

Towards a new media archaeology? A report on some books and tendencies

Over the last few years media archaeology has become an accepted method of research and has attracted an increasing number of scholars. Beginning in the 1980s with Friedrich Kittler's groundbreaking books *Aufschreibesysteme* (Discourse Networks) and *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, then continuing in the 1990s with Siegfried Zielinski who used the term 'Medienarchäologie' for the first time in its full methodological sense, one might say media archaeology is booming.¹ Following Michel Foucault's studies on the formations of knowledge, media archaeology tries to reveal the various epistemological conditions that point to the emergence of media and probes for breaks and non-continuities in their history. Not surprising then, the emergence of cinema is one of its preferred objects – German *Medientheorie* (media theory) as well as Anglo-Saxon new film history share an interest in the interchanging scientific and cultural discourses of the 19th century and the arising mass culture.

In their anthology *Cinema beyond Film*, published in 2010 in the series *Film Culture in Transition* from Amsterdam University Press, François Albera and Maria Tortajada focus specifically on the epistemology of viewing and hearing around the year 1900.² In reviewing Foucault's notion of *dispositif* they understand the term as a network of relations between spectator, representation, and technology that 'goes beyond the dispositif itself' (p. 12). According to Albera and Tortajada, this network can be formalised in a tri-partite epistemic schema linking the concrete elements of various dispositifs to concepts and discourses from which they emerge. This heterogeneity of sources and data refers to a notion of epistemology that does not try to be scientifically coherent but rather tries to include diffuse or even conflicting knowledge. In her essay 'The Cinematic Snapshot', Tortajada recovers various epistemological conflicts and contradictions that Étienne-Jules Marey was confronted with during his experiments on animal and human locomotion.

What makes this anthology valuable is how it develops a set of questions from its epistemic schema of spectator-representation-technology relations. According to Albera and Tortajada, this schema is related to specific viewing dispositifs that can be reconstructed by studying the scientific discourses of inventors and engineers, the discourses of technicians and salesmen, as well as by involving discourses of spectators and event managers – even literary discourses and the various techniques of magicians. On this level of discourse analysis, media technologies are seen as contextualised by modes of reception and spectatorship that always include hierarchies, institutions, and power relations. These assumptions lead to the following questions: Is there, in a concrete mode of reception, an isolated spectator or a group of spectators? Is the spectator mobile or immobile? Is

he/she included in large-scale machinery or is he/she handling an apparatus? What is the spectator's access to what is seen and/or heard? By answering these and other questions, Albera and Tortajada want to establish a differentiation of viewing dispositifs that aims to pinpoint the epistemology of viewing and hearing and its variations.

What such an approach can achieve becomes evident in an essay by Olivier Lugon on exhibition designs of the 1920s and 1930s, in which he claims that in popular exhibitions such as *Pressa* (International Press Fair, Cologne, 1928) or *Deutsche Bauausstellung* (German Building Fair, Berlin, 1931) visitors no longer stood immobile in front of represented objects – instead, they moved through a display of fluid time-space relations. Lugon also discusses the integration of cinema in exhibitions with a direct educational impact as a strategy to make them more spectacular and immersive. Alain Boillat's two contributions to the volume underline the diversity of practices and the variety of dispositifs concerning the place of the voice – whether live or recorded – in early cinema. Regarding the heterogeneity of exhibition practices in early cinema, he classifies the lecturer as an agency in its own right, whose function is to mediate between spectator, technology, and representation. This in turn develops a typology of sound parameters that, in a diagrammatic manner, combines different layers and human as well as non-human agencies of producing, transmitting, and consuming sound.

The relations between the human body and non-human agencies revealed by cinema are also crucial in Pasi Väliäho's study *Mapping the Moving Image*, which focuses on the epistemology of automatic movement in the period from 1870 to 1920.³ He is interested in showing how cinema has become a 'specific formation of rationalities, bodies and machines' (p. 10) and in this way, 'one of the predominant anthropological processes of modernity' (p. 9). Väliäho calls this formation 'the moving image', which includes sensations, perceptions, and thoughts as they are manifested technically, artistically, or scientifically.

Väliäho adopts Deleuze's notion of the movement-image on the one hand and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of diagrammatic mapping on the other to consider cinema as a spatio-temporal multiplicity of different forces and agencies. This diagrammatic approach tries to reveal novel configurations of time and power, for which gesture, rhythm, and environment are key concepts. In Väliäho's point of view rhythm not only modulates time and makes it perceivable but also creates, as an effect of medial transformations, 'new forms of embodiment, action and thought' (p. 16). In the same manner, gestures are linked to body-politics and incorporated in the new medial arrangements of cinema. According to Väliäho, nervous gestures can be regarded as signals for the new technologies of self-moving images that alter the spectator's body and affect his or her perception and agency. Thus, 'cinema creates circuits of affection and action' (p. 20) that result in a new type of living being for which unconscious automated movements as well as physi-

cal distortions become common articulations or mere effects of the new technologies.

This is why, according to Väliaho, cinema is doubling the body in its own mediality and ‘becomes a sort of gesture itself’ (p. 31). For him, the transformation of corporeality to a new type of automated life is emblematic of the trick films of Georges Méliès. The French filmmaker has used the human body (mainly his own) as a source of endless variations, producing multiplications as well as fragmentations that not only trick spectators but also experiment with their mode of perception by confusing it. Väliaho regards this practice as an effect of the experimentalisation of life shaping ‘the changing configurations of vision and knowledge in modernity’ (p. 38). Evidence can be found, according to him, in the fact that these configurations are increasingly produced by non-human observers. Here, Väliaho is referring to technologies of automatic inscription used by Marey in his locomotion analyses. The potential independence of a human observer is what Väliaho highlights as an epistemological shift toward dispositifs of recording that make cinema a double of automatic movement. For him, this shift also leads to a new epistemology of simulation for which causes and effects are immanent to each other.

Thus, as a result of non-human recording devices, a new diagrammatic vision is created that aims towards spatialisation and calculation and – more importantly – that renders it impossible to differentiate between technology and reality. Following arguments by Friedrich Kittler, Väliaho believes that devices and machines used in scientific experiments on the capacities of human perception (such as the tachistoscope) prefigure the automatic perception of the moving image in cinema. In adopting Walter Benjamin’s notion of the psychosomatic experience of cinema based on physically and psychically perceived shocks, he ultimately claims there exists ‘a fundamental reversibility between the media technologies and the body’ (p. 58).

Väliaho’s transversal study emphasises a body concept that is fully equivalent to the experimentation and automation of life; it is a concept that is associated with scientific laboratories and clinical studies. His thesis of a fundamental reversibility between media technologies and the body highlights the normative processes of modernisation. However, the cinematic experience is a mass spectacle with its own dynamics that includes, of course, options of inadequate or even subversive behavior. Particularly in early cinema, the audience was accustomed to interacting in various manners with what happened on the screen. If one looks beyond meta-films as Väliaho does (to the rube genre, for instance) and takes exhibition practices into account, one can find a differentiation of viewing dispositifs that goes beyond the notion of a strict reversibility between media and body.

At first sight Jussi Parikka’s *Insect Media*, a study on the media-archaeological relations between entomology, ethnology, and media, is based on the same the-

oretical background.⁴ For Parikka, to think about insects means to think about media and network culture in a new way. Influenced by the diagrammatics of Deleuze and Guattari, actual network theories, and neo-materialist cultural analysis, Parikka considers models of insect life (such as swarming or distributed intelligence) as the very basis of today's digital media culture, particularly network theory. He mostly highlights the non-human agencies of insects in their ability to resolve complex tasks. This is why Parikka goes back to the roots of the animal ethnological research introduced by Jakob von Uexküll in the 1920s, all the way to 19th century entomology, where insects were regarded as entities living in close relationship with their environment. In doing so he analyses not only entomological handbooks and ethnological theories but also newspaper reports and novels in non-metaphorical readings. His media archaeological approach focuses on transversal case studies that do not form a coherent history. Parikka combines scientific sources with aesthetic articulations. Not surprisingly, the French insect scientist and surrealist Roger Caillios plays a crucial role in his book.

Parikka follows a twofold task: 'to look at media as insects' and 'to analyze the archaeology of the recent figurations in terms of "insects as media"' (p. xiii). The relation between media and insect implied here is grounded on his preference for non-human agency. Following Deleuze, Parikka regards insects 'as carriers of intensities (potentials) and modes of aesthetic, political, economic, and technological thought' (p. xiii) and also as active operators. In a similar way, he also understands media not only as technology or a demand of mass communication in human culture but also as complexes of human and non-human affects, potentials, and resonating forces. According to Parikka, transpositions between insects and media technologies can be observed at the end of the 20th century when insect models were used to organise computer science and digital culture.

In an ethnological perspective, biological and technological bodies share relations, percepts, and affects. Thus, Parikka suggests, ethnology becomes media theory – a media theory negotiating non-human observers and a new regime of signification. Regarding the 'heterogeneous multiplicity' (Jacques Derrida) in the animal itself, assemblage becomes a key term of Parikka's non-representational cultural analysis, which is based on the relationality of the inside and the outside. Parikka observes a media archaeological shift toward ethnology around 1900. During the 19th century, animals were regarded in experimental sciences as a resource for testing and measuring the capabilities of non-human forces, intensities, and affects. At the same time, diagrammatics structured the transposition of animals into media. However, at the end of the 19th century, when the animal instinct was more often seen as an unconscious reflex action on environmental demands that leads to automatic behavior, ethnological thinking was emerging. Thus, insects then were regarded as well-organised autopoietic machines with a distinctive potential for variation and accommodation that makes them not only superior to

other living beings but also to a super-signifier that refers, according to Parikka, to much more abstract relationships between the body and ‘security, individuality, collective life, and technological dystopias’ (p. 43).

As agencies without a center, insects have become an interesting subject for the politics of rationalisation and a model for the optimisation of social organisation. Parikka thereby tries to reconstruct how the thinking about swarming was emerging in 19th century entomology and migrated to other discourses of the arising media culture, such as cybernetics. Following Eugene Thacker, he argues that the migration of biological models of swarming into recent notions of biopolitics and network theories remains far from clear. Maybe this is why Parikka looks for singular events, such as Norbert Wiener’s paper on ants, to make this migration evident.

Parikka’s study is not only instructive and informative concerning historical relations between entomology and ethnology but – more importantly – it also gives a lesson in how media archaeology can provide a non-linear understanding of media history. In his transversal analysis of swarm and network theories he produces a kind of nomadic knowledge that is very akin to his subject of analysis. Parikka is not interested in discovering fundamental breaks between different regimes of knowledge. Such breaks become unimportant in a “bestial” media archaeology’ (p. xxxiv) when hierarchies, stable relations, and entities collapse. The reader of Parikka’s advanced study has to accept gaps in the media archaeology of insects as media regarding the thinking of insect societies in early social sciences and mass psychology of the late 19th century, presented in the studies of Alfred Espinas and Scipio Sighele.

Parikka (together with Erkki Huhtamo) has published an anthology representing the status quo of media archaeology and, at the same time, tackling questions about its methodology.⁵ *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* is a collection of rather short essays giving insight into a variety of ongoing research projects and methodological questions concerning the reasoning powers as well as the possible methodological restrictions of media archaeology. The first section of the book questions the status of the imaginary for media archaeological research. In his contribution to this section, co-editor Erkki Huhtamo introduces a model of media archaeology as topos study regarding topoi that are always created and conditioned by cultural forces. According to Huhtamo, topoi play a crucial role in media culture as connectors to other cultural traditions, as commentaries, and as elaborations of media cultural forms, themes, and fantasies (p. 34). Topoi have, so to say, their own life – they are not strictly dependant on a medium’s apparent materiality. For Huhtamo, there is no wonder that old topoi (such as the little man living inside a machine) migrate from radios to television sets and to computers. Of course, this argument stands in contrast to a strict materialist notion of media archaeology.

The essays in the second section focus on specific media-user relations. Machiko Kusahara recovers the so-called Baby Talkie – a hybrid media device that combines a small version of the zoetrope with a gramophone in order to add animated images to music. The Baby Talkie was popular in wealthy Japanese households for a short period of time around 1930. Kusahara not only links her media archaeological research to other similar devices for home entertainment, such as the Moviefun or the Kinetophon (popular in the United States around the 1920s), but also discusses the exchange between Japanese culture and the Western world. In this regard, the Baby Talkie also becomes an imaginary object. Wanda Strauven discusses man-machine interactions in the field of home entertainment devices in the pre-cinema era. She highlights the role of gaming for media archaeological questions and focuses on the involvement of hands in utilising optical toys such as the thaumatrope or the zoetrope. Her argument, however, aims towards an archaeology of the touch screen as part of an overall archaeology of cinema that differentiates between media devices that have to be touched to initiate operation and media that were consumed only by viewing screen projections. Finally, Strauven discusses how touch screen-based media reinforce the game and tactile dimensions of earlier optical toys and by doing so, points once more to the relevance of man-machine interactions.

The third and final section deals with digital media and puts forward issues such as trash and noise. In his essential contribution, Wolfgang Ernst explicitly understands media-archaeology as an alternative method to media historical narratives and stresses that media itself ‘become active “archaeologists” of knowledge’ (p. 239). By this he means that machines produce articulations that do not need a human observer or translator. According to Ernst, in the digital age one needs competence in informatics to reach the sub-semantic strata of media culture as well as the non-cultural dimensions of the technological regime making cultural analysis calculable. Thus, he concludes, media archaeology ‘is more akin to the gaze of the optical scanner than to that of the anthropological observer’ (p. 249).

Ernst proposes a neo-materialist thinking that marks the core of the recent tendency in media archaeology toward non-human agencies. This thinking foregrounds the variety and specificity of media, the diversity of media practices and environments, and finally, the singularity of events. It is also characterised by its avoidance of hermeneutics, linearity, and teleology. This is why Vivian Sobchack, in her afterword, appreciates ‘media archaeology’s value as an undisciplined discipline that assiduously avoids any kind of comprehensive interpretation or totalizing theory’ (p. 328). Concerning its status as ‘an undisciplined discipline’, media archaeology, according to Sobchack, is able to rethink and modify epistemic norms and established values. Following this conclusion, the plurality of case studies on the one hand and the variety of theoretical concepts (ranging from a differentiation

of dispositifs to a materialist diagrammatics of media) on the other can be seen as a necessary strategy for further explorations.

The most discussed topic in media archaeology today is, without a doubt, the position of human observers. Media archaeologists influenced by the concepts of new film history negotiate the agency of human observers as part of man-machine interactions or as part of viewing dispositifs; whereas for media archaeologists like Väliäho, Parikka, and Ernst, cybernetics, network theories, and non-human agencies have become a main interest. In this regard, the diversity of voices in the field of academic media archaeology is not a handicap. On the contrary, it is a guarantee for its productivity.

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Notes

- 1 In 1966 the German journalist and author Kurt Wilhelm Marek, under the pseudonym 'C. W. Ceram', published a book entitled *Archäologie des kinos* in which he uses the term in its broader sense.
- 2 François Albera and Maria Tortajada. *Cinema beyond film: Media epistemology in the modern era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
- 3 Pasi Väliäho. *Mapping the moving image: Gesture, thought and cinema 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
- 4 Jussi Parikka. *Insect media: An archaeology of animals and technology* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 5 Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (eds). *Media archaeology: Approaches, applications, and implications* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 2011).