RECURSIONS

New Media Archaeologies

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Amsterdam University Press

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The book series RECURSIONS: THEORIES OF MEDIA, MATERIALITY, AND CULTURAL TECHNIQUES provides a platform for cuttingedge research in the field of media culture studies with a particular focus on the cultural impact of media technology and the materialities of communication. The series aims to be an internationally significant and exciting opening into emerging ideas in media theory ranging from media materialism and hardware-oriented studies to ecology, the post-human, the study of cultural techniques, and recent contributions to media archaeology. The series revolves around key themes:

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These themes resonate with some of the most interesting debates in international media studies, where non-representational thought, the technicity of knowledge formations and new materialities expressed through biological and technological developments are changing the vocabularies of cultural theory. The series is also interested in the mediatic conditions of such theoretical ideas and developing them as media theory.

New Media Archaeologies

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Introduction

Ben Roberts and Mark Goodall

This collection of essays highlights innovative work in the developing field of media archaeology. It builds on the conference *Archaeologies of Media and Film* organized by the editors in collaboration with the UK National Media Museum and Royal Television Society in September 2014. The volume includes essays by some of the contributors to that conference and it focuses, in particular, on the relationship between theory and practice and the contribution that experimentation can make to our understanding of media archaeology.

In the last decade, a growing number of volumes dedicated to the topic of media archaeology have been published, notably Siegfried Zielinski's *Deep Time of the Media* (2006 [2002]), Jussi Parikka's *What is Media Archaeology?* (2012), Erkki Huhtamo's *Illusions in Motion* (2013), and Wolfgang Ernst's *Digital Memory and the Archive* (2013). We would highlight here two very recent and notable contributions: Thomas Elsaesser's *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* and Wolfgang Ernst's *Sonic Time Machines: Explicit Sound, Sirenic Voices, and Implicit Sonicity* (both 2016).

In *Sonic Time Machines*, Wolfgang Ernst argues that media archaeology needs to be understood not only as a way of understanding media technology, but also as 'a form of technical perception in which the technological device itself turns into a listening organ' (Ernst, p. 31). This 'sonic' dimension of time-based media allows the media archaeologist to access the past in ways distinct from the interpretative methods of historiography, because these media preserve 'technological knowledge of the material past' (*Ibid*., p. 113). This technological knowledge can be analysed using tools quite distinct from those of traditional hermeneutic interpretation. Fourier analysis can be used to break down sound into its constituent waveforms. Computational methods equally allow us to break down and understand audio in new ways. For example, the algorithms developed for music recognition software may lead to new forms of searching and sorting audio archives.[1] Ultrasound

1 See the 'Humanizing Algorithmic Listening' project, an AHRC research network that considers 'the technical, epistemological and creative possibilities, as well as cultural and ethical

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monitors provide the metaphor here: they emit, measure, and manipulate human inaudible sound into an image that is legible to the human eye (*Ibid*., p. 31). What Ernst calls 'sonicity' is not confined to the audio domain, but opens up time-based media technology in general to new forms of analysis. Sonicity thus extends and reworks the 'symbol' and 'signal' distinction from his earlier *Digital Memory and the Archive*. For Ernst, sonicity marks a new investment in 'signal', that is, the non-cultural dimensions of media as opposed to their 'symbolic' cultural content.

A second major intervention can be seen in Thomas Elsaesser's *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema.* Media archaeology, as Elsaesser observes, can be seen as being divided between its French and German roots. These two recent texts fully instantiate that divide: on the one hand, we have Ernst's German media theory with its emphasis on materiality and the inhuman (non-cultural) logic of the machine. On the other hand, we have the Foucauldian influence described in Elsaesser's new film history, that is, an interest in the discontinuous, in the connections between apparently divergent fields and practices in relation to the moving image (Elsaesser suggests Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* (1992) as a media archaeological text *avant la lettre*). Both writers view media archaeology as challenging traditional narrative history. In Elsaesser's case, this comes from posing alternative narratives, such as one in which cinema and the digital find a common origin; Ernst, on the other hand, sees the sonic time machine as providing a new technical method of engaging with the past.

Although his book gathers much material that has been previously published elsewhere, the volume clearly highlights the trajectory of Elsaesser's thinking on the relationship between new film history, the digital, and media archaeology. In particular, the final chapter, 'Media Archaeology as Symptom', can be seen as a 'state of the field' address from a writer who has been intimately involved in defining, debating, and redefining media archaeology over the years. In this chapter, Elsaesser proposes the question 'why media archaeology (now)?' as well as, or rather than, 'what is media archaeology?'. He therefore pushes back a little against the idea of justifying media archaeology as a research programme and suggests that we understand that programme itself as a symptomatic response to philosophical crises in relation to the idea of progress, causality, memory, narrative, and representation (Elsaesser, pp. 360–361). In particular, Elsaesser suggests a

implications, of listening with algorithms': (Accessed 2 June 2017) http://www.algorithmiclistening.org/.

more sceptical account of media archaeology's 'radical' challenge to linear history and teleological accounts of progress. He argues that we could see one facet of a contemporary 'ideology of the digital' in media archaeology's interest in obsolete technologies, one that offers a convenient historical counterweight to digital memory loss and the constant embrace of the 'new'. As Elsaesser suggests, 'obsolescence is a term that not only belongs to the discourse of capitalism and technology, but speaks from the position of relentless innovation and "creative destruction"' (*Ibid*., p. 384). From this perspective, one might see media archaeology's interest in media history as 'merely the flip side of the general appropriation of the past for the benefit of our corporate future'.

One possible response to this complicity with the ideology of the digital is to look further at the relationship between theory and practice. Here, one might add a further question to Parikka's ('what is media archaeology?'), and Elsaesser's ('why media archaeology?'): how is media archaeology? What does media archaeology mean in practice? Of course, posing the question of practice is not entirely new: the question of media archaeology as/in art practice is raised in almost every discussion of the field. Indeed, in her influential overview of media archaeological theory, Wanda Strauven suggests that art practice is one of the three branches of media archaeology. However, there has perhaps been significantly less discussion of media archaeology as educational and academic practice. For us as editors, one of the motivations for this book (and, indeed, the conference that preceded it) was our experience of teaching media archaeology to undergraduates at the University of Bradford. In our teaching, we tried to engage not only with media archaeology as a new way of doing media studies, but also on the experiential and experimental level. Traditional lectures were supplemented with 'hands on' experience of everything from nineteenth-century optical toys (courtesy of the UK National Media Museum) through 8 and 16mm amateur film making to the 1980s and 1990s dial-up bulletin boards that were a precursor to the internet. This educational process required us to constantly question the relationship between theory and practice.

Since its inception, the field of media archaeology has engaged with and advocated experimentation. Theorists and practitioners have done this by rediscovering and promoting avant-garde writings and methodologies from the past and reinterpreting the meanings and potential uses of these works (which in themselves have often been marginalized by conventional academic and scientific rationalist 'wisdom') whilst at the same time encouraging that contemporary writers, artists, and creative thinkers devise their own experimental theories and practices to drive the discipline forward.

Also critical is the combining of theory and practice, something that has long been common in arts schools and emerged in early media departments from the 1980s as a way of developing better 'media workers' (see for example Len Masterman's foundational text *Teaching the Media* (1985) where the term 'critical practitioner' appears central). In experimental media archaeology, theory and practice are intrinsically linked and follow on from each other, overlapping and dissolving in interesting and diverse ways. Media archaeologists, especially *experimental* media archaeologists, see the potential for work that is engaging with the historical past to be transformed into new ideas for the future. This, in turn, can influence a range of practices inside and outside of the field relating to arts projects, museum and curatorial practices, textual production, and extra-disciplinary areas of study (actual archaeology for example).

The key formal texts thus far on the subject of media archaeology have also emphasized the experimental and playful dimension to the field (whilst also noting that there should be no 'correct principles or methodological guidelines' (Huhtamo and Parikka, p. 3). The field itself has indeed been developed out of a complex mixture of theoretical works from history, cultural studies, philosophy, and media studies from modernity to post-modernity and back again. Parikka's notion of 'alternative histories' encourages us to seek out and develop approaches to media technology that may be unusual and different, not to mention bizarre and provocative, following the credo of 'it could have been otherwise' as Parikka, referencing Elsaesser and Burch, puts it (Parikka, pp. 12–13). As Parikka argues, in order to 'rethink our current visual and media field' an open and experimental approach is required, in fact is necessary; these are '*epistemological perversions*' that offer a non-mainstream approach to culture and media (*Ibid.*).

Perhaps the most famous example of this kind of approach is Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* with its playful, abstract, and poetic anti-narrative about the modern industrial world. Benjamin's project is referenced with notable frequency because it still remains a high point of the kind of methodology made possible by the application of experimental, avant-garde (surrealist) techniques to a study of geography, landscape, and history. Benjamin's method of 'tearing fragments out of their context and ranging them afresh in a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state' (Arendt, p. 47) is a practice that we imagine could still bear fruit in the early twenty-first century. Benjamin's approach, to borrow archaeological terminology, of 'drilling' rather than 'excavating' (*Ibid.*, p. 48) leads to inference and poetics as opposed to causal or systematic interpretation. Yet, as some of the essays in this suggest, this

difficult but provocative approach can yield interesting results for media archaeology.

It is noticeable that a number of recent, high-profile academic projects have engaged with the debate around what we might call 'experimental media archaeology'. One example is ADAPT, a five-year research project, funded by the European Research Council and based at Royal Holloway, University of London. The aim of the project, which runs from 2013 to 2018, is to 'research and document the history of British broadcast television technology between 1960 and the near-present' (ADAPT, n.d.). Aside from the usual outputs, such as conferences and symposia and PhD theses, recreation/restaging/reconstruction is an important aspect of the ADAPT project. One example was the attempt in May 2016 to recreate the experience of 1970s BBC Outside Broadcasting (OB). The aim of this was to supply: 'convenient contextual material for the many websites and agencies that are now offering archival TV material to various categories of users' (ADAPT, n.d.). This resonates with reconstruction approaches taken in history, for example, the recent 'Hands on History' project hosted by the BBC, the UK National Trust, and English Heritage, designed to immerse (mostly young) learners in historical reality with the opportunity to 'give our audience the chance to become part of the action by seeing, feeling and trying the materials, weapons and activities from their chosen historic era' (Hands on History, n.d.).

A perhaps more strident and provocative set of ideas about experimentation in media archaeology is offered by Anders Fickers and Annie van den Oever (2014). They praise the 'discourse-orientated method' of the discipline thus far deployed, but suggest that more focus be aimed at the material aspect of media. They propose 'historical re-enactment as a heuristic methodology' (*Ibid*., p. 272), an approach they note is located within certain dimensions of experimental archaeology and some histories of science. Re-enactment and 'experiencing history' are fine, but we can and must go further: '[i]n engaging with the historical artefacts, we aim at stimulating our sensorial appropriation of the past and thereby critically reflecting the (hidden or non-verbalized) tacit knowledge that informs our engagement with media technologies', they argue (*Ibid*., p. 273). The 'transparency' dimension to media, as noted by Bolter and Grusin in their theory of 'Remediation', must be resisted in experimental media archaeology so that we can encourage a 're-sensitization of expert observers', which is required to 'construct the epistemic object' or 'to define what a "medium" is more precisely' (Ibid., p. 274; Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Fickers and Van den Oever argue that experimental media archaeology must open the black

boxes and turn museums and archives into laboratories for experimental research (Fickers and Van den Oever, p. 277). This work involves a mixing together of curators, practitioners, and researchers in new and creative ways. Importantly, Van den Oever also advocate a dialogue between amateurs who increasingly 'wish to share their expertise and knowledge in online platforms and home pages' (*Ibid*., p. 26); the possibilities opened up by the digital and 'crowd sourcing' in this area have yet to be exploited to their fullest potential.

The Network of Experimental Media Archaeology exists to promote experimental and playful ways of 'thinkering' with past media technologies. In facilitating collaborations between university scholars and cultural heritage institutions, such as museums and archives, the network aims at turning the archive or museum into a laboratory space, turning researchers (historians, media archaeologists) as well as archivists and curators into experimenters' (NEMA, n.d.). One of NEMA's aims: the creative disconcertion of available knowledge (education through failure) is notable. Experimental work will not always yield 'productive' outputs and 'results' and the process of exploring and playing with media technologies and the subsequent understanding of those as presented textually (or in another form) is as important as the results. NEMA is at the forefront of the promotion of experimental approaches to media archaeology and its practices. One is also reminded here of the experimental process of the discipline of archaeology itself, especially the 'fragmented heritage' approach where, in a potential application of Gustav Metzger's concept of 'auto-destructive' art, objects can be completely destroyed in order to understand how they are constructed in the first place, and may be reconstructed again in the future.[2]

The adoption of experimental media archaeology allows theorists and practitioners to go beyond 'the literary study of the "expert users" (as found in technical and consumer association journals and professional publications)' (Fickers and Van den Oever, p. 277). More unusual or diverse fields of thinking and working are possible. Hence, it is useful perhaps to investigate experimental poetics or artistic practices from the avant-garde (although not necessarily exclusively) in order to rework theory and practice. Approaches as diverse as Derrida's early experimental texts, various surrealist methodologies, and the theories and poetics of art cinema can come into play to help us better understand and shape the media landscape of the future.

2 See the 'Lithic Lab' project at the University of Bradford (Mennear). Also 'Manifesto for Auto-Destructive Art' (1960) by Gustav Metzger.

What is important and significant about experimental practices is that they hold the potential to keep the field of media archaeology vibrant and open – open to interpretation and open to all available possibilities. One of the most exciting aspects of media archaeological theory has always been its willingness to divert from and challenge 'path-dependent' thinking. Thus, the first part of the book is concerned with *Experimental Media Archaeology*.

For Wanda Strauven, media archaeology creates a new laboratory for writing and history. Strauven's chapter looks at how theory can become, and to some extent already is, a form of creative practice. Referring back to the provocative, revolutionary ideas of the late 1970s developed by the likes of Gene Youngblood in cinema, Bruno Munari in design, and Buckminster Fuller in architecture, the author updates this thinking for the digital epoch. Drawing also on earlier fascinations with 'outsider art' and alternative practices of play and experimentation, the essay in essence proposes new ways of *doing* media archaeology. It is the way that media archaeology draws on the creative arts and collective practice that sets it apart from a purely technical or socio-political mode of theory.

Annie van den Oever and Andreas Fickers are interested in moving away from using the archive simply as a means of telling timelines of narrative histories and instead using the archive as a means of re-creating processes. Their contribution, 'Doing Experimental Media Archaeology', is a provocative call for change, formed by a discussion of a series of media archaeological experiments executed by the authors in search of alternative ways to draft historical statements on past media practices. By working with certain media objects (for example, domestic film technologies) they explore the 'heuristic possibilities offered by an experimental approach to those devices'. The authors focus on *re-enactment* as an experimental practice. We know that a variety of different and diverse 'users' engage with media objects and thus a practice more reflective of this complex audience is necessary to better understand the media world of the present and the future.

Mark Goodall's contribution to the volume, 'The Ghosts of Media Archaeology', is also focused on the experimental arts and vanguard practices and theories of the past, and is suggestive of ways in which such radical ideas could be applied to current media archaeology practices and theories. This can work towards new ways of engaging with the archive, but could also be adopted in order to potentially avoid the stasis from which so many theoretical movements of the past have suffered. Goodall confirms that even the most avant-garde works can offer methods for creative adoption by established organizations, individuals, and groups.

Alison Gazzard, in '(game)(code): re-playing program listings from 1980s British computer magazines' (in this volume), extends this idea of play and experimentation with a practical application devoted to a specific collection of media artefacts. Importantly, the chapter shows that it is not just the playing or replaying of actual games in the laboratory themselves that can yield interesting results, but how play can be applied effectively to *secondary* materials connected to media technologies (printed manuals, magazines, etc.). This extends what archives and museum spaces can and should be doing to develop usage of their often vast and varied holdings.

The second section of this volume is concerned with *Media Archaeological Theory*. In 'Motion, Energy Entropy: Towards Another Archaeology of the Cinema', Thomas Elsaesser draws our attention to the tendency of media theory to focus as a paradigm on the photographic image. To move away from this dependency, during a phase we can identify as the 'death of cinema', theorists would be advised to adopt the 'multiple agenda' knowledge developed by media archaeology. Elsaesser argues that this shift 'better reflects the contemporary epoch but also acknowledges the changing function of the moving image for our information society, our service industries, our memory cultures, and our "creative industries" more generally'. Theories devoted to the 'persistence of vision', while certainly valuable for describing the manner of twentieth-century media, must be superseded in the twenty-first century. This needs to manifest in an experimental manner that is typical of media archaeological thinking: by moving forward and backwards in time to integrate ideas more innovatively to produce new knowledge.

Both Peter Buse and Ben Roberts revisit the work of Walter Benjamin, arguably one of the totemic founding figures of media archaeology theory. In 'Collector, Hoarder, Media Archaeologist: Walter Benjamin with Vivian Maier', Buse draws our attention to the important practice of collecting, reflecting on Benjamin's famous text on his own library and comparing this with contemporary examples of (photographic) archives, collections, and bodies of found work. Buse notes the complex relationships we develop with collections and collecting. On the one hand, it is a fetishist consumption of objects as consumer capital; on the other, it is a passionate and highly emotional engagement with things, of attachments. The potential parallels Buse discusses between the antiquarian and the archivist provide food for thought for the expansion of more vibrant museum and curatorial practices going forward. Ben Roberts meanwhile, in 'Media Archaeology and Critical Theory of Technology', updates Benjamin's theories in relation to more recent debates located within the work of Bernard Stiegler and Wolfgang

Ernst. Roberts suggests that we need to understand the specific contribution media archaeology makes to a critical theory of technology.

The final section of the book, *Media Archaeology at the Interface*, looks at the relationship between media archaeology and other practices.

Angela Piccini and the Cube Collective's essay 'The Cube: A Cinema Archaeology' provides a vivid case study on how media archaeology can be used not just to gain a better, deeper understanding of a historical site, but a clear demonstration that media archaeology and traditional archaeology may have more in common than at first seemed evident. The imaginative practices utilized by the author and her team on the site of The Cube arts space in Bristol offer insights for a wide potential application of experimental and poetic practices allied with more traditional techniques of (re)discovery. By using the 'full range of promiscuous methods developed and practised by both academic and developer-funded archaeologists', the project reveals the ways in which a range of these techniques can intersect.

Finally, in 'Inventing Pasts and Futures: Speculative Design and Media Archaeology', Jussi Parikka continues his work exploring the new possibilities of media archaeology. In drawing again from the realms of art and design, and by suggesting that we follow the dreams of a 'political imaginary' through 'imaginary design' (and a pedagogy of such), it is media archaeology, of all the twenty-first century theoretical models, Parikka argues, that can best divine the future, the science-fiction even, of the media landscape yet to arrive.

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