construction of totalizing histories of popular forms of communication” – “lost traces of media technologies” – “**dead’ media** technologies and idiosyncratic developments reveal important themes, structures, and links in the history of communication that would normally be occluded by more obvious narratives. This includes tracing **irregular developments** and **unconventional genealogies** of present-day communication technologies” (Parikka & Hertz)

“...media archaeology (1) as a ‘history of losers,’ or what linear history of media ‘forget’; as a multilayered resonance with new film history and the multiple connections and modalities of media, (3) as recurring themes (Huhtamo, Bolter, Grusin) (Parikka & Hertz)

CAVEAT

“The **mere rediscovery of the forgotten, the establishment of oddball paleontologies, of idiosyncratic genealogies, uncertain lineages**, the excavation of antique technologies or images, the account of erratic technical developments, are, in themselves, **insufficient to the building of a coherent discursive methodology**” (Druckery ix)

“danger is often marginalia for its own sake, a curiosity cabinet way of doing media history” (Parikka & Hertz)

FOCUS ON MATERIALITY

“Drawing on Foucault and Kittler, Wolfgang Ernst has suggested that media should be primarily researched as **nonsignifying channels**. The fact of mediation should be considered before any idea of hermeneutic meaning. The phenomenological content of communication is too often mistaken for the essence of media. For Ernst, media archaeology focuses on the **agency of the machine**, the ways in which technical media themselves contract time and space. See Wolfgang Ernst, “Let There Be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archaeology in Parallel Lines,” *Art History* 28 (November 2005): 582 – 603” (Huhtamo & Parikka p. 18, note 36)

“What I want to use from Foucault is a certain neomaterialist mode of cultural analysis that comes up with approaches that touch on the **singularity of the material assemblages**, of which technology is one component. In other words, specificity and singularity should be some of the key ‘aims’ of a media archaeological excavation” (Parikka & Hertz)

“...the question of singularity and specificity of media in its material qualities for expression is as much a political as an aesthetic question because it points towards thinking of media as potentials for action; **what can a medium do? What are its potentials?**” (Parikka & Hertz)

Foucault’s *dispositif*: “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.” (Foucault, Confessions)

GENERATIVE POTENTIAL

“Everyday consumer media,...curating practices, representational techniques, and spatial modes of organizing media can borrow heavily from history...rewiring of some of the connections of

the past and the present, in order to come up with something new” (Parikka & Hertz)

Media Archaeology has inspired imaginary media, **hardware hacking, circuit bending,** “operative diagrammatics”

“How can we write such histories of media not historically but more ‘**media artistically,**’ that is, **taking into account the materialities through which history is articulated,** not relying on written narrative as the only way of producing historical, temporal knowledge?” (Parikka & Hertz)

“adopting and investigating temporal processes that are either too quick or too slow for the human senses?” (Parikka & Hertz)

“media archaeology needs to be **executed,** not constructed as a narrative” (Parikka & Hertz)

ARCHAEOLOGY AS URBAN ARCHIVAL METHOD

“A vital theme in Benjamin’s cityscapes is his critique of the city as the locus of an illusory and deceptive vision of the past. **False history, myth, is to be liquidated through the revelation and representation of a different, hidden past.** This in turn is to be achieved by adherence to a particular set of critical and redemptive **historiographic principles...**”

- **Archaeological:** an approach concerned with the **salvation and preservation of the objects and traces of the past** that modern society threatens to destroy.
- **Memorial:** Benjamin exhorts the Critical Theorist to **oppose the modern propensity for amnesia,** to remember those whose struggles and sufferings in the past would otherwise be forgotten.
- **Dialectical:** Benjamin develops his conception of the dialectical image, the **momentary mutual recognition and illumination of past and present.**” (Gilloch 13)

“History itself is a construction of the present age and must always be **read backwards from the ruins which persist in the here and now.**” (Gilloch 14)

“Benjamin is engaged in an **archaeological excavation** of the city to **salvage its fragments so that they can be refunctioned.**” (Gilloch 18)

“Urban archaeology... The notion of **repeated excursions into the same spaces and moments...**” (70) – “It is the medium of the past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging...” (OWS, p. 314)” – “The task of the archaeologist is to **dig beneath the surface of the modern city and the modern sensibility it engenders, to unearth the evidence of past life and the shocks that have become lodged in the depths of the unconscious.**” (Gilloch 70)

Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Introduction: "Did Somebody Say New Media?" In Wendy Hui Kyong Chun & Thomas Keenan, Eds., *New Media Old Media: A History and Theory Reader* (NY: Routledge, 2006): 1-10.

Timothy Druckery, Foreword to Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006): vii-xi.

Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh" In Colin Gordon, Ed., *Power Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (Pantheon, 1980): 194-228.

Erkki Huhtamo, From Kaleidoscomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes Toward an Archaeology of the Media" *Leonardo* 30:3 (1997): 221-4.

Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, "Introduction: An Archaeology of Media Archaeology" In Ibid., Eds., *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

Friedrich A. Kittler, "The City is a Medium," *New Literary History* 27:4 (1996): 717-729.

Jussi Parikka, Interview with Garnet Hertz, "Archaeologies of Media Art" *CTheory* (April 1, 2010).

Vyjayanthi Rao, "Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive," *New Literary History* 40:2 (Spring 2009): 371-383.

Kazys Varnelis, "Centripetal City," *Cabinet* 17 (Spring 2004/2005): 27-33.

Siegfried Zielinski, "Introduction: The Idea of a Deep Time of the Media" In *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006): 1-11.