

Jesper Olsson

## Going Underground. An Expanded Materialism of Media Theory

2015

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3835>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Olsson, Jesper: Going Underground. An Expanded Materialism of Media Theory. In: *spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures*, Jg. 2 (2015), S. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3835>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

[https://spheres-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/spheres-2\\_Olsson.pdf](https://spheres-journal.org/wp-content/uploads/spheres-2_Olsson.pdf)

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

JESPER OLSSON

**GOING UNDERGROUND –  
AN EXPANDED MATERIALISM OF MEDIA  
THEORY**

Review of: Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

It is one of the persistent topoi in Western literature and art, the *Katabasis*, the descent into the underworld. Frequently haunting the individual subconscious as a low-intensity poetic figure for the finitude of life, it has, throughout history, grown into a complex and fascinating chronotope of its own, carrying multiple traces of nature and culture. From Homer's *Hades* to the infernal visions of Dante, to modernized descents into the belly of the earth in German Romanticism or the stories of Jules Verne to pataphysically-inflected and politically-charged accounts by writers such as Christian Bök or Reza Negarestani today – this geo-imaginary is a strange zone of different times and spaces. That it has an acute reality, with a world-changing force, is necessary to remember, too.

This is the crucial task of Jussi Parikka's amazing new book, *A Geology of Media*, part of the Electronic Mediations series from University of Minnesota Press. It is the third and final part of Parikka's "media ecologies" trilogy, preceded by *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (2007) and *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (2010).

Last autumn, a thought-provoking teaser-essay circulated as "The Anthroscene", a portmanteau that underlines the obscenity of the

modern industrial exploitation of nature under the current geological epoch of the Anthropocene. This approach to nature as a resource is a key theme in the new book, and it will be critically analyzed through a number of perspectives and contextualizations, such as the media archaeology of Siegfried Zielinski, the history of technology of Lewis Mumford, new materialist theory by Rosi Braidotti, and contemporary artistic practices exploring the crossroads of media and geology.

And, of course, as Parikka points out early on, the book is,

“structured around the argument that there is such a thing as *geology of media*: a different sort of temporal and spatial materialism of media culture than the one that focuses solely on machines or even networks of technologies as nonhuman agencies”.<sup>1</sup>

This passage indicates how Parikka wants to expand and differentiate the materialism of German media theory performed by and in the wake of Friedrich Kittler, and, on the other hand, analyzes the *continuum* between nature and technology, between material earth and cultural practice. As Parikka writes on the very first page, the insight that human thinking and doing over the last two hundred years have transformed planetary conditions demonstrates that “morals, culture, and geology have something to do with each other” after all.<sup>2</sup> This is a crucial theoretical and political challenge for the humanities today.

Parikka accepts and confronts the challenge in five chapters, a short afterword and an appendix. The first chapter, “Materiality. Grounds of Media and Culture”, sets the stage for the analysis and reflections to follow. Perhaps the first observation to be made in assuming that a geology of media exists, is that media in their materiality consist of matter culled from the earth, from beneath its crust, from *geos*. The amount of substances that circulate through the digital technological body today are quite high – from silicon and lithium to cobalt and copper. Media are thus directly connected to the land and the subterranean. This material link cannot be neglected, and should be activated in our thinking around media. As Parikka contends in the following chapter,

“Media history conflates with earth history; the geological materials of metals and chemicals get deterritorialized from their strata and reterritorialized in machines that define our technical media culture.”<sup>3</sup>

But if the earth in this way provides for media, the latter are also crucial in our grasping of the former as an “object for cognitive, practical, and

---

1 Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015, p. 3.

2 Ibid., p. vii.

3 Ibid., p. 35.

affective relations”<sup>4</sup>. We have always used technological instruments, and today more than ever, to map, calculate, and visualize the earth. These practices are materialized, for instance, in the global surveillance systems, and can be considered as an epitome of a contemporary economic, political, and military control apparatus. At the same time, artists and theorists explore and complexify this relationship. Parikka brings up, for example, Douglas Kahn’s latest book on composers and artists who have approached the earth itself as a medium or a producer of art, and discusses this in relation to the so-called Gaia hypothesis.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the first chapter converges on the theoretical assumption of a “double bind”, according to which media and nature are “co-constituting spheres”. Parikka brings up the concept “medianatures” (to be compared with Donna Haraway’s “naturecultures”), which he considers “the topic of this book, with a special focus on geology and the geophysical”. It is accurate to say, that this double bind will be the hub for the observations and reflections to follow.

The opening and exploring of a continuum between nature and technology change *the space* of media. Media theory literally goes underground, in a manner similar to the work of critics and scholars such as Andrew Blum or Nicole Starosielski.<sup>6</sup> This spatial expansion also entails a *temporal* transformation. Since modern geology’s formation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with scientists such as James Hutton and Charles Lyell, who authored the *Principles of Geology* (1830), it has operated with an idea of the earth as a stratified system into which different epochs and temporalities are inscribed. Consequently, a geology of media will address and analyze different time scales than those that frame “history”. If Siegfried Zielinski’s media archaeology (or variantology) has paved the way for an analysis of the “deep time of the media” – an analysis that follows alternative routes and excavates other strata than those displayed in a linear success story of technologies – a geology of media will extend this approach to encompass a nonlinear history counted in millions rather than thousands of years, as Parikka writes.

Zielinski, and the idea of deep time, first articulated by Stephen Jay Gould, is at the core of chapter two, which also addresses acute environmental issues around media technologies and capitalist production – e-waste in the shape of discarded batteries, mobile phones, and cheap tablets, for example – as well as literary and artistic takes on geology and the exploitation of nature as a resource: from the late Conan

---

4 Parikka, p. 12.

5 Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound Earth Signal. Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013

6 Cp. Andrew Blum, *Tubes. A Journey to the Center of the Internet*, New York, Ecco, 2013; Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015.

Doyle story, “When the World Screamed” (1927), to Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Against the Day* (2006), a short reading of which concludes the chapter. Most importantly, Parikka offers a series of variations on how the expanded space-time of media must be linked to acute ecological issues, which – rather than haunting history – haunt a difficult-to-imagine-future. The question of deep time becomes not only a question of the past, but one of “futures of extinction, pollution, and resource depletion”<sup>7</sup>, a theme that is visited again in the final chapter.

Artistic, if not novelistic works will also play a key role in the ensuing discussion. The title of chapter three, “Psychogeophysics of Technology”, carries explicit connotations to Situationist practice and will, moreover, approach and analyze artistic activities that expand the psychogeography of Guy Debord and his peers to include subterranean matters, such as the fascinating, ongoing *Earthcodes* project of Martin Howse or Katie Paterson’s installation *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* (2007) which gives the listener a chance to get in touch with “the soundscapes of the geophysical”. In distancing itself from anthropocentrism, this kind of geological art can observe the crucial effects that human affairs have had on the planet for a long time, during the Anthropocene, by definition, which paves the way for the chapter’s and the book’s core critical question,

“can we remain *just-humanities* in an age of planetary scale engineering and massive changes to the very physical ground on which we live?”<sup>8</sup>

The answer is no. Whether we call it “posthumanities”, as David Theo Goldberg and others do, or something else, doesn’t really matter.<sup>9</sup> What matters is matter, the inclusion of materialist perspectives in our thinking on history, culture, media, and the arts. This entails an ontological reconfiguration of the object of the humanities as well as an epistemological reconsideration of how knowledge is produced in the field.

The matter focused on in chapter four belongs to those small and infinitely differentiated things that caught the attention of the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace in the nineteenth century – this means, *dust*. Apart from calibrating our gaze for material substances that aggregate to become digital technologies shaping everyday life and the media waste they are destined to become – quickly so in an age of planned obsolescence –, dust also brings up questions of labour conditions and

---

7 Parikka, p. 51.

8 Ibid., p. 69.

9 Cp. David Theo Goldberg, “The Afterlife of the Humanities”. Available at: <http://humafterlife.uchri.org/> [accessed December 14, 2015].

labouring bodies. Parikka references a number of materialisms here. He reads, for example, Reza Negarestani's multifarious theory-fiction on oil and other things, *Cyclonopedia* (2008), and the media artwork *Coal Fired Computers* (2010), by the British duo YoHa (Matsuko Yokokoji and Graham Harwood) in order to sketch a "political economy of dust and labour", as the final section of the chapter suggests. Thus zooming in on the dual regime of energies that digital ecology embodies: "human energy and the energy needed for technological machines".<sup>10</sup>

The final chapter, fittingly, turns toward the future and the production of past futures and future pasts. The guiding concept is *the fossil* and the idea of the Earth as a recording medium or an archive. Looking back on a caricature image from 1830, pointing toward the post-Anthropocene, Parikka then approaches the work of artists such as Grégory Chatonsky (*Telofossiles*) and Trevor Paglen (*Last Pictures*), who also stretch the media geological exploration beyond the boundaries of the Earth.<sup>11</sup> But the central issue in the chapter is time. The challenge set, not least a political one, is to analyze the temporalities that bring us beyond the "narratives of men" – the microtemporalities of the machine, as Wolfgang Ernst has described them, and the deep times of the geology of media, as they have been addressed, evoked, and circumscribed in various ways in this book.<sup>12</sup>

And this is just another way of phrasing what has been in the making all along. In a way, the trajectory of *A Geology of Media* can be described as a number of partially overlapping circles, forming a networked topography of readings and reflections on different stratified sediments of media. This paves the way for some repetition, which is not to say that the same thing returns, as Alfred Wallace already knew well. But, the difference in repetition could at times have been further explored, perhaps by bringing in other historical material from literature and art. The discussion of the *dérive* in the third chapter, for example, brings up expectations of a discussion of that other key operation in Situationist practice, the *détournement*, the distorting, recycling of existing cultural material or data. The geological aspects of the latter could open yet another vista on the media geological in art.

---

10 Parikka, p. 106; Cp. Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia. Complicity with Anonymous Materials*, Victoria, Re.press, 2008. For a short presentation of *Coal Fired Computers*, see <http://yoha.co.uk/cfc> [accessed December 14, 2015].

11 A presentation of Chatonsky's *Telofossiles*, 2013, can be found on his website: <http://chatonsky.net/projects/telofossiles/> [accessed December 14, 2015]. For an account of Paglen's satellite project, see here: <http://www.paglen.com/lastpictures> [accessed December 14, 2015].

12 Wolfgang Ernst addresses the issue of microtemporality in a number of essays, see, for example, in English, "Media Archaeography," in Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, ed. Jussi Parikka, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

On the other hand, the territory mapped out is rich enough and has not been trespassed by media historians before. In order for it to be explored, an undaunted materialism such as Parikka's – having already tracked down the ways of viruses and insects in the intersections of technology and nature – is necessary. By combining insights of German media theory with those of new materialism, land art, and crucially, the far-sighted work of Robert Smithson, the media archaeological excavation is transformed into a media geological earthwork.<sup>13</sup> And the partially circular move described above is perhaps integral to the ambition of writing a non-linear history and to the thinking of the essay, which is always a productive and maybe necessary methodological tactic for a pioneer venture.

That this is a necessary venture today has already been emphasized. With *A Geology of Media*, Parikka not only expands and vitalizes the fields of media theory and media history, he also forces the humanities at large to rethink its methods and objectives, not least in relation to the complex political stakes that the contemporary raises. That the book's appendix, co-written with artist Garnet Hertz, brings scholarly work in closer contact with lab-based tinkering and media archaeological artistic practice, underlines not only the important role that art in general plays for Parikka, but also the width of his undertaking.<sup>14</sup> And it gives, perhaps, a clue to the poetically innovative thrust of his thinking with and around media.

---

13 The earthworks and essays of Robert Smithson are crucial in a discussion of the interrelations of modern art, geology, and media. A central essay, and important in Parikka's book, is "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects", where Smithson discusses an "abstract geology". See *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996.

14 For a presentation of the work of Garnet Hertz, see his website: <http://www.conceptlab.com/> [accessed December 14, 2015].